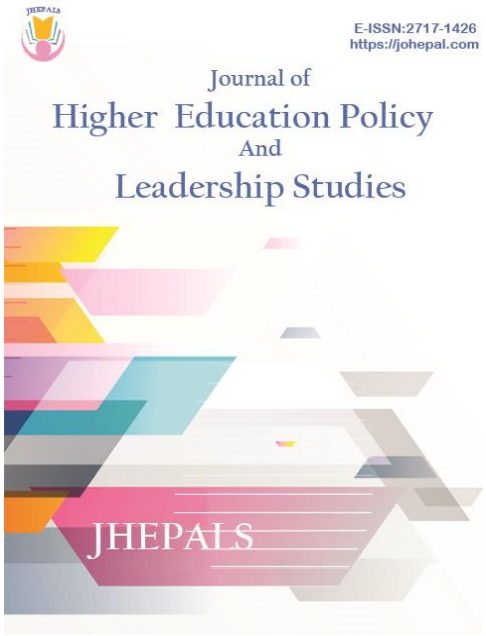
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Classroom Justice in Higher Education: A Bibliometric Analysis of 1990-2025

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Zahra Banitalebi *

Highlights

- This bibliometric study explores the academic landscape regarding classroom justice in higher education, utilizing 250 publications sourced from the Web of Science database covering the years 1990 to 2025.
- The research focuses on several key elements, including the identification of influential journals, authors, and institutions, the analysis of collaboration patterns between countries, an exploration of co-cited documents, and an examination of commonly used keywords and their thematic groupings.
- Findings reveal that Higher Education and Teaching in Higher Education journals are the leading contributors, with four authors identified as significant figures. The USA is the primary contributor, with the strongest collaborations between USA and New Zealand and UK and New Zealand. Co-citation networks emphasize key foundational paper by Colquitt (2001), highlighting theories of procedural and distributive justice. Keywords are grouped around themes of procedural and organizational justice, evolving to issues of identity.

Keywords: Bibliometric Analysis; Higher Education; Classroom Justice; Procedural and Organizational Justice; Identity

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Introduction

Justice within higher education involves the fair allocation of resources, equitable procedural practices, and acknowledgment of various identities present in academic institutions (Sharma et al., 2023). This complex concept, which includes distributive (fair allocation), procedural (fair processes), and interactional (fair treatment) aspects, tackles ongoing issues such as disparities in access, campus environments, and biases in assessment (Martínez-Heredia et al., 2022). With the globalization of higher education, social justice issues have become increasingly significant, shaped by decolonization movements that reveal systemic inequities in teaching, research, and administration (Cock et al., 2025).

Bibliometric analysis serves as an effective tool to quantify and depict scholarly trends, highlighting key authors, networks, and changing discourses. Although previous research has charted topics within higher education, such as ethics (Sharma et al., 2023), inequality (Martínez-Heredia et al., 2022), and sustainability (Machado & Davim, 2022), studies focusing specifically on justice-related bibliometrics are still lacking. This lack of exploration is crucial, as research on justice contributes to the formulation of policies aimed at enhancing participation and equity, especially in diverse environments (Sheeraz et al., 2021).

This paper analyzed 250 English-language publications from 1990 to 2025 (Nov.), a period of economic recovery, social upheavals, and the COVID-19 pandemic, which intensified justice debates (Cock et al., 2025). Guided by four research questions, the study elucidates the field's structure:

1. Which journals, authors, and institutions contribute most to this field?
2. What are the patterns of collaboration among authors and countries?
3. Which papers are most co-cited and cited, and what does that reveal about theoretical foundations?
4. What are the most frequently used keywords, and how do they cluster thematically?

Research Methodology

Data Collection and Search Strategy

The dataset was compiled from Web of Science (WoS), using queries such as ("justice" OR "social justice" OR "equity" OR "fairness") AND ("higher education" OR "university" OR "college"), filtered for peer-reviewed articles, reviews, and book chapters (see Supplementary File for full search string). WoS was chosen due to its reputation for quality and rigor. This methodology aligns with numerous systematic reviews and bibliometric analyses that emphasize the depth and quality of sources (Rathakrishnan et al., 2025). The corpus was analyzed via Bibliometrix R-package (R v4.5.1).

