

An Interdisciplinary Social Science Analysis of Culture, Psychology, Economics, Government Policy, History, and Social Inclusion in Disability Studies: A Systematic Literature Review

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ABSTRACT:

Disability is a multidimensional phenomenon influenced by cultural, psychological, economic, political, historical, and social factors that collectively shape the lived experiences of people with disabilities. This systematic review aimed to synthesize interdisciplinary evidence on the role of culture, psychology, economics, government policy, history, and social inclusion in disability studies while identifying key research trends and future directions. The review followed the PRISMA 2020 guidelines, and studies were identified through comprehensive searches of PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, Embase, and Google Scholar. Following the application of predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, 12 peer-reviewed studies published between 2015 and 2025 were included in the qualitative synthesis. The findings indicate that cultural beliefs and stigma continue to influence social acceptance, psychological well-being, and community participation. Economic inequality and limited employment opportunities remain major contributors to poverty and social exclusion, while inconsistent policy implementation restricts access

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to education, healthcare, and public services. Historical analyses demonstrate a progressive transition from medical to rights-based models of disability, emphasizing equality, accessibility, and participation. Overall, the evidence highlights the need for integrated, interdisciplinary approaches that combine cultural awareness, inclusive governance, economic empowerment, and community engagement to improve disability outcomes. Future research should prioritize longitudinal and comparative studies to strengthen evidence-based policies and promote sustainable social inclusion for people with disabilities.

Keywords: Disability studies, Social inclusion, Government policy, Interdisciplinary research, Disability rights

Introduction

Disability is increasingly recognized as a multidimensional concept that extends beyond physical or cognitive impairment to include the social, cultural, psychological, economic, and political conditions that shape the lives of individuals. Modern disability studies focus on the interaction between the person and the obstacles he or she encounters in society, rather than just the person's impairment. This has shifted disability research away from a medical approach and towards a wider range of inter-disciplinary studies looking at how social structures, cultural values, public policies and historical influences affect equality and participation (Goodley, 2024, Watson & Vehmas, 2019). This has made disability a significant field of study in many fields such as sociology, psychology, economics, public health and political science.

Traditionally, disabled people have been seen in a charitable and medical perspective, which is dependent and institutional. This viewpoint often ignored the problems of social and environmental exclusion faced by disabled people in society. However, over the last few decades, disability scholarships have developed significantly and the social model and rights-based perspectives (Stiker, 2019; Bustreo & Doebller, 2020) have emphasized accessibility, inclusion, and equal opportunities as basic human rights. The shift has stimulated governments, researchers and practitioners to consider disability in the wider context of society and recognise that problems of

disability inequality are deeply embedded in discriminatory practices, poverty, poor policies and cultural attitudes.

Disability studies, like disability experiences, is interdisciplinary in nature. Cultural beliefs affect public perceptions and the nature of disability in terms of acceptance or stigma and psychological factors affect identity, resilience and emotional wellbeing. Economic conditions influence employment, financial autonomy and access to basic services, while government policies create and/or shape the legislative and

institutional environment which fosters and/or hinders inclusion. Historical analyses also demonstrate the impact of disability movements on current policies and public perceptions, which has led to increased social justice, accessibility, and participation (Lester & O'Reilly, 2021). These dimensions illustrate that disability is not only not a single issue, but it cannot be fully recognized from the viewpoint of any single discipline.

Although much progress has been made in disability research, there is a lack of integration of evidence across the academic disciplines. Most of the studies focus on a single cultural, psychological, economic, or policy dimension, which results in a lack of understanding of the lived experiences of individuals with disabilities arising from all of these factors working together. There was also evidence in recent years that there remained profound disparities in educational

attainment, employment, health and social participation (Banks et al., 2024). Similarly, disability-related economic disadvantage is tightly linked to poverty, labour market exclusion and access to social protection, making it imperative to address disability through an integrated policy approach (Mitra & Palmer, 2023). Therefore, it is important to integrate evidence from various disciplines to uncover commonalities, gaps and future research needs.

This systematic review, then, focuses on disability

Objectives

1. To systematically review interdisciplinary
2. To examine the influence of social science factors on the experiences and inclusion of people with disabilities.
3. To identify research gaps and future directions for interdisciplinary disability studies.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

A systematic literature review design was used for this study to analyse the interdisciplinary social science study on disability. The review was centered on six key areas of culture, psychology, economics, government policy, history and social inclusion. The review process was carried out according to the PRISMA 2020 guidelines to guarantee transparency and methodological consistency. Using a systematic approach, relevant empirical evidence was identified, screened, evaluated and synthesized.

