

Thematic Structures of Social Work Research During the COVID-19 Pandemic

TaeJeong Park* HyungWon Park Seoyoung Lee

Seoul Cyber University

The purpose of this study is to explore the thematic structures and responses of Korean social work research during the COVID-19 pandemic. Data were initially collected from Korea Citation Index (KCI) accredited social work journals published during the target period. To ensure academic representativeness, the final dataset was restricted to articles published in the *Korean Journal of Social Welfare (KJSW)*, a premier accredited journal in the field. Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) topic modeling and text-based network analysis were applied. The topic analysis identified four dominant themes that characterized the period: “Youth Well-being,” “The Intersection of Mental Health and Economic Instability,” “Methodological Diversification,” and “Employment and Social Integration.” Notably, the network analysis revealed that “COVID-19” functioned as a central hub, structurally mediating discussions on poverty, depression, and employment vulnerability. This finding suggests that the pandemic crisis reconstructed individual variables into interconnected social risks. Consequently, this study suggests the need for data-driven policy designs and methodological diversification to address complex social vulnerabilities, including future pandemics. Furthermore, it advocates for strengthening integrated support systems specifically targeting youth and economically marginalized groups.

Key words: Pandemic, COVID-19, Social Work Research, LDA Topic Modeling, Network Analysis, Research Trends, KCI, Python

* First author & Corresponding author: TaeJeong Park/Professor, Dept. of Social Welfare at Seoul Cyber University /Solmae-ro 49-gil, Gangbuk-gu, Seoul/Tel: 02-944-5019/E-mail: withjoy@iscu.ac.kr

I . Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed profound vulnerabilities in global health, welfare, and social policy systems, generating unprecedented disruptions that reshaped institutional priorities and strained service infrastructures worldwide. In South Korea, the crisis revealed structural limitations in health care accessibility, income protection mechanisms, and caregiving supports, prompting large-scale adjustments across social service sectors. Similar patterns have been observed worldwide. European countries experienced severe backlogs in primary and emergency care, while, in the United States, the absence of universal healthcare and comprehensive leave policies intensified health disparities and highlighted systemic inequities (Adams-Prassl et al., 2020; Heymann & Sprague, 2022; Villarreal & Yu, 2022). These examples collectively demonstrate how the pandemic functioned as a stress test for social policy systems worldwide, exposing gaps in preparedness and response capacity.

Amid these disruptions, social work scholarship—as a primary engine of knowledge production—played a critical role in addressing heightened vulnerabilities, yet scholarly examinations of how the field’s intellectual knowledge base evolved during this period remain limited. Existing Korean studies have primarily focused on specific policies, service delivery contexts, or practice-level challenges. Although such work provides valuable insights, it does not offer a comprehensive understanding of how social work research, as a collective discipline, navigated the crisis.

It is important to note that this study focuses

on elucidating the specific thematic structures and discursive patterns that crystallized during the pandemic (2020–2023), rather than strictly verifying causal changes through a quantitative comparison with the pre-pandemic era. South Korea’s delayed transition to the endemic phase suggests that pandemic-related social vulnerabilities persisted for a longer period, thereby creating a unique “crisis context” within which academic discourse developed a distinct structural configuration. Understanding how Korean social work scholarship responded to this prolonged period of disruption can therefore provide a window into the broader evolution of welfare research during crisis conditions.

Against this backdrop, this study analyzes social work research published between 2020 and 2023. To capture the mainstream academic discourse most rigorously, the dataset was strategically sourced from the *Korean Journal of Social Welfare (KJSW)*. Given the rapid quantitative expansion of academic journals, focusing on this flagship journal allows for a concentrated analysis of the most authoritative and consensus-based knowledge produced during the crisis. By employing Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) topic modeling and text-based network analysis, this study identified dominant themes, conceptual linkages, and structural patterns across the corpus. These computational methods enable the detection of underlying discourse trajectories that are not easily captured through traditional qualitative reviews (Hwang, 2023). By elucidating how social work research responded to the pandemic’s multidimensional challenges, this study strengthens the evidence base for future policy development, crisis preparedness, and welfare

system resilience.

II. Theoretical Background

1. Related Studies

Social work research in South Korea has evolved in tandem with changing socio-economic conditions and welfare state reforms, increasingly engaging with issues central to social policy, such as accountability, mental health, and service provision for vulnerable populations. Recent studies have focused on social isolation, financial insecurity, and unequal access to health care services, reflecting the growing complexity of welfare needs in an ageing and risk-prone society. For example, studies on rural social work have examined how Digital Social Prescribing can mitigate depression and loneliness among older adults, highlighting the role of digitally mediated interventions in expanding the reach of community-based care (Lee et al., 2023). Likewise, Lee et al. (2021) used latent profile analysis to classify psychosocial risk profiles among older adults living alone in South Korea and, demonstrated that multiple overlapping vulnerabilities—mental health problems, weak social ties, and economic precarity—coexist within this population. Their findings underscore the need for targeted, and differentiated policy interventions that address both psychosocial risks and structural drivers of isolation.

While such studies provide important insights into intervention design and program-level practice, they also reveal a broader gap in how Korean social work and social policy scholarship has been assessed over time. Despite the steady

expansion of issue-driven research, systematic evaluations of how the field as a whole responds to major crises and policy shifts remain limited. In particular, although the COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly affected welfare policies, service delivery, and everyday life, relatively little empirical work has explicitly traced how this global crisis influenced the thematic focus and structural organization of social work and social policy research in Korea (Park, 2024). Therefore, a comprehensive analysis of research trends is necessary to evaluate how knowledge production in social work and social policy navigates social disruptions, welfare reforms, and long-term transformations in the Korean welfare regime.

