Review Article

Disability, Discrimination and Psychological Well-Being: A Bibliometric Analysis from an Inclusive Development Perspective

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Editor: Solomon Mekonnen

Article History:
Received: May 12, 2026
Accepted: July 8, 2026
Published: September 7, 2026

Citation: Evelin Astrid Calva Camacho, Wilmer Fernando Chamba Calva, Disability, Discrimination and Psychological Well-Being: A Bibliometric Analysis from an Inclusive Development Perspective. DCIDJ. 2026, 37:3. doi.org/10.20372/dcidj.1022

ABSTRACT

Aim: This study aimed to provide an updated bibliometric analysis of scientific production on disability, discrimination and psychological well-being indexed in Scopus between 2020 and 2025.

Method: A total of 1,004 articles and reviews were analysed using performance indicators and science mapping techniques. Bibliometric analyses included publication trends, thematic structure, temporal evolution of keywords, density visualisation and country co-authorship patterns.

Results: Results showed sustained publication growth, with strong geographical concentration in the United States and the United Kingdom. Core themes focused on mental health, stigma, depression, discrimination and disability, while emerging topics included ableism, equity, gender, caregivers and quality of life.

Conclusion and Implications: Findings suggest that the field is characterised by the coexistence of a consolidated psychosocial foundation and an increasingly articulated structural, relational, and rights-based research agenda. The study also identifies important geographical inequalities in scientific production and highlights research gaps that can inform future disability research, Community-Based Rehabilitation (CBR), and inclusive development strategies. The study highlights the need for more inclusive, context-sensitive and globally diverse disability research, particularly from underrepresented regions.

Keywords: stigma; ableism; mental health; equity; social determinants of health; science mapping.

INTRODUCTION

Disability constitutes a central dimension of human diversity and, at the same time, one of the most persistent axes of social inequality. Beyond physical, sensory, intellectual, or psychosocial conditions, persons with disabilities continue to face structural, relational, and symbolic barriers that restrict their full participation in social life. In this context, discrimination, stigma, and other forms of exclusion should not be understood as peripheral phenomena, but rather as social processes with direct consequences for mental health, psychological well-being, and quality of life (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2013; Shakespeare, 2018; Gréaux et al., 2023).

In recent years, the literature has consistently documented that exposure to discriminatory experiences is associated with higher levels of emotional distress, depressive symptoms, anxiety, and lower subjective well-being among persons with disabilities. These experiences operate as chronic social stressors that accumulate across the life course, increasing psychosocial vulnerability and deepening pre-existing disadvantage (Brown & Ciciurkaite, 2022; Saia et al., 2024). Recent evidence further suggests that experiences of ableism and discrimination differ according to disability type, gender, and social context, highlighting the importance of intersectional approaches for understanding these inequalities (Timmons et al., 2024).

At the same time, disability studies have progressively moved from biomedical models centred on individual deficit toward critical perspectives that emphasise the role of social, cultural, and institutional environments in the production of exclusion. This transition has enabled the incorporation of concepts such as stigma, prejudice, discrimination, intersectionality, and ableism, highlighting that many disadvantages associated with disability arise not only from individual conditions but also from power relations, social norms, and institutional practices that reproduce inequality (Oliver, 2013; Goodley, 2017; Campbell, 2009).

In particular, the concept of ableism has gained increasing relevance as an analytical framework for examining how certain forms of embodiment, functioning, and autonomy are constructed as normative, while others are devalued or excluded. Recent research indicates that ableism operates across interpersonal, institutional, and structural levels, affecting educational, employment, and healthcare opportunities, and functioning as a social determinant of health for persons with disabilities (Mannor & Needham, 2024; Gooderham et al., 2025).

Similarly, emerging lines of inquiry have begun to explore specific manifestations of ableism in previously underexamined settings. For instance, recent evidence has documented ableism in mental healthcare systems, where explicit and implicit biases may reduce quality of care and limit timely access to appropriate treatment (Wang et al., 2024). These findings reinforce the need to understand disability not merely as a clinical category, but as an experience shaped by broader structures of exclusion.

Despite these advances, scientific production on disability, discrimination, and psychological well-being has expanded unevenly across disciplines, journals, and geographical regions. This dispersion makes it difficult to clearly identify how the field has evolved, its dominant thematic cores, which emerging agendas have gained visibility, and how international collaboration networks are structured. In this regard, bibliometric approaches are particularly useful, as they allow researchers to map the evolution of a research field, identify its conceptual structure, and examine the dynamics of knowledge production and circulation (Donthu et al., 2021; Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017; Zupic & Cater, 2015).

Accordingly, the aim of this study is to provide an updated bibliometric analysis of scientific production indexed in Scopus on disability, discrimination, and psychological well-being during the period 2020–2025. Specifically, the study seeks to identify growth trends, dominant thematic areas, emerging topics, and patterns of international collaboration. These bibliometric patterns are interpreted through an inclusive development perspective, understood here as an approach that centers equitable participation, the removal of structural barriers, and the expansion of substantive opportunities for persons with disabilities in social and development processes (Sen, 1999; Mitra, 2018; WHO, 2022). From this perspective, the thematic and geographical organisation of scientific knowledge is relevant not only to understanding the evolution of disability research but also to identifying whether current research agendas adequately reflect the structural conditions, participation needs, and contextual diversity required for inclusive policy and practice. In

doing so, the study aims to contribute to a more critical, integrative, and globally sensitive understanding of the field while identifying knowledge gaps relevant to inclusive development.

Theoretical framework: from stigma to ableism in disability research

Disability has historically been understood through different conceptual frameworks that reflect broader social, political, and epistemological transformations. For much of the twentieth century, the medical model predominated, interpreting disability as an individual deficit to be corrected, rehabilitated, or compensated. Under this perspective, the difficulties experienced by persons with disabilities were attributed mainly to bodily impairment or functional limitations, while the role of social and structural barriers remained largely invisible (Oliver, 2013; Shakespeare, 2018).

Subsequently, the development of the social model of disability represented a paradigmatic shift by arguing that many limitations do not arise exclusively from bodily conditions, but from physical, institutional, and cultural environments designed without considering human diversity. From this perspective, exclusion emerges through architectural barriers, discriminatory practices, segregated educational systems, exclusionary labour markets, and stigmatising social representations (Goodley, 2017; Shakespeare, 2018). This theoretical turn shifted attention away from individual deficit and toward collective and political responsibility for the production of inequality.