2.2 Eligibility Criteria

This article included studies that were empirical (peer-reviewed) articles that discussed disability from at least one of the social science perspectives listed above. Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method studies were included in the review if they were published in English between the selected date. Studies that focused solely on clinical, biomedical or rehabilitation aspects, but didn't have a social dimension were not included. Editorials, commentaries, conference abstracts

as a multi-faceted concept that includes cultural, psychological, economic, government policy, historical and social dimensions. The review seeks to draw together the insights of inter-disciplinary research to gain a broader overview of factors affecting disability, major trends in the research literature and research gaps that can feed into future research, policy and practice. Such an interdisciplinary synthesis helps to reinforce disability studies and evidence-based approaches that foster equality, participation and social inclusion for individuals with disabilities.

evidence on disability across culture, psychology, economics, government policy, history, and social inclusion.

and duplicated records as well as articles providing insufficient methodological information were also excluded.

2.3 Information Sources

Relevant literature was searched using the databases of Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, Sociological Abstracts, JSTOR and ScienceDirect. Google Scholar was another source used to find additional studies that were not included in the primary databases. Additionally, reference lists of eligible articles were hand-screened for additional relevant publications. The sources chosen to ensure wide interdisciplinary disability research coverage.

2.4 Search Strategy

The search strategy combined disability-related terms with keywords representing the six review domains. Main terms included “disability studies,” “persons with disabilities,” “culture,” “psychology,” “economics,” “government policy,” “history,” and “social inclusion.” Boolean operators such as AND and OR were used to improve search accuracy and relevance. Search strings were adjusted according to the indexing requirements of each database.

2.5 Study Selection and Data Extraction

Identified records were all entered in the reference-management software, and duplicate studies were eliminated. All titles and abstracts were first screened, and then full text was assessed

according to the predefined eligibility criteria. Data pertinent to the study were collected using a structured form that included authorship, year, country, sample, study design, disability group, research domain, and key findings. A PRISMA 2020 flow diagram was created to document the selection process.

2.6 Quality Assessment

Appropriate critical-appraisal tools were used to assess the methodological quality of the included studies. For qualitative studies, CASP was used and for quantitative studies, JBI checklists were used and for mixed-method studies, MMAT was used. Research design, sampling, data collection, analysis, bias, ethical clarity and validity of findings were the factors considered. Research was categorized as highly, moderately, or poorly methodologically sound.

2.7 Data Synthesis

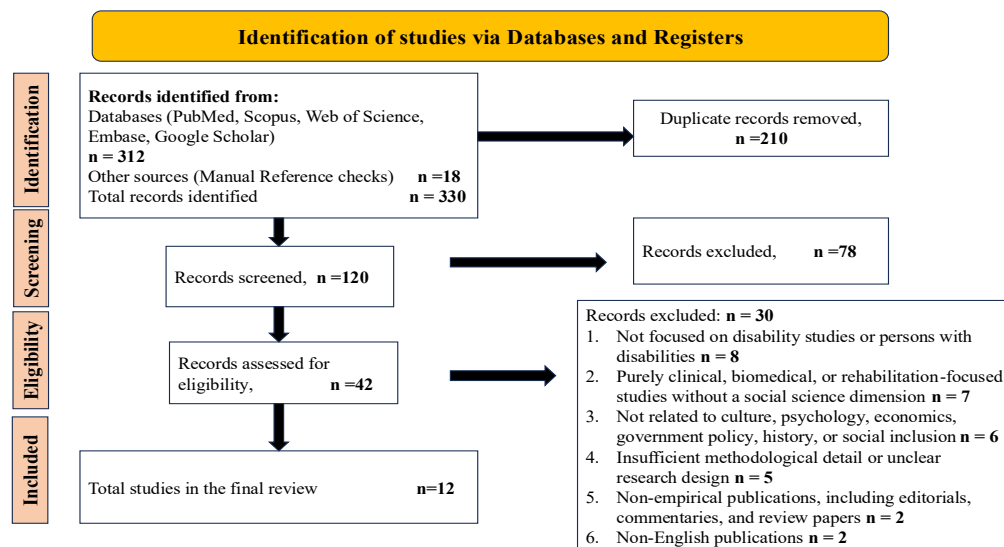
Due to the diversity of study designs, populations, contexts, and outcome measures, a narrative and thematic synthesis were decided upon. The results were organised around the themes of cultural, psychological, economic, policy, historical and social inclusion. Comparisons were used to look for similarities, differences, conflicts, opportunities, and geographical differences. The synthesis also explored how the six domains relate to each other and what were some of the key gaps in research.