Relevance was established through a screening process: studies that were included concentrated on issues of justice within higher education settings (for example, access for students, equity among faculty, and fairness in assessments); studies that were excluded pertained to unrelated areas (such as criminal justice programs). Figure 1 depicts this process (Haddaway et al., 2022).

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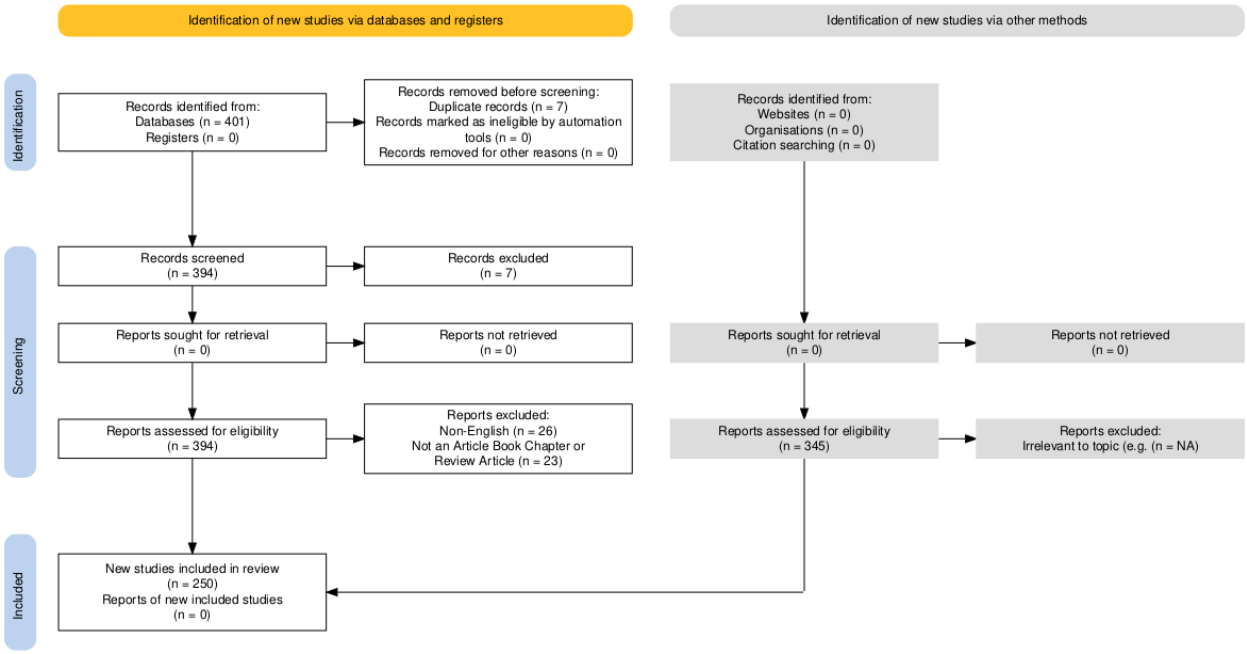


Figure 1. PRISMA Flowdiagram

Results

Publication output grew from 1 document in 1990 to 29 in 2025 (Figure 2), with average 13.82 citation per document. Average co-authorship per document was 2.98 overall, with 76% (N= 191 documents) multi-author papers. This expansion reflects rising global justice concerns.

