Review

Review on Sublethal Effects of Environmental Contaminants in Honey Bees (Apis mellifera), Knowledge Gaps and Future Perspectives

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Abstract: Honey bees and the pollination services they provide are fundamental for agriculture and biodiversity. Agrochemical products and other classes of contaminants, such as trace elements and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, contribute to the general decline of bees’ populations. For this reason, effects, and particularly sublethal effects of contaminants need to be investigated. We conducted a review of the existing literature regarding the type of effects evaluated in Apis mellifera, collecting information about regions, methodological approaches, the type of contaminants, and honey bees’ life stages. Europe and North America are the regions in which A. mellifera biological responses were mostly studied and the most investigated compounds are insecticides. A. mellifera was studied more in the laboratory than in field conditions. Through the observation of the different responses examined, we found that there were several knowledge gaps that should be addressed, particularly within enzymatic and molecular responses, such as those regarding the immune system and genotoxicity. The importance of developing an integrated approach that combines responses at different levels, from molecular to organism and population, needs to be highlighted in order to evaluate the impact of anthropogenic contamination on this pollinator species.

Keywords: honey bees; sublethal effects; plant protection products; bees decline; monitoring strategies; methodological approach

1. Introduction

Honey bees (Apis mellifera) are essential organisms for the environment, in particular for their critical roles in the pollination of crops, flowers, and fruit trees [1–3]. It has been estimated that honey bees are responsible for providing a pollination service to 96% of animal-pollinated crops [4,5]. Bees are also indirectly responsible for the reproduction and maintenance of wild plant communities and biodiversity [6–8]. Their value to global food crops is estimated at €153 billion per year [9]. In addition, honey bees provide honey, pollen, wax, propolis, and royal jelly to humans [10]. Throughout the last decade, declines in bees and other pollinators have been observed globally [11–13]; important honey bee colony losses have been reported, particularly in North America and Western Europe [14–16]. It was beekeepers who alerted the scientific community of this vital colony mortality, since they monitor bee colonies worldwide and are immediately aware of any kind of changes to the bees’ colony [17]. This decline has led to concerns over there being a sustainable food supply and the health of natural ecosystems [18]. The causes of pollinator decline may be complex and subject to disagreement. However, the general weakening and death of bee colonies has been observed to be mainly caused by the combined effects of multiple stressors [3,19–21], such as biological factors [22,23], environmental factors...
[19,24,25], chemical and nutritional stressors [26,27], chemical and biological factors [28–33] and multiple chemicals [34–36]. In particular, this last kind of stressor is a matter of great concern since bees can be exposed to a wide range of chemical mixtures, including anthropogenic compounds, such as plant protection products (PPPs) or veterinary drugs, and those of natural origin, such as mycotoxins, flavonoids and plant toxins [20,37,38]. Although PPPs, such as insecticides, acaricides, herbicides, and fungicides, have many benefits for agriculture [39], there are also several potential risks associated with their use, such as pest resistance, resurgence, and secondary pest outbreaks, as well as wider environmental contamination and human health concerns [40–42]. Although insecticides are applied to target insect pests, their use in agriculture can affect non-target insects that provide beneficial services to agriculture. Among these beneficial insects, the focus was on social bees, with a particular interest in neonicotinoid insecticides and their lethal and sublethal effects at colony and population levels. Nonetheless, other PPPs used in modern agriculture, such as fungicides and herbicides, were demonstrated to affect honey bee’s health status [43–46].

The sublethal effects of PPPs and other anthropogenic contaminants in *Apis mellifera* need to be investigated. A wide range of studies investigated mortality and accumulation in honey bees, in order to obtain data related to contamination that may affect these organisms [33,47–49]. Moreover, studies concerning the general fitness of honey bees, which examined their behaviour, flight activity, and sensory ability, were conducted over the years to observe the macroscopic effects of contaminants [48,50–52]. To a lesser extent, enzymatic and molecular responses have also been studied, using genomic, metabolomic, and transcriptomic techniques and biomarkers [43,53–56], in order to increase understanding of the anthropogenic impact on these insects.

The current manuscript aims to provide a review of the available toxicological studies about the biological responses of honey bees to external stressors. In particular, we focused on where studies were carried out, we examined the contaminants involved, methodological approaches, honey bees’ life stages, and the different kind of responses considered in each paper, with the purpose to determine and identify knowledge gaps. This review could also provide indications regarding possible improvements in the monitoring approach, both in a scientific and regulatory way.

2. Materials and Methods

The search for scientific papers was conducted on ScienceDirect, Google Scholar, and One search database, using the following search terms to find relevant literature: “*Apis mellifera*”, “honey bees”, “biomarkers”, “ecotoxicology”, “toxicology”, “sublethal effects”, and “biochemical analysis”. To extend the collection of the relevant literature, the bibliographical references of each article were also examined. The selected articles were written in English and the full text version is available. Grey literature and non-accessible peer-reviewed articles were not included in our work, and this resulted in a primary dataset of 846 publications.

Papers considered for this review included investigations into toxicity effects, sublethal behavioural effects, impacts on bees at a genetic, molecular, or physiological level. Studies that reported only LC50 and LD50 were omitted from our analysis. The final dataset included a total of 106 research papers. For each paper, we extracted the following information: a complete bibliographical reference, a methodological approach, the investigated compounds, the life stage, and the studied responses. Where multiple categories of any variable were reported in the same paper, all were included in the final analyses. Methodological approaches were divided into three categories: “laboratory”, “semi-field” and “field”. “Laboratory” studies were defined as those carried out within the laboratory, with the exposure of honey bees to contaminants. “Semi-field” studies were defined as those that were conducted outdoors, but confined to bees, e.g., using exclusion cages. “Field” studies were defined as studies conducted outdoors with no restriction on the bees’ movements and the data were collected in the field.
The compounds studied in the papers were divided into insecticides, herbicides, fungicides, acaricides, trace elements, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), parasites, radioactivity, mixtures, and other compounds.