3. Results

3.1 Study Selection Outcomes

The procedure for selecting studies followed the guidelines of PRISMA 2020, to have a transparent and systematic process of identifying relevant studies. During the first search, a total of 330 records were identified, 312 of which were retrieved from electronic databases (PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, Embase, and Google Scholar) and 18 more were found by manually searching the reference lists. After the removal of 210 duplicate studies, 120 unique studies were eligible for title and abstract screening.

At the screening stage, 78 records were removed for not meeting the set-up criteria. Therefore, 42 articles in full text were evaluated for eligibility. Following a thorough evaluation, 30 studies were excluded because of the following reasons: Eight studies were not disability studies or concerned with persons with disabilities, seven studies were purely clinical, biomedical or rehabilitation oriented, and did not have a social science or disability approach; six studies did not address the interdisciplinary domains of culture, psychology, economics, government policy, history, or social inclusion; five studies lacked methodological detail or methodology was unclear; two studies were non-empirical publications (such as editorials and commentaries or review papers); and two studies were in non-English languages. In total, 12 studies met all the inclusion criteria and were therefore included in the qualitative synthesis. The entire process of identification, screening, eligibility determination and inclusion is depicted in Figure 1.



Figure

1. PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram of Study Identification, Screening, Eligibility Assessment, and Inclusion

Figure 1 illustrates the PRISMA 2020 study selection process used in this systematic review. A total

of 330 records were identified, systematically screened through predefined eligibility criteria, and 12 studies were ultimately included in the qualitative synthesis after duplicate removal and full-text assessment.

3.2 Characteristics of Included Studies

The systematic review involved 12 peer-reviewed studies published between the years 2015 to 2025, indicating a development of interdisciplinary nature of disability studies. The studies were carried out in a variety of geographical contexts such as Kenya, Ghana, Cameroon, Zambia, Colombia, Canada, India, the United Kingdom and in multi-national populations, hence offering wide cultural and socioeconomic perspectives. Methodologically it included qualitative studies, quantitative studies, comparative studies, historical studies, and case-control studies, so that a holistic view of disability from various social science perspectives could be gained. The literature reviewed explored a variety of disability groups

such as people with intellectual disabilities, people with visual disabilities, people with physical disabilities, and people with developmental disabilities, autistic adults, and women with disabilities. These are the main research topics, directly related to the goals of this review, that were analyzed: culture, psychology, economics, government policy, history, and social inclusion. Most studies highlighted the importance of social stigma, community attitudes, employment inequities, access to health services, policy and structural barriers in the lives of people with disabilities. In general, the evidence indicated a complex interplay of cultural values, mental health, economic conditions, public policies, history and inclusive social settings that influence disability experiences. A variety of study designs and settings facilitated a thematic synthesis of the narrative approach, enabling the broad comparison of interdisciplinary findings, along with the identification of common themes, contextual variations and gaps (Table 1).

Table 1. Characteristics of the Included Studies

Author (Year)	Country	Methodology	Main Domain	Key Focus
Bunning et al. (2017)	Kenya	Qualitative	Culture	Community beliefs and stigma
Opoku et al. (2021)	Cameroon &	Survey	Culture/Social	Public attitudes toward

	Ghana		Inclusion	disability
Zeilinger et al. (2020)	Europe	Quantitative	Psychology	Disability literacy and stigma
Keating et al. (2024)	Multinational	Quantitative	Psychology	Mental health and acceptance
Liasidou & Gregoriou (2025)	UK	Quantitative	Psychology	Violence and intersectionality
Mactaggart et al. (2018)	Cameroon & India	Case-control	Economics	Employment and livelihoods
Pinilla-Roncancio & Cedeño-Ocampo (2023)	Colombia	Quantitative	Economics	Multidimensional poverty
Gupta et al. (2021)	Canada	Secondary analysis	Economics	Employment outcomes
Cleaver et al. (2020)	Zambia	Qualitative	Government Policy	Policy implementation
Ganle et al. (2016)	Ghana	Qualitative	Policy/Social Inclusion	Healthcare accessibility
Jarrett (2015)	UK	Historical analysis	History	Evolution of community inclusion
Bixby et al. (2022)	USA	Policy analysis	Social Inclusion	Disability, incarceration, and exclusion