International social work and social policy scholarship have more systematically applied structured methodologies to assess theoretical trends, empirical rigor, and research quality. For instance, Hendrix et al. (2024) conducted a systematic review of 120 quantitative social work studies published between 2010 and 2015 that examined methodological transparency, research designs, and theoretical integration. They found that 62% of the studies relied on cross-sectional descriptive designs and only 40% incorporated substantive theoretical frameworks. Moreover, 15% of the articles did not address missing data, raising concerns about methodological robustness, replicability, and cumulative development of knowledge. These results highlight the need for standardized methodological frameworks that are explicitly aligned with the epistemological foundations and social justice commitments of social work and social policy research.

Qualitative social work research has been subject

to similar scrutiny. Barusch, Gringeri, and George (2011) reviewed 100 qualitative articles published between 2003 and 2008, identifying commonly used rigor-enhancing strategies such as explicit sampling rationales (67%), analyst triangulation (59%), and explicit discussion of study limitations (56%). However, negative case analysis (8%) and external audits (7%) were rarely employed, suggesting persistent gaps in methodological reflexivity and transparency. Building on this, Gringeri, Barusch, and Cambron (2013) examined 100 qualitative social work studies published from 2008 to 2010 and reported that 77% adopted exploratory approaches, with half of them focusing on pressing social issues. Practitioners (39%) and clients (28%) were the primary research participants, indicating a strong orientation toward practice and policy relevance. Yet critical dimensions such as power relations (7%) and researcher reflexivity (16%) remained underdeveloped, limiting the extent to which these studies could engage with inequality, voice, and representation—core concerns of sociology and social policy. Notably, this body of work still lacks longitudinal, thematic analyses that trace the evolution of social work knowledge production across time, welfare regimes, and policy contexts.

Existing approaches to research trend analysis in social work and policy rely largely on descriptive statistics to map publication volumes, target populations, and methodological choices. Although these methods are useful for capturing broad empirical patterns, they are insufficient for identifying deeper conceptual structures, knowledge clusters, and structural linkages between themes in large bodies of literature. They do not fully capture

how research agendas shift after major policy reforms, crises, or socioeconomic transitions. This limitation underscores the need for more sophisticated computational approaches that can reveal latent thematic structures and discursive formations.

Against this backdrop, this study employs natural language processing (NLP) and machine learning techniques to analyze research trends in Korean social work scholarship as a country-specific case of social policy and welfare state transformation. By systematically mapping how the field responded to social disruptions and policy changes during the COVID-19 pandemic, this study offers empirical evidence of the dynamics of knowledge production.

2. Characteristics of Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA)

LDA, first introduced by Blei, Ng, and Jordan (2003), is a probabilistic topic model designed to uncover latent thematic structures within large collections of texts. Unlike Latent Semantic Analysis, which is based on singular value decomposition of term-document matrices, LDA treats each document as a mixture of multiple topics and each topic as a probability distribution over words (Jelodar et al., 2019). This generative and hierarchical structure enables LDA to capture semantic relationships across documents while maintaining interpretability of the extracted topics—an important requirement in social science and social policy research. Dirichlet priors help stabilize topic distributions, enhance topic coherence, and reduce overfitting in high-dimensional text data (Boyd-Graber et al., 2017). Through iterative

inference procedures such as variational Bayesian methods or Gibbs sampling, LDA refines word-to-topic and document-to-topic assignments, thereby improving classification accuracy and the reliability of thematic interpretations (Nikolenko et al., 2017).

Owing to these strengths, LDA has been widely adopted across many disciplines, including public health, political science, policy analysis, and social sciences, to extract latent themes from unstructured text and examine the composition of discourse (Park, 2024). In sociology and social policy, LDA is particularly useful for analyzing how policy debates, welfare narratives, and problem framing are structured in response to specific crises or reforms. It allows researchers to move beyond manual coding or simple frequency counts and to examine how clusters of concepts coalesce into more durable “topic regimes” tied to broader institutional and political transformations.

As big data analytics and computational methods become more central to social work and social policy research, LDA offers a systematic and replicable framework for uncovering hidden thematic structures in academic and policy discourse. When combined with network analysis and other NLP techniques, it can be used to identify salient policy issues, detect emerging research themes, and explore conceptual developments in ways that are difficult to achieve with traditional methods alone. In this study, LDA is employed to examine the thematic landscape of Korean social work research, thereby linking disciplinary knowledge production to wider debates on social risk and inequality in the wake of the pandemic.

3. Network Analysis: Eigenvector and Betweenness Centrality in Text-Based Research

Network analysis provides a structural perspective for examining the relationships within complex systems and has become an important methodological tool in sociology and social policy. When applied to text, network approaches conceptualize words, concepts, or topics as nodes and their co-occurrences or semantic associations as ties, allowing researchers to identify key themes, influential concepts, and their interconnections in large bodies of discourse. Such analyses reveal how policy narratives are assembled, which concepts occupy central or bridging positions, and how thematic clusters are organized.

Among the various centrality measures, eigenvector and betweenness centralities are particularly useful for text-based applications. Eigenvector centrality assesses the influence of a node based not only on the number of connections but also on the importance of the nodes to which it is connected. In text analysis, this measure highlights the dominant themes and core terms that structure the overall discourse (He & Meghanathan, 2016). Empirical studies have shown that eigenvector centrality is strongly correlated with degree centrality, making it a robust indicator of structurally significant concepts in semantic networks (Meghanathan, 2015). Applied to social work and social policy texts, it can illuminate how certain notions—such as “activation,” “conditionality,” or “vulnerability”—become central in framing welfare debates and institutional reforms.

