

REVIEW

Belief, attitude and critical understanding. A systematic review of social justice in Service-Learning experiences

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Abstract

This systematic review examined the role of Service-Learning experiences promoted by higher education institutions to strengthen the achievement of social justice outcomes among youth. We screened and coded studies following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA). Of the 555 articles found in the database search, 47 peer-reviewed studies were included in the final sample. Social justice construct, together with research location, participants, target community and outcomes, were coded. Results show effects of Service-Learning experiences on (a) fostering significant improvement of students' social justice beliefs, (b) stimulating significant changes in students' attitudes with respect to the development of altruistic behaviours and their commitment to social justice, and (c) increasing students' critical understanding by sparking questioning processes related to personal assumptions of inequalities. This systematic review provides insights into the strengths and challenges of implementing social justice-oriented Service-Learning experiences.

KEYWORDS

critical reflection, higher education, Service-Learning, social justice, university students

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Since its origins, community psychology (CP) has recognized that inequity and injustice produce adverse effects on people's well-being (Dalton, Elias, & Wandersman, 2001). Some of the founding concepts of the discipline were based on a conception of social justice, even when they did not explicitly mention it. For example, empowerment and liberation in CP refer to processes that provide access to resources, self-determination and emancipation from some forms of oppression (Munger, MacLeod, & Loomis, 2016). As such, it can be claimed that community psychology has always been attentive to addressing and overcoming inequalities by acknowledging systemic inequities and injustices and giving voice to the needs of minority groups. In the last two decades, a call to action to pursue social justice in CP has become more prominent (Evans, Rosen, & Nelson, 2014). Indeed, Nelson and Prilleltensky (2010) defined community psychology as an applied science of social change, where social justice promotes people's well-being.

1.1 | Social justice

Nowadays, Social Justice (SJ) is usually portrayed as a social system where economic and social resources are equitably distributed to guarantee people's active and equal participation in social systems and their psychological and physical safety (Bell, 2007; Reason & Davis, 2005).

The term "Social Justice", however, has a long history. Munger et al. (2016) provided an historical review of its foundations, starting from Plato and Aristotle. They portray the classical, ancient view of justice as incorporating a philanthropic perspective, equating justice with helping the less fortunate, without any redistribution of power. This approach leaves the hierarchical structures unaltered. From their perspective, Locke, Hume and Rousseau represent a different perspective on social justice, that calls into question power, rights and property. Overall, these "contractualists" consider the social contract as a way to pacify conflicts that "naturally" arise from living together. The social contract however does not have the power per se to grant justice; nor does it require explicit rules and provisions that address the concerns of those in need (who deserve them). One of the most influential theories of justice is offered by John Rawls (1971/2005) who proposes the notions of distributive justice, the extent to which each individual has access to resources in a fair and equitable manner; and procedural justice, a concept that has been further developed by Fraser (2009) into the principle of participatory parity, which emphasizes that injustice is not limited to redistribution, but that it also includes recognition and representation, and occurs any time someone is limited in their ability to participate socially and politically on an equal basis with peers (see also Thrift & Sugarman, 2019, for additional historical perspectives).

CP did not avoid providing a conceptual and pragmatic framework for social justice, even if in many cases social justice has been assumed as a self-evident premise, or guiding principle for research and intervention without a precise conceptualization or discussion of the social positioning of the researchers (Fondacaro & Weinberg, 2002). Prilleltensky (2001) defined SJ as an equitable distribution of burdens, power, resources and rights according to people's needs, power and ability to express their needs. In 2012 he posited that distributive and procedural justice are concerned respectively with outcomes (what is distributed, for example, objective and subjective resources), and process (how resources are distributed), at different levels of analysis (intrapersonal, interpersonal, organizational, community) offering an ecological model for understanding the relationship between social justice and well-being (Prilleltensky, 2012). Similarly, Evans et al. (2014), recognized social justice as a multi-level construct grounded in the socio, historical, cultural and political contexts, with several subtypes. Young (1990) claims that the "ultimate goal" of SJ is social equality, seen as "the full participation and inclusion of everyone in a society's major institutions, and the socially supported substantive opportunity for all to develop and exercise their capacities and realize their choices" p. 173. In other words, SJ is intended to tackle oppression and social inequality based on race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation or social class, among other social group identities. This is made possible by supporting all

individuals within a community to have the opportunity to engage equally in community life and access the needed social and material resources, while developing a critical understanding of the social systems that structure their reality (Li, Yao, Song, Fu, & Chen, 2019). Social Justice is anchored in an understanding of social systems. But it is also a belief or attitude that emphasizes that the critical understanding of social systems, and of the systemic causes of inequalities, must be nurtured in people's mind (Tyler et al., 1997). Indeed, individuals with a heightened sense of social justice develop a sense of social and personal responsibility towards and with others, their community, and the broader world in which they live. This nurtures their civic-mindedness (Hatcher, 2011), and leads to a greater commitment to act towards social justice (Li et al., 2019; Nowell & Boyd, 2010).

1.2 | Engaged scholarship for social justice

Evidence of the increasing magnitude of social injustice and inequalities and their detrimental consequences for people's health and well-being is robust (e.g., Marmot, 2020) and has led to the formation of a class of engaged scholars (not only in CP) who have made a conscious effort to more directly address society's needs and challenges in their research and teaching activities. Beaulieu, Breton, and Brousselle (2018) define engaged scholarship as an academic stance, anchored in ideals of social justice and citizenship, that encourages academics and universities to operate in ways that will develop mutually beneficial and reciprocal linkages between university activity and civil society. This orientation of teaching and research towards social challenges has become known as the "third mission". Third mission activities engage the intellectual, human and physical resources of the university to address societal challenges (Soeiro et al., 2012). Although there are different interpretations of "third mission" (Knudsen et al., 2021), addressing the urgent social needs of communities, fostering social justice and supporting active citizenship, are common among the types of third mission activities adopted by "engaged" Higher Education Institutions. Universities can be an important actor in implementing projects and programs that address community needs and challenge inequalities (Knudsen et al., 2021). Students are key actors in third mission activities. Students can not only participate in activities that address societal challenges; but they also benefit greatly from this engagement with society, and particularly with social structures. Higher education institutions can contribute to the development of students' agency (i.e., confidence in one's capacity to effect change) by designing experiences that help them learn, strengthen, and deploy their civic competencies while developing a more critical worldview (Moore, Hope, Eisman, & Zimmerman, 2016). Indeed, helping youth to cultivate a sense of personal and social responsibility and civic engagement represents a way to contribute to democratic society that fosters social equality, thus contributing to SJ (Verba & Nie, 1987).