However, contemporary scholarship argues that even the social model may be insufficient when it fails to account for other dimensions of power such as gender, race, social class, sexuality, or geography. In response, intersectionality provides a robust analytical lens for understanding how multiple systems of oppression interact simultaneously and shape differentiated experiences of exclusion. Originally developed by Crenshaw (1989), intersectionality has increasingly been incorporated into disability studies to explain how disability intersects with other axes of inequality, producing complex forms of discrimination and vulnerability (Collins, 2022; Liasidou & Gregoriou, 2024).

In recent years, the concept of ableism has become central to this debate. Ableism refers to a system of beliefs, norms, and practices that privileges certain bodies, cognitive capacities, and forms of autonomy considered "normal" or "desirable," while devaluing those who diverge from such standards. It is not limited to individual prejudice, but constitutes a structural logic embedded in institutions, public policy, everyday language, and organisational decision-making (Campbell, 2009; Friedman & Owen, 2017). Recent studies further suggest that ableism functions as a social determinant of health by shaping access to healthcare, educational opportunities, and employment trajectories (Gooderham et al., 2025).

The literature also shows that ableism frequently operates in intersectional ways. For example, racialised youth with non-apparent disabilities may simultaneously experience racism, ableism, and occupational exclusion, particularly in precarious or non-inclusive labour contexts (Lindsay & Dain, 2025). Emerging research has also begun to measure the interaction between racism and ableism as intertwined symbolic systems, highlighting the need to move beyond single-axis explanations (Friedman, 2025).

From the perspective of psychological well-being, these processes are especially relevant. Stigma, discrimination, and sustained exclusion function as chronic social stressors that increase the likelihood of anxiety, depression, social isolation, and lower life satisfaction. In contrast, inclusive environments, effective accessibility, identity recognition, and social participation are associated with higher levels of subjective well-being and positive mental health (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2013; World Health Organization [WHO], 2022).

Accordingly, analysing scientific production on disability, discrimination, and psychological well-being requires a theoretical framework that integrates contributions from the social model, intersectionality, and critical ableism studies. Such an approach allows

the literature to be interpreted not merely as thematic accumulation, but as a reflection of epistemological disputes over how disability is defined, who produces knowledge, and which forms of social justice are prioritised. From this standpoint, the present bibliometric study seeks to identify how these frameworks have influenced the recent evolution of the scientific field between 2020 and 2025.

METHODS

Data Source Selection

Scopus was selected as the sole data source because it is one of the most widely used multidisciplinary bibliographic databases in bibliometric research, providing extensive coverage of peer-reviewed scientific literature across health sciences, psychology, social sciences, rehabilitation, and disability studies (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017; Donthu et al., 2021).

In addition, it offers standardized bibliographic metadata, including author information, institutional affiliations, citations, keywords, and source details, which facilitate the application of bibliometric performance indicators and science mapping techniques. In this study, the Bibliometrix package (R) was used for bibliometric performance analysis, whereas VOSviewer (version 1.6.20) was employed for science mapping and network visualization.

The use of a single bibliographic database ensured methodological consistency and enhanced the reproducibility of the study by allowing other researchers to replicate the search strategy under the same methodological conditions while minimizing metadata heterogeneity and duplicate records that may arise when integrating multiple databases. Although Web of Science, PubMed, and Dimensions also index relevant literature on disability, discrimination, and psychological well-being, Scopus was considered appropriate for this study's objectives due to its broad interdisciplinary coverage, high-quality indexing, and compatibility with the bibliometric procedures employed.

The period from 2020 to 2025 was selected to examine the most recent evolution of scientific production on disability, discrimination, and psychological well-being. This timeframe captures the growing incorporation of contemporary perspectives, including ableism, intersectionality, equity, and the social determinants of health, which have become increasingly prominent in recent disability research. This provides an updated overview of the conceptual and thematic development of the field.

Finally, it is acknowledged that restricting the analysis to Scopus may have excluded publications indexed exclusively in other bibliographic databases or studies published in languages other than English. Nevertheless, this methodological decision ensured a homogeneous, consistent, and reproducible dataset for the bibliometric analyses. These limitations are discussed in greater detail in the limitations section.

Search Strategy

The bibliographic search was conducted in the Scopus database on 18 March 2026 using the *TITLE-ABS-KEY* field, which retrieves records containing the search terms in the title, abstract, or author keywords. The search strategy was developed around three conceptual domains aligned with the objectives of the study: (1) disability, (2) discrimination, and (3) psychological well-being. Within each domain, synonymous terms were combined using the Boolean operator *OR*, whereas the three conceptual domains were linked using *AND* to retrieve publications simultaneously addressing all dimensions of interest.

To ensure methodological transparency and enhance the reproducibility of the study, the complete Scopus search strategy is provided in Appendix A (Search strategy). The search was restricted to *articles* and *review articles* published in English between 2020 and 2025. These criteria were established to obtain a homogeneous corpus of peer-reviewed

scientific literature and ensure consistency throughout the subsequent bibliometric analyses.

The search strategy retrieved a total of 1,004 records, which constituted the initial dataset for the study. Subsequently, the records were exported from Scopus in *CSV* format, including complete bibliographic information, abstracts, author keywords, indexed keywords, institutional affiliations, citation information, and cited references. These metadata were used for the subsequent stages of data cleaning, normalization, and bibliometric analysis using the *Bibliometrix* package (*R*) and *VOSviewer* (version 1.6.20). Following the application of eligibility criteria and data cleaning procedures described below, the resulting dataset was retained for the final bibliometric analyses.

Search Validation

The search strategy was developed through an iterative process based on a comprehensive review of recent literature on disability, discrimination, and psychological well-being to identify principal concepts and most frequently used synonymous terms. Different combinations of search terms were tested in preliminary searches and progressively refined until a final strategy was obtained that was consistent with the objectives of the study.

As part of the validation process, the final search strategy was assessed to verify that it successfully retrieved highly cited and conceptually relevant publications within the field while minimizing the inclusion of records unrelated to the research topic. This iterative refinement ensured that the search strategy adequately represented the conceptual scope of the study while maintaining coherence with its research objectives.

Because Scopus is a multidisciplinary database and does not rely on a single controlled vocabulary across all subject areas, the search strategy was developed using *free-text terms* combined with Boolean operators rather than controlled vocabularies such as *Medical Subject Headings (MeSH)*, which are specifically designed for biomedical databases such as PubMed. The use of *free-text terms* allowed the inclusion of terminology commonly employed across different disciplines, thereby improving the retrieval of literature from health sciences, psychology, social sciences, rehabilitation, and disability studies.