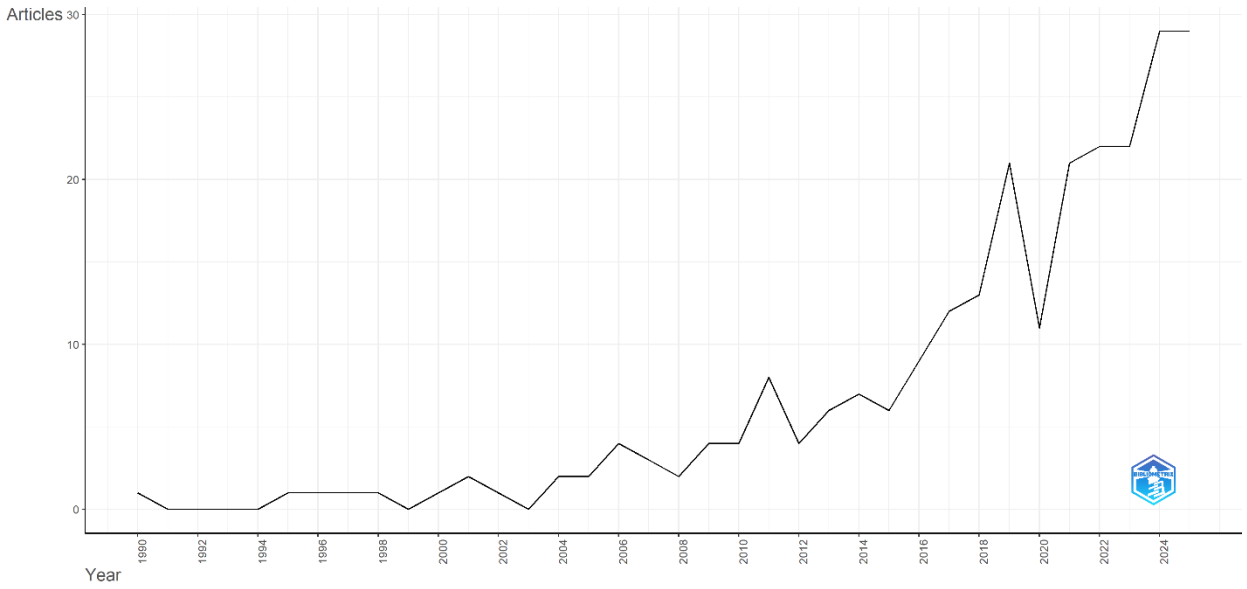


Figure 2. Annual Scientific Production

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Top Contributors (RQ1: Journals, Authors, Institutions, Countries)

Journals

The field is led by education-focused outlets. *Higher Education* topped with 8 articles (share: 0.64%), tied with *Teaching in Higher Education* (8 articles), emphasizing pedagogical justice. *Social Justice Research* followed (7 articles), focusing on distributive equity. Other key journals include *Frontiers in Psychology* (6), and *BMC Medical Education* (5), respectively (Table 1). These represent 42% of output, with impact factors 2.5–4.2, indicating concentration in interdisciplinary social sciences.

Table 1.
Top Journals

Rank	Journal	Articles	Share (%)
1	Higher Education	8	0.64
1	Teaching in Higher Education	8	0.64
3	Social Justice Research	7	0.56
4	Frontiers in Psychology	6	0.48
5	BMC Medical Education	5	0.40

Authors

S. Burdziej led with 3 articles, specializing in procedural justice in academia. M. Glowczewski matched this output, focusing on cultural equity. H.J. Smith followed (3 articles), exploring student perceptions of fairness (Table 2). Other contributors include X. Wu (3 articles) and P.O. Bello (2 articles). Less productive but influential authors are J.B. Bernerth, C. Berti, D.R. Bobocel, R.M. Chory, A. Cook-Sather, M. Estaji, and K. Zhale, each contributing 2 articles.

Table 2.
Top Authors

Rank	Author	Articles	Articles Fractionalized
1	S. Burdziej	3	1.33
1	M. Glowczewski	3	1.33
3	H.J. Smith	3	0.78
4	X. Wu	3	1.17
5	P.O. Bello	2	1.00

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Institutions

While specific institutional data were aggregated by country (Figure 3), U.S. dominance implies leadership from institutions like the Michigan State University (11) and University of Illinois (10).

