

# Documenting Social Justice in Library and Information Science Research: A Literature Review

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this study is to provide an overview of *social justice* research in Library and Information Science (LIS) literature in order to identify the research quantity, what populations or settings were included, and future directions for this area of the discipline through examination of when related research was published, what contexts it covered, and what contributions LIS researchers have made in this research area.

**Design/Methodology/Approach** – This study reviews results from two LIS literature databases—Library, Information Science and Technology Abstracts (LISTA) and Library and Information Science Source (LISS)—that use the term “social justice” in title, abstract, or full text to explicitly or implicitly describe their research.

**Findings** – This review of the literature using the term social justice to describe LIS research recognizes the significant increase in quantities of related research over the first two decades of the twenty-first century as well as the emergence of numerous contexts in which that research is situated. The social justice research identified in the literature review is further classified into two primary contribution categories: indirect action (i.e., steps necessary for making change possible) or direct action (i.e., specific steps, procedures, and policies to implement change).

**Research Implications** – The findings of this study provide a stronger conceptualization of the contributions of existing social justice research through examination of past work and guides next steps for the discipline.

**Practical Implications** – The conceptualizations and related details provided in this study help identify gaps that could be filled by future scholarship.

**Originality/Value** – While social justice research in LIS has increased in recent years, few studies have explored the landscape of existing research in this area.

**Keywords** –Direct Action; Indirect Action; Library and Information Science; Literature Review; Social Justice

**Paper Type** – Literature Review

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# **Documenting Social Justice in Library and Information Science Research: A Literature Review**

## **Introduction**

While Library and Information Science (LIS) has had a long—albeit complicated—history with social justice principles, only in recent years have researchers begun asking what social justice in a LIS context means (Mehra *et al.*, 2017; Rioux, 2010). Social justice in a LIS context has been defined in many ways in order to emphasize ending oppression and privilege, human rights, new systems of justice, self-education, and providing equal access and equity, among others (Cooke *et al.*, 2016). But while researchers have offered up their own frameworks or models (Mathiesen, 2015), called for the provision of services to specific, marginalized populations (Cooke, 2016), or have brought attention to the need for more research in the area of social justice in LIS generally (Jaeger *et al.*, 2015a), few studies have attempted to quantitatively assess the existing volume and variety of social justice research in Library and Information Science. A systematic literature review is necessary to ascertain what this growing body of research is helping to achieve presently and to chart future forays of justice (Gorham *et al.*, 2016).

## *Research Problem*

A major challenge in attempting to assess the condition of social justice research in LIS is the amorphous nature of the term. Social justice can take many forms and is not always referred to as such (Gale, 2000). For example, research that seeks to meet the needs of a historically marginalized population might not use the term “social justice” but nevertheless engage with topics that could be described as social justice adjacent (Jaeger *et al.*, 2011). Tangential topics to social justice, such as intellectual freedom, have long been a part of the profession of librarianship—though not universally enforced—and have been part of the conversation on the

role of diversity, inclusion, and equity in the information professions (Knox, 2014). Recognizing intellectual freedom and similar topics as social justice related emphasizes the complexities that come with attempting to assess the current research occurring using the term *social justice* in LIS literature.

In order to circumvent this issue, it is helpful to focus attention on LIS research that uses the phrase “social justice” to conceptualize, explain, or otherwise situate their study. In other words, one approach to identifying social justice research within LIS is finding existing research in which the author(s) has 1) explicitly stated that their research is social justice related by mentioning “social justice” in the title or making a statement linking the research to social justice within the text; or by 2) implicitly suggested that their research is social justice related by describing similar work in the publication using the term “social justice” or by utilizing references that explicitly state “social justice” (Rioux and Mehra, 2016). MacNeil *et al.* (2018) provide an explicit example of social justice research in LIS by using “social justice” in the title of their paper and by including mentions of social justice throughout such as, “In this article, the findings of the Shaw Report provide the backdrop for an exploratory case study of the social justice impact of records (p. 2).” Glassman and Worsham (2017) provide an example of implicit social justice research in LIS because while social justice is not explicitly mentioned throughout the narrative, the abstract shows a linkage between the study and social justice by stating that, “Use of the research notebook opened up more time during face to face instruction time for deeper learning, critical information literacy and discussions of social justice issues related to information production and access (abstract).” Both examples indicate how social justice is directly or indirectly showcased in existing LIS research.