Overall, the validation process ensured that the final search strategy achieved an appropriate balance between sensitivity (maximizing the retrieval of relevant publications) and specificity (minimizing the retrieval of irrelevant records), thereby providing a robust, transparent, and reproducible dataset for the subsequent bibliometric analyses.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were considered eligible for inclusion if they met all of the following criteria: (1) they were indexed in the Scopus database; (2) they were published between 2020 and 2025; (3) they were written in English; (4) they were classified as *articles* or *review articles*; and (5) they explicitly addressed the relationship between disability, discrimination, and psychological well-being or mental health, as determined from the title, abstract, and author keywords.

Records were excluded if they were published outside the predefined time frame, written in languages other than English, classified as document types other than *articles* or *review articles*, identified as duplicate records during the data export process, or if their thematic relevance could not be confirmed after screening the title, abstract, and author keywords.

The application of these eligibility criteria ensured the inclusion of a homogeneous corpus of peer-reviewed scientific literature while ensuring the methodological rigor, consistency, and reproducibility required for subsequent bibliometric analyses.

Data Cleaning and Preparation

The retrieved records were exported from Scopus in *CSV* format for subsequent processing and bibliometric analysis. Initially, the integrity of the exported metadata was verified to ensure the completeness and accuracy of the bibliographic information.

Subsequently, a data cleaning procedure was performed, including the identification and removal of duplicate records, followed by a manual screening of titles, abstracts, and author keywords to confirm each publication's thematic relevance to the study objectives. Records whose relationship with disability, discrimination, and psychological well-being could not be confirmed were excluded from the final dataset.

To improve the consistency and reliability of the bibliometric networks, a terminological normalization process was conducted using a *thesaurus file* in *VOSviewer* (version 1.6.20). This procedure allowed the standardization of spelling variants, singular and plural forms, synonymous expressions, and the exclusion of generic or non-informative terms that did not contribute to the conceptual analysis. Consequently, inconsistencies derived from bibliographic indexing were minimized, improving the accuracy and interpretability of the keyword co-occurrence networks.

Following the cleaning and normalization procedures, the final dataset was imported into the *Bibliometrix* package (*R*) for bibliometric performance analyses, whereas *VOSviewer* (version 1.6.20) was used to generate the science mapping visualizations, including keyword co-occurrence, overlay visualization, density visualization, and international collaboration networks.

Bibliometric Analysis

The bibliometric analyses were conducted using a complementary approach based on the *Bibliometrix* package (*R*) and *VOSviewer* (version 1.6.20), allowing the integration of bibliometric performance indicators with science mapping techniques. This combined approach provided a comprehensive assessment of the scientific production, conceptual structure, and international collaboration patterns within the field.

Bibliometric performance analyses were performed using the *Bibliometrix* package (*R*). These analyses included the characterization of the bibliographic dataset, annual scientific production, the most relevant publication sources, the most productive authors, leading institutional affiliations, the most productive countries, and scientific performance and impact indicators derived from citation analysis. In addition, a *thematic map* was generated to identify motor themes, basic themes, niche themes, and emerging or declining themes, thereby providing a deeper understanding of the conceptual organization of the research field.

Science mapping analyses were performed using *VOSviewer* (version 1.6.20). Specifically, keyword co-occurrence networks, overlay visualization maps, and international collaboration networks were generated using the *association strength* normalization method. These visualizations facilitated the identification of conceptual relationships among research topics, temporal trends in keyword usage, and patterns of scientific collaboration between countries.

The combined use of *Bibliometrix* and *VOSviewer* enabled the integration of quantitative bibliometric performance indicators with network visualization techniques, providing complementary perspectives on the evolution, conceptual structure, and collaboration patterns of the scientific literature on disability, discrimination, and psychological well-being.

Given the descriptive and exploratory objectives of the present study, the selected bibliometric techniques were considered appropriate for characterizing the scientific production, conceptual structure, and international collaboration patterns within the field while maintaining methodological coherence with the research objectives.

Although co-citation analysis, bibliographic coupling, and thematic evolution analyses can provide additional insights into the intellectual structure and longitudinal

development of a research field, they were not included because the primary objective of this study was to characterize recent scientific production, thematic organization, scientific impact, and collaboration patterns. Future bibliometric studies may build upon the present findings by incorporating these complementary analytical approaches to further explore the intellectual evolution of disability research.

RESULTS

Dataset Characteristics

Table 1 summarizes the general characteristics of the bibliographic dataset analyzed in this study. The final corpus comprised 1,004 publications indexed in Scopus, published between 2020 and 2025, and distributed across 537 scientific sources, reflecting the multidisciplinary nature of research on disability, discrimination, and psychological well-being. The dataset included a total of 4,925 authors and 131,569 cited references, indicating a broad scientific foundation and extensive scholarly participation in the field.

The annual growth rate of scientific production reached 24.49%, suggesting a sustained increase in research interest during the study period. Furthermore, the average of 12.45 citations per document indicates that the retrieved publications have achieved measurable scientific impact despite the relatively recent time frame analyzed.

Regarding collaboration patterns, the dataset showed an average of 5.42 co-authors per document, while 30.98% of the publications involved international co-authorship, highlighting the collaborative and increasingly international character of research in this area. Finally, the corpus consisted predominantly of original research articles (n = 874), complemented by 130 review articles, providing a comprehensive overview of both empirical evidence and synthesized knowledge within the field.

Table 1. General characteristics of the bibliographic dataset

Description	Results
MAIN INFORMATION	
Timespan	2020–2025
Sources	537
Documents	1004
Annual Growth Rate (%)	24.49
Average Citations per Document	12.45
References	131,569
DOCUMENT CONTENT	
Author's Keywords (DE)	2,583
AUTHORS	
Authors	4,925
COLLABORATION INDICATORS	
Co-authors per Document	5.42
International Co-authorship (%)	30.98
DOCUMENT TYPES	
Articles	874
Reviews	130

Note. Data were retrieved from the Scopus database (2020–2025) and analyzed using the *Bibliometrix* package (*R*). *DE* = Author's Keywords.

Scientific Performance

Table 2 summarizes the scientific performance of the field by integrating leading publication sources, most productive authors, principal research institutions, and countries with the highest scientific output. Overall, the results indicate that scientific production is concentrated within a relatively limited group of journals, researchers, institutions, and

countries, suggesting the existence of well-established research hubs driving knowledge generation on disability, discrimination, and psychological well-being.

Among publication sources, the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* was the leading journal with 34 publications, followed by *Social Science & Medicine* (24), *Frontiers in Psychiatry* (19), and *PLOS ONE* (18). The predominance of journals specializing in public health, psychiatry, and interdisciplinary health sciences reflects the strong integration of disability research within broader health-related disciplines.