The following life stages were considered: “Brood”, “Pupae”, “Larvae”, “Adults” and “Queens”. If the life stages at which bees were exposed to pesticides differed from the life stage at which the effects were measured, then both were included in the final analyses.

Examining the existing literature, we described fifteen different “effect types” that were assessed, including morphology, apoptosis and necrosis, histopathology, cytotoxicity, consumption, foraging activity, and fitness, learning ability, other behaviours, physiological function and morphology, reproduction, sensory (gustatory or olfactory), flight activity, growth and development and, accumulation. Research studies were placed into multiple categories if they contained more than one effect type.

Moreover, we isolated more specific responses, mostly characterized by biomarkers and transcriptomic, metabolomic, proteomic approaches, in nine endpoints: detoxification, neurotoxicity, immunity, metabolism, oxidative stress, genotoxicity, primary stress response, carbohydrates assay, and protein amounts. Where studies included more than one option in any of the variables measured, it was included in analyses of both.

3. Results

3.1. Where Studies Took Place

Most studies examined for this review were carried out in Europe (48) and North America (35), followed by Asia (11) and South America (9), Africa (8) and Australia (3) (Figure 1).

![Figure 1](image)

Figure 1. Number of studies, conducted on *Apis mellifera*, and divided by continent, that met the criteria for inclusion in this review.

3.2. Methodological Approaches

As shown in Figure 2, most studies were carried out under laboratory conditions (63), with 14 studies carried out in semi-field conditions, and 25 at the full field scale.
3.3. Life Stages

The bibliographical research highlighted that most of the studies, as shown in Figure 3, were conducted on adult bees (99), followed by larvae (9), brood (7), and pupae stage (4). Only 2 studies, that met the criteria of this work, were about queen bees.

3.4. Studied Compounds

Insecticides were investigated in 71 studies, followed by trace elements, in 15 papers. Studies on acaricides (12), herbicides (12), and fungicides (11) were present with a similar number. Mixtures and PAHs are still poorly studied, respectively with 8 and 2 papers (Figure 4). In the “other compounds” category, SO₂, ethyl methane-sulfonate (EMS), ethanol and pharmaceutical compounds were included. In the category “parasites” are present not only papers that examined reactions to parasites but also other contaminants;
there are not any papers that studied only parasites since they did not satisfy the criteria used for this review.

Figure 4. Number of studies, divided by kind of compounds, on *Apis mellifera*, that met the criteria for inclusion in this review.

3.5. Effect Type

Most studies used for this review investigated more than one effect (64 studies) on honey bees but 42 studies concentrated on investigating just one effect. The most widely studied single effect type was accumulation (20) followed by foraging activity (15) studies (Figure 5). Figure 6 shows studies regarding enzymatic and molecular responses (58): the effects that were studied in more depth were detoxification (27) and neurotoxicity (26), followed by metabolic responses (21), immunity (17), and oxidative stress (15).

Figure 5. Number of studies, divided by kind of responses, on *Apis mellifera*, that met the criteria for inclusion in this review.
Figure 6. Number of studies, divided by molecular and enzymatic responses, on *Apis mellifera*, that met the criteria for inclusion in this review.

In the following tables, all the examined papers are summarized by endpoint; there are two tables for each methodological approach, one for cellular to whole organism and population endpoints, and one for molecular and enzymatic endpoints.

Endpoints examined in laboratory studies are summarized in Tables 1 and 2. Table 1 shows two endpoints were most used in laboratory studies, “foraging activity/fitness/production of matrixes” and “sensory (gustatory or olfactory)”, both with a total of 12 papers.

Table 2 shows the molecular and enzymatic endpoints examined in laboratory studies. The most studied effect concerned “neurotoxicity” (24 studies) and the test that was applied most frequently was the acetylcholinesterase (AChE) activity; only two papers examined the presence of trembling, hyperactivity, and paralysis in the organisms exposed mostly to insecticides. The second most investigated endpoint was “detoxification”, with studies mostly concerning the activity of glutathione-S-transferase (GST) or CYP450.

Another endpoint with a considerable number of papers (17) was “metabolism”, in which alkaline phosphatase (ALP) and ATPase were mostly examined. “Oxidative stress” endpoint was examined only in 14 papers, evaluating the activity of antioxidant enzymes such as catalase (CAT) and superoxide dismutase (SOD).

### Table 1. Summary of laboratory studies divided by endpoint and contaminants.

| Endpoint          | Test                                      | N  | Contaminants                                                                 | Reference                  |
|-------------------|-------------------------------------------|----|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Morphology        | Cellular structure of midgut cells         | 2  | CdO and PbO nanoparticles, mixtures                                          | Dabour et al. 2019 [57]    |
|                   | Morphologies of antenna and hypopharyngeal | 2  | Herbicides, fungicides, insecticides, acaricides                            | Tomé et al. 2020 [58]      |
|                   | glands                                     |    |                                                                              |                             |
| Apoptosis/necrosis| Apoptosis/necrosis                         | 2  | Trace elements, mixtures                                                    | Dabour et al. 2019 [57]    |
|                   | Apoptosis                                  | 2  | Insecticides                                                                | Qi et al. 2020 [59]        |
| Histopathology    | Midgut, hypopharyngeal and brain           | 2  | Insecticides                                                                | de Castro et al. 2020 [60] |
|                   | Midgut                                     | 1  | Insecticides                                                                | Oliveira et al. 2019 [61]  |
|                   | Consumption                                | 7  | CdO and PbO nanoparticles, mixtures                                          | Al Naggar et al. 2020 [62] |
|                   |                                           |    | Insecticides, fungicides, acaricides, Herbicides                            |                             |
|                   |                                           |    | Sodium selenate, seleno-DL-methionine, DL-methionine                         | Hladun et al. 2012 [65]    |
|                   |                                           |    |                                                                              |                             |

In the following tables, all the examined papers are summarized by endpoint; there are two tables for each methodological approach, one for cellular to whole organism and population endpoints, and one for molecular and enzymatic endpoints.