Although the process of identifying social justice research presents challenges, a systematic review of social justice research in LIS would be beneficial from both researcher and practitioner perspectives as past work helps illustrate the discipline's path and future direction(s). An analyses of what has been contributed indicates trajectories of where it appears to be headed, what opportunities exist to inform other research, and what literature gaps exist and persist. Previous research has suggested that systematic literature reviews are helpful for identifying themes in an emerging area of the LIS discipline (Bishop and Mandel, 2010; Mandel *et al.*, 2020). As such, this study conducts a literature review in order to address this literature gap for social justice in LIS by asking the following research questions:

- (1) When has social justice research in LIS been published?
- (2) In what contexts has social justice research in LIS focused?
- (3) What types of contributions are identifiable within social justice research in LIS?

## **Methods**

The Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts (LISTA) and Library and Information Science Source (LISS) databases were selected for conducting this literature review. LISTA was chosen because it is one of the most inclusive research databases in LIS as it indexes more than 500 academic journals (Garg *et al.*, 2019). LISS was also selected because it is the product of a merger of previously popular and well-known databases owned by EBSCO and H.W. Wilson (Garg *et al.*, 2019; Figureola *et al.*, 2017).

In order to identify potential results for screening and inclusion, the decision was made to begin the query by searching for “social justice” in the databases. This resulted in 2,372 records which included “social justice” in the title, keywords, or full text. The researchers then decided to include academic results such as peer reviewed journal articles, book chapters, full books, and

conference proceedings while excluding other results such as videos, magazines, and trade publications. This refined search resulted in 754 records including 397 LISS records and 357 LISTA records. Moving further into the identification process, 342 records were found to be included in both databases leaving 412 unique results after duplications were removed.

The next step required the screening of results for temporal and content eligibility. The researchers decided to include any records published before January 2020 in order to establish a clear cut off point for the initial search which was conducted in the spring of 2020. In terms of content, results that used the term “social justice” to conceptualize, explain, or otherwise situate their research was deemed eligible for inclusion. Therefore, 51 results published after December 2019 were excluded regardless of content and 114 results which were not self-identified social justice research were also excluded, bringing the total removed in that round to 165. Results were excluded for numerous content reasons. For example, some of the results retrieved did not engage with social justice. Additionally, several of the excluded 114 results were letters to the editor or similar documents which were excluded due to not being research oriented. The final sample consisted of 247 records which are compiled in the appendix. Figure I illustrates the process of identifying, screening, and including “social justice” records from both databases.