1.3 | Service-Learning

Service-Learning represents one way to implement the third mission and a scholarly engaged praxis. Service-Learning (SL) is a form of experiential education that integrates community service with class-based learning that allows students to participate in structured service activities that benefit both students' sense of responsibility and communities' needs (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995).

Many actors are involved in the SL experience: students, academic members, community partners (local institutions and organizations) and community members. Research findings on the impact of service learning on students can be divided into (a) personal outcomes, such as the improvement of communication skills, critical thinking, analytical skills, the ability to create new innovative solutions and problem-solving skills; (b) social outcomes, such as the ability to work both in independent and collaborative environments, teamwork and the attitudes towards the population one is serving; (c) citizenship outcomes, such as social awareness, sense of civic responsibility, civic engagement and social justice attitudes; and, (d) academic outcomes, such as positive attitudes towards schools, higher

motivation to learn and ability to apply knowledge in real-world contexts (Celio, Durlak, & Dymnicki, 2011; Compare & Albanesi, 2022; Cooper, Cripps, & Reisman, 2013; Salam, Iskandar, & Ibrahim, 2017; Salam, Iskandar, Ibrahim, & Farooq, 2019; Yorio & Ye, 2012).

Reflection represents a critical element of the SL experience. We can say that the development that SL fosters “do[es] not necessarily occur as a result of experience itself but as a result of [the] reflection process” (Jacoby & Associates, 2003, p. 4). The reflective process refers to regular and ongoing guided activities where students are asked to critically analyse their experiences (Butin, 2010a; Jacoby, 2015). It contributes to a “deeper understanding of social problems and makes it possible for students to identify, frame and resolve them as citizens in communities” (Eyler, 2002, p. 519).

By focusing on, and reflecting on, the root causes of social inequality, and the subsequent development of practical competencies to promote justice, SL can support students in moving along the continuum from “charity” to “Social Justice promotion” (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Kendall, 1990).

The charity paradigm is related to altruistic actions that imply direct service to communities and are based on a philanthropic perspective of helping the less fortunate. It builds on the idea that well-off citizens help underserved and less-advantaged “others,” not necessarily conceiving those served as being part of their own communities (Battstoni, 1997). On the contrary, the SJ paradigm considers service as a means to enact social change and activism, disrupting the unacknowledged binaries that guide much of our day-to-day thinking and acting (Butin, 2007). This disruption, in turn, forces a reconsideration of the taken-for-granted qualities of the structures and practices that previously seemed all too normal (Himley, 2004).

SL has been proven to effectively support students' reflection and understanding of Social Justice (Butin, 2008), and change students' perspectives on marginalized groups through their direct engagement with underserved and oppressed communities (Bringle, 2003). Findings show that SL fosters SJ-oriented beliefs and attitudes among students (Barr & Bracchitta, 2015; Brown, 2011); and that SL students significantly increase their Social Justice beliefs (Moely, McFarland, Miron, Mercer, & Illustre, 2002), develop SJ-oriented behaviours (Cooper et al., 2013) and raise their level of awareness of social inequality (Einfeld & Collins, 2008). Moreover, Rockquomore and Schaffer (2000) found that SL sustains students' attitudes towards SJ, fostering actions to create equality. Research on commitment and action to promote SJ as a result of participation in SL experiences is varied and considers both instructor (Baldwin, Buchanan, & Rudisill, 2007) and student perspectives (Boyle-Baise & Langford, 2004; Cipolle, 2010; Groh, Stallwood, & Daniels, 2011; Wang & Rodgers, 2006), and suggests that the community with which students interact can have an important role in strengthening their motivation and belief in a just world (Seider, Rabinowicz, & Gillmor, 2012).

However, the literature also highlighted that poorly structured SL experiences can reinforce stereotypes and fail to uncover the root causes of social inequality (Boyle-Baise, 2002; Gallini & Moely, 2003).

SL's capacity to contribute to students developing a better understanding of social justice and to mobilizing youth to actively work against injustice and inequality, is quite often treated as an intrinsic feature of SL or its added value. After exploring the existing literature that emphasizes the connection between the SJ construct and SL, a systematic review of the papers that document experiences of SL informed by a social justice framework was redacted. Indeed, despite a growing emphasis on the role of Social Justice in Service-Learning experiences, with many articles recalling the relevance of the SJ construct, no systematic review to inquire about the work accomplished hitherto has been conducted. Therefore, the current paper aims at reviewing the published articles on the topic and answering the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the characteristics of the studies that embed Social Justice in Service-Learning experiences?

RQ2: Which theoretical frameworks are adopted in defining SJ in SL experiences?

RQ3: What outcomes are associated with SL experiences in SJ?

RQ4: With which target communities are SL experiences in SJ associated?

To answer these questions, detailed steps for conducting the systematic review suggested by PRISMA were followed (Moher et al., 2009).

2 | METHODS

Systematic reviews can provide overviews of the state of knowledge in a field, from which future research priorities can be outlined. Moreover, they can answer questions that individual studies would otherwise be unable to answer, identifying flaws in primary research that should be addressed in future research while generating or evaluating theories about how or why the phenomena occur. As a result, systematic reviews generate a wide range of knowledge for various audiences (i.e., researchers, policymakers, practitioners, etc.) (Page et al., 2021). Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) is a reporting guideline that aims to improve systematic review reporting. It provides authors with recommendations on how to organize transparent, complete and accurate accounts of why the review was done, how it was done and its findings (Moher et al., 2009). Given its broad consensus among multiple journals and different disciplines, our search and analysis process was guided by PRISMA replicable protocols.