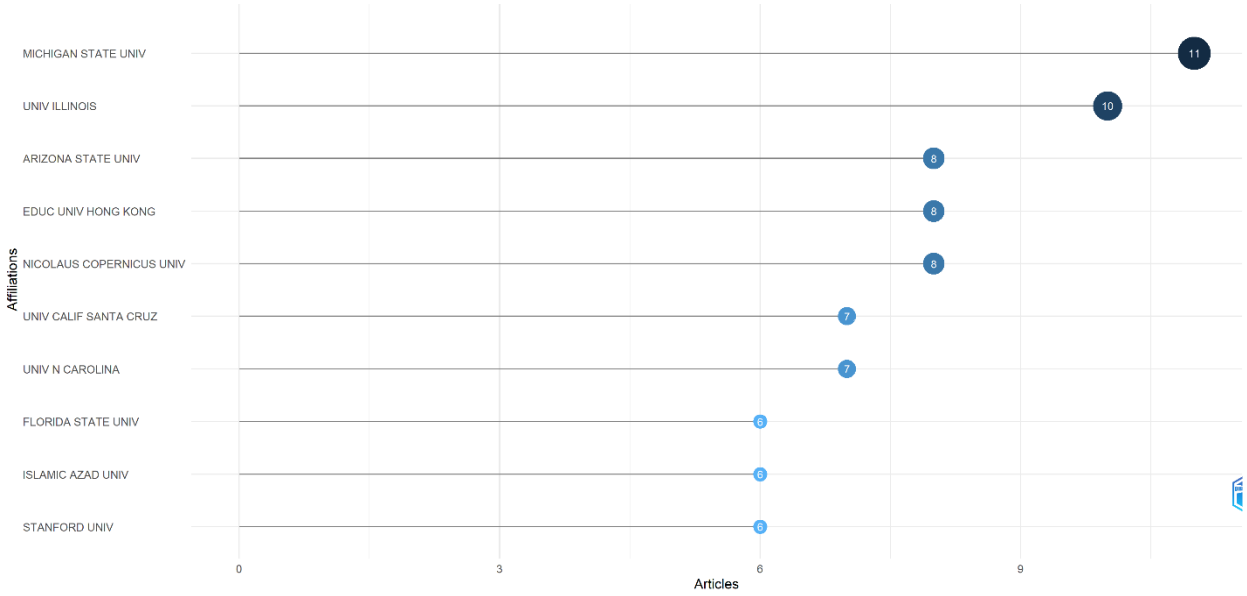


Figure 3. Top Institutions

Countries

The USA produced 371 articles (29.8%), followed by China and UK (46 each, 3.7%), Canada (34, 2.7%), Iran (33, 2.6%), Australia (25, 2.0%), Germany (25, 2.0%), South Africa (22, 1.8%), Spain (14, 1.1%), and Pakistan (13, 1.0%) (Table 3). It should be noted that the frequency for USA exceeds the total number of articles because authors' affiliated countries were taken into account, and a single publication can have authors from multiple countries.

Table 3.
Top Countries by Production

Rank	Country	Frequency
1	USA	371
2	China	46
2	UK	46
4	Canada	34
5	Iran	33

Collaboration Patterns (RQ2: Authors, Countries)

Author Networks

Smith, Berti, di Battista, and Agronick co-authored 2 papers on sense of justice. Burdziej and Glowczewski co-authored 3 papers on procedural fairness. Chory, Estaji, and Zhale worked on classroom justice. Other collaborators include Bello and Matshaba; Kelly, O'flynn, and Andrew; al Salhi, Annamalai, and Arulselvi; Akhmadi and Ami; Lucas and Trelan. Figure 4 demonstrates the density of collaboration networks.

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Figure 4. Density of Collaboration Networks

Countries Networks

The strongest collaborative relationships occurred between USA and New Zealand (171.48), UK and New Zealand (171.48), USA and Japan (138.03), USA and Australia (134.49), Canada and Australia (134.49), UK and Australia (134.49).