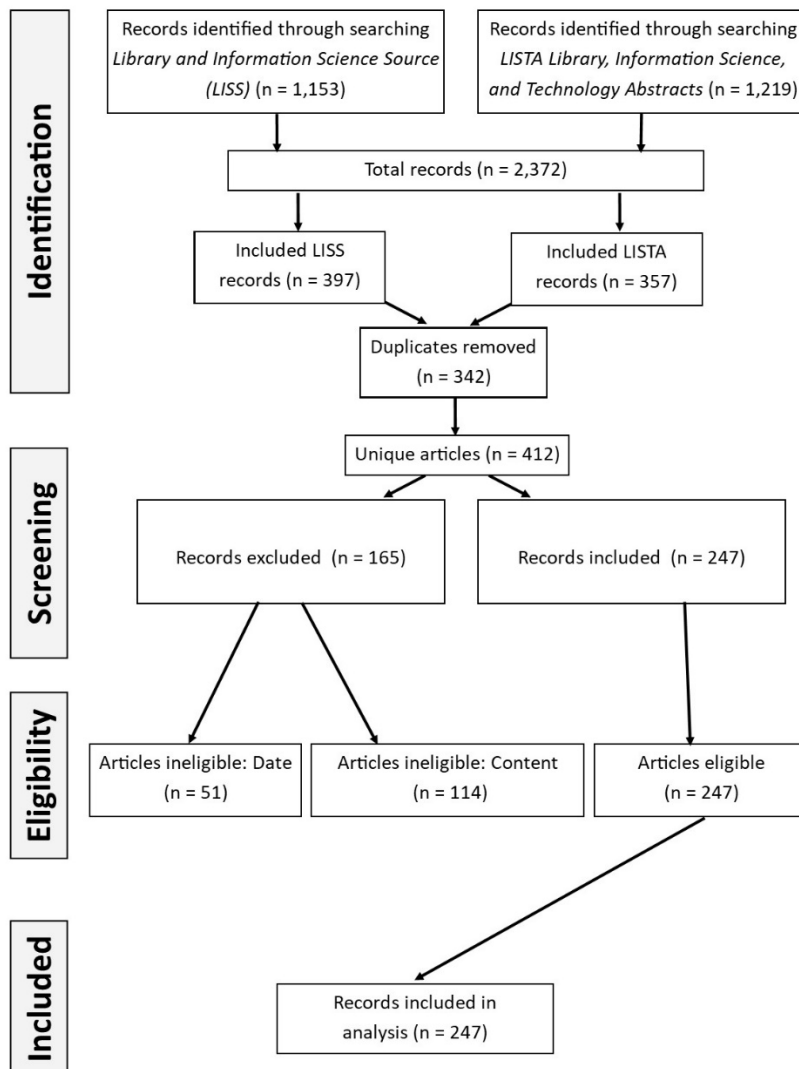


Figure I. Literature review inclusion process

## Findings

Analysis of the included articles identified three main categories of distinctions among the results which helped describe how social justice is represented in the LIS literature. These distinctions included year of publication, context, and article contribution type.

### *Year of Publication*

Although there were some earlier examples, social justice began appearing regularly after 2000 in the literature sampled for this study. One of the earliest studies found in the sample explored the role of social justice in combatting information poverty (Britz and Blignaut, 2001). Information poverty, or the inability to access information, was a concept popularized by Elfreda Chatman (1996) who was one of the first information scientists to study the information behavior of marginalized populations (Fulton, 2010). This early connection between social justice and meeting the needs of marginalized people has since become commonplace in the related LIS literature—and an impetus behind the increased attention given to social justice topics in recent years—but was considerably understudied at the time (Cooke *et al.*, 2019, Jaeger *et al.*, 2016).

Following years of steady increase, the period of 2014-2015 saw a 322% increase over the 2012-2013 period. The number of publications increased slightly in the 2016-2017 period before trailing significantly in the 2018-2019 period. Publication data are illustrated in figure II.