2.1 | Search and sampling strategy

Two databases were searched to collect articles on the topic: Web of Science and Scopus. Web of Science is a robust database covering more than 250 fields of studies and more than 30,000 journals; meanwhile, Scopus is one of the most extensive abstracts and citation databases of peer-reviewed literature. The review period included articles published between 1967 (when the SL term was coined; Stanton, Giles Jr, & Cruz, 1999) and October 2021 (when the search was run). To identify eligible studies, we entered search terms using the Boolean operators AND, OR. Our search criteria included terms associated with the SL construct and its possible wording (i.e., “service learning” OR service-learning) AND SJ reference (i.e., “social justice”). The search term was used to explore keywords in the Scopus TITLE, ABSTRACT, KEYWORD sections, and the Web of Science ALL FIELD section.

2.2 | Eligibility criteria

Eligibility criteria focused on three key elements: (a) study characteristics (published, empirical studies, published in peer-reviewed journals, published in English); (b) experience setting (studies comprised participants directly or indirectly involved in higher education SL experience – e.g., university students or community partners' and members' narration of higher education SL experience in their community); (c) reflection on the SJ construct (studies where authors reflected on the meaning of the SJ construct and its relation with the SL experience).

2.3 | Study selection

The systematic search process included four phases (see Figure 1), led by the authors (i.e., a doctoral student and a faculty member). Both authors established the eligibility criteria and searched, screened and coded the studies. After conducting electronic searches using the databases and search terms described, Phase 1 involved preliminary screening of the titles to identify potential duplicates. The search resulted in 555 studies, of which 125 were duplicates. In Phase 2, articles were assessed for meeting Study Criteria (a): study characteristics inclusion. This resulted in the removal of 150 records which were either not published, non-peer-reviewed or not written in English. In Phase 3, full articles were retrieved and further assessed for meeting the Study Criteria (b) and Study Criteria (c). This resulted in

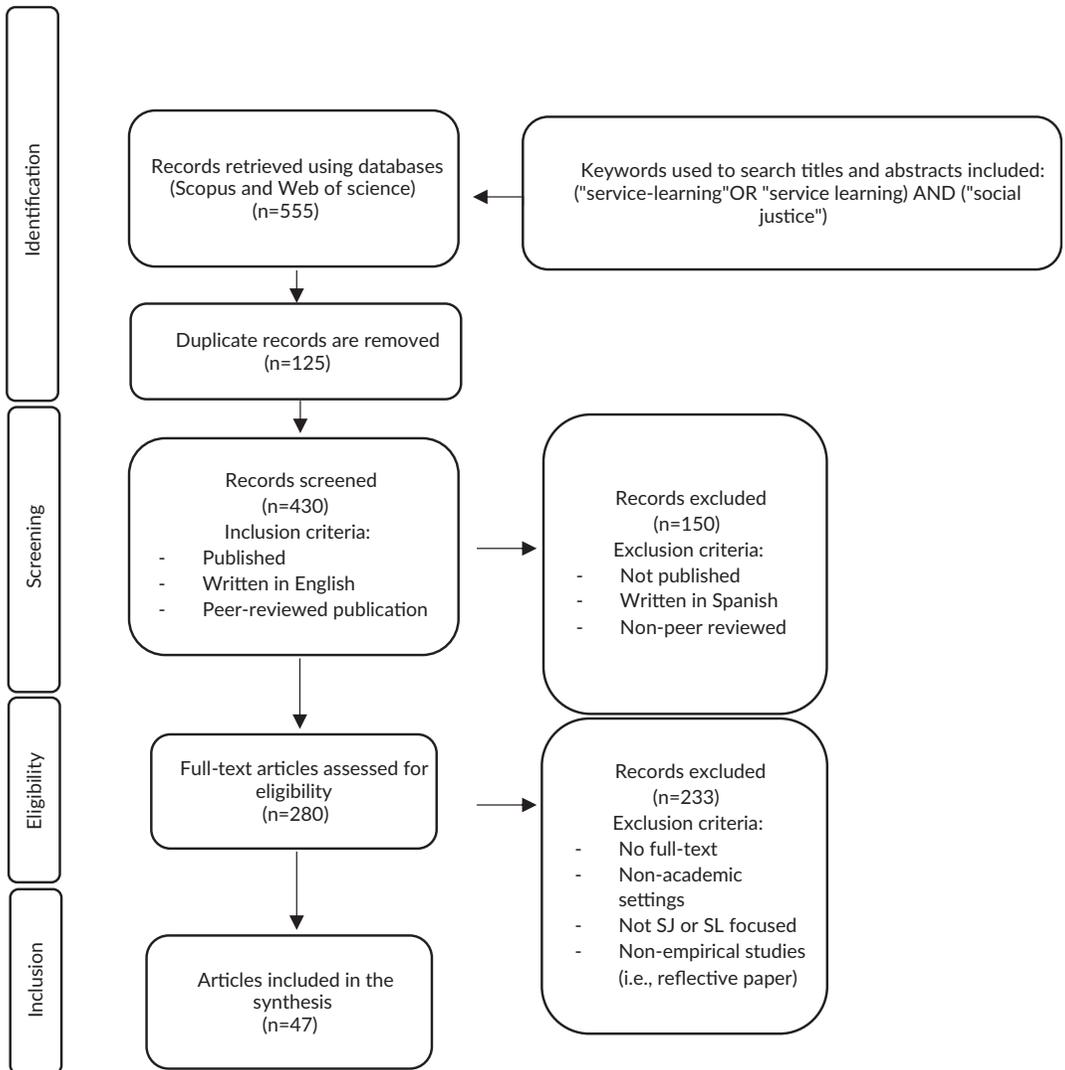


FIGURE 1 Flow diagram, Identification, screening and eligibility of the review sample. Source: Moher et al. (2009).

an additional 233 records being removed from the study for the following reasons: 10 records had no full-text availability; 10 records were from non-academic settings (e.g., K-12 settings); 134 records were non-empirical studies (i.e., conceptual works, essays, reflective papers, methodological papers, review papers and self-studies); 79 records were not explicitly focused on SL or SJ (i.e., poor SJ reflection, non-SL experiences, no SL samples specified, no SJ references, etc.). Phase 4 involved the analysis of all the remaining articles (i.e., 47 records), following the standards for such reviews. The screening criteria were systematically defined. Each record was independently reviewed by each of the two researchers. Then, the researchers met to resolve any discrepancies in their analysis.

2.4 | Data items

The articles' analysis can be summarized in three main sections reported below.