Regarding scientific productivity, Lindsay S. was the most prolific author (11 publications), followed by Dean L., Fekadu A., Semrau M., and Thornicroft G., each contributing nine publications. At the institutional level, the University of Toronto emerged as the leading research institution (72 publications), followed by Addis Ababa University and King's College London (29 publications each). Other highly productive institutions included Harvard Medical School, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, and University College London, highlighting the prominent role of internationally recognized academic centers in advancing research within this field.

At the country level, the United States demonstrated the highest scientific productivity, followed by the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia. This distribution indicates that research output is largely concentrated in high-income countries with well-established research infrastructures and extensive international collaboration networks. Collectively, these findings reveal a scientific landscape characterized by a limited number of highly productive journals, authors, institutions, and countries that play a central role in shaping the contemporary development of research on disability, discrimination, and psychological well-being.

Table 2. Scientific performance of the field: leading publication sources, authors, institutions, and countries (2020–2025).

Leading Publication Sources	Articles	Most Productive Authors	Articles	Leading Institutions	Articles	Most Productive Countries	Frequency
International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health	34	Lindsay S.	11	University of Toronto	72	United States	1,061
Social Science & Medicine	24	Dean L.	9	Addis Ababa University	29	United Kingdom	568
Frontiers in Psychiatry	19	Fekadu A.	9	King's College London	29	Canada	363
PLOS ONE	18	Semrau M.	9	Harvard Medical School	23	Australia	273
BMJ Open	14	Thornicroft G.	9	London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine	23	India	146
PLOS Neglected Tropical Diseases	12	Davey G.	8	University College London	21	South Africa	92
BMC Psychiatry	11	Kinfe M.	8	University of Cape Town	20	Spain	74
Disability and Health Journal	11	Ali O.	7	University of Melbourne	18	Netherlands	68
Rehabilitation Psychology	11	Lund C.	7	University of Sydney	17	China	65
Autism	10	Van Brakel W.H.	7	McMaster University	16	Ethiopia	65

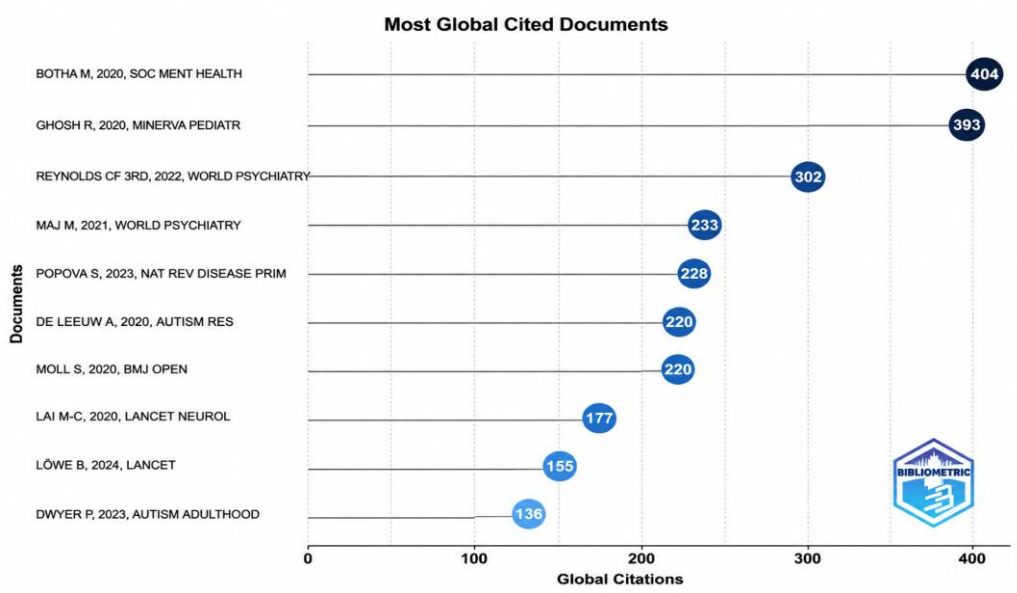
Note. Data were analyzed using the *Bibliometrix* package (*R*). Country frequencies reflect authors' affiliations and may exceed the total number of documents due to international collaboration.

Citation Analysis

Figure 1 presents the ten most globally cited publications within the study corpus. The most influential article was published by Botha et al. (2020), accumulating 404 global citations, followed by Ghosh et al. (2020) with 393 citations and Reynolds et al. (2022) with 302 citations. The prominence of these highly cited publications indicates that research on mental health, stigma, neurodevelopmental conditions, and psychosocial well-being has substantially shaped the intellectual development of the field during the study period.

This citation pattern suggests that the intellectual influence of the field remains strongly anchored in mental health, stigma, neurodevelopmental conditions, and psychosocial well-being. However, structurally oriented topics such as ableism, accessibility, equity, and inclusive development appear more visible in the thematic networks than among the most highly cited publications. This contrast indicates that newer structural and rights-based perspectives are gaining conceptual relevance, although they have not yet become the dominant citation base of the field.

Figure 1. *Top 10 globally cited publications on disability, discrimination, and psychological well-being (2020–2025).*



Note. Bubble size reflects the number of global citations received by each document. Documents are ranked according to total global citations within the analysed dataset.

Thematic Structure of the Field

The co-occurrence analysis of author keywords allowed for the identification of the thematic structure of scientific production on disability, discrimination, and psychological well-being during the period 2020–2025. Based on the corpus of 1,004 documents and a minimum threshold of 10 occurrences, the resulting network included the most frequent and interconnected terms within the field.

As shown in Figure 2, the co-occurrence structure is organised around *disability* as the main articulating node of the network. Its central position and multiple connections with *discrimination*, *ableism*, *social discrimination*, and *disabled persons* indicate that recent scientific production addresses these phenomena not as independent research lines, but as closely interconnected dimensions within the study of exclusion and well-being.

The purple cluster, characterised by terms related to *mental health*, *depression*, *anxiety*, *psychology*, and *quality of life*, represents an orientation centred on the psychological and psychosocial consequences associated with disability and stigmatisation. The proximity

of these terms to the core of the network indicates that psychological distress remains one of the main pathways through which the literature examines the effects of exclusion.

In contrast, the green cluster, articulated around *disability* and *ableism* and connected with *health equity*, *inclusion*, *accessibility*, *education*, and *participation*, reflects a more structural orientation. This configuration broadens the focus from the individual consequences of discrimination to the social, institutional, and environmental conditions that may produce or sustain exclusion.