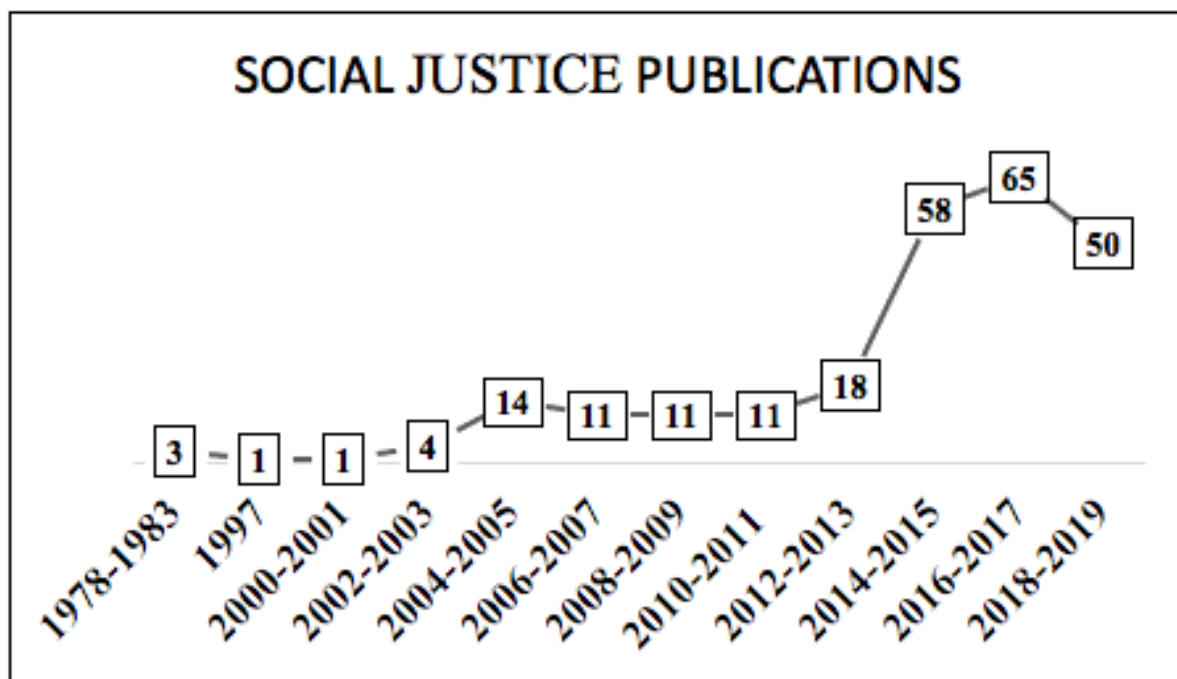


Figure II. Social justice publication by year published

Future study will indicate whether or not 2016-2017 represents the high mark of social justice research in these LIS databases, but further analysis of the results between 2014-2019 suggests that special issues regarding social justice topics in some journals or social justice-centered serials increased the numbers (e.g., Jaeger *et al.*, 2015b; Mehra, 2015; Dencik *et al.*, 2019). The rise of related special issues beginning in 2005 increased the overall amount of social justice research that was published; the continued proliferation of such special issues in recent years helps to support claims that social justice is becoming a topic of increased interest within the discipline. It also suggests that there is a realization of the importance of social justice topics in LIS, which may stem from pragmatic realization that such research is popular or from a deeper conviction that there is a moral obligation to diversify and address the information needs of those who are marginalized (ASIS&T, 2020; Mehra and Gray, 2020).

### *Context*

Context is an important term in LIS which is defined in numerous ways such as a setting or environment among others (Courtright, 2007; Pettigrew, 2000; Rieh, 2004). The analysis of the collected literature suggests that context in social justice research could refer to many factors relevant to the study findings such as the population in the study, the location in which the study takes place, or the intention of a specific study. The most common context represented were locations such as archives. Creating or restoring representation of a specific population within memory institutions was often describes in the archival context articles as a social justice issue (Baeza Ventura *et al.*, 2019; Hyde, 2008; Nakamura *et al.*, 2017). Other common locational contexts included academic settings (such as academic libraries or non LIS academic settings), public libraries, LIS education programs, and community settings.

Additional contexts included youth-oriented spaces (e.g., school libraries or the youth department of libraries), online settings, data contexts (e.g., data science settings and topics), and the realm of scholarly communications (e.g., open access publishing). Some articles had contexts with too few results to warrant a category of their own (e.g., health libraries, geographic information systems-focused, etc.) and therefore were listed as “other.” Lastly, a number of the research articles were more theoretical in nature or did not exist in a particular locational context and therefore were labeled as “conceptual.” The number of articles per category of LIS context are summarized in figure III.