2.5 | Study characteristics

Study author(s)' discipline and country were recorded for each study. Furthermore, study methods were coded as quantitative, qualitative or mixed research methods (these codes were mutually exclusive). In addition, where possible, each study design was coded as stated in the article, including: grounded theory, critical discourse analysis (CDA), critical ethnography, multi-sited ethnography, ethnographic case study, case study, cohort sequential, experimental, cross-sectional, quasi-experimental, two-phase exploratory, comparative, pre/post and/or longitudinal. Research instruments included questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, field logs, reflective papers/journals, focus groups, observations, collection of documents, essays, portfolios, photographs and artefacts. Participants included college, university and Ph.D. students in the SL experiences, alumni, researchers and community members (e.g., teachers, K-12 students, community partners). Sample sizes were recorded, and, where possible, demographics were reported, including age, gender and ethnicity.

2.6 | Social justice construct

For each study, references to the SJ construct were collected. Six papers [3,13,18,19,26,29]¹ included references to the construct's distributive and procedural justice dimension that pushes individuals and communities towards more equitable societies (Bell, 2007; Chambers, 2009; Goodman et al., 2004; Warren, 1998). Following these dimensions of SJ, two articles [20,38] focused on the role of psychology, and community psychology in particular, in dismantling oppressive social systems (APA, 2003; Prilleltensky, 2001; Torres-Harding, Steele, Schulz, Taha, & Pico, 2014). Other articles [8,21,28,40,41,42] highlighted the relevance of the SJ dimension for the training of prospective teachers (Ayers, Hunt, & Quinn, 1998; Guyton, 2000; Hawkins & Norton, 2009); while one article [45] emphasized the relevance of the SJ approach to mental health services (Graham, 1999). The most common perspective adopted by the papers [6,11,30,31,34,36,37,39,43,46] presented SJ as intertwined with experiential and reflexive experiences like SL, especially in its critical form (Boyle-Baise & Langford, 2004; Donahue, 1999; Donahue, Bowyer, & Rosenberg, 2003; Einfeld & Collins, 2008; Freire, 1970 2000; Mitchell, 2007; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2014). Other papers [1,2,4,7,10,14,16,22,23,24,25,32,33] highlighted how SL is an empowering approach that lets students experience a sense of agency as citizens, working on civically engaged activities. These studies focused on students developing values and a personal sense of social responsibility, indicating SJ as one of the most desirable SL outcomes (Barker, 2000; Beatty, 2010; Bennett, 2003; Chupp & Joseph, 2010; Jacoby & Associates, 2009; Kaye, 2010; Sofka & Lynskey, 2011; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004; Yep, 2011). Two papers [17,35] contemplated SL experiences as a means to move students along a continuum from providing charity towards promoting SJ (Kendall, 1990; Morton, 1997). Finally, some additional distinctions of the constructs were reported in some articles, such as "disability justice" to describe and understand disability as an issue of SJ [12] (Ostiguy, Peters, & Shlasko, 2016), and "just sustainability" as the need to ensure a better quality of life for all in a just and equitable manner [27] (Agyeman, Bullard, & Evans, 2002). Five articles [5,9,15,44,47] had no explicit reference to the SJ framework in the literature section, but they embedded reflections on the construct throughout the experience and in the discussion and conclusion. For this reason, they were therefore included in the analysis.

2.7 | Social justice outcomes associated with Service-Learning

Students' social justice outcomes were outlined as any change in participants' understanding of reality and/or improvement of their beliefs and action towards justice. The outcomes identified included the following:

- a. Improvement in the students' SJ beliefs; SL students became more interested in issues of SJ and diversity [9,16,30,37,47] by reflecting on their perspectives and privilege while engaging in different contexts [5,27,35,43,45]. SJ beliefs were significantly improved in SL students when compared to non-service activities [29].

- b. Changes in students' attitudes towards SJ; SL compelled students to respond to pressing issues in society by challenging current norms and engaging in altruistic behaviours [1,15,23,34,36]. SL enabled community members' empowerment against injustice with the help of students' commitment [10], reframed students' approach to disability [11,12], migration [31] and underserved communities [13,14], while orienting them towards a more social justice-oriented perspective on citizenship [2,3]. These effects were stronger in SL students when compared to other experiential or didactic activities [25,42] and when SL post-surveys are compared to SL pre-surveys [33].
- c. Deeper students' critical understanding; SL represented a way for students to increase their awareness of SJ and civic responsibilities [4,18,20,39], see how communities are affected by inequalities [8,19,44], experience the emotional toll of their impact on the issues they encountered [22,26]. This focus on critical understanding is reported to be one of the key aspects of preventing SL from being a "charitable exercise" that replicates and reinforces oppressive systems and ensures that the discourse of social justice becomes more entrenched in the students' frames of reference as citizens and future professionals [6,7,21,28,38,41].

Finally, a minority of articles ($n = 4$) reported a lack of change connected to the SL experiences. For example, two studies found that SL was not significantly relevant to helping students injustice compared to participants' personal history of experienced inequalities [17,24]. And, two other studies identified students' incapability of verbalizing and theorizing SJ values as an issue [40,46]. Furthermore, one study [32] reported lower scores on social justice responsibility after the SL experience. A response-shift bias explained this phenomenon, which occurs when students overestimate their self-reported competencies at the time of the pretest and, through the course of a particular intervention, recognize that their actual skill level was much lower than what they initially reported (Rohs & Langone, 1997). In this sense, SL might be perceived as a positive experience that makes students more aware.

3 | RESULTS

Table 1 provides a summary of all the included studies, each identified by a number from 1 to 47. Of the 47 studies, the majority were qualitative ($n = 34$), and the remaining were quantitative ($n = 8$) and mixed-method ($n = 5$). More than half of the studies ($n = 27$) had a case study design and included interviews and/or focus groups for data collection ($n = 31$). This result demonstrates the popularity of the qualitative method and case study to examine SL experiences in general (Donahue, 1999). The majority of the articles ($n = 20$) was published by authors belonging to educational disciplines, followed by psychology ($n = 8$; i.e., community, counselling, educational and school psychology), cross-disciplinary ($n = 8$), health science ($n = 3$), anthropology ($n = 1$), audiology ($n = 1$), chemistry ($n = 1$), counselling ($n = 1$), food and nutrition science ($n = 1$), nursing ($n = 1$), social work ($n = 1$) and sociology ($n = 1$).