By contrast, betweenness centrality captures

the extent to which a node functions as a bridge along the shortest paths between other nodes. Textual networks identify terms that connect otherwise separate thematic clusters, thereby highlighting conceptual intersections and zones of discursive transition (Singh et al., 2018). In social work and social policy research, high-betweenness terms often signal emerging interdisciplinary themes, such as the intersection of digitalization and care or the linkage between labor market precarity and mental health, which cut across conventional subfields. Particularly in crisis contexts, identifying these bridging nodes is crucial for understanding how distinct social problems are interconnected. Although the exact computation of betweenness centrality can be computationally intensive for large networks, heuristic and approximation algorithms allow for its application to sizeable text corpora (Singh et al., 2017).

Integrating eigenvectors and betweenness centralities enables a more nuanced understanding of semantic structures than do a simple frequency-based analysis.

While frequency counts identify popular terms, centrality measures uncover concepts that are structurally influential or mediate distinct clusters of meaning (Diallo et al., 2016). In the context of this study, this approach provides a structural map of how key ideas in Korean social work research are organized, which concepts dominate the discourse, and which terms connect different thematic domains, such as social care, labor, health, and family policy. As social work and policy scholarship increasingly relies on computational methods, network analysis offers a powerful lens for systematically tracing policy trends,

mapping academic debates, and revealing the structural architectures of welfare-related knowledge.

III. Research Methodology

1. Data Source

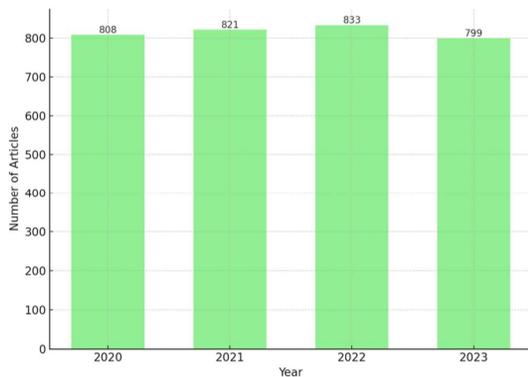
The dataset for this study was constructed using the Korea Citation Index (KCI), which is managed by the National Research Foundation of Korea. The primary challenge in defining a dataset was the rapid quantitative expansion of social welfare in South Korea. Notably, 3,261 academic articles were published in KCI-accredited social welfare journals during the four-year data collection period (2020~2023).

Given this volume, a mechanical aggregation of all available publications risks masking distinct research trends, owing to the varying scope and quality of the journals. Analyzing such a vast and heterogeneous corpus often leads to a “dilution” of thematic characteristics, where critical discursive shifts are obscured by the sheer noise of peripheral studies.

Therefore, this study strategically restricts its data source to the KJSW to rigorously capture mainstream academic discourse. As the only journal in the field designated as an “Excellent Accredited Journal” by the National Research Foundation, the KJSW functions as a rigorous gatekeeper of academic quality. Focusing on this flagship journal allows for a concentrated analysis of authoritative knowledge, serving as a valid and distinct proxy for understanding how the social work academic community has intellectually responded to the COVID-19 pandemic.

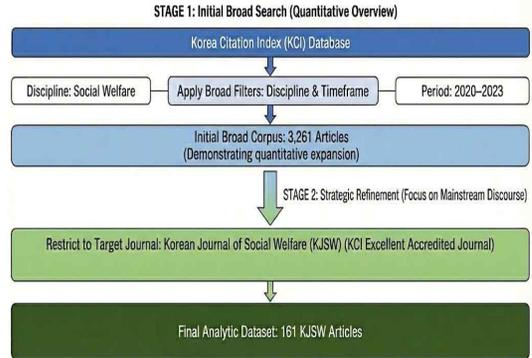
2. Data Collection and Processing

The data collection process was executed in two stages. First, an initial broad search was conducted in the KCI database to gauge the overall volume of research in the field. The search criteria were set to include all articles categorized under “Social Welfare” published between 2020 and 2023. This preliminary step confirmed the quantitative expansion of the discipline, yielding a corpus of 3,261 articles, as illustrated in Figure 1.



[Figure 1] Social Work Articles Published Annually (2020~2023).

In the second stage, the dataset was refined to isolate mainstream academic discourse. Consistent with the study’s focus on authoritative knowledge, the search was narrowed down to the KJSW. From the initial corpus, only articles published in the KJSW during the same four-year period were selected. This rigorous filtering process yielded a final dataset of 161 articles. The detailed selection and filtering process, moving from the broader corpus to the final analytical dataset, is shown in Figure 2.



[Figure 2] Data Collection Process

After the selection process, a data preprocessing phase was conducted to optimize the dataset for analysis. This involved correcting typographical errors and standardizing spacing to ensure uniformity. Numerical data, proper nouns, and synonymous terms were refined to maintain consistency across the dataset. Additionally, irrelevant stopwords unrelated to the study’s objectives were systematically removed using a customized stopword collection method. These meticulous preprocessing steps ensured that the dataset was clean, structured, and optimized for accurate and effective topic modeling analysis.

3. Analysis Procedure

The refined dataset was analyzed using a systematic procedure designed to extract latent themes and structural patterns. First, a Term Frequency–Inverse Document Frequency (TF–IDF) analysis was conducted to identify salient keywords. Although raw Term Frequency (TF) indicates simple occurrence, it can disproportionately emphasize generic words. TF–IDF addresses this issue by weighting terms based on their dis-

tribution across the entire corpus, thereby filtering out generic lexicon items and retaining words with specific discriminatory power relevant to social work discourse (Wu et al., 2008).

Regarding the topic modeling approach, this study deliberately selected LDA over hard clustering methods such as K-means. While K-means was initially considered, its assumption of a “one-document-one-topic” structure limits its applicability to academic literature, where a single article often integrates multiple dimensions such as policy, practice, and theory. Therefore, LDA, which treats documents as probabilistic mixtures of multiple topics, was determined to be the optimal method for capturing the complex, multi-thematic nature of the dataset.