3.3 Cultural and Psychological Perspectives on Disability

The results of the studies included in this review suggest that cultural beliefs and psychological experiences are deeply linked in understanding the lived experiences of people with disabilities. Disability is defined in different ways in different social contexts, and these cultural understandings, religious beliefs and community norms can have an impact on the attitudes and opportunities for social inclusion of people. Stigma, discrimination and exclusion are often driven by negative cultural perceptions, while positive cultural perceptions create acceptance and inclusion. Several East African communities have traditional beliefs that associate disability with myths or supernatural causes (Stone-MacDonald and Butera 2012) which add to the social marginalization of people with disabilities. Likewise, Bunning et al. (2017) identified that the community's beliefs

also significantly affect family support, educational opportunities, and social engagement. Another important determinant of public attitudes is disability literacy, which occurs when there is an understanding of disability and a decrease in prejudice as a result of that understanding (Opoku et al., 2021; Zeilinger et al., 2020). Cultural influences are not the only factors that impact psychological well-being; experiences of acceptance, identity and social relationships have a profound impact. However, Goodley (2019) argued that disability is not just a medical condition and must be considered a social and psychological experience. In line with this view, cohesive sense of self and positive social contexts are associated with greater psychological functioning (Waters & Fivush, 2015). In the opposite direction, economic uncertainty and social identity disturbances can

aggravate psychological distress and diminish in general well-being (Godinić, 2020). Together, these results provide evidence that disability inclusion can be achieved by tackling culture and psychologies, via education, inclusive policies, and

community-based disability-inclusion interventions that promote dignity, resilience, and equality of opportunity for people with disabilities (Table 2).

Table 2. Cultural and Psychological Dimensions of Disability

Theme	Main finding	Evidence base	References
Cultural beliefs	Traditional and community beliefs shaped perceptions of disability and influenced acceptance or exclusion.	Community and cross-cultural studies	Bunning et al. (2017); Stone-MacDonald and Butera (2012)
Disability literacy	Greater knowledge of intellectual disability was associated with reduced stigma and more positive attitudes.	Multinational and cross-national surveys	Opoku et al. (2021); Zeilinger et al. (2020)
Identity and acceptance	Social acceptance and coherent identity development supported psychological well-being.	Psychological and cross-cultural evidence	Goodley (2019); Keating et al. (2024); Waters and Fivush (2015)
Psychological distress	Stigma, violence, exclusion, and economic insecurity increased risks to mental health.	Intersectional and psychological studies	Godinić (2020); Liasidou and Gregoriou (2025)

3.4 Economic and Government Policy Perspectives

The reviewed studies have shown that economic inequality and government policy are essential factors influencing the social inclusion or quality of life of people with disabilities. There remains a long-standing gap between the participation of developed and developing countries in economic activities which is restricting their economic participation through employment, income generation, education, and access to public resources. People with disabilities often face challenges related to workplace discrimination, lack of accommodation, lack of access to vocational training, limited career advancement opportunities and unemployment and poverty (Pettinicchio et al., 2022). Comparative evidence also suggests that inclusive employment policies and interventions in the labour market can significantly enhance livelihoods and decrease socioeconomic inequalities (Mahendra Dev, 2018). In addition to employment, government policies are critical to ensuring access to equal health,

education, social protection and disability services. Disability laws need to be implemented in a coordinated way, disability agencies should be held to account for their implementation and active engagement of disability organizations in the process of addressing structural barriers and promoting equal participation (Yilmaz, 2020).

But sometimes the policy effect can be hampered by insufficient resources, administrative difficulties, and irregular enforcement, especially when the economy is in turmoil. Economic crises are known to affect government policy decisions and are likely to result in less investment in social welfare initiatives that provide for the poor and vulnerable, according to Nelson (2021). Overall, the results indicate that disability-related inequalities will have to be tackled through multi-sectoral public policies that address employment promotion, access to public services, social protection and institutional governance (Table 3).

Therefore, strengthening policy implementation, along with inclusive economic strategies, is necessary to advance disability rights, promote

financial independence and sustainable social inclusion (Pettinicchio et al., 2022; Yilmaz, 2020).