All the included studies were conducted and published in the last two decades (i.e., from 2004 to 2021), with the vast majority of them published after 2011 ($n = 36$) and the remaining before 2010 ($n = 11$). This result aligns with the renewed interest in theorizing about justice itself that emerged in the latter half of the twentieth century (Weigert, 2015).

In terms of their locations, most of the studies were conducted in the United States ($n = 27$), 5 in South Africa, 3 in the Philippines, 2 in China, 1 in Canada, 1 in Chile, 1 in Ecuador, 1 in India, 1 in Mauritius, 1 in Pakistan, 1 in Singapore, 1 in Spain, 1 in Switzerland (with SL activities in Rwanda and Kenya), and 1 in the United Kingdom.

Almost all of the articles involved students (college, university, master, Ph.D., alumni) as exclusive participants of the study ($n = 39$). Seven studies involved scholars and community members (e.g., researchers, teachers, elder adults, high school students) in addition to university students; and one study focused exclusively on community members (i.e., teachers and two groups of school students) to collect data over the SJ dimension of the SL experience. This confirms the findings that speak to a relative lack of studies focusing on community members, and community partners in the SL literature (Compare, Pieri, & Albanesi, 2022).

TABLE 1 Description of included studies (N = 47)

Reference	Method	Design	Measures	Participants	Context
1 Adario (2020)	Qualitative	Multi-sited ethnography	Fieldwork notebook, reflexive journals, semi-structured interviews	University students (18)	Extremely poor children and community members
2 Adario and Marquez (2017)	Qualitative	Case study	Observation, reflexive journals, semi-structured interviews	University students (24; 17 women, 7 men; 24 Filipinos; ages 20 to 22)	Communities with low access to healthcare
3 Adario and Pelias (2021)	Qualitative	Ethnographic case study	Observation, descriptive notes, portfolios, semi-structured interviews [provided]	University students (3; 3 women)	Pre-school children of an urban poor community
4 Ahmad and Gul (2021)	Qualitative	Exploratory research	Semi-structured interviews	College students (12)	Health professionals
5 Akiba (2021)	Quantitative	Case study	Ad-hoc post-participation survey [provided]	International university students (11; 9 women, 2 men)	Homeless youth
6 Andrews and Leonard (2018)	Qualitative	Ethnographic multi-case study	Interviews, focus groups, field notes, artefacts	Ph.D. students (8); community members (10)	Economically disadvantaged middle school students
7 Asghar and Rowe (2017)	Qualitative	Case study	Semi-structured interviews	University students (11)	Users of mental health services
8 Baldwin et al. (2007)	Qualitative	Case study	Semi-structured interviews and reflective papers [partially provided]	University students (41; 29 women, 12 men; 2 African American, 1 Latina)	Community members who needed literacy or motor-skill acquisition courses
9 Barnes (2016)	Quantitative	Quasi-experimental longitudinal	Service-Learning Self-Evaluation Tool (SLESET; Groh, Stallwood & Daniels, 2011)	University students (371; 29 men, 342 women; ages 20 to >55)	Homeless, elders, at-risk teenagers, children, mental health users, migrants, domestic violence victims.
10 Bhagwan, Naidu, and Panwar (2021)	Qualitative	Case study	Semi-structured interviews	University student (11; 11 women); Faculty (6)	Young women in deep rural communities
11 Bialka, Havlik, Mancini, and Marano (2019)	Qualitative	Case study	Focus group and reflective journals	University students (12; 4 men, 8 women); community members (3 teenage boys)	Youth with visual disabilities

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Reference	Method	Design	Measures	Participants	Context
12 Bialka and Morro (2018)	Qualitative	Exploratory case study	Interviews and course assignments	University students (18; 16 women and 2 men; 16 white, 1 middle eastern, 1 African American)	University students with physical disabilities
13 Boyle-Baise and Langford (2004)	Qualitative	Case study	Interviews, participant observation and collected documents [provided]	College students (8; 7 women, 1 man; 5 white, 2 African American, 1 Asian)	Low-income children, Age 4–11
14 Brown (2005)	Qualitative	Case study	Focus groups, reflective journals, class discussions, culminating reports (students); letters, questionnaires, reviews (community members); field notes, observations, interviews (scholar)	University master students (73); Community members (secondary students, teachers, administrators, parents); Scholar (1)	Urban public secondary school students
15 Cooper et al. (2013)	Quantitative	Longitudinal pre/post	Community Service Attitudes Scale (CSAS; Shiarella, McCarthy, & Tucker, 2000)	University students (26; 23 women, 3 men; 21 Caucasian, 5 African American; ages 18 to 29)	Deaf people
16 Diaz, Ramia, Bramwell, and Costales (2019)	Mixed-method	Experimental pre/post	Survey (CASQ; Moely et al., 2002); semi-structured interviews	University students (396; 218 women, 171 men; mean age 20)	Children 0–11 years old, adolescence 12–17 years old, adults >18 years old
17 Einfeld and Collins (2008)	Qualitative	Case study	Semi-structured interviews	University students (9; 6 women, 3 men; 7 white, 2 African American; age 19–23)	Community center, at-risk teenage girls, people with developmental disabilities, English learners as second language
18 Grapin, Cunningham, and Sital (2021)	Qualitative	Case study	Semi-structured interviews	Undergraduate students (11; 11 women; 6 white, 4 Latinx, 1 middle eastern; ages 20 to 30)	K-12 school districts
19 Grobelaar, Napier, and Maistry (2017)	Qualitative	Case study	Focus groups	University students (48; 40 women, 8 men)	Children and youth of a health clinic