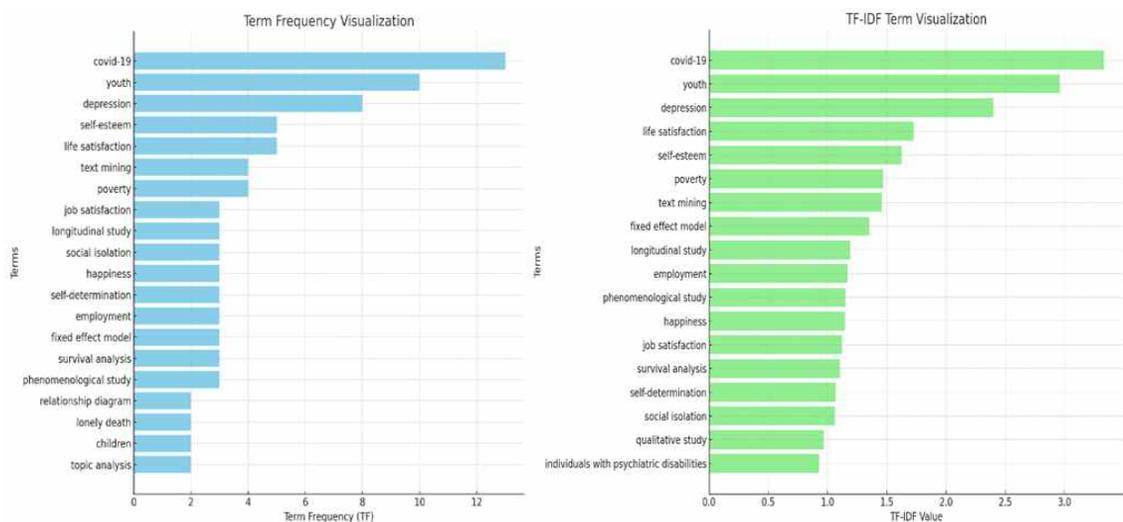
Complementary topic modeling and semantic network analysis were employed to map the structural organization of the key concepts. This analysis utilized two specific centrality metrics to interpret the discourse structure. Eigenvector centrality was calculated to identify dominant

concepts that exert global influence within the network, reflecting the core agenda of the field. Simultaneously, betweenness centrality was measured to detect “bridging” terms—concepts that act as intermediaries connecting otherwise distinct thematic clusters. By analyzing these structural properties, this study elucidates how specific concepts function as hubs or mediators within the academic response to the pandemic.

IV. Analysis Results

1. TF and TF-IDF Analysis

To identify the primary thematic structure of social work research during the pandemic, a TF and TF-IDF analysis was conducted on the top 20 keywords extracted from the KJSW dataset. The results, presented in Figure 3, provide a quantitative overview of the concepts that gained the most prominence within mainstream academic discourse.



[Figure 3] TF and TF-IDF Results

The TF (Term Frequency) results identify the most frequently occurring terms. Notably, “COVID-19” and “youth” emerged as the most dominant keywords, suggesting that the academic community prioritized the intersection of the public health crisis and the developmental challenges faced by younger populations. High-frequency terms such as “depression”, “self-esteem”, and “life satisfaction” indicate a sustained focus on psychosocial well-being as a core domain of social work practice. Additionally, the emergence of terms like “text mining” alongside traditional keywords like “poverty” highlights a dual focus on adopting new methodological tools while maintaining engagement with fundamental socioeconomic issues.

The TF-IDF analysis, which assigns greater weight to terms with high discriminatory power within specific documents, offers a more nuanced perspective on the methodological and thematic distinctiveness of research. While “COVID-19” and “youth” maintain high values, terms such as “fixed effect model” and “phenomenological study” appear significantly. Rather than implying a simple methodological shift, this indicates that the field responded to the crisis by employing rigorous analytical frameworks, ranging from advanced statistical techniques to in-depth qualitative inquiries, to capture the complex realities of the pandemic. Furthermore, specific terms like “individuals with psychiatric disabilities” underscore the field’s commitment to examining the experiences of highly vulnerable groups who may be disproportionately affected by social disruptions.

Collectively, these analyses demonstrate that the intellectual response of the Korean social work community is characterized by a distinct

structural configuration. The discourse was not only centered on the immediate phenomena of the pandemic, but it was also structured around methodological diversity and targeted investigations into specific vulnerable populations. This finding suggests that knowledge production during this period was driven by the need to provide evidence-based insights into the mental health consequences of the crisis and its structural inequalities.

2. LDA Topic Modeling

To determine the optimal number of topics for LDA topic modeling, a topic coherence analysis was first conducted. Coherence scores serve as a quantitative measure of semantic interpretability, and the final number of topics was selected to maximize this value. Using the C_V metric, the analysis yielded a high coherence score of 0.6978 at k=4. Accordingly, the model was fitted with four topics, as detailed in Table 1.

The labeling of each topic was driven by a qualitative interpretation of the most salient keywords. While demographic terms such as “elderly”, “disabled”, and “youth” appeared frequently across the corpus, the naming process prioritized keywords that capture the specific context or problematic associated with each group. Consequently, the topic names were constructed to reflect the distinct thematic clusters that structured the academic discourse during the pandemic. The results identify four key thematic areas, each representing a significant dimension of how the field intellectually organized its response to the crisis.

The first theme, “Youth Well-being in the

Context of COVID-19” (29.49%), explores the intersection of well-being and pandemic-related challenges. Keywords such as youth, COVID-19, life satisfaction, phenomenological study, and longitudinal study indicate a pronounced academic interest in scrutinizing how young individuals navigated the pandemic—both in terms of subjective well-being and broader social contexts. This theme underscores the field’s methodological strategy of employing longitudinal and phenomenological approaches to capture the nuanced experiences of youth during times of crisis.