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|                   | glands                                     |    |                                                                              |                             |
| Apoptosis/necrosis| Apoptosis/necrosis                         | 2  | Trace elements, mixtures                                                    | Dabour et al. 2019 [57]    |
|                   | Apoptosis                                  | 2  | Insecticides                                                                | Qi et al. 2020 [59]        |
| Histopathology    | Midgut, hypopharyngeal and brain           | 2  | Insecticides                                                                | de Castro et al. 2020 [60] |
|                   | Midgut                                     | 1  | Insecticides                                                                | Oliveira et al. 2019 [61]  |
|                   | Consumption                                | 7  | CdO and PbO nanoparticles, mixtures                                          | Al Naggar et al. 2020 [62] |
|                   |                                           |    | Insecticides, fungicides, acaricides, Herbicides                            |                             |
|                   |                                           |    | Sodium selenate, seleno-DL-methionine, DL-methionine                         | Hladun et al. 2012 [65]    |
|                   |                                           |    |                                                                              |                             |
| Category                        | Behaviours                                                                 | References                                                                 |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Food consumption               | Food consumption                                                          | Williamson and Wright 2013 [28]                                            |
|                                | Foraging activity                                                         | Zhu et al. 2020 [66]                                                       |
|                                | Sucrose response threshold                                                | Decourtye et al. 2004 [67]                                                |
|                                | Foraging activity                                                         | Hladun et al. 2012 [65]                                                   |
|                                | Fitness and production of wax and honey                                   | Hladun et al. 2013 [51]                                                   |
| Foraging activity/fitness/production of matrixes | Foraging activity 12                                                      | Hladun et al. 2016 [68]                                                   |
|                                | Foraging behaviour                                                        | Herbert et al. 2014 [69]                                                  |
|                                | Foraging activity                                                         | Mixson et al. 2009 [52]                                                   |
|                                | Foraging activity                                                         | Morfin et al. 2019 [70]                                                   |
|                                | Foraging activity                                                         | Prado et al. 2019 [50]                                                   |
|                                | Weight, duration of immature development                                  | Renzi et al. 2016 [33]                                                    |
|                                | Olfactory learning                                                        | Zhu et al. 2020 [66]                                                       |
|                                | Visual and olfactory learning                                             | Decourtye et al. 2005 [63]                                                |
| Learning ability               | Training for olfactory conditioning using proboscis extension reflex      | Guez et al. 2010 [73]                                                     |
|                                | Colony strength                                                           | Williamson and Wright 2013 [28]                                            |
|                                | Aggressive behaviour                                                      | Zhang et al. 2020 [74]                                                    |
| Other behaviours               | Hygienic behaviour                                                        | Hladun et al. 2016 [68]                                                   |
|                                | Thermoregulation                                                          | Mixson et al. 2009 [52]                                                   |
| Reproduction                   | Preparal weight, percentage of prepupation, and pupation, relative growth indices | Mixson et al. 2009 [52]                                                   |
| Sensory (gustatory or olfactory) | Olfactory conditioning of Probesocis extension reflex                    | Morfin et al. 2019 [70]                                                   |
|                                | Antennal response assays, Proboscis response assays                       | Tong et al. 2019 [27]                                                     |
|                                | PER                                                                       | Guez et al. 2010 [73]                                                     |
|                                | PER                                                                       | Schmuck et al. 2003 [71]                                                  |
|                                | PER                                                                       | Chaimanee et al. 2016 [75]                                                |
|                                | PER                                                                       | Dai et al. 2010 [76]                                                      |
|                                | Antennal response assays                                                  | Al Naggar et al. 2015 [77]                                                |
|                                | PER                                                                       | Decourtye et al. 2004 [67]                                                |
|                                | PER                                                                       | Decourtye et al. 2005 [63]                                                |
|                                | PER                                                                       | Guez et al. 2010 [73]                                                     |
|                                | PER                                                                       | Hladun et al. 2013 [51]                                                   |
|                                | PER                                                                       | Hladun et al. 2012 [65]                                                   |
|                                | PER                                                                       | Herbert et al. 2014 [69]                                                  |
|                                | PER                                                                       | Imran et al. 2019 [78]                                                    |
|                                | PER                                                                       | Mixson et al. 2009 [52]                                                   |
|                                | PER                                                                       | Weick and Thorn 2002 [79]                                                 |
|                                | PER                                                                       | Williamson and Wright 2013 [28]                                            |
|                                | Flight navigation                                                        | Wright et al. 2015 [80]                                                   |
| Flight activity                | Flight activity and success                                               | Yang et al. 2012 [81]                                                     |
|                                | Flight activity                                                           | Mixson et al. 2009 [52]                                                   |
|                                | Growth of adult workers                                                   | Tong et al. 2019 [27]                                                     |
| Growth and development/brood production | Larval growth and development                                            | Prado et al. 2019 [50]                                                   |
|                                | Brood production                                                          | Insecticides, Varroa destructor                                            |
|                                | Duration of immature development                                          | Abbo et al. 2017 [47]                                                    |
|                                | Chemical analysis                                                         | Dai et al. 2010 [76]                                                      |
|                                | Chemical analysis                                                         | du Rand et al. 2017 [82]                                                  |
|                                | Chemical analysis                                                         | Hladun et al. 2016 [68]                                                   |
|                                | Trace elements, selenium                                                  | Tomè et al. 2020 [58]                                                     |
|                                | Chemical analysis                                                         | Hladun et al. 2013 [51]                                                   |
|                                | Trace elements, selenium                                                  | Hladun et al. 2016 [68]                                                   |
Table 2. Summary of laboratory studies divided by molecular and enzymatic endpoint and contaminants.