The blue cluster, which connects *disabled persons* with *employment*, *prejudice*, *legislation*, *legal aspects*, and *architectural accessibility*, reveals an institutional and regulatory dimension of the field. The structure of these connections suggests that the social participation of persons with disabilities is examined in relation to employment opportunities, legal frameworks, and barriers within the built environment.

The yellow cluster, encompassing terms such as *social stigma*, *psychology*, *child*, *family*, *caregiver*, *social support*, and *personal experience*, configures a relational and community-oriented dimension of well-being. Its integration with *disability* and *discrimination* nodes suggests that experiences of exclusion are also examined through family relationships, support networks, and immediate social contexts.

Finally, the red cluster, which is closely interconnected with the central core of the network, brings together terms related to *social discrimination*, *healthcare policy*, *healthcare*, and sociodemographic characteristics. Its transversal position appears to function as a thematic bridge between psychological, structural, and institutional perspectives, illustrating how discrimination is linked to different contexts of care and social inequality.

Overall, the topology of the network shows that the field is organised around the relationship between disability and discrimination while simultaneously incorporating psychological, structural, legal, institutional, and relational dimensions. Rather than indicating a replacement of psychosocial approaches by structural perspectives, the proximity between clusters suggests their coexistence and interconnection. This thematic organisation indicates that recent research is progressively broadening its understanding of psychological well-being by linking mental health outcomes with ableism, inclusion, accessibility, and conditions of social participation.

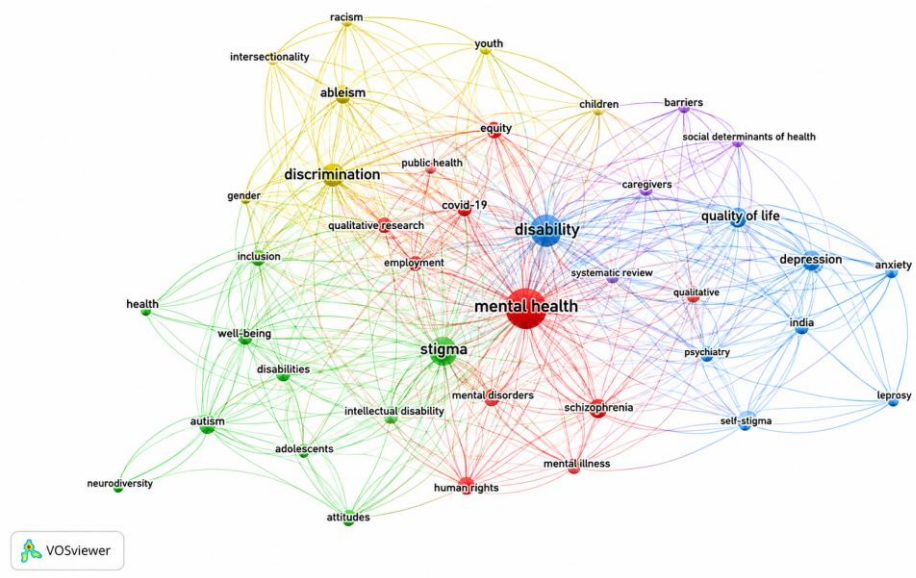


Figure 2. Co-occurrence network of author keywords

Note. Node size is proportional to keyword frequency, links indicate co-occurrence relationships, and colors represent thematic clusters identified through the network analysis.

Thematic Map

The thematic map provides a complementary perspective on the conceptual organization of research on disability, discrimination, and psychological well-being by positioning thematic clusters according to their centrality and development (Figure 3). Themes located in the upper-right quadrant represent motor themes, characterized by both high centrality and high density, whereas those in the lower-right quadrant correspond to basic themes, which constitute the conceptual foundation of the field but exhibit comparatively lower internal development. The upper-left quadrant contains niche themes, representing specialized but well-developed research areas, while the lower-left quadrant identifies emerging or declining themes, reflecting topics with lower centrality and density within the analyzed period.

As shown in Figure 3, the thematic map reveals an uneven conceptual development within the field. *Disability*, *discrimination*, *ableism*, *intersectionality*, and *inclusion* occupy the motor-theme quadrant, indicating that structural and inequality-oriented perspectives are not merely peripheral topics but constitute a highly developed and influential research domain. Their association with *racism*, *equity*, *gender*, and *children* further suggests that disability is increasingly examined in relation to intersecting systems of disadvantage and broader conditions of social participation.

In contrast, *mental health*, *stigma*, *human rights*, *mental illness*, and *well-being* are positioned as basic themes. Their high centrality but comparatively lower density suggests that these concepts provide a common conceptual foundation connecting multiple areas of disability research, although they do not constitute a single internally specialised research domain. The position of *depression*, *quality of life*, *anxiety*, *public health*, *psychiatry*, and *self-stigma* near the boundary between basic and motor themes further illustrates the strong connection between psychological outcomes and the broader conceptual structure of the field.

The contrast between these thematic positions is analytically relevant. While mental health and stigma remain central to the overall research landscape, the greater internal development of the cluster organised around ableism, discrimination, and intersectionality suggests that structural perspectives have become more conceptually articulated within recent research. However, this pattern should not be interpreted as evidence that structural approaches have replaced psychosocial perspectives. Rather, the thematic map indicates the coexistence of a consolidated psychological foundation with a highly developed structural and intersectional research agenda.

The peripheral positioning of *autism*, *neurodiversity*, *intellectual disability*, *employment*, *health*, and *qualitative research* reveals a different limitation in the current knowledge structure. These topics remain weakly connected to the dominant thematic core, suggesting that disability-specific populations, employment contexts, and qualitative approaches are not yet fully integrated into the principal research agendas on discrimination and psychological well-being. Similarly, the niche positioning of *schizophrenia*, *caregivers*, *barriers*, *systematic review*, and *recovery* indicates specialised lines of inquiry with substantial internal development but limited integration with the broader conceptual network.

Overall, the bibliometric evidence indicates that contemporary disability research is characterised by the coexistence of a consolidated psychosocial foundation and an increasingly articulated structural, relational, and rights-based research agenda. Rather than demonstrating a uniform transition between perspectives, the findings reveal uneven thematic development and geographical participation within the field. Addressing these imbalances will require research agendas that more explicitly connect psychological well-being with structural barriers, equitable participation, context-sensitive CBR implementation, and the inclusion of underrepresented disability populations and regions.

From an inclusive development perspective, this fragmentation is particularly significant because research on participation, employment, and context-specific disability experiences remains insufficiently integrated with the dominant knowledge base. This pattern suggests that the field's capacity to inform inclusive policies and practices across diverse social settings may remain constrained when the experiences and participation barriers of specific disability populations are positioned at the periphery of the thematic structure.