The second theme, “Mental Health and Economic Challenges in the COVID-19 Context” (26.43%), structurally integrates issues of psychological well-being with economic vulnerability. Keywords such as “COVID-19”, “depression”, “poverty”, “self-esteem”, and “survival analysis” highlight the discursive linkage between the pandemic’s mental health consequences and financial instability. Rather than viewing these as separate domains, this theme suggests that the academic community conceptualized mental health disparities as being deeply intertwined with economic hardship during

the crisis.

The third theme, “Methodological Diversification in Social Work Research” (23.81%), highlights the active adoption of distinct analytical tools. Keywords such as “text mining” and “ethnography” reflect an expansion of the methodological repertoire used to examine social issues. This cluster suggests that the complexity of the pandemic context prompted researchers to integrate diverse qualitative and quantitative methods to generate more comprehensive and multi-layered insights.

The fourth theme, “Employment and Social Integration” (20.27%), examines the relationship between employment, social inclusion, and health outcomes. Keywords such as “employment,” “job satisfaction,” “marriage migrant women,” “elderly health,” and “turnover intention” indicate a focus on workforce dynamics as a critical determinant of social integration. This theme emphasizes how the discourse framed employment not merely as an economic activity but as a vital pathway to social inclusion, particularly for vulnerable populations such as older adults and migrant workers.

<Table 1> Topic Modeling Results

Topic	Keywords	Proportion (%)
Youth Well-being in the Context of COVID-19	youth, covid-19, life satisfaction, phenomenological study, longitudinal study	29.49%
Mental Health and Economic Challenges in the COVID-19 Context	covid-19, depression, poverty, self-esteem, survival analysis	26.43%
Emerging Methods in Social Work Research	text mining, ethnography, children, relationship diagram, press release	23.81%
Employment and Social Integration	employment, job satisfaction, marriage migrant women, elderly health, turnover intention	20.27%

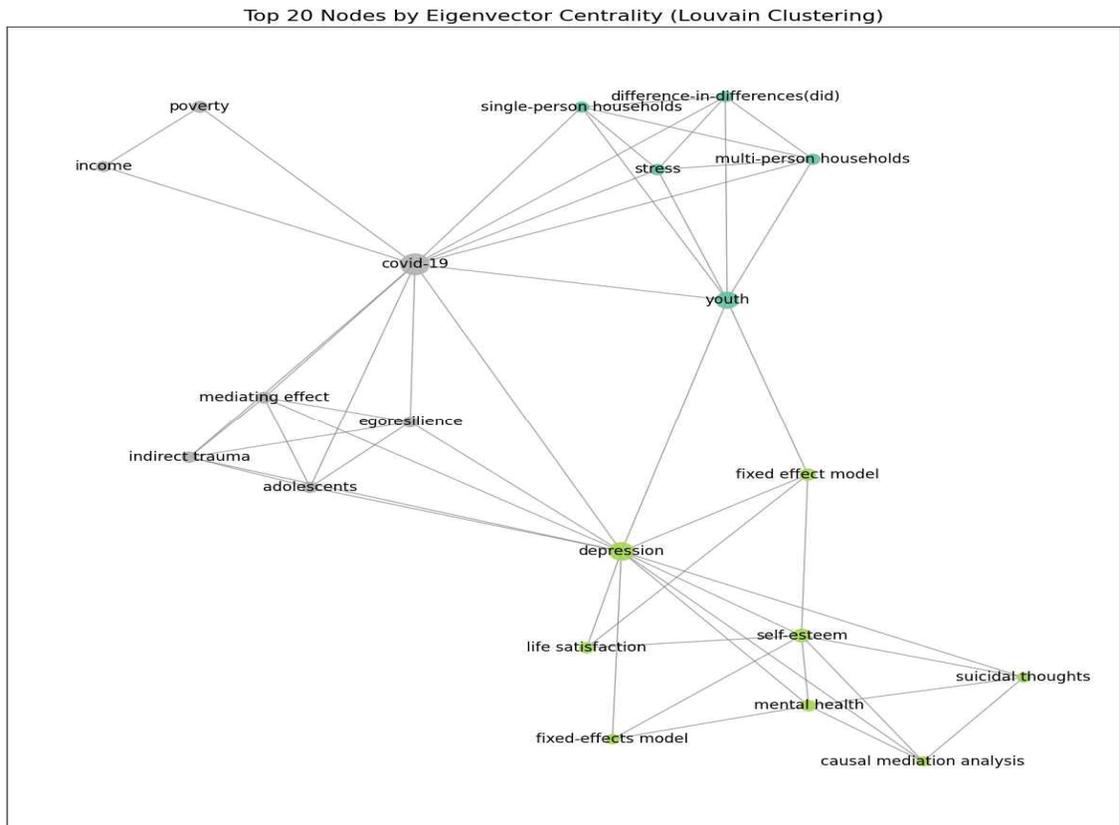
3. Eigenvector Centrality Analysis

Eigenvector centrality identifies not only frequently used terms but also the most influential nodes that are connected to other highly central concepts. This metric reveals the “core agenda” that structured the academic discourse during the study period. The analysis identified three dominant clusters, illustrating how the field prioritizes specific thematic intersections.

- **Mental Health and Methodological Rigor:** The most central cluster anchors the network around psychosocial distress, linking terms like “depression,” “suicidal thoughts,” and “life satisfaction.” Crucially, these concepts

are tightly interwoven with advanced statistical terms such as “fixed-effects model” and “causal mediation analysis.” This structural coupling indicates that the field’s response to mental health crises was characterized by a drive for empirical rigor, moving beyond descriptions to establish robust causal relationships with psychological well-being.