| Endpoint       | Test                                                                 | n  | Contaminants                                      | Reference                  |
|----------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|----|--------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Detoxification | CYP genes expression, glutathione-S-transferase (GST) genes expression |    | Insecticides                                      | Al Naggar et al. 2015 [77] |
|                | CYP and GST genes expression                                          |    | CdO and PbO nanoparticles, mixtures               | Al Naggar et al. 2020 [62] |
|                | (GST)                                                                |    | Insecticides, fungicides, herbicides and mixture  | Almasri et al. 2020 [83]   |
|                | GST                                                                  |    | Insecticides                                      | Badawy et al. 2015 [84]    |
|                | GST and CaEs                                                         |    | Insecticides                                      | Badiou-Bénéteau et al. 2012 [53] |
|                | GST                                                                  |    | Fungicides, metals, EMS                          | Caliani et al. 2021 [43]   |
|                | Detoxification genes expression                                      | 23 | Insecticides, acaricides                          | Christen et al. 2019 [85]  |
|                | Genes encoding CYP450 monoxygenases                                   |    | Insecticides                                      | Christen et al. 2019 [86]  |
|                | Proteomic and metabolomic analysis                                   |    | Insecticides                                      | du Rand et al. 2017 [82]   |
|                | cytochrome P450 (CYP450), GST and CaEs                               |    | Herbicides, fungicides, insecticides, Varroa destructor | Gregorc et al. 2012 [87] |
|                | CYP450                                                               |    | Insecticides, acaricides                          | Johnson et al. 2006 [88]   |
|                | GST                                                                  |    | Insecticides, acaricides                          | Johnson et al. 2009 [89]   |
|                | P450 genes expression                                                |    | Acaricides                                        | Li et al. 2017 [90]         |
|                | GST isoenzymes expression                                            |    | Insecticides, Bacillus thuringiensis, mixtures    | Mao et al. 2011 [91]        |
|                | GST                                                                  |    | Insecticides, Bacillus thuringiensis              | Papadopoulos et al. 2004 [59] |
|                | P450 genes expression                                                |    | Herbicides, fungicides, insecticides, acaricides | Tomè et al. 2020 [58]       |
|                | Esterase (EST), GST, CYP450, CYPs and GSTs transcript levels          |    | Insecticide                                       | Yao et al. 2018 [93]        |
|                | CYP450 and phospholipase A2                                           |    | Insecticides                                      | Zhu et al. 2020 [66]        |
|                | Detoxification genes expression                                      |    | Insecticides                                      | Al Naggar et al. 2015 [77]  |
|                | AChE and CaE-3                                                        |    | Insecticides                                      | Al Naggar et al. 2020 [63]  |
|                | AChE                                                                 |    | Insecticides, fungicides, herbicides and mixture  | Almasri et al. 2020 [83]   |
|                | AChE                                                                  |    | Insecticides                                      | Badawy et al. 2015 [84]    |
|                | AChE and CaEs                                                        |    | Insecticides, acaricides                          | Badiou et al. 2008 [95]    |
|                | AChE                                                                 |    | Insecticides, Bacillus thuringiensis              | Badiou-Bénéteau et al. 2012 [53] |
|                | AChE and CaE                                                         |    | Insecticides                                      | Bohy et al. 2013 [97]       |
|                | AChE and CaEs                                                        |    | Insecticides                                      | Caliani et al. 2021 [43]   |
|                | AChE and CaEs                                                        | 24 | Insecticides                                      | Carvalho et al. 2013 [55]   |
| Neurotoxicity  | Genes encoding acetylcholine receptors                                |    | Insecticides                                      | Christen et al. 2019 [85]  |
|                | AChE and CaEs                                                        |    | Insecticides                                      | Christen et al. 2019 [86]  |
|                | AChE                                                                 |    | Insecticides                                      | Decourtey et al. 2004 [67]  |
|                | AChE and CaEs                                                        |    | Insecticides                                      | Gagnaire et al. 2019 [98]  |
|                | Esterase                                                             |    | Insecticides                                      | Glavan et al. 2018 [99]    |
|                | AChE and CaE                                                         |    | Insecticides                                      | Hashimoto et al. 2003 [100]|
|                | AChE                                                                |    | Insecticides                                      | Li et al. 2017 [90]         |
|                | AChE                                                                |    | Insecticides                                      | Qi et al. 2020 [59]         |
|                | Octopamine, serotonin, dopamine                                      |    | Insecticides                                      | Rabea et al. 2010 [49]      |
|                | Hyperresponsiveness, hyperactivity and trembling                      |    | Trace elements                                     | Søvik et al. 2015 [72]      |
|                | Protein level of synapsin                                            |    | Insecticides                                      | Suchail et al. 2001 [101]   |
|                | AChE                                                                |    | Insecticides                                      | Tavares et al. 2019 [102]   |
|                | AChE                                                                |    | Insecticides, acaricides                          | Weick and Thorn 2002 [79]   |
| Immunity       | Vtg expression                                                       | 13 | Insecticides                                      | Al Naggar et al. 2015 [77]  |
|                | Defensin I, Abaecin, Hymenoptaecin expressions                      |    | Insecticides                                      | Abbo et al. 2017 [47]       |
| Nodulation            | Dexamethasone (eicosanoid biosynthesis inhibitor) | Bedick et al. 2001 [103] |
|----------------------|--------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Hemocytes density, encapsulation response and antimicrobial activity | Insecticides           | Brandt et al. 2016 [104] |
| Lysozyme (Lys) and granulocytes count | Fungicides, metals, EMS | Caliani et al. 2021 [43] |
| Immune response genes expression | Insecticides, acaricides | Chaimanee et al. 2016 [75] |
| Vtg gene expression  | Insecticides                                     | Christen et al. 2019 [105] |
| Vtg gene expression  | Insecticides                                     | Christen et al. 2019 [86] |
| Phenoloxidase (PO)   | Gamma irradiation                                | Gagnaire et al. 2019 [98] |
| Immune genes expression | Herbicides, fungicides, insecticides, Varroa destructor | Gregorc et al. 2012 [87] |
| Immune genes expression | Vtg synthesis | Li et al. 2017 [90] |
| Immune genes expression | Insecticides | Pinto et al. 2000 [106] |
| Immune genes expression | Insecticides | Zhu et al. 2020 [66] |
| Alkaline phosphatase (ALP) and GST | Insecticides, fungicides, herbicides and mixture | Almasri et al. 2020 [83] |
| Alkaline phosphatase (ALP) and GST | Insecticides | Badiou-Bénéteau et al. 2012 [53] |
| Na+, K+ -ATPase assay | Insecticides | Bendahou et al. 1999 [96] |
| GST, ALP             | Insecticides                                     | Bounias, 1985 [107] |
| GST and CaE          | Insecticides                                     | Caliani et al. 2021 [43] |
| GST and CaE          | Insecticides                                     | Carvalho et al. 2013 [55] |
| GST, CaEs and ALP    | Insecticides                                     | Christen et al. 2019 [85] |
| GST, CaEs and ALP    | Insecticides                                     | du Rand et al. 2017 [82] |
| GST, CaEs and ALP    | Gamma irradiation                                | Gagnaire et al. 2019 [98] |
| Metabolism           | Insecticides                                     | Li et al. 2017 [90] |
| Aspartate aminotransferase (AST), alanine aminotransferase (ALT), ALP | Insecticides | Paleolog et al. 2020 [108] |
| ATP assays and GADPH activity | Mixtures | Prado et al. 2019 [50] |
| ATPase               | Insecticides                                     | Rabea et al. 2010 [49] |
| GST, ALP             | Insecticides                                     | Renzi et al. 2016 [33] |
| Metabolic profile    | Insecticides                                     | Shi et al. 2018 [109] |
| AST, ALT, ALP        | Insecticides                                     | Strachecka et al. 2016 [110] |
| Abundance of gut microbiota for metabolic homeostasis, metabolic genes expression | Insecticides | Zhu et al. 2020 [66] |
| GST, G6PDH           | Insecticides, fungicides, herbicides and mixture | Almasri et al. 2020 [83] |
| GST, superoxide dismutase (SOD) and catalase (CAT) genes expression | Insecticides, fungicides, herbicides and mixture | Al Naggar et al. 2020 [62] |
| polyphenol oxidase (PPO) | CdO and PbO nanoparticles, mixtures | Badawy et al. 2015 [84] |
| CAT                  | Insecticides                                     | Badiou-Bénéteau et al. 2012 [53] |
| CAT                  | Insecticides                                     | Carvalho et al. 2013 [55] |
| CAT, SOD, glutathione peroxidase (GPx), GST α-tocopherol and metallothionein-like proteins (MTLPs) | Gamma irradiation | Gagnaire et al. 2019 [98] |
| LPO, lutein, zeaxanthin, α-Cryptoxanthin, β-Cryptoxanthin, β-Carotene, at-RoH, α-Tocopherol | Trace elements | Gauthier et al. 2016 [111] |
| GST and PPO          | Trace elements                                    | Hericides | Helmer et al. 2015 [64] |
| SOD, CAT, reduced glutathione (GSH), protein thiol groups (SH), malondialdehyde (MDA) DNA methylation | Insecticides | Li et al. 2017 [90] |
| Peroxidase (PO), malondialdehyde (MDA), lipid peroxide (LPO), SOD, CAT | Trace elements | Nikolić et al. 2016 [112] |
| GAPD, G6PD           | Insecticides, Bacillus thuringiensis, mixtures | Insecticides | Paleolog et al. 2020 [108] |
| SOD, GPx, CAT, GST   | Insecticides, Bacillus thuringiensis, mixtures | Acaricides | Qi et al. 2020 [59] |
| Nuclear abnormalities (NA) assay | Acaricides | Renzi et al. 2016 [33] |
| HSP70                | Insecticides                                    | Strachecka et al. 2016 [110] |
| Carbohydrates assay  | Insecticides                                    | Caliani et al. 2021 [43] |
| Protein amount       | Metabolism                                       | Paleolog et al. 2020 [108] |
In semi-field studies, the most frequently studied endpoints are “foraging activity/fitness/production of matrixes” and “other behaviors”, both with 6 studies (Table 3). In Table 4 the molecular endpoints are summarized; in this case the most examined endpoints (3 studies) were “protein amount” and “immunity”, followed by “detoxification”, with 2 papers.