From a Community-Based Rehabilitation (CBR) perspective, the thematic structure suggests that future programmes should not be limited to individual rehabilitation outcomes, but should also address stigma, discrimination, accessibility, employment, social support, and participation barriers. The peripheral position of disability-specific populations and qualitative research indicates that CBR-oriented evidence remains insufficiently integrated into the field's main conceptual structure. This pattern highlights the need for implementation research capable of linking psychological well-being, structural barriers, and locally grounded community participation.

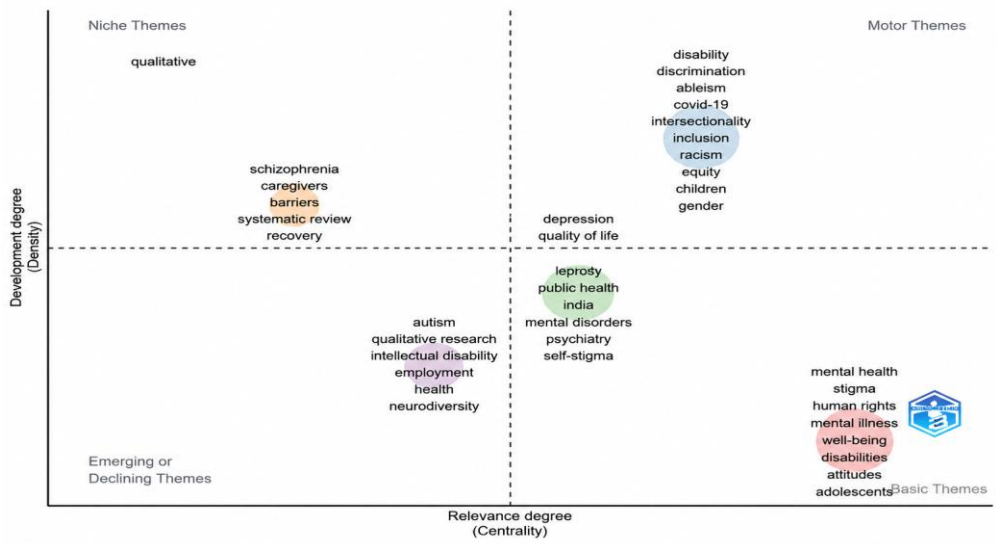


Figure 3. *Thematic map of author keywords.*

Note. *The thematic map was generated using the* Bibliometrix package (*R*). Bubble size is proportional to keyword frequency, while themes are positioned according to Callon's centrality (x-axis) and density (y-axis).

International Collaboration Patterns

The country collaboration network illustrates the international structure of scientific collaboration in research on disability, discrimination, and psychological well-being during 2020–2025. In Figure 4, node size reflects the scientific production of each country, links represent collaboration between countries, and colors distinguish collaborative clusters within the network.

As shown in Figure 4, the collaboration network is characterised by a marked concentration around a limited number of highly connected national research hubs. The central positions of the United States and the United Kingdom indicate not only high scientific productivity but also their structural role in connecting different segments of the international collaboration network. Their extensive links with Canada, Australia, and several European countries suggest that knowledge production in the field is organised around a core of countries with strong research infrastructures and established transnational partnerships.

This concentration is analytically relevant because the countries occupying central positions in the network may have a greater capacity to shape collaborative agendas and influence which disability-related issues gain international scientific visibility. The dense

connections among high-income countries contrast with the more limited network integration of countries such as India, China, South Africa, Brazil, and Nigeria. Although these countries participate in the international research landscape, their comparatively fewer and less central connections suggest an uneven distribution of opportunities for sustained cross-national knowledge production.

The network therefore reflects internationalisation without equivalent geographical integration. A substantial proportion of research is produced through cross-country collaboration, yet the topology of the network indicates that these partnerships remain organised around a relatively concentrated scientific core. This pattern may limit the visibility of disability experiences, structural barriers, and priorities from regions with different socioeconomic, cultural, and institutional conditions.

Overall, the collaboration structure suggests that the field has developed a substantial international research network, but scientific connectivity remains geographically unequal. The predominance of a limited number of highly connected countries highlights the need to distinguish between the expansion of international collaboration and the equitable participation of diverse regions in knowledge production. Greater integration of underrepresented countries could broaden the empirical and contextual foundations of research on disability, discrimination, and psychological well-being.

From an inclusive development perspective, this geographical imbalance is particularly relevant because policies and practices aimed at expanding participation and reducing structural exclusion require evidence grounded in diverse socioeconomic, cultural, and institutional contexts. The limited integration of underrepresented regions therefore represents not only an inequality in scientific collaboration but also a constraint on the development of context-sensitive disability knowledge capable of informing inclusive development across different settings.

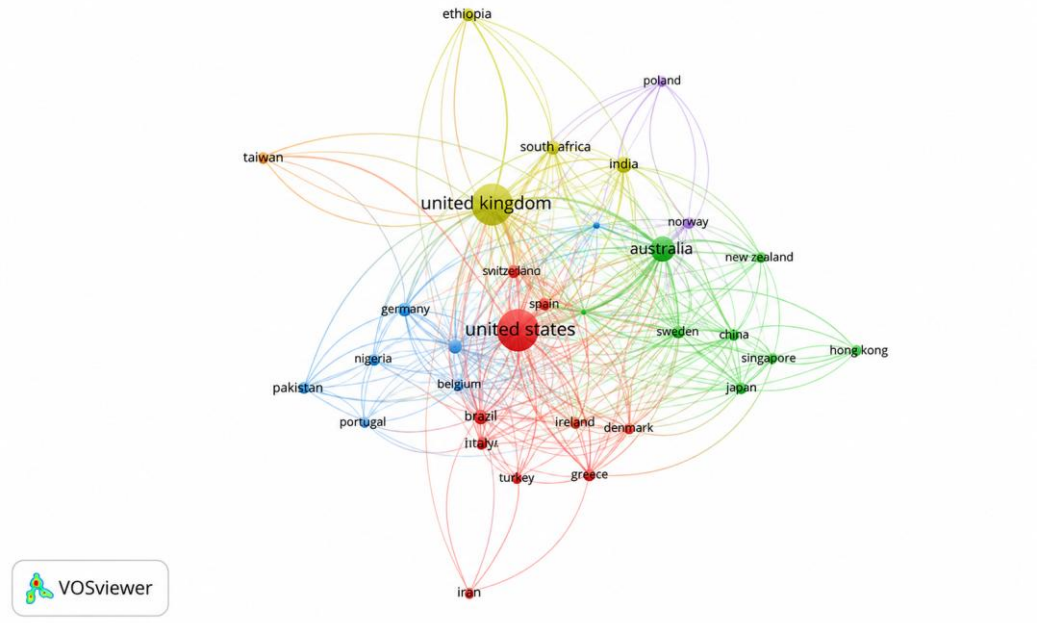


Figure 4. *International co-authorship structure by country*

Note. Node size reflects each country's scientific production, links represent collaboration intensity, and colors represent collaborative clusters identified through the co-authorship network.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that research on disability, discrimination, and psychological well-being experienced sustained growth between 2020 and 2025. Rather