- **Youth and Socioeconomic Dynamics:** This cluster captures the structural context of vulnerability, connecting “youth” with socioeconomic indicators like “single-person households” and “stress.” The inclusion of “Difference-in-Differences (DID)” analysis within this group suggests that researchers prioritized policy



[Figure 4] Eigenvector Centrality Analysis.

evaluation frameworks to assess how socio-economic shifts specifically impacted the younger generation. These findings highlight the interplay between structural changes and individual developmental outcomes.

- **Resilience and Vulnerability Mechanisms:** The third cluster focuses on the internal dynamics of adaptation, grouping “adolescents” with “ego-resilience,” “indirect trauma,” and “mediating effect.” This configuration suggests that the discourse did not focus solely on pathology; rather, it structurally emphasized the mechanisms of resilience amidst adversity. The presence of “indirect trauma” further signals the expanded scope of research on the secondary and ripple effects of social crises.

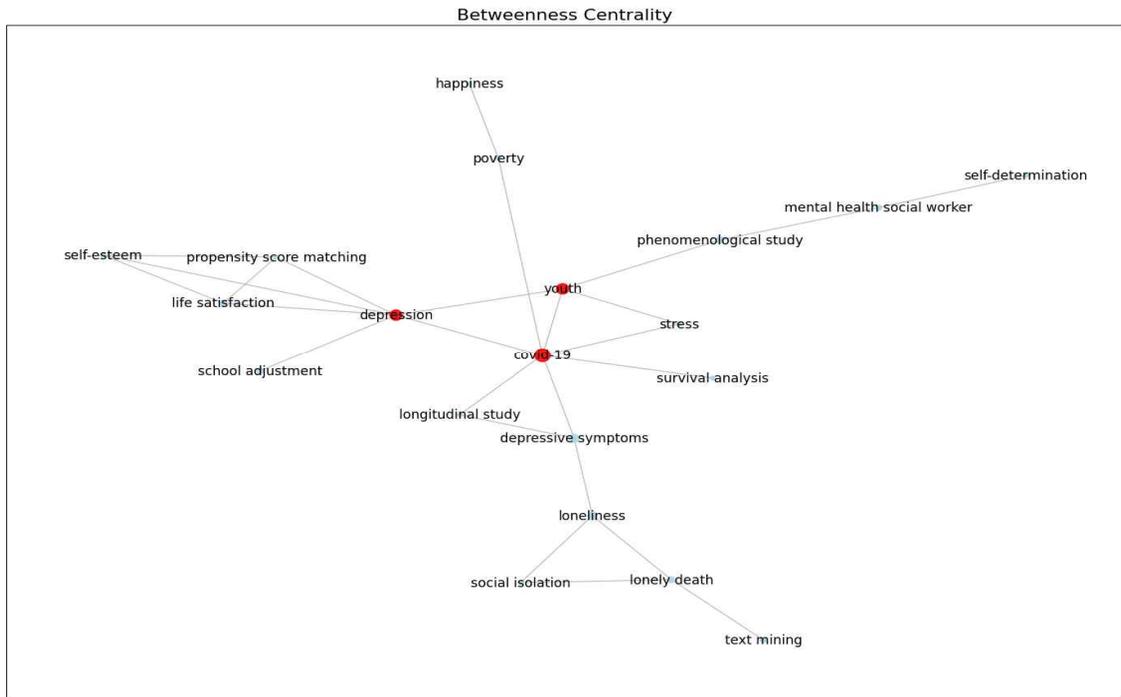
Collectively, these clusters demonstrate the intellectual backbone of Korean social work research during the pandemic. The high centrality of these nodes confirms that the field’s “mainstream” discourse was organized around a dual commitment: addressing the heightened complexity of mental health and youth issues while simultaneously elevating the methodological standards required to study them.

4. Betweenness Centrality Analysis

Betweenness centrality measures the extent to which a specific node acts as a “bridge” along the shortest paths between other nodes. Unlike frequency or eigenvector centrality, this metric reveals the structural gatekeepers that connect disparate thematic clusters within the research network. The analysis highlights how the aca-

dem discourse was interconnected through specific key concepts.

- **COVID-19 as the Structural Anchor:** As anticipated, “COVID-19” exhibited the highest betweenness centrality, functioning as the supreme mediator of the network. However, the significance lies in what it connected. The visualization reveals that COVID-19 bridged macro-structural variables (e.g., “poverty”, “economic instability”) with micro-individual outcomes (e.g., “depression”, “stress”). This indicates that the pandemic served as a unifying context, compelling researchers to integrate previously distinct domains—linking economic hardship directly to psychological vulnerability in ways that might have been less explicit in non-crisis periods.
- **Key Conduits: Youth and Mental Health:** Apart from the pandemic itself, “youth” and “depression” emerged as critical secondary hubs. Their high betweenness scores suggest they acted as discursive intersections. For instance, “youth” did not merely appear as a subject of study but served as a connector linking educational challenges (e.g., “school adjustment”) with psychological metrics (e.g., “self-esteem”, “life satisfaction”). This structure implies that the field utilized these populations and conditions as the primary lens through which to interpret the broader societal impact of the crisis.
- **Methodological Bridges:** Interestingly, methodological terms such as “phenomenological study” and “text mining” appeared not as isolated nodes but as bridges connecting var-



[Figure 5] Betweenness Centrality Analysis.

ious substantive topics. This structural placement confirms that diverse analytical approaches were actively deployed across different thematic areas, serving as the functional tools that allowed the discipline to explore the complex, multidimensional nature of the pandemic.