Table 3. Summary of semi-field studies divided by endpoint and contaminants.

| Endpoint                                      | Test                                                                 | n  | Contaminants                      | Reference                  |
|-----------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|----|-----------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Morphology                                    | Asymmetry of wing nervature, diameter of forager bee hypopharyngeal gland, asymmetry of left and right branches of ovary | 1  | Insecticides                      | Wegener et al. 2016 [114]   |
| Colony nutritional status                     |                                                                      |    | Acaricides                        | Cabbri et al. 2018 [115]    |
| Foraging activity                             |                                                                      |    | Insecticides                      | Colin et al. 2004 [116]     |
| Foraging activity                             |                                                                      | 6  | Insecticides, acaricides          | Decourtye et al. 2004 [67]   |
| Time spent near a food source                 |                                                                      |    | Insecticides                      | Ingram et al. 2015 [117]    |
| Foraging activity                             |                                                                      |    | Fungicides, insecticides          | Schmuck et al. 2003 [71]     |
| Learning ability                              | Learning capacity and long-term memory of presumed forager bees       | 1  | Insecticides                      | Shi et al. 2020 [118]        |
| Intensive cleaning, trembling, cramping, locomotion problems, inactive bees, aggressiveness |                                                                      | 6  | Fungicides, insecticides          | Wegener et al. 2016 [114]    |
| Bee locomotion and social interactions        |                                                                      |    | Insecticides                      | Ingram et al. 2015 [117]    |
| Homing performances                           |                                                                      |    | Insecticides                      | Monchanin et al. 2019 [119]  |
| Other behaviours                              | Overwintering success                                                |    | Herbicides                        | Odemer et al. 2020 [120]     |
| Overwintering success                         |                                                                      |    | Insecticides                      | Siede et al. 2017 [121]      |
| Behavioural anomalies (exaggerated motility, disordinated movements, trembling, shaking, apathy) |                                                                      |    | Fungicides, insecticides          | Schmuck et al. 2003 [71]     |
| Reproduction                                  | Number of capped brood cells                                         | 1  | Insecticides                      | Wegener et al. 2016 [114]    |
| Sensory (gustatory or olfactory)              | PER                                                                  | 1  | Insecticides, acaricides          | Decourtye et al. 2004 [67]    |
| Flight activity                               | Homeward flight path                                                | 2  | Herbicides                        | Balbuena et al. 2015 [122]   |
| Development of bee brood                      | Flight activity                                                      |    | Fungicides, insecticides          | Berg et al. 2018 [48]        |
| Growth and development/brood production       | Brood and colony development, colony weight                          |    | Herbicides                        | Berg et al. 2018 [48]        |
|                                                | Number of brood cells, weight gain and production of drones          | 4  | Insecticides                      | Odemer et al. 2020 [120]     |
|                                                | Reduction in bees and brood                                         |    | Insecticides                      | Siede et al. 2017 [121]      |
| Accumulation                                  | Chemical analysis                                                   | 1  | Insecticides                      | Thompson et al. 2019 [123]   |
### Table 4. Summary of semi-field studies divided by molecular and enzymatic endpoint and contaminants.