than reflecting a homogeneous transformation, the bibliometric evidence suggests the coexistence of a consolidated thematic core-centred on mental health, disability, stigma, and discrimination with emerging perspectives focused on ableism, intersectionality, equity, and rights-based approaches. The annual growth rate observed during the study period, together with the citation performance indicators, suggests that this expansion reflects not only increasing publication volume but also the growing scientific relevance of the field. These findings indicate that disability research is expanding both quantitatively and conceptually, although this evolution remains gradual.

First, the predominance of mental health, disability, stigma, and discrimination confirms that contemporary research continues to prioritise the psychosocial consequences of exclusion. The thematic structure identified in this study is consistent with previous evidence showing that stigma and discrimination negatively affect psychological well-being, social participation, and quality of life (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2013; Brown & Ciciurkaite, 2022; Prizeman et al., 2023; Emerson et al., 2023). Likewise, discrimination has been described as a chronic social stressor that accumulates across the life course, contributing to poorer mental health outcomes (Kavanagh et al., 2015; Lund, 2021; Saia et al., 2024). More recent evidence further demonstrates that discrimination operates not only at the interpersonal level but also through structural barriers affecting rights, recovery, and community inclusion (Funk et al., 2025). However, these bibliometric patterns should be interpreted cautiously because keyword co-occurrence reflects thematic prominence rather than direct evidence of theoretical change.

Second, the increasing visibility of ableism, intersectionality, equity, and gender suggests growing scholarly interest in structural approaches to disability. Campbell (2009) conceptualises ableism as a normative system that privileges particular bodies and capacities, whereas Goodley (2017) and Wolbring (2008) argue that it operates through cultural, institutional, and policy structures that shape opportunities for participation. More recently, Mannor and Needham (2024) have reinforced this perspective by highlighting the role of structural discrimination within disability research. Empirical evidence further demonstrates that ableism adversely affects physical, psychological, and social well-being through barriers to education, healthcare, and community participation (Lindsay et al., 2025), while cultural contexts and intersecting social identities influence how discrimination is experienced across different populations (Li et al., 2024). Nevertheless, these structural perspectives coexist with traditional psychosocial themes, indicating an increasingly articulated research agenda without displacing the established psychosocial foundation of the field.

Third, the growing prominence of quality of life, caregivers, youth, and social determinants of health reflects a broader understanding of well-being that extends beyond individual psychological outcomes. Contemporary evidence supports the view that well-being depends on family relationships, social support, accessibility, and opportunities for meaningful participation. This interpretation is consistent with the capability approach proposed by Sen (1999) and further developed by Mitra (2018), which emphasises participation and autonomy as essential dimensions of well-being. Recent systematic evidence also demonstrates that the quality of life and well-being of caregivers are shaped by multiple contextual and relational dimensions—including family relationships, social support, access to services, and community participation—which ultimately influence the well-being of persons with disabilities (Kamono et al., 2025; Funk et al., 2025). Likewise, rights-based interventions have been shown to promote recovery, participation, and social inclusion while reducing discrimination (Funk et al., 2025). Collectively, these findings reinforce the importance of understanding psychological well-being as the product of interactions between individuals and their social environments.

Another important finding is the geographical concentration of scientific production and collaboration within countries of the Global North. The United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia dominate both publication output and international collaboration networks. The collaboration network further suggests that scientific leadership remains concentrated among institutions with greater research infrastructure, funding capacity, and international visibility, potentially influencing global research agendas. While this pattern partly reflects stronger research capacity, it is also influenced by the coverage characteristics of Scopus. Consequently, the observed distribution should not be interpreted as representing global research equally. The limited visibility of studies from Latin America, Africa, and other low- and middle-income regions highlights persistent inequalities in knowledge production and underscores the need to strengthen locally led research and equitable international collaboration. This interpretation is consistent with arguments regarding global epistemic inequalities (Connell, 2007; Tikly, 2016) and recent evidence demonstrating that disability experiences are strongly shaped by political, economic, and institutional contexts (Gréaux et al., 2023; Boehm & Jammaers, 2024).

The findings also contribute to the theoretical, policy, and practical understanding of inclusive development. At the theoretical level, the coexistence of a consolidated psychosocial core with a more structurally articulated agenda around *ableism*, *intersectionality*, *equity*, and *inclusion* supports an understanding of disability-related well-being as dependent not only on individual psychological outcomes but also on the substantive opportunities, social arrangements, and structural conditions that enable participation. This interpretation is consistent with the capability approach, in which development is linked to the expansion of real opportunities to participate in social life, and with disability frameworks that emphasise the interaction between individual functioning and social context (Sen, 1999; Mitra, 2018).

At the policy level, the thematic prominence of discrimination, accessibility, employment, health equity, and human rights indicates that inclusive disability policies should move beyond compensatory or individually focused responses. The bibliometric structure suggests the need for policies that simultaneously address discriminatory institutional practices, barriers to participation, and inequalities in access to social and health-related opportunities. This interpretation is consistent with global evidence showing that health inequities among persons with disabilities are strongly shaped by avoidable structural and systemic barriers (WHO, 2022; Gréaux et al., 2023).

At the practical level, the integration of psychological, relational, and structural themes suggests that inclusive development initiatives should connect mental health and well-being support with accessibility, social participation, family and community support, and the active reduction of discriminatory barriers. Rather than treating psychological well-being as an isolated individual outcome, the thematic patterns identified in this study support context-sensitive practices that recognise participation and inclusion as conditions that can shape well-being. In this sense, the bibliometric findings translate the inclusive development perspective into identifiable research priorities related to equitable participation, barrier reduction, and the inclusion of diverse disability experiences in programme and service design (Mitra, 2018; Mannor & Needham, 2024; Funk et al., 2025).