In summary, the high betweenness centrality of these nodes illustrates the “connective tissue” of the discourse. The network was not a collection of fragmented topics but a highly cohesive structure where COVID-19 functioned as the central axis, integrating the study of mental health, economic precarity, and vulnerable populations into a unified academic agenda.

V. Implications and Conclusion

1. Implications

The findings of this study, derived from the mainstream discourse of the *KJSW*, offer critical insights into how the discipline intellectually responded to the prolonged crisis. These structural patterns provide theoretical and practical implications for advancing social welfare policies and practices in South Korea.

First, the structural coupling of “youth well-being” and “economic precarity” necessitates a paradigm shift toward integrated interventions. The analysis revealed that academic discourse consistently linked youth mental health to socio-economic instability, rather than treating it as an

isolated clinical issue. This implies that social work practices must move beyond singular counseling models. Instead, multilevel interventions that simultaneously address individual psychosocial needs and structural determinants, such as labor market entry and housing stability, are required. Given the distinct challenges facing Korean youth, who are often characterized by delayed independence and economic insecurity, social services must adopt a “developmental resilience framework” that combines mental health support and tangible economic empowerment programs.

Second, the central position of “mental health” within the network underscores the urgency of expanding the delivery system beyond clinical settings. The high centrality of the mental health terms indicates that psychological distress acts as a core mediator of social vulnerability during a crisis. Consequently, policy responses should prioritize preventive and accessible care models. Specifically, integrating mental health services into everyday settings such as schools, universities, and workplaces is essential for lowering barriers to access. Furthermore, considering the strong linkage between “depression” and “economic hardship” found in the study, public mental health services must be closely coordinated with income support systems to address the root causes of distress.

Third, the emergence of “unemployment and social integration” emphasizes the necessity of improving the occupational environment within the social service sector. Discourse analysis highlighted a significant focus on the working conditions of caregivers and social service professionals. This finding suggests that the resilience of the Korean

welfare system is contingent on the occupational well-being of the workforce. To prevent burnout and ensure service efficacy, institutional policies must prioritize fair remuneration, manageable workload distribution, and continuous professional development, particularly in the context of Korea’s rapidly aging society, where care demands are escalating.

Fourth, methodological diversification signals a pressing need to modernize social work education. The appearance of terms related to advanced statistical modeling and text mining indicates that the field is increasingly relying on data-driven evidence.

Consequently, graduate-level curricula should be updated to include computational social sciences and data literacy. Equipping future researchers and practitioners with these skills will enable the field to detect macrolevel social trends more rapidly and refine intervention strategies with greater precision.

2. Conclusion

This study analyzed the intellectual response of the Korean social work community to the COVID-19 pandemic by strategically examining the mainstream discourse within the KJSW. This study identified how the field prioritized and framed emerging social risks during a period of unprecedented uncertainty (2020~2023). The analysis revealed that academic discourse was not merely reactive but was structurally organized around the integration of mental health, economic vulnerability, and rigorous methodological inquiry. The pandemic functioned as a catalyst, compel-

ling the discipline to bridge the gap between macro (structural) variables and micro (individual) experiences. This study contributes to the literature by documenting how specific academic disciplines construct knowledge under crisis conditions. These findings suggest that, for Korean social work to remain resilient, it must continue to strengthen the interdisciplinary linkages between social policy and clinical practice. Ultimately, the insights from this study provide foundational evidence for developing a more responsive and robust welfare system capable of navigating future social crises.

Nevertheless, this study is limited by its focus on the mainstream discourse of a single Korean journal (*KJSW*), which may constrain the generalizability of its findings. Future research should pursue cross-national comparisons using international journal corpora and multi country datasets to assess the generalizability and context-specificity of the identified thematic structures across welfare regimes and pandemic responses.

References

- Adams-Prassl, A., Boneva, T., Golin, M., & Rauh, C. (2022). The impact of the coronavirus lockdown on mental health: Evidence from the United States. *Economic Policy*, 37(109), 139-155. <https://doi.org/10.1093/epolic/eiac002>
- Barusch, A., Gringeri, C., & George, M. (2011). Rigor in qualitative social work research: Strategies used in published articles. *Social work research*, 35(1), 11-19. <https://doi.org/10.1093/swr/35.1.11>
- Blei, D. M., Ng, A. Y., & Jordan, M. I. (2003). Latent Dirichlet allocation. *Journal of Machine Learning Research*, 3, 993-1022. <https://doi.org/10.1162/jmlr.2003.3.4-5.993>
- Boyd-Graber, J., Hu, Y., & Mimno, D. (2017). Applications of topic models. *Foundations and Trends® in Information Retrieval*, 11(2-3), 143-296. <https://doi.org/10.1561/15000000030>
- Decerf, B., Ferreira, F. H. G., Mahler, D. G., & Sterck, O. (2020). Lives and livelihoods: Estimates of the global mortality and poverty effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (Policy Research Working Paper No. 9277). *World Bank*. <https://doi.org/10.1596/1813-9450-9277>
- Gringeri, C., Barusch, A., & Cambron, C. (2013). Epistemology in qualitative social work research: A review of published articles, 2008-2010. *Social work research*, 37(1), 55-63. <https://doi.org/10.1093/swr/svs032>
- He, X., Meghanathan, N. (2016). Correlation of eigenvector centrality to other centrality measures: Random, small-world and real-world networks. *Computer Science and Information Technology*, 6(12), 9-18. <https://doi.org/10.5121/csit.2016.61202>
- Hendrix, E., Koelling, E., Barusch, A., Abu-Bader, S., & Gringeri, C. (2024). Are we advancing the quality of social work research? An assessment of quantitative research published in social work journals. *Research on Social Work Practice*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049731524128369>
- Heymann, J., Sprague, A. (2022). Paid leave and beyond: The urgency and feasibility of addressing structural inequalities across race, gender, and class. *American Journal of Public Health*, 112(7), 959-961.