| Endpoint          | Test                                                                 | n  | Contaminants              | Reference                                      |
|-------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|----|---------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| Detoxification    | GST, CYP450, CaEs, GST                                               | 2  | Insecticides               | Wegener et al. 2016 [114]                      |
|                   |                                                                     |    | Insecticides               | Zhu et al. 2020 [124]                          |
| Neurotoxicity     | Trembling and paralysis, Vtg and apolipophorin (APO)                | 1  | Insecticides               | Decourt et al. 2004 [67]                       |
| Immunity          | Hymenoptaletin gene expression, Vtg                                 | 3  | Insecticide, Acaricides    | Cabbri et al. 2018 [115]                      |
|                   |                                                                     |    | Vtg, Insecticides          | Siede et al. 2017 [121]                        |
| Metabolism        | Phosphofructokinase                                                  | 1  | Insecticides               | Wegener et al. 2016 [114]                      |
| Oxidative stress  | GST, phenolxydase, glucose oxidase                                   | 1  | Insecticides               | Wegener et al. 2016 [114]                      |
|                   |                                                                     |    | Acaricides                 | Cabbri et al. 2018 [115]                      |
|                   |                                                                     |    | Insecticides               | Zhu et al. 2020 [124]                          |
|                   | Protein amount                                                       | 3  | Insecticides               | Wegener et al. 2016 [114]                      |

The endpoints examined in field studies are summarized in Tables 5 and 6. Table 5 shows that 16 studies observed “accumulation” in the honey bees sampled in sites with different levels of anthropogenic pressure. In general, herbicides and insecticides were the contaminants that tended to be observed more in these accumulation studies.

Table 6 shows molecular endpoints examined in field studies. The effect that was studied with the highest degree of frequency concerned “detoxification” and “metabolism”, both with 5 papers. The next two endpoints that were examined with a good degree of frequency were “neurotoxicity” and “oxidative stress”; the first was observed through the evaluation of AChE activity, the second mostly with the observation of CAT and SOD activity.

### Table 5. Summary of field studies divided by endpoint and contaminants.

| Endpoint          | Test                                                                 | n  | Contaminants              | Reference                                      |
|-------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|----|---------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| Morphology        | Wing asymmetry                                                       | 1  | Urbanisation              | Leonard et al. 2018 [125]                      |
| Chemical analysis | Metals                                                               |    | Herbicides, insecticides  | Al Naggar et al. 2013 [126]                    |
| Chemical analysis | Insecticides                                                         |    | Herbicides, insecticides  | Al Naggar et al. 2015 [127]                    |
| Chemical analysis | Insecticides                                                         |    | Herbicides, insecticides  | Al Naggar et al. 2015 [128]                    |
| Chemical analysis | PAHs                                                                 |    | Herbicides, insecticides  | Amorena et al. 2009 [129]                      |
| Chemical analysis | Fungicides, insecticides                                             |    | Herbicides, insecticides  | Amulien et al. 2017 [130]                      |
| Chemical analysis | Insecticides                                                         |    | Herbicides, insecticides  | Codling et al. 2016 [131]                      |
| Chemical analysis | Metals                                                               |    | Herbicides, insecticides  | Conti and Botrè, 2001 [132]                    |
| Chemical analysis | Herbicides, insecticides                                             | 18 | Herbicides, insecticides  | El-Saad et al. 2017 [56]                       |
| Chemical analysis | Metals                                                               |    | Herbicides, insecticides  | Fulton et al. 2019 [133]                       |
| Chemical analysis | Herbicides, fungicides, insecticides, acaricides                    |    | Herbicides, insecticides  | Kump et al. 1996 [134]                         |
| Chemical analysis | Trace elements                                                       |    | Herbicides, fungicides, insecticides, acaricides | Mullin et al. 2010 [45] |
| Chemical analysis | PAHs                                                                 |    | Herbicides, insecticides  | Nikolić et al. 2015 [135]                      |
| Chemical analysis | SO2                                                                  |    | Herbicides, fungicides, insecticides, acaricides | Perugini et al. 2009 [136]                     |
| Chemical analysis | Herbicides, fungicides, insecticides                                 |    | Herbicides, insecticides, metals | Ponikvar et al. 2005 [137]                     |
| Chemical analysis | Herbicides, fungicides, insecticides                                 |    | Herbicides, insecticides, metals | Raimets et al. 2020 [46]                       |
| Chemical analysis | Herbicides, insecticides, metals                                     |    | Herbicides, insecticides, metals | Ruschioni et al. 2013 [138]                     |
| Gamma spectrometry | Radiations                                                           |    | Herbicides, insecticides, metals | Tonelli et al. 1990 [139]                       |
| Chemical analysis | Trace elements                                                       |    | Herbicides, insecticides, metals | van der Steen et al. 2012 [140]                |
Table 6. Summary of field studies divided by molecular and enzymatic endpoint and contaminants.