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Reference	Method	Design	Measures	Participants	Context
20 Guerrero, Anderson, Catlett, Sánchez, and Liao (2021)	Qualitative	Case study	Semi-structured interviews	University students (30: 21 women, 9 men; 17 white, 9 Latinx, 4 Asian, 4 African American, 1 middle eastern, 1 native American -multiple options reported; mean age 22)	Community members (not better specified)
21 Guthrie and McCracken (2010)	Qualitative	Case study	Qualitative surveys and semi-structured interviews	University students (28: 18 women, 10 men; 21 Caucasian, 4 African American, 2 Latinx, 1 multiethnic; ages 20 to 55)	Non-profit agencies and organizations
22 Hamby and Brinberg (2016)	Qualitative	Case study	Essays [provided]	Undergraduate students (14: 11 women, 3 men; ages 20 to 21)	Underprivileged primary school-aged Kenyan and Rwandan youth
23 Hardin-Ramanan, Balla Soupramanien, and Delapeyre (2018)	Qualitative	Case study	Focus groups	Undergraduate students (23)	People with disabilities
24 Iverson and James (2010)	Qualitative	Longitudinal pre/post	Writings, field logs	University students (22; 21 women, 1 man; 20 white, 2 African American; ages 20 to 24)	Community organizations (not better specified)
25 Killian and Floren (2020)	Quantitative	Quasi-experimental	Advocacy Competencies Self-Assessment (ACSA) Survey (Ratts & Ford, 2010)	University students (60: 50 women, 10 men; 47 white, 6 Latinx, 3 African American, Asian 1, multiethnic 3; ages 22 to 59)	Assisted living facilities, homeless shelters, food banks, religious organizations, Asian Pacific center, LGBT centers, refugee and immigrant adolescent, people with disabilities

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Reference	Method	Design	Measures	Participants	Context
26 Koch, Ross, Wendell, and Aleksandrova-Howell (2014)	Qualitative	Consensual research	Semi-structured interviews	University master students (9; 7 women, 2 men; 5 white, 4 African American; ages 23 to 42)	High-needs school (children and teachers)
27 Larsen et al. (2014)	Qualitative	Longitudinal pre/post	Journals, written assignments, pre-post open-ended survey	University students (23; 16 women, 7 men)	Delray community
28 Leiva, Miranda, and Riquelme-Sanderson (2021)	Mixed-method	Descriptive and exploratory	Ad-hoc survey (open and closed), focus groups, course evaluation questionnaire [all provided]	University students (39; 25 women, 14 men; ages 21 to 25)	Children from low-income families and different cultural backgrounds who live in vulnerable communities
29 Li et al. (2019)	Mixed-method	Quasi-experimental pre/post	Social justice subscale (CASQ; Moely et al., 2002); reflexive journal	University students (60; 28 men, 32 women; mean age = 19.8 years)	At-risk adolescents; adolescents with CP (cerebral palsy)
30 Lo (2019)	Qualitative	Critical inquiry	Reflective writings (students), semi-structured interviews (community members)	University students (3; 2 women, 1 man); community members - adolescents (3; 2 girls, 1 boy)	Adolescents
31 Lund and Lianne (2015)	Qualitative	Critical ethnography	Interviews, observations, field notes	University students (10; 10 women; 9 white; ages 23 to 49); community mentors	Children and youth of immigrant families
32 Mayhew and Engberg (2011)	Quantitative	Longitudinal	Student Service-Learning Course Survey (SSLC; Wang, Ye, Jackson, Rodgers, & Jones, 2005)	College students (178; 120 women, 58 men; 163 white; ages around 18)	Homeless
33 Midgett and Doumas (2016)	Quantitative	Cross-sectional	Advocacy Competencies Self-Assessment (ACSA) Survey (Ratts & Ford, 2010).	University students (38; 31 women, 7 men; 35 white, 1 Latinx, 1 Asian, 1 native American; mean age 32)	Refugees
34 Mitchell (2007)	Qualitative	Grounded theory	Essays, reflective writings, interviews, focus group	University students (11)	Children, parents, community housing advocates

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Reference	Method	Design	Measures	Participants	Context
35 Mitchell and Humphries (2007)	Qualitative	Case study	Participatory techniques, interviews, focus group	Community partners (2 groups of school students, 11–14 years old and 17–19 years old; 2 teachers)	Adolescents
36 Mitchell and Rost-Banik (2019)	Mixed-method	Case study	Ad-hoc survey, in-depth interviews	Alumni (192; 153 women, 39 men; 161 white; graduated from 1995 and 2010)	Different community projects (not better specified)
37 Mobley (2007)	Quantitative	Longitudinal comparative	Ad-hoc survey [provided]	University students (61)	Homeless
38 Moy et al. (2014)	Qualitative	Cohort-sequential	Focus groups [provided]	University students (37; 33 women, 4 men; 5 form ethnic minority groups)	Different community projects (not better specified)
39 Mtawa and Wilson-Strydom (2018)	Qualitative	Case study	Interviews, focus groups	University students (41); Lecturers (3); Community members and partners (11; ages 30 to >60)	Black communities
40 Petersen (2007)	Qualitative	Critical discourse analysis, grounded theory	Journals, photographs, collages and educational artefacts	University students (44)	People with TB, people with HIV or AIDS
41 Petersen and Henning (2018)	Qualitative	Case study	Reflexive journals, essays, educational artefacts	University students (not better specified)	Primary school students
42 Prentice (2007)	Quantitative	Quasi-experimental comparative pre/post	Civic Engagement Survey (Prentice, 2007)	College students (149; <25 years old)	Community issues (not better specified)
43 Rondini (2015)	Qualitative	Case study	Reflection and reading synthesis papers, semi-structured interviews	College students (12)	HIV/AIDS advocacy organization, people with dementia-related illnesses, food bank/pantry organization
44 Ruiz-Montero, Chiva-Bartoll, Salvador-García, and González-García (2020)	Qualitative	Case study	Reflective journals (students), semi-structured group interviews (community members)	University students (23; 3 women, 20 men), community members (older adults)	Disadvantaged older adults

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Reference	Method	Design	Measures	Participants	Context
45 Smith, Jennings, and Lakhan (2014)	Qualitative	Case study	Open-ended questionnaire	Master students (17; 15 women, 2 men; 13 euro-Americans, 2 Asian Americans, 1 Arab American, 1 multiracial); Ph.D. students (3; 2 women, 1 man; 1 Asian American, 2 multiracial).	Adolescent girls who are the survivors of abuse
46 Tinkler, Hannah, Tinkler, and Miller (2014)	Mixed-method	Two-phase exploratory	Interviews, ad-hoc surveys with close- and open-ended items	University students (72; Qual = 37; 9 men, 28 women; 35 Caucasian; ages 19 to 30; Quan = 35; 7 men, 28 women; 33 European American, 1 native American, 1 multiracial; ages 18 to 44)	Almost illiterate students from low socioeconomic backgrounds
47 Whiteley, Walsh, Hayden, and Gould (2017)	Qualitative	Longitudinal pre/post	Interviews, reflection journals, written reflections, observations	University students (3; 2 women; 1 man; 1 Mexican American; 1 Filipino; 1 Caucasian; ages 22 to 27)	High school students