- <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2022.306911>
- Jelodar, H., Wang, Y., Yuan, C., Feng, X., Jiang, X., Li, Y., & Zhao, L. (2019). Latent Dirichlet allocation (LDA) and topic modeling: Models, applications, a survey. *Multimedia Tools and Applications*, 78(11), 15169–15211. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11042-018-6894-4>
- Lee, H., Koh, S. B., Jo, H. S., Lee, T. H., Nam, H. K., Zhao, B., Lim, S., Lim, J. A., Lee, H. H., Hwang, Y. S., & Kim, D. H. (2023). Evaluating the Effectiveness of Rural Digital Social Prescribing in Korea: Protocol for a Cohort Study. *JMIR research protocols*, 12, e46371. <https://doi.org/10.2196/46371>
- Lee, C., Cho, B., Yang, Q., Chang, S. J., Ko, H., Yi, Y. M., Cho, H. R., & Park, Y. H. (2021). Psychosocial risk profiles among older adults living alone in South Korea: A latent profile analysis. *Archives of Gerontology and Geriatrics*, 95, 104429. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.archger.2021.04429>
- Meghanathan, N. (2015). Correlation coefficient analysis of centrality metrics for complex network graphs. In *Advances in Computer Science and Ubiquitous Computing* (pp. 11–20). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-18503-3_2
- Mercado, M., Wachter, K., & Schuster, R. C. (2022). A cross-sectional analysis of factors associated with stress, burnout, and turnover intention among healthcare workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Health & Social Care in the Community*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hsc.13718>
- Nikolenko, S. I., Koltcov, S., & Koltsova, O. (2017). Topic modelling for qualitative studies. *Journal of Information Science*, 43(1), 88–102. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0165551515617393>
- Park, T. (2024). COVID-19 research trends in social work: LDA topic modeling analysis in South Korea. *Journal of Social Service Research*, 50(4), 609–619. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01488376.2024.2354528>
- Sievert, C., Shirley, K. (2014). LDAvis: A method for visualizing and interpreting topics. *Proceedings of the Workshop on Interactive Language Learning, Visualization, and Interfaces*, 63–70. <https://doi.org/10.3115/v1/W14-3110>
- Singh, R. R., Chaudhary, S., & Agarwal, M. (2017). An efficient heuristic for betweenness-ordering. *arXiv preprint arXiv:1409.6470*. <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.1409.6470>
- Singh, R., Iyengar, S., Chaudhary, S., & Agarwal, M. (2018). An efficient heuristic for betweenness estimation and ordering. *Social Network Analysis and Mining*, 8(1), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13278-018-0542-x>
- Hwang, U. (2023). Analysis of Big Data from Social Networks to Identify Issues of Interest in employment Services. *Journal of Future Society*, 14(3), 12–29.
- Villarreal, A., Yu, W. (2022). Research note: Gender differences in employment during the COVID-19 epidemic. *Demography*. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00703370-9710353>
- Withers, M., Jahangir, T., Kubasova, K., & Ran, M. (2021). Reducing stigma associated with mental health problems among university students in the Asia-Pacific: A video content analysis of student-driven proposals. *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, 68, 827–835. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00207640211007511>

Wu, H. C., Luk, R. W. P., Wong, K. F., & Kwok, K. L. (2008). Interpreting TF-IDF term weights as making relevance decisions. *ACM Transactions on Information Systems*, 26(3), Article 13.

<https://doi.org/10.1145/1361684.1361686>

World Health Organization. (2022). COVID-19 has caused major disruptions and backlogs in health care: New WHO study finds. *WHO Europe*. <https://www.who.int/>

투고일자: 2025. 12. 11.
심사일차: 2026. 1. 27.
게재확정일자: 2026. 2. 6.

코로나19 팬데믹 시기 사회복지 연구의 중심 주제와 구조 분석

박 태 정 박 형 원 이 서 영

서울사이버대학교

본 연구의 목적은 팬데믹 기간 동안 형성된 한국 사회복지 학계의 연구 주제 구조와 방법론적 대응 양상을 탐색하는 데 있다. 이를 위해 한국학술지인용색인(KCI)에서 해당 기간에 발표된 사회복지학 분야 등재지 이상 논문을 수집한 후, 우수등재지로서 학문적 대표성을 지닌 『한국 사회복지학(KJSW)』 게재 논문을 최종 선별하여 데이터셋을 구축하였다. 분석 방법으로는 LDA 토픽 모델링과 텍스트 기반 네트워크 분석을 적용하였다. 토픽 분석 결과, ‘청년의 안녕’, ‘정신건강과 경제적 불안정의 결합’, ‘방법론적 다양화’, ‘고용과 사회통합’이 이 시기를 관통하는 핵심 주제로 도출되었다. 특히 네트워크 분석에서는 ‘코로나19’가 빈곤, 심리적 우울, 고용 취약성 관련 논의를 구조적으로 매개하는 핵심 허브(Hub)로 기능했음이 확인되었다. 이는 팬데믹이라는 위기가 개별적 변수들을 상호 연관된 사회 위협으로 재구성했음을 시사한다. 이에 팬데믹을 비롯한 복합적인 사회적 취약성에 대응하기 위해 데이터 기반의 정책 설계와 방법론적 다각화가 필요하며, 나아가 청년 및 경제적 취약계층을 위한 통합적 지원 체계를 강화할 것을 제언하였다.

주요어: 팬데믹, 코로나19, 사회복지연구, LDA 토픽 모델링, 네트워크 분석, 연구동향, 한국학술지인용색인(KCI), 파이썬