Table 3. Economic Inequality and Government Policy

Theme	Main finding	Evidence base	References
Employment barriers	People with disabilities experienced reduced employment opportunities, workplace exclusion, and limited career progression.	Employment and livelihood studies	Gupta et al. (2021); Mactaggart et al. (2018); Pettinicchio et al. (2022)
Poverty and deprivation	Disability was associated with multidimensional poverty and unequal access to socioeconomic resources.	Population and municipal-level analyses	Pinilla-Roncancio and Cedeño-Ocampo (2023); Pettinicchio et al. (2022)
Policy implementation	Weak coordination, limited resources, and inconsistent enforcement reduced policy effectiveness.	Stakeholder and policy analyses	Cleaver et al. (2020); Yilmaz (2020)
Public-service access	Institutional and structural barriers restrict access to healthcare and social protection.	Qualitative and policy evidence	Ganle et al. (2016); Nelson (2021)

3.5 Historical Development and Social Inclusion

The results show that the past has made a significant impact on current thinking on social inclusion, policy making and community involvement. Previous views tended to be medicalistic and define disability as an impairment in a person, something to be treated and institutionalized. As time passed, this focus turned to the social model, recognising that it is not just disability that limits the participation of people with a disability, but environmental, social and institutional barriers as well (Blackie & Moncrieff, 2022). This change has helped to increase movements of disability rights and awareness of equality, access and independent living. Historical analyses also show that the shift in societal values has helped to spur governments and communities to take more inclusive steps, such as changing policies and practices to exclude those with disabilities, to include them (Blackie & Moncrieff, 2022). Social inclusion has therefore become a key goal of disability research and disability public policy, with a focus on equal opportunities to go to the school, to the job, to the health care centre,

and to the political arena. The community's participation is an important part of the solution for reaching these goals; it is a means for the people with disabilities to participate in decision-making and local development projects. Ananga and Naiga (2023) asserted that if marginalized populations are involved in community programs, then the effectiveness of the program is enhanced by participatory development, and this can lead to greater social cohesion. Similarly, Nwachi (2021) recognized participation as one of the important factors that promote social inclusion and thus empowerment, sense of belonging, and equal citizenship. Additionally, employment policies and inclusive governance systems strengthen opportunities for civic involvement and social and economic inclusion (Pettinicchio et al., 2022; Yilmaz, 2020). Overall, the evidence reviewed indicates that, to date, there has been progress toward inclusion based on human rights, and this has contributed to more equitable and participatory societies for people with disabilities (Table 3).

Table 4. Historical Development and Social Inclusion

Theme	Main finding	Evidence base	References
Historical transition	Disability discourse moved from institutional and medical interpretations toward social and rights-based models.	Historical scholarship	Blackie and Moncrieff (2022); Jarrett (2015)
Community participation	Participation in community planning strengthened empowerment, representation, and belonging.	Socio-historical and participation studies	Ananga and Naiga (2023); Nwachi (2021)
Social exclusion	Incarceration, economic disadvantage, and institutional barriers intensified exclusion.	Social and policy analysis	Bixby et al. (2022); Pettinicchio et al. (2022)
Inclusive governance	Collaboration among governments, communities, and disability organizations improved inclusion.	Policy and stakeholder evidence	Cleaver et al. (2020); Yilmaz (2020)

3.6 Cross-Disciplinary Synthesis and Research Gaps

The findings of the synthesis of the studies presented indicate that disability is a multi-dimensional phenomenon resulting not only from the individual's disabilities but also from the interaction among the various factors that shape it, such as culture, psychological, economic, historical, policy and social. Societal attitudes and cultural beliefs can impact psychological health through social and economic inequities, such as restricted access to education, employment, health care and social participation, and through impacts on self-esteem and identity and on life experiences of stigma. Likewise, government policies set the extent to which structural barriers are lowered and equal opportunities are created. However, the nature of disability discourse has changed over time, moving away from a medical approach, and toward a rights-based and social inclusion perspective, with a focus on access, participation and equity. Despite the progress made, there are a number of research gaps that are evident in literature. Most studies were performed in low-

and middle-income countries or in specific high-income countries rather than in a wide range of contexts and cultures. Some disability groups are still underrepresented, such as multiple disabilities, older people and indigenous people. From a methodological perspective, literature is rich in cross-sectional and qualitative design studies, and only a few longitudinal and mixed method studies can be found that have the capacity for investigating long-term social change. Transdisciplinary research is therefore needed in the future that incorporates cultural, psychological, economic, historical and policy perspectives and uses robust comparative and longitudinal methodologies. These in-depth evaluations will support evidence-based policymaking and help create more inclusive societies that meet a range of needs and experiences of people with disabilities.