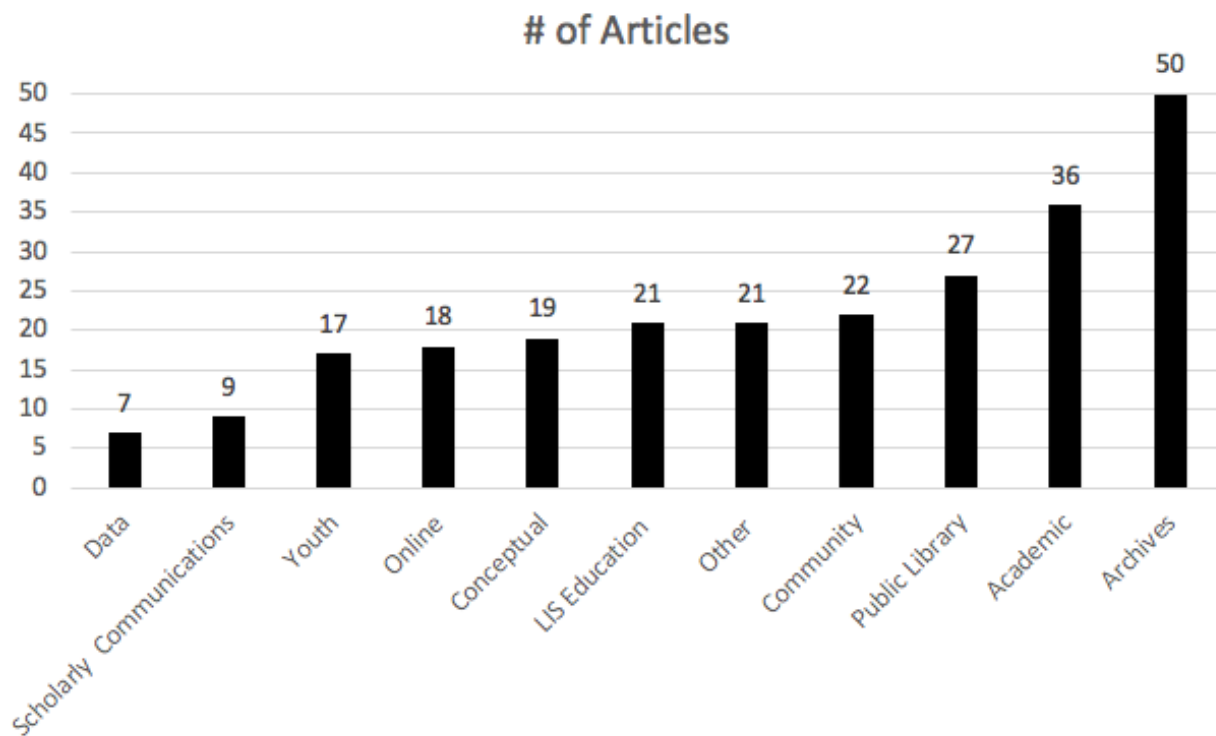


Figure III. Numbers of articles per LIS context

#### *Contribution Types*

Previous research has identified two major types (e.g., knowledge and practice) and eight minor types (e.g., metatheoretical, theoretical, ideational, methodological, empirical, narrative,

professional, and pedagogical) of social justice research in LIS (Winberry, In Press). However, while these classifications offer a framework for understanding how existing related research was developed and what its authors intended the research to be, they illuminate less about the types of contributions of the research itself. The analyses of the literature sample suggested that article contributions tended to be about planning or action. This is an important distinction within this area of the literature because the discussion over social justice and related topics as either simply buzzwords/fads or as specific, meaningful actions demanding change has long been debated within LIS (Brook *et al.*, 2015; Mehra, 2004; Mehra and Gray, 2020). Closer examination of related literature helped evolve the researchers' thinking beyond the planning vs. action conceptualization. For instance, professor and activist bell hooks (2010) said that "thinking is an action" (p. 7). Similarly, some social justice research makes mention of "implicit" and "explicit" forms of social justice action within LIS work (Rioux and Mehra, 2016, p. 8) or discuss social justice as either a process or product in other fields such as nursing (Buettner-Schmidt and Lobo, 2012). Based on this conceptual evolution, this study's findings suggest that social justice research contributions are either indirect action (i.e., steps necessary for making change possible) or direct action (i.e., specific steps to implement change). Both types of contributions are beneficial for pursuing social justice as they each contribute to making change a reality. Figure IV summarizes some of the distinctions between contribution research types.