Table 4.
Countries' Collaboration Networks

From	To	Frequency
United Kingdom	New Zealand	171.484923466
USA	New Zealand	171.484923466
USA	Japan	138.030895577
Canada	Australia	134.491000082
United Kingdom	Australia	134.491000082
USA	Australia	134.491000082

Co-citation Analysis (RQ3: Most Co-cited/cited documents and Theoretical Foundations)

Co-cited documents

As Figure 5 demonstrates, there are four clusters. Cluster 1 contains the most-cited documents. J.A. Colquitt (2001), having the highest score (PageRank: 0.071), is foundational in organizational justice. J. Thibaut (1975) and J.S. Adams (1965) followed, emphasizing procedural and equity theories. Highest betweenness score for the three mentioned papers also indicate that they strongly act as bridges to other clusters. Chory-Assad multiple papers constitute Cluster 2, applying organizational justice theory to the classroom and student-instructor relationships. Cluster 3 with T.R. Tyler (multiple papers), Cohen (1988), Van den Bos (2002), and Folger (1989) connects core justice concepts to broader themes like authority, legitimacy, social identity, and rule-breaking. Cluster 4, having Freire (1974) and Hooks (1994) indicates low betweenness and high closeness. This cluster

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represents a critical theory perspective on justice, power, and education. The zero betweenness implies that they come from a very different philosophical tradition.

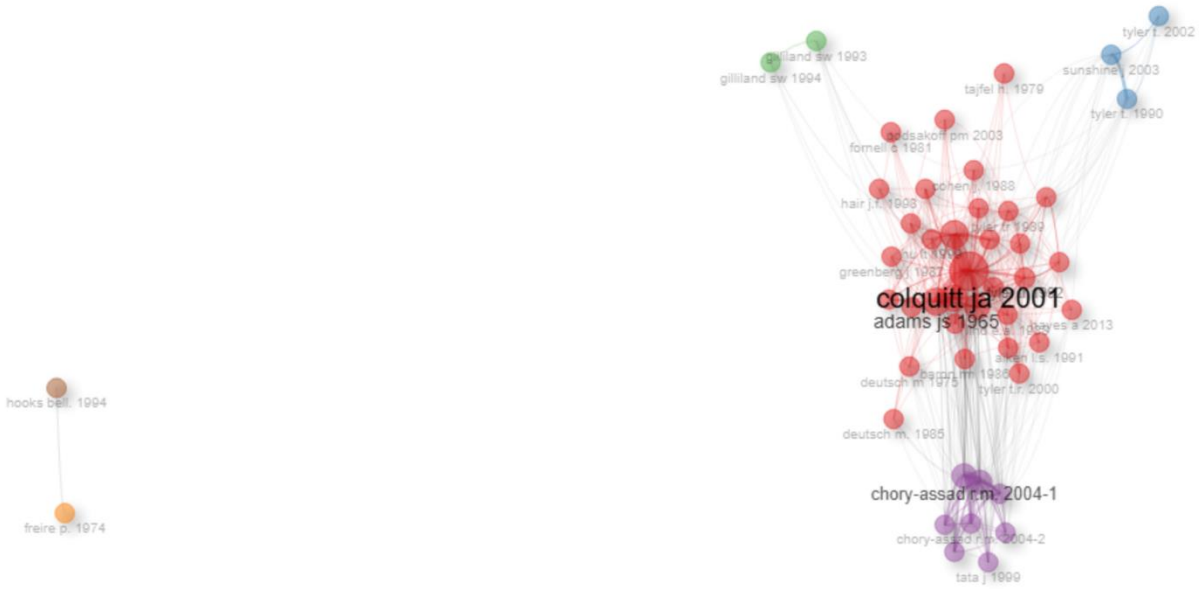


Figure 5. Co-Cited Documents

Cited Documents

R.C. Liden (2015, 438 citations) topped, on leadership justice. H. Min (2015, 163 citations) and J. Tankebe (2016, 163 citations) focused on procedural justice and legitimacy, respectively. B.B. Caza (2007, 125 citations), and A. Liu (2011, 108 citations) addressed meritocracy (Table 5).

