

## Social Justice and Moral Reasoning: An Exploratory Study Among College Students Pursuing Law and Not Pursuing Law

Minu Bharathi D<sup>1\*</sup>

### ABSTRACT

This study investigates the relationship between moral reasoning and social justice among the students pursuing law and not pursuing law using the Defining Issues Test (DIT) and social psychological measures based on (Wendorf, Alexander, & Firestone, 2002). The study adopted a quantitative research approach and used a sample of 60 students of which 30 students were pursuing law major and the rest of the 30 students were pursuing other majors. The objectives of the study were 1) to identify the significant difference in social justice and moral reasoning among students pursuing law and not pursuing law. 2) To examine the relationship between the age, moral development and social justice among the sample. 3) To examine the relationship between the gender, moral reasoning and social justice. The results revealed that there is a significant difference between students pursuing law and not pursuing law in social justice. The students pursuing law scored average mean higher than the students not pursuing law, indicating that students pursuing law place main importance on the procedural justice criterion. The results showed that there is a significant relationship between age and social justice.

**Keywords:** *Social Justice, Moral Reasoning, Law, ethical education, policy making*

In the largest democracy practicing country like India, jurisdictions, law and order hold vital role for the harmony of the country. In India an individual's privilege and status is determined by birth and often provides limited opportunities for the individual's mobility in the stratification hierarchy. In cases such as these, individuals highly rely on the role of democracy – the constitution; for equality, equity, fairness, and for many other components of social justice. Often, the friction between social justice and moral reasoning arises within oneself – be it regarding the just for oneself or for others. Questions like 'I have been treated right?' or 'Did I get what I deserve?' are based on social justice. The very word 'justice' holds different interpretations and meanings to different people. According to (Ahmad & Ali, 2006), in reference to the constitution of India, social justice refers to the 'availability of equal social opportunities for the development of personality to all the people in the society, without any discrimination on the basis of caste, sex or race'. In an article (Buettner-Schmidt & Lobo, 2012), it states that the definition of social justice was

<sup>1</sup>M.Sc. Psychology, Department of Psychology, Kristu Jayanti College, Bangalore, India

\*Corresponding Author

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influenced by authority, power and peer pressure, which would have an impact on how other would be treated.

Since justice is an amorphous and broad concept, it would be difficult to capture the people's concern over an issue to identify it as just or unjust. For instance, individuals could be concerned over the nature of the decision making process or their say in the final decision. Tyler & Smith, (1998) stated that, based on the objective circumstances and people's reaction to a particular event or an issue, the judgements about justice are made. This paper on moral decision making and social justice have majorly focused on the notions of distributive and procedural justice

### ***Need For the Study***

It would enable us to know the criteria under which the lawyers make decisions in choosing the case that they would handle, prosecuting criminals and in policy making. Professionals in particular fields are often subject to increased levels of public accountability and scrutiny by public interest groups and media (Doyle & O'Flaherty, 2013) and one such professionals are lawyers. Hence, notions of embarrassment and loss of public confidence and reputation are often the cost of immoral professional behaviour (Lamar, 2003). While law places increased ethical guidelines and codes of conduct on individuals practicing or studying law in resolving social conflicts, the question of whether they make decisions and policies based on their moral reasoning or based solely on their ethics arises. It also opens the scope to study the impact of the major (law) on moral reasoning.

### ***Research Gap***

A research gap was found from the literature review that the relationship between social justice and moral reasoning among students pursuing law to assess the impact of ethical education on moral development. In other words, the relationship between the type of education and moral development. Hence, the present study explored the moral reasoning criteria and social justice criteria among student pursuing law and not pursuing law.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### ***Research Design***

The study takes up a quantitative research approach to identify the decision-making process based on moral reasoning and social justice. In the study, a non-experimental survey research design has been used. The data was collected from the sample through online administration and direct survey method which included demographic details along with standardised questionnaire. The study included students from various regions of the country and from various institutions to get a wider perspective around moral reasoning and social justice. In this study the population included the students who are pursuing and not pursuing law from different academic levels.

### ***Statement Of the Problem***

According to Rest's four component model (Thoma, 2000) moral reasoning is one of the components necessary for moral behaviour. Law is enforced based on the written principles and regulations by the people who have been bestowed with the power to do so such as magistrates or judges. This study examines the moral reasoning criteria and social justice criteria among students pursuing law and student who are not pursuing law.

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### ***Objectives***

- To identify the significant difference in social justice and moral reasoning among students pursuing law and not pursuing law.
- To examine the relationship between the age, moral development and social justice among the sample.
- To examine the relationship between the gender, moral reasoning and social justice among the sample.

### ***Hypotheses***

H<sub>0</sub>1a: There will be no significant difference between students pursuing law and not pursuing law in moral reasoning.

H<sub>0</sub>1b: There will be no significant difference between students pursuing law and not pursuing law in social justice

H<sub>0</sub>2a: The moral development has no significant difference with age among the population.

H<sub>0</sub>2b: The social justice has no significant difference with age among the population.

H<sub>0</sub>3a: There will be no significant difference in moral reasoning among males and females.

H<sub>0</sub>3b: There will be no significant difference in social justice among males and females.

### ***Psychometric Tools Used***

The study uses two psychometric tools which includes Defining Issues Test (DIT) and Social Justice questionnaire (Wendorf et al., 2002). Along with the questionnaires, 6 questions were added to collect the respondent's demographic variables of the study sample.

It includes:

Initial(s)	:
Email ID	:
Gender	:
Age	:
Occupation	: Student pursuing Law / Student not pursuing Law
State	:

### ***Defining Issues Test (DIT)***

In 1979, Rest developed the defining issues test (DIT) (Rest University of Minnesota., Center for the Study of Ethical Development., 1990) which measures the comprehension and preference for the highest levels of reasoning (or post conventional), using the index called *P* score. It is a self-administered, multiple-choice questionnaire that was developed based on Kohlberg's stages of moral development. The DIT assumes that a person can operate at many stages at once, it measures the comprehension and principled level of reasoning rather than attempting to assess which stage does a person belongs to.

Rest categorised Kohlberg's six stages into three schemata – the personal interest schema, the maintaining norm schema and the post-conventional schema. From the Kohlberg's developmental stages of moral reasoning, stages two and three constitutes to Rest's schema the Personal Interest schema. Kohlberg's stage four of reasoning constitutes