4. Discussion

This systematic review collected evidence from 12 studies to explore the disability from a multi-dimensional, inter-connected cultural, psychological, economic, government policy, historical and social inclusion lens. The results

show that disability is a multi-dimensional social phenomenon and that not only individual impairments, but also environmental, institutional and social elements have an influence. The literature reviewed shows that cultural beliefs, economic disparities, policy implementation and community involvement consistently affected the opportunities and quality of life for people with disabilities. The results corroborate the increased attention on rights-based and social perspectives of health care over the medical model, which focus on social participation, equality, and accessibility (Blackie & Moncrieff, 2022).

Culture became a key enabler of disability experiences. The studies reviewed indicated that traditional beliefs, stereotypes and misconceptions can sometimes lead to stigma and discrimination which can restrict access to education, to work, and to community life. The results obtained are similar to Matsumoto and Hwang (2021) who noted that cultural values have an impact on social behavior, attitudes and interpersonal relationships. This means the disability inclusion needs to be achieved through culturally responsive interventions that help to bring awareness to the public while combating negative stereotypes. Increasing disability literacy can help create more inclusive communities and minimize challenges faced by people with disabilities in society.

It also emphasises the significance of psychological well-being as a key factor in inclusion. Stigma and exclusion have a negative impact on the individual's mental health, self-esteem and identity, which in turn limits their ability to function in society. The reviewed studies all supported the notion that internalized stigma is a cause of psychological distress as shown by O'Donnell et al. (2018). Thus, disability policy should also consider incorporating psychosocial support, while focusing on physical accessibility to build resilience, social connectedness and well-being.

Economic inequality is one of the greatest obstacles for disability inclusion. The evidence reviewed has consistently shown that individuals with disabilities are less likely to have a job, less likely to be promoted and are more likely to be

financially insecure than their nondisabilities counterparts. The results are consistent with the results of Pettinicchio et al. (2022), who stated that there is economic inequality based on disability due to structural inequalities in public institutions and in the labour market. In a similar manner, Jovanović (2020) established poverty and social inequality as important drivers of social exclusion, and economic dependence as a potential determinant of participation and decision-making, further limiting the latter (Brites & Morsello, 2018). The results emphasise the importance of policies and practices that guarantee inclusive employment, workplace accommodation, and comprehensive social protection systems.

Government policy also has a significant impact on the outcomes of disability. Disability rights legislation has been adopted in many countries, but resources, institutions and coordination between them are limited, and there is insufficient engagement of stakeholders. Improving governance, monitoring and cooperation between governments, disability groups and communities is thus critical to ensure that the commitments in legislation are translated to meaningful changes in education, health care and employment as well as in public accessibility.

There is great progress but important research gaps there are still to be filled. Most of the studies were conducted with cross-sectional or qualitative design, which did not provide adequate information on the long-term outcomes of disability. Furthermore, there are still some areas and disabled populations which are under researched. Future research needs to move toward interdisciplinary and longitudinal research and increase diversity or evidence from cultural and socioeconomic contexts. Inclusive education and the involvement of communities in the education process should also be increased, as community belonging and equal citizenship is reinforced through them (Moreno-Tallón & Guasp, 2025). The conclusions made overall highlight the need for synergistic efforts in cultural, psychological, economic, historical and policy dimensions to build inclusive and accessible societies for everyone with a disability.

5. Conclusion

This systematic review illustrates that disability is a multidimensional phenomenon, which is influenced by complex dynamic interaction between cultural, psychological, economic, historical, policy and social factors rather than by impairment itself. Cultural beliefs and stigma are found to persist in influencing public attitudes and opportunities for participation, and psychological well-being is closely tied to social acceptance, identity and supportive environments. Economic disparities, job restrictions and poor access to essential resources continue to be major hurdles to the realization of independence and equal opportunities for people with disabilities. While a growing number of countries have enacted rights-based laws and policies that embrace everyone, many remain ineffective due to implementation irregularities and institutional obstacles. The shift in the definition of disability throughout history

from a medical and institutional view to those of social inclusiveness, accessibility and human rights further emphasizes the need for community participation and equitable governance. While there has been increased interdisciplinary research on these subjects, there are critical research gaps especially in the areas of longitudinal studies, comparative studies, and representation of underrepresented groups and cultural contexts. Future studies should be based on a multidisciplinary approach in order to find more comprehensive evidence for policy and practice, taking the social science perspective into account. In summary, strengthening connections between the research, policy, practice, and community is key for the creation of equitable strategies for equality, participation, dignity, and enhanced quality of life for people with disabilities, as well as for next steps in the trajectory of disability studies.

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