Table 5.
Top Cited Documents

Rank	Authors (Year)	DOI	Citations	TC/Year
1	Liden et al. (2015)	10.1016/j.leaqua.2014.12.002	438	39.82
2	Min (2015)	10.1177/1938965514560014	163	14.82
3	Tankebe (2016)	10.1037/lhb0000153	163	16.30
4	Caza (2007)	10.1080/01973530701665108	125	6.58
5	Liu (2011)	10.1007/s10734-010-9394-7	108	7.20

Keyword Analysis and Thematic Clustering (RQ4: Frequent Keywords and Clusters)

From 2,456 normalized keywords, top terms included "procedural justice" (73 occurrences), "higher education" (38), "perceptions" (35), "organizational justice" (34), "fairness" (33), and "distributive justice" (29). Thematic map (Figure 6) illustrates 4 types of themes. The motor themes of “procedural” and “organizational justice” represent the core themes driving the field. Basic themes, such as “identity” are of central importance but require further development. The presence of “equity” as a niche theme indicates a specialized but sub-domain of the field, while emerging or fading themes were “service-learning” and “neoliberalism”.

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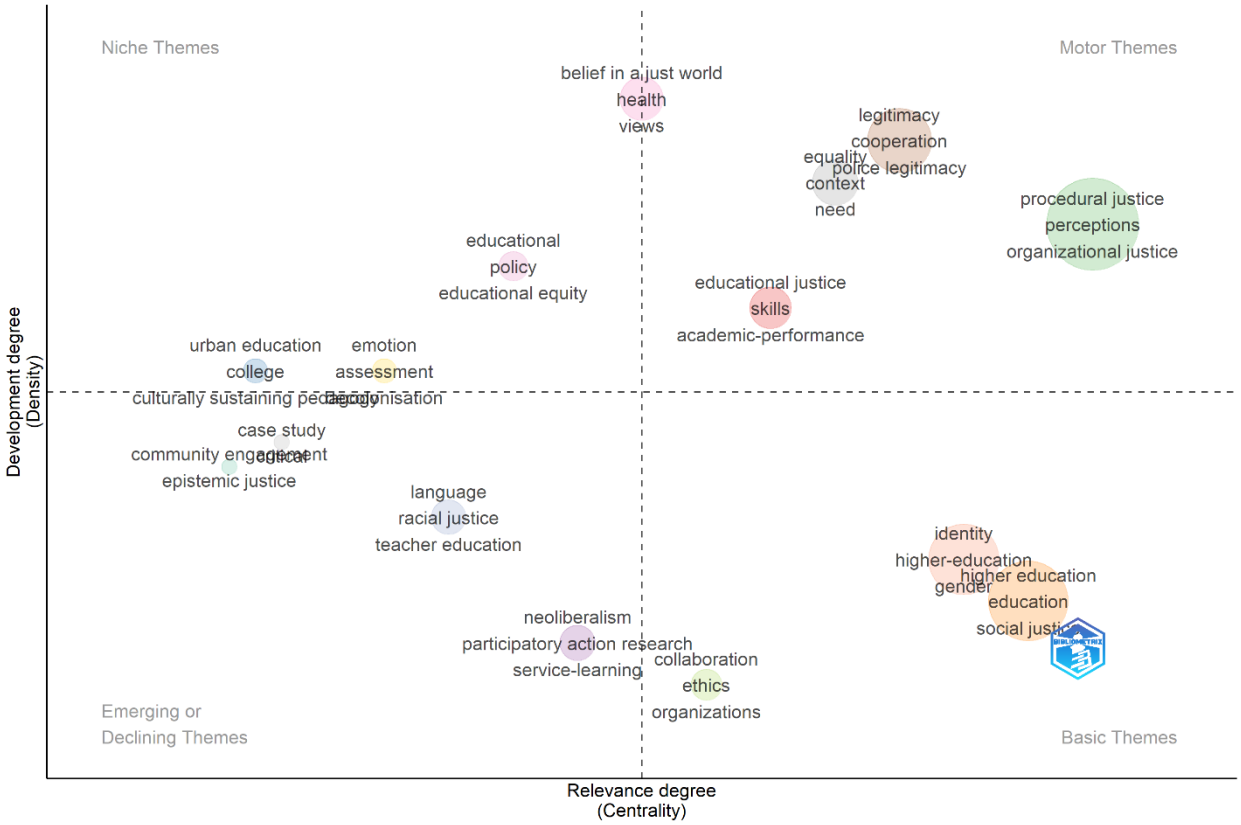