| Endpoint                  | Test                                      | n  | Contaminants                                                                 | Reference                           |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------------------|----|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Detoxification            | GST and metallothioneins (MT)             | 4  | Trace elements 
Herbicides, fungicides, insecticides, electromagnetic fields suspended dust | Badiou-Bénéteau et al. 2013 [54]    |
|                           | GST                                       |    |                                                                               | Lupi et al. 2020 [44]               |
|                           | GST                                       |    | Insecticides 
Herbicides, fungicides, insecticides, electromagnetic fields suspended dust | Nicewicz et al. 2020 [141]          |
|                           | GST, esterases, epoxide hydrolase and DDT-dehydrochlorinase | |                                                                             | Yu et al. 1984 [142]               |
|                           | AChE                                      | 4  | Trace elements 
Herbicides, fungicides, insecticides, electromagnetic fields suspended dust | Badiou-Bénéteau et al. 2013 [54]    |
|                           | AChE                                      |    |                                                                               | Lupi et al. 2020 [44]               |
|                           | Esterases                                 |    | Insecticides 
Herbicides, fungicides, insecticides, electromagnetic fields suspended dust | Nicewicz et al. 2020 [141]          |
|                           | Esterases                                 |    |                                                                               | Yu et al. 1984 [142]               |
| Neurotoxicity             | Defensin                                  | 1  | Trace elements 
Herbicides, fungicides, insecticides, electromagnetic fields suspended dust | Nicewicz et al. 2020 [141]          |
|                           | ALP and GST                               | 5  | Trace elements 
Herbicides, fungicides, insecticides, electromagnetic fields suspended dust | Badiou-Bénéteau et al. 2013 [54]    |
|                           | ALP and Acidic phosphatase                |    |                                                                               | Bounias et al. 1996 [143]          |
|                           | ALP and GST                               |    |                                                                               | Lupi et al. 2020 [44]               |
| Metabolism                | GST                                       |    | Insecticides 
Herbicides, fungicides, insecticides, electromagnetic fields suspended dust | Nicewicz et al. 2020 [141]          |
|                           | GST                                       |    |                                                                               | Yu et al. 1984 [142]               |
|                           | SOD, CAT, GPx, GR                         | 4  | Insecticides 
Herbicides, fungicides, insecticides, electromagnetic fields suspended dust | El-Saad et al. 2017 [56]           |
|                           | SOD and CAT                               |    |                                                                               | Nikolić et al. 2015 [135]          |
| Oxidative stress          | CAT and GST                               |    | Insecticides 
Herbicides, fungicides, insecticides, electromagnetic fields suspended dust | Lupi et al. 2020 [44]               |
|                           | GST and total antioxidant capacity (TAC)  |    | Insecticides 
Herbicides, fungicides, insecticides, electromagnetic fields suspended dust | Nicewicz et al. 2020 [141]          |
| Primary stress response   | HSP70                                     | 1  | Trace elements 
Herbicides, fungicides, insecticides, electromagnetic fields suspended dust | Nicewicz et al. 2020 [141]          |

4. Discussion

The exposure of honey bees to environmental pollutants, especially agrochemical products, is causing a decline in their colonies [11,144], leading also to consequences for crop production, food security, and environmental health. For this reason, it is important to understand primarily both the benefits and the risks that the use of PPPs pose to the environment in order to make decisions about agricultural management. To determine the role of pesticides and other contaminants and their impact on honey bees it is essential to understand the kind of studies that have been conducted until now.
The majority of studies into the effects of pollutants on bees have been undertaken in North America and Europe, where important honey bee colony losses have been reported [14–16]. However, this phenomenon should be studied globally, in order to ascertain a better understanding of its causes. Although, PPPs tend to be most widely used in developed countries, they are increasingly being used in other parts of the world where regulations and best practices around their environmental impacts may not be as stringent [145].

The great majority of examined papers were about adult honey bees; it would be useful for there to be an improvement in the studies conducted related to other life stages, in order to have a better understanding of whether and how environmental contaminants may affect every stage of a honey bee’s life cycle.

This review underlined that the majority of studies on honey bees are carried out in a laboratory more than in semi-field and field conditions, in a controlled environment and with controlled environmental exposure to the selected substances. The vast majority of papers about laboratory experiments reviewed focused on the sublethal effects, mostly about foraging activity, sensorial ability, neurotoxicity, detoxification, metabolism, and oxidative stress. In semi-field studies different responses both at macroscopic and microscopic levels were considered; however, in this review, only 14 papers of this kind were found. Honey bees, in the field, are exposed to multiple stressors and most of the field papers were monitoring studies where accumulation of various contaminants in *Apis mellifera* were investigated; only 8 papers [28,33,50,57,62,71,83,95] analysed the sublethal effects of the contaminant mixtures on *Apis mellifera*. All these studies highlighted that honey bees are sensitive bioindicators of environmental pollution. Therefore, it is only through context monitoring that the honey bees decline should be examined, in order to understand its causes and to provide effective prevention tools to administrations.