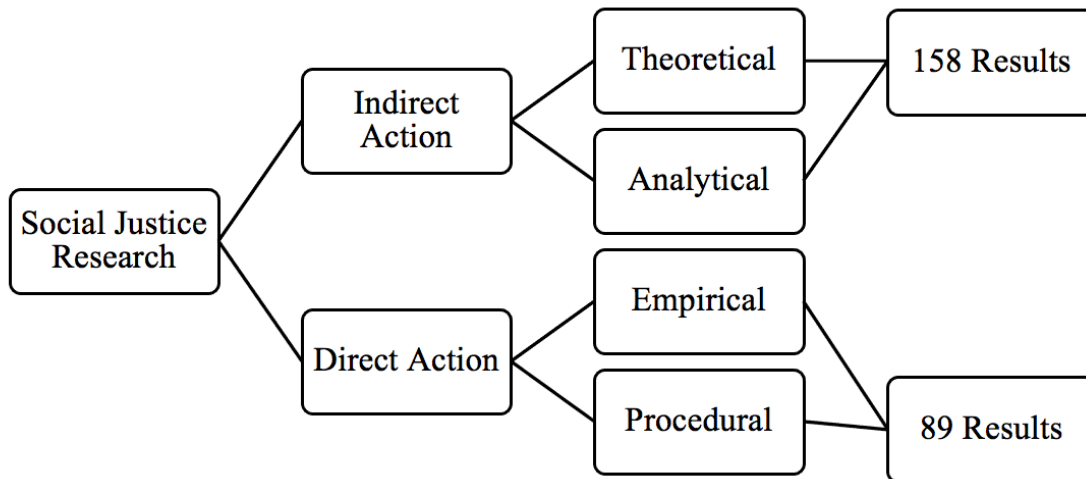


Figure IV. A Social justice contribution categorization framework.

Indirect action focuses on theoretical and analytical research. Adler and Harper (2018) exemplify the indirect approach by presenting a study focused on the political and epistemological components of knowledge organization and providing suggestions on how social justice issues *might* be incorporated into information organization curriculum. There are almost twice as many indirect action results in the literature sample. This speaks to the fact that academic research is often more theoretical. It also is a testament to the fact that social justice is a still emerging research area within LIS and so there remains the need for the establishment of conceptual frameworks to guide more direct actions.

Direct action is a smaller but still dynamic research type within this area which focuses on empirical and procedural research. Direct action was present more often in some of the contexts found in the literature sample than in others. For instance, an overwhelming number of articles that occurred in an archival context involved direct action as the researchers often took specific steps to make change in actual archives. One example of direct action in an archival context is a research article on creating the first digital humanities center for Latinx research (Baeza Ventura *et al.*, 2019). Direct action is essential for creating a more socially just society because building a

culture that is representative and supportive of the varying identities and ideals requires everyone involved to identify, examine, reflect, and build on the failures and limitations of us as individuals as well as members of institutions and communities (Dali and Caidi, 2017; Dali and Caidi, 2020). However, this cannot be done without careful planning. Therefore, the two contribution types of research in LIS complement one another and help in strengthening the contributions that social justice research provide the literature and society.

## **Discussion**

The temporal results of the analysis suggest that while social justice research in LIS has increased steadily over the two decades prior to this study, research production—at least among the sampled results—declined in the most recent years preceding the publication of these findings. This suggests that the future of social justice in LIS research and practice is at a crossroads. Will researchers and practitioners innovate in order to ensure that social justice continues to pervade the field and continue to mature or will social justice prove to be the buzz term or fad when no longer in vogue as some feared it was rather than a vehicle of real and sustainable change (Gibson *et al.*, 2020; Winberry and Potnis, In Press)?

The numerous contexts in which social justice is studied suggest that researchers have become more conscious of the rise of this area as an increasingly important research topic in the discipline with helpful insights found among different populations, locations, and purposes. Some of these contexts have been explored more broadly and over a wider period of time than others. For instance, most of the research related to data science has appeared more recently and in response to the growth of data science within LIS as well as a desire to use data tools and data management in order to bring about social change (Dencik *et al.*, 2019). As social justice research continues in LIS, there will likely be newly situated avenues to explore. These emerging

areas could determine the scope of impact that social justice has on LIS practice and research in the future—including theory development.

LIS is sometimes described as a practice-centered discipline whose creation and utilization of theory lags behind other disciplines (Case and Given, 2016; Day, 2010; Paisley, 1968). Even with the recent increases of social justice research, concerns about the absence of a LIS-centered social justice theory have grown (Britz, 2008; Jimerson, 2007; Mehra, 2015). The action categorization put forth in this article provides a theoretical way of conceptualizing social justice research in LIS as indirect action-oriented research in particular provides an opportunity for building on nascent theoretical understandings in order to confirm social justice as an emerging sub-discipline within LIS (Winberry, In Press).