Figure 6. Thematic Map

Discussion and Conclusion

This review illustrates a field undergoing a shift, transitioning from a traditional organizational-justice framework to a broader, socially grounded, and increasingly critical understanding of justice. The annual scientific output reaches its highest peak from 2021 to 2025, reflecting the post-COVID social justice research (Lawrence et al., 2024) and recent work focused on social justice (Cock et al., 2025). The findings indicate a connection to well-established theoretical foundations while also expanding into new domains that address social justice by analyzing leading authors, countries, institutions, and journals, as well as exploring citation patterns, co-citation networks, trending topics, and keyword frequencies.

The collaboration clusters among the US, the UK, and their affiliated academic networks imply a deepening integration of social justice discourse within Western neoliberal societies (Cock et al., 2025). The prominence of Liden et al. (2015) as the most cited work, followed by Min (2015) and Tankebe (2016), highlights the historical roots of the field in organizational behavior and leadership dynamics. This observation aligns with previous bibliometric findings that underscore Social Exchange Theory as the most influential framework in organizational justice research (Cock et al., 2025). Although these findings show that the field still relies heavily on traditional justice frameworks, particularly procedural justice, emerging topics reveal a shift is underway.

In line with these findings, the keyword analysis further highlights the continued prominence of traditional justice concepts, with “procedural” and “organizational justice”

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identified as core themes. In contrast, "identity" appears as a key foundational theme that, while important, remains insufficiently explored, suggesting it may gain prominence in the future. The identification of "equity" as a specialized theme points to a growing but still niche area of research, while "service-learning" and "neoliberalism" are seen as either new or declining themes, reflecting areas that may be rising in relevance or losing traction.

Similarly, the co-citation analysis revealed that foundational justice studies, including works by Colquitt (2001), Thibaut and Walker (1975), Adams (1965), Bies and Moag (1986), Leventhal (1980), and Lind and Tyler (1988), form the structural core of the network. Their significant weights and centrality values indicate the ongoing focus on procedural, distributive, and interactional justice. This trend mirrors earlier discoveries that within theoretical models, the group-value model (Lind & Tyler, 1988) was frequently cited in organizational justice research, with a greater emphasis on procedural justice compared to distributive justice (Sheeraz et al., 2021).

This indicates that traditional justice theories continue to act as a conceptual foundation, yet scholars are increasingly incorporating wider social justice issues, particularly in educational settings and related to systemic inequalities. This evolution creates possibilities for creating multidimensional justice frameworks that connect organizational and societal realms; extending justice research beyond workplace environments into social, educational, and community contexts; and involving historically marginalized voices and groups whose experiences have been overlooked in earlier justice literature.

In conclusion, this analysis illustrates justice in higher education as an evolving field characterized by procedural justice themes, the USA scholarly contributions, and changing identity discussions.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Human Participants

This is a review and does not involve human participants.

Originality Note

The author confirms that the manuscript is her original work.

Use of Generative AI/ AI-assisted Technologies Statement

The author claimed that [ChatGPT] is used in this research just for the purpose of improving the language of the manuscript. No further use of these technologies are also confirmed by the author(s) to write different parts of the research.

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