In this review, it is highlighted that the most widely investigated PPPs are insecticides, because they were demonstrated to be harmful to non-target organisms, such as honey bees. Different authors observed that neonicotinoid insecticides, such as imidacloprid, thiamethoxam, acetamiprid, dinofeturain, thiacloprid, nitenpyram, and clothianidin, are able to damage honey bees olfactory learning performances [65,76,78], foraging activity [65,68,69], and homing flight abilities [119]. This kind of compounds may cause neurotoxicity in honey bees, by altering AChE activity which may be induced [97] or inhibited [84], and by modulating carboxylesterase (CaE) activity [53,82]. Furthermore, detoxification and antioxidant enzymes activities seem to be altered by neonicotinoids, such GST [53,81,82], CAT [53], PPO [84], ALP [53] and CYP450 [94] activities. Moreover, these compounds may affect the immune system for instance, by modulating the content of vitellogenin [47,101], by reducing the hemocyes density, encapsulation response and antimicrobial activity [83], and by modulating the relative abundance of several key gut microbial molecules [66]. Several authors studied the effects of pyrethroid insecticides, such as deltamethrin, bifenthrin, cypermethrin, permethrin, and λ-cyhalotrin, on honey bees; these compounds seems to cause neurotoxicity by increasing AChE activity [59,91], modulating CaE activity [55]. Pyrethroids caused variations in lipid [107] and carbohydrates [96], reduced learning, memory performances [62,72] and foraging activity [67], and influenced bees locomotion and social interaction [117]. This class of insecticides is also able to cause variations in metabolic and detoxification activities, such as increasing GST activity [89,136], modulating ALP activity [107], inducing the expression of CYP450 monooxygenase [86], and inhibiting Na+, K+-ATPase activity [96]. Moreover, they may induce immune responses, cause changes in the activity of POD and in the content of MDA and LPO and induce oxidative stress [59]. Authors, who studied organophosphorus insecticides effects, observed an inhibition in the odour learning [79], a modulation of AChE activity [75,77,84,95], a modulation of different immune system related genes and an induction of vitellogenin transcript [86]. El-Saad et al. (2017) [56] observed midguts ultrastructural modifications, a reduction of GSH levels, an inhibition of SOD, CAT and GPx activities, and an increase in MDA levels.
A recent review [146] underlined that other PPPs, such as fungicides and herbicides, that are not designed to target insects, may be factors that influence honey bees decline. For this reason, it would be important to increase the number of studies conducted related to their effects on these pollinators. Papers included in this review showed that the most frequently studied herbicide was glyphosate; it seems to cause a more indirect homing flight [122], to reduce sensitivity to sucrose and learning performance [69], to delay worker brood development [120], to have effects on the expression of CYP isoforms genes [87], and to slightly inhibit AChE activity [97].

Moreover, we believe that studies regarding other pollutants, such as PAHs and trace elements, should be improved, because of their presence in the environment that could cause honey bees exposure and adverse effects. Studies on trace elements underlined that pollutants, like aluminum, cadmium, selenium, lead, and copper, are able to influence foraging behavior [63,70] and the development time [51,66], to cause histopathological alterations [57], to alter AChE, ALP, GST [43,54], CAT and SOD [107,140] activities. The European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) pointed out that the study of the impact of mixtures of chemicals also compared to non-chemical stressors, like *Varroa destructor* and viruses, on honey bee health are of great relevance, in view to support the implementation of a holistic risk assessment method [147,148].

In field studies, it is more difficult to understand the effects caused by single contaminants, due to the presence of multiple stressors. Up to now, few papers have investigated the sublethal effects on honey bees in their natural conditions and habitats. Badiou-Bénéteau et al. (2013) [54] and Nikolić et al. (2015) [135] highlighted the presence of sublethal effects, characterized by oxidative stress and the induction of detoxification processes, in honey bees from more anthropized areas, due to the presence of neurotoxic pollutants, such as metals. Lupi et al. (2020) [44] observed that pesticide mixtures, characterized by the combination of fungicides, insecticides, and plant regulators, could cause an increase in Reactive Oxygen Species (ROS) that can inhibit AChE and CAT activities. An inhibition of some antioxidant stress biomarkers (GSH, SOD, CAT, GST) was also observed in specimens collected from anthropized areas [56]. Nicewicz et al. (2020) [141] observed the importance of defensin and HSP70 levels as indicators of urban multistress both at individual and colony levels. Further studies are needed to investigate the ecotoxicological status of honey bee colonies.

Another aspect to be pointed out is that in all three types of experimental conditions (laboratory, semi-filed and field), research studies have focused their attention on the development of some biomarkers to assess exposure to and the effects of contaminants on honey bees, such as esterases activity to evaluate neurotoxic effects, antioxidant enzymes activity, and predominantly CAT and SOD, together with detoxification reactions and metabolic activity. However, several responses, such as genotoxicity and immune system alteration, remain poorly explored and require an increased interest and a significant degree of effort to ensure that research studies are conducted. Colin et al. (2004) [116] observed, for example, that the suppression of the immune system may lead to a decrease in the individual performance and consequently in the population dynamics and the degree of disorders present in the colony. Moreover, Lazarov and Zhelyazkova (2019) [149] observed that *Varroa destructor* infestations are responsible for the weakening of honey bees’ immune system, which may lead to a pronounced susceptibility of honey bees to contaminant exposure. To the best of our knowledge, Caliani et al. (2021) [43] is the only study that has been conducted into genotoxicity and that has examined *Apis mellifera*; in this study, it was observed that there are not only compounds such as EMS, with known genotoxic effects; indeed, there are also Cd and fungicides that have effects on the presence of hemocytes nuclear abnormalities.

While we have investigated the range of research approaches that have been used to study potential effects of contaminants on honey bees and provided a summary of main investigated effects (Tables 1–6), a full evaluation of effects direction was beyond the scope of this research. As there are 106 papers included in this review it is clear that there
is an increasing corpus of literature that examines the effects of a wide range of compounds on bees. Only when certain research gaps are addressed, may this area benefit from a meta-analysis in the future to establish a clearer picture of the magnitude and direction of each effect.

5. Conclusions

The current review highlighted that *Apis mellifera* biological responses to external stressors were studied mostly in Europe and North America; consequently, there is a notable need to increase monitoring in other regions. Insecticides are widely studied compounds compared to other PPPs, or other classes such as e PAHs and trace elements. Laboratory studies are useful in order to determine the effects of specific compounds; however, field studies should be implemented, in order to gain a better understanding of the ecotoxicological status of *A. mellifera* in relation to environmental contamination patterns. Through the observation of the different responses examined by the authors, several gaps have been identified that should be addressed, particularly within enzymatic and molecular responses, such as those regarding immune system and genotoxicity. The development of an integrated approach, supported by statistical models could be vital, in order to combine responses at different levels, from molecular ones to the organism and the population. This could be a valid tool to evaluate the impact of contamination on these organisms and to support monitoring strategies not only at a scientific level, but also at a regulatory one.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, S.C., I.C., G.C., T.C.; formal analysis, A.D.N.; investigation, A.D.N.; data curation, A.D.N.; writing—original draft preparation, A.D.N., I.C., T.C.; writing—review and editing, S.C., G.C.; supervision, S.C., G.C. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** Data sharing not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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