Similarly, the direct-action category is especially relevant to practitioners—and to the overwhelming number of LIS students who want to be practitioners—who while perhaps appreciative of the role of theory in conceptualizing social justice writ large, nevertheless seek out evidence-based interventions useful for enacting real change in their information organizations and communities (Fraser-Arnott, 2016). Given the *do more with less* attitude that has often guided library administration and other public sector services, information professionals are not in the strongest position to create or interpret indirect action contribution literature; instead, they require research that is more easily enacted (Wilkins, 2014). In addition to the lack of time, lack of access can be an issue as well. While paywalls may be easily scalable at large, academic institutions, smaller academic or non-academic settings such as public libraries or non-profits may not have the budgets necessary for paying for research. As such, their staff may not be able to implement research ideas without open access to that research (Caldwell *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, not only is it worth demarking for easier identification and

access, direct action contributions offer the most immediacy for accomplishing what social justice research in LIS seeks to do: bringing about real and lasting change for people (Mehra and Rioux, 2016; Rioux, 2010).

### **Limitations and Future Research**

There are limitations to this literature review. First, social justice is a term that is defined in numerous ways. Related terms such as diversity, inclusion, and equity among others as well as general topics such as civil rights might also be used to describe social justice adjacent research even if the term itself is not used. As such, the decision to only cite research which uses the term “social justice” means that this review is not representative of all variations of social justice related scholarship in LIS. However, the decision to focus exclusively on scholarship that uses the term social justice provides plenty of insights into when the term entered the field’s published lexicon. It also helps establish a preliminary understanding of social justice research in LIS that can be expanded in future research.

The decision to focus the search on filtered results from two databases could be seen as a limitation as there are numerous resources on social justice in a LIS context that are not present in the search results. However, since the two databases chosen represent some of the largest and most thorough collections of academic research in the LIS field, this limitation could be an opportunity to assess where related research is being published—such as in different LIS databases—and why. This could result in further insights into the future of social justice research and scholarly communications in the discipline.

A closer examination of what was found in the literature sample—as well as what was not found—provides insights into the state of social justice research in LIS as of 2019. For example, social justice research in LIS is reported in a number of contexts. One such context is

youth—which includes school libraries as well as library services meant for people under the age of eighteen—of which there were 16 related articles. Classifying articles by context not only assists with identifying what exists but also helps to unearth gaps. For instance, there was almost no focus on older adults in the literature sample despite the fact that we are living in an aging information society (Lenstra, 2017). Additionally, the diverse identities of older adults as well as ageism suggest that there are social justice issues that need to be addressed in the information research related to older adults (Winberry, 2018; Winberry and Mehra, In Press). The true extent of the dearth of social justice results related to certain marginalized populations (e.g., older adults, indigenous groups, people who are differently abled, etc.) and the role of information in other justice related grand challenges (e.g., economic, environmental, political, etc.) requires further investigation as well as commitment from LIS researchers and leaders in order to fill the gaps that need filling (Albright *et al.*, 2020).

## **Conclusion**

2020 has been marked by multiple pandemics—including the COVID-19 pandemic and the racial injustice pandemic represented by the deaths of George Floyd and others at the hands of police—which has brought social justice further into the conscience of society and to the LIS discipline (ASIS&T, 2020; Xie *et al.*, 2020). Although the exact future of social justice research in LIS remains uncertain, numerous evidence—ranging from conference themes to job ads—suggest that this area will inevitably increase in value as there is more realization about the importance of social justice issues to the information needs of all people and to the continued relevance of the LIS discipline and scholarship in general. Therefore, it is helpful to assess where gaps exist in the body of related literature. This paper provided this assessment by identifying and analyzing the years of publication, contexts, and contribution types of 247 social justice

records located in two major LIS databases. This review of social justice research has important implications for research and practice in LIS. The results of this analysis are helpful for gauging further growth in this area as well as a better understanding of how social justice research can help prepare for and bring about lasting change for information seekers and the society in which they live, work, and strive for equity. In reference to what follows, only time has the answers. The findings of this paper suggests, however, that there is still a desire—and a need—for more social justice related research around various informational and technological topics, and that the discipline is just beginning to fully embrace, benefit from, and create value for others in social justice and related areas of research and practice.

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## Appendix

The appendix file is available online at <https://josephwinberry.org/products>.