The sample size mean of the studies was $M_{\text{size}} = 51.6$ with a high standard deviation value ($SD = 83$), with two missing values. The majority of the studies involved less than 30 participants ($n = 28$; participants' range 3–30), twelve studies had less than 100 participants (participants' range 37–72), and five studies worked with more than 100 participants (participants' range 149–396). The small sample sizes is an indication of the SL experience, which is often conducted with small groups of students. It is also reflective of the constraints of the qualitative methodology, which, according to some scholars, reaches data saturation with a sample size of 12 (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

The target communities of the studies were very heterogeneous and primarily involved youth ($n = 26$; e.g., low-income children, at-risk adolescents, homeless youth, adolescents with medical conditions, survivors of abuse). 16 studies involved adults and older adults, and five studies did not specify the target community of the SL activities.

4 | DISCUSSION

This study's general objective was to analyse the characteristics of social justice-oriented SL experiences by carrying out a systematic review of the papers that document experiences of SL informed by a social justice framework. SL's capacity to contribute to a better understanding of social justice and as a way to mobilize youth against injustice and inequality is quite often treated as an intrinsic feature of SL or its added value.

Regarding the first research question (RQ1), we see that only around 17% of the studies initially identified met the selection criteria (phase 1 and phase 2 screening excluded). Moreover, 34% of the screened-out studies had poor or no reflection on the SJ construct (e.g., SJ only stated as a keyword or as an outcome in the abstract section but nowhere else investigated). This result suggests that social justice in most SL research has been used as an overarching theme, poorly defined and seldomly operationalized. This result resonates with Butin's (2010b) concerns about the “mythical equivalence” of social justice in SL as a neutral and already agreed-upon principle.

With regard to the geographical representation of the publications and methodological concerns, our results align with recent reviews (Camilli Trujillo, Cuervo Calvo, García Gil, & Bonastre Valles, 2021; Stewart & Wubbena, 2015). Although it may be affected by the language and the “Service-Learning” term selection criteria, the prevalence of US publications (58%, $n = 27$) is more likely to reflect the more extensive adoption of SL programs in North America compared to other areas of the world. Camilli Trujillo et al. (2021) suggested that qualitative methodology is prevalent in SL research and asked for more methodological strength in SL research, calling for more mixed-method studies, where qualitative data can corroborate quantitative results and lead to additional insights not gleaned from one approach alone (Creswell, 2015; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). The results of our review converged with those suggestions. Only five articles adopted a mixed-method design to understand the processes that occur during the various stages/activities of social justice-oriented SL. However, mixed-method has proven to be very effective in understanding the degree and processes of change (Albanesi, Prati, Guarino, & Cicognani, 2021). All papers emphasized reflection as SL's core process, which underpins its capacity to push students towards more significant engagement with SJ. The emphasis on the reflection process explains the methodological choices of the reviewed papers. There was a clear preference for case studies, where the case is considered contingent, requiring analysis and recognition of the situational context in which the SL takes shape. Radley and Chamberlain (2012) claim that to comprehend how individuals engage their worlds necessitates an acknowledgment of agency and, with that, of particularity. Agency is a core dimension of SL: students are engaged in the community; they learn by doing and reflecting. To understand the process that prioritized SJ concerns, most reviewed papers explicitly focused on students' experience by analysing their service within SL and how their doing affected their worldviews.

Even though 72% ($n = 34$) of the studies used qualitative methodologies which acknowledge the contextual nature of knowledge creation, only 17% ($n = 8$) of the studies incorporated the faculty's and/or the community members' perspectives. Triangulating perspectives can contribute to understanding the reflective process and how it operates in SL, but in more than 80% of the studies, faculty and community members' perspective and voice are missing. This finding seems to contradict the emphasis that the SL field places on reciprocity (Dostilio et al., 2012), as

faculty and community members were not seen as active actors in the changes that occur as a result of the SL experience.

For the second research question (RQ2), the studies present an interesting picture of what SJ is in the SL community. First, SJ is a principle that pushes individuals and communities towards equity and equality, influencing different academic fields (e.g., psychology, mental health science, education). This transdisciplinary approach suggests the SJ construct's relevance in transforming societies through the training of more responsible and justice-oriented citizens and professionals.

Moreover, the findings show that social justice concepts have been embraced by, and embedded in, community discourse as it pertains to different social issues such as sustainability and disability rights. This shows the pervasiveness and relevance of social justice, equity and equality as concepts in various social contexts.

Finally, the findings showed that students develop a sense of civic agency and sense of social responsibility as a result of SL's experiential and self-reflexive pedagogy. This greatly facilitates students' deep understanding of power dynamics and systemic inequities.

Regarding the third research question (RQ3), our review highlights that SL delivers, in a structured way (e.g., experiential learning, engagement with vulnerable and underprivileged communities, reflection activities), opportunities for students' engagement to directly address SJ issues. It also showed evidence of the outcomes related to SJ in SL experiences, such as (a) fostering significant improvement of students' SJ beliefs, (b) initiating changes in students' attitudes development of altruistic behaviours and commitment to SJ, and (c) students' critical understanding by sparking questioning processes over personal assumptions of inequalities.

While the findings provided a clearer picture of the outcomes of SJ-oriented SL experiences for university students, outcomes for faculty, community partners or community members were not clarified. What kind of knowledge and understanding do faculty and community partners gain in terms of their capacity to promote social justice? Are they encouraged by encounters with youth to envisage different dimensions of injustice? Are they questioning or discussing their privilege as part of the process? The review only partially answers the second question; one of the studies [9], reported how in a deep rural context in India, young women were empowered by the experience and exchange with students to take a stance against the destruction of female foetus life and bring back the value of girls and women in such communities. Unfortunately, the review did not answer other questions and did not shed light on how SL experiences support or hinder instructors and faculty concerning their own civically engaged and SJ-oriented scholarship. However, more than one scholar (Bringle, Hatcher, & Williams, 2011) claims that it would be essential to explain the perspectives and the differences between the groups that form part of the SL project.