The identified thematic patterns also have specific implications for Community-Based Rehabilitation (CBR). At the programme level, the centrality of *mental health*, *stigma*, *discrimination*, and *quality of life* indicates that CBR initiatives should more systematically integrate psychological well-being and anti-stigma components into community-based disability support. This priority is particularly relevant because people with psychosocial disabilities remain insufficiently included in CBR programmes in low- and middle-income settings, despite the potential of community-based approaches to promote participation and social inclusion (Butura et al., 2024). At the same time, the growing articulation

of *ableism*, *accessibility*, *employment*, and *health equity* suggests that programmes should not focus exclusively on individual functioning or adaptation, but should also identify and address environmental, institutional, and attitudinal barriers that restrict participation.

For CBR services, the relational and contextual themes identified in the network highlight the importance of involving persons with disabilities, families, caregivers, and community actors in programme planning and service delivery. Evidence from community-based inclusive development initiatives indicates that programme priorities and implementation strategies should be grounded in locally identified needs and meaningful community participation (Bachfischer et al., 2023). Similarly, evidence from CBR practice in Ethiopia highlights the importance of stakeholder engagement and inclusive evaluation processes for identifying programme challenges and improving implementation (Asres, 2025). The peripheral position of several disability-specific populations further suggests that CBR services should avoid assuming that a single model of intervention is equally applicable across physical, sensory, intellectual, psychosocial, and neurodevelopmental disabilities. Instead, services should be adapted to local participation barriers, support networks, and sociocultural conditions, particularly in settings where formal disability and mental health resources are limited.

Finally, the geographical concentration of scientific production, thematic fragmentation, and underrepresentation of disability-specific populations identified in this study point to important priorities for future research and CBR implementation. People with physical, sensory, and intellectual disabilities remain comparatively less visible within the thematic structure, possibly reflecting a growing research emphasis on cross-cutting concepts such as mental health, discrimination, stigma, and well-being rather than disability-specific conditions. Future studies should, therefore, examine how integrated psychosocial and structural interventions are adopted, adapted, and sustained across diverse community and sociocultural settings, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. This priority is supported by implementation evidence showing that limited resources, insufficient coordination, and weak collaboration among stakeholders can restrict the uptake and sustainability of CBR programmes (Blose et al., 2024). Given the predominance of observational research, longitudinal, intervention, participatory, qualitative, and mixed-methods designs are needed to identify implementation barriers, contextual mechanisms, and programme adaptations, while also examining how structural discrimination, ableism, and intersectionality influence psychological well-being. Greater involvement of persons with disabilities and local stakeholders in the design and evaluation of CBR research may further strengthen the contextual relevance and applicability of the resulting evidence.

Overall, the bibliometric evidence indicates that contemporary disability research is characterised by the coexistence of a consolidated psychosocial foundation and an increasingly articulated structural, relational, and rights-based research agenda. Rather than demonstrating a uniform transition between perspectives, the findings reveal uneven thematic development and geographical participation within the field. Addressing these imbalances will require research agendas that more explicitly connect psychological well-being with structural barriers, equitable participation, context-sensitive CBR implementation, and the inclusion of underrepresented disability populations and regions.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the analysis was restricted to the Scopus database. Although Scopus provides broad multidisciplinary coverage and is widely recognised for bibliometric research, the exclusion of other databases such as Web of Science, PubMed, or Dimensions may have resulted in the omission of relevant publications, particularly those indexed in regional or specialised sources. Likewise, restricting the search to English-language

documents may have limited the representation of research produced in other languages, especially from low- and middle-income countries.

Second, bibliometric analyses are inherently influenced by database indexing practices and citation dynamics. The predominance of publications from countries in the Global North may therefore reflect not only differences in research productivity but also the greater representation of English-language journals and institutions within Scopus. Similarly, citation-based indicators are subject to citation lag, meaning that recently published studies may not yet have accumulated citations comparable to older publications despite their potential scientific relevance.

Third, thematic analyses based on author keywords and keyword co-occurrence are affected by variations in terminology, indexing practices, and authors' keyword selection. Different terms may describe similar concepts, while inconsistencies in keyword assignment can influence network structures and thematic clustering. Consequently, keyword co-occurrence should be interpreted as an indicator of thematic prominence rather than definitive evidence of conceptual or theoretical change.

Finally, although bibliometric methods provide valuable insights into the evolution, structure, and collaboration patterns of scientific fields, they do not evaluate the methodological quality, risk of bias, or empirical robustness of individual studies. Therefore, the findings presented here should be interpreted as evidence of research trends rather than assessments of the strength or quality of the underlying scientific evidence.

Conclusion

This bibliometric study provides an updated overview of the scientific development of research on disability, discrimination, and psychological well-being between 2020 and 2025. The findings demonstrate sustained growth in scientific production, increasing citation impact, and progressive thematic diversification. Although mental health, stigma, and discrimination remain the dominant focus of the literature, the increasing visibility of ableism, intersectionality, equity, and rights-based approaches suggests that the field is gradually broadening its conceptual scope.

The results indicate that contemporary disability research is characterised by the coexistence of established psychosocial perspectives and increasingly articulated structural, social, and contextual approaches to well-being. Rather than reflecting a uniform shift between paradigms, the thematic structure reveals uneven conceptual development. Mental health, stigma, and discrimination remain central, while ableism, intersectionality, equity, and rights-based perspectives form a more structurally developed research agenda.

The study also highlights important research gaps. Scientific production and international collaboration remain concentrated in countries of the Global North, whereas evidence from Latin America and other low- and middle-income regions continues to be comparatively limited. Likewise, some disability groups, particularly people with physical, sensory, and intellectual disabilities, remain underrepresented within the thematic structure of the literature. Addressing these gaps will require greater geographical diversity, stronger international collaboration, and the expansion of longitudinal, intervention-based, participatory, and mixed-methods research.

Overall, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the evolution of research on disability, discrimination, and psychological well-being by identifying emerging themes, collaboration patterns, and current knowledge gaps. These findings provide evidence that can inform future research priorities, disability policy, Community-Based Rehabilitation (CBR), and inclusive development strategies aimed at reducing discrimination, promoting equitable participation, and improving the well-being of persons with disabilities.

DECLARATION

Data Availability Statement: The bibliographic data analyzed in this study were retrieved from the Scopus database using the search strategy described in the Methods section and detailed in Appendix A. Owing to Scopus licensing restrictions, the complete bibliographic dataset cannot be publicly shared. However, the search strategy, eligibility criteria, data cleaning procedures, and analytical workflow are reported in sufficient detail to ensure transparency and facilitate the reproducibility of the study.
Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.
Competing Interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.
Ethics Statement: This study was based exclusively on secondary bibliographic data retrieved from the Scopus database and did not involve human participants, personal data, or confidential records. Therefore, informed consent and formal ethical approval were not required. The study was conducted in accordance with principles of scientific integrity, transparency, and responsible data use.

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