For our last research question (RQ4), we found that many SJ-oriented SL experiences engaged students with vulnerable youth (58%, $n = 27$). This result could be explained by the fact that SL is popular in teacher education and medical programs (Salam et al., 2019). To our knowledge, no previous review has systematically analysed who the beneficiaries of SL experiences are, representing an original contribution of this study. It would be interesting to understand to what extent the target community in SJ-oriented SL is chosen based on relevance (Butin, 2010b) and on identification (e.g., where youth can choose whom to work with and choose to do it with other youth because they see their peers' reality closer to theirs), rather than as the result of a "technical" consequence of the curriculum.

5 | CONCLUSION

Service-Learning is perceived as a means to orient students' attitudes towards SJ, fostering actions to create greater social equity (Rockquermore & Schaffer, 2000). In our findings, SL is confirmed to be a positive learning experience that engages students in social justice-oriented actions. Indeed, most studies report positive changes in students' relationships with the SJ construct. Nevertheless, SL also represents a tough challenge. As previous research indicates, poorly structured SL experiences can reinforce stereotypes and fail to uncover the root causes of social inequities (Boyle-Baise, 2002; Gallini & Moely, 2003; Mtawa & Wilson-Strydom, 2018). If related power dynamics are

not taken into account, SL risks perpetuating, rather than challenging, oppressive social relations (Hart & Akhurst, 2017).

According to Hart and Akhurst (2017), SL supports learning in community psychology by fostering the development of anti-oppressive community practice. However, it also can be corrosive by endorsing neoliberal and managerial interests through its advancement of the employability agenda. In this perspective, SL represents a way to deliver community psychology-oriented experiences, allowing students to engage in transformative learning situations based on stepping outside their comfort zones to develop a critical awareness that supports anti-oppressive action (Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005). Despite being considered an interesting vehicle for promoting and developing critical community psychology practice (Mitchell, 2008), studies conducted by psychology scholars are a minority of the sample (17%; $n = 8$), with only one coming from the community psychology field.

We acknowledge some limitations, such as adopting exclusive categories like the English language, the higher education context or the fact that we only reviewed empirical studies. Almost half of the excluded papers on this topic (48%; $n = 134$) are reflexive, conceptual and methodological papers and essays that argue the meaning of SJ in SL experiences. While we decided to focus on the empirical studies in this review because we wanted to collect research-based evidence, further studies should also focus on non-empirical studies. Reflective papers of SL instructors or scholars engaged in SL institutionalization could be a source of understanding of the faculty perspective on SL's capacity to promote SJ or, even more interestingly, the relevance of SJ as a motive for adopting SL methodology.

Another limitation concerns the terminology connected to SL experiences. We are aware that some studies use other terms interchangeably (e.g., community-based learning or community-engaged). However, we decided to rely on the most common -and precise- term to refer to these kinds of methodology. Future studies can also use more inclusive search strategies and rely on different databases.

Despite these limitations, our paper provides different insights on the role of SJ in SL experiences.

The review highlights how, as soon as general renewed interest in theorizing SJ values arose, researchers started to empirically look for relationships between SJ and SL. So, the timespan of the publications emphasizes the strong perceived connection between these two frameworks.

The paper also contributed to clarifying the target community of SJ-oriented SL experiences, offering a reflection on the meaning of involving young community members when promoting experiential and community-based learning such as SL to university students.

Furthermore, the paper highlights the need for methodological rigour in designing SL empirical research (only 8 of 39 studies that used ad-hoc surveys, semi-structured interviews, or focus groups provided items wording or guidelines) and detailing the involved participants (only 30% of studies specified the participants' gender, age and ethnicity).

Finally, our findings offer insights on the role of community psychology in advancing Social Justice-oriented Service-Learning research, encouraging more participatory research capable of triangulating the voice of different actors (students, faculty, community partners and community members), facing the challenges to work towards liberation and transformation, rather than merely amelioration (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010).

6 | FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

One last contribution of this study concerns understanding future research needs. We propose different indications to guide future research directions and efforts.

This study uncovered how sometimes SJ is used as a label rather than an approach. Moreover, we presented how poor reflections on power dynamics and systemic injustice can be corrosive to students' understanding and stance for justice. Therefore, the first indication is related to authentically embedding the social justice construct into the SL experience, clarifying SJ meaning and conceptualization, and recognizing the value and the additional reflexive work it entails, compared with the philanthropic approach. In this regard, we encourage SJ committed faculty members and community organizations to bring this perspective explicitly into SL classes and in the SL discourse when

establishing university-community partnerships. Both academic curriculum and practice can benefit from integrating a profound reflection on the capacity of promoting SJ, leading to a discussion on privilege and challenging injustice.

Although previous studies have provided evidence on the effects of SJ-oriented SL experiences, further research is needed. For instance, studies have mainly involved students as participants, losing the faculty's and community partners' perspectives on their capacity to promote and pursue SJ in the academic and community settings. Moreover, without their voice, it is unclear whether the SJ approach is part of a greater agenda or is limited to the reported experience. Therefore, future studies should focus on including other actors besides students.

This is particularly true for the target community of the SL experiences. Very little is known about how community members that are involved perceive these experiences or to what extent they impact their lives and understanding of systemic injustice. Future studies should investigate how SL raises awareness among the beneficiaries of SJ-oriented SL experiences. In this aspect, the community psychology approach might represent an added value, uncovering and mobilizing resources from within communities and adopting participatory approaches to analyse and collect impact.

Finally, concerning methodological approaches and measurement development, we remark the call for rigour in doing SL research. Future studies should include more longitudinal mix-method perspectives, use existing scales more consistently and adopt (shared) qualitative instruments in their work. It is essential to clarify which SJ-oriented SL processes contribute to stimulating SJ positioning and action to support its development in SL design.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

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The authors of this manuscript have complied with APA ethical principles in their treatment of individuals participating in the research, program, or policy described in the manuscript.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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ENDNOTE

¹ Squared brackets refer to the selected papers as numbered in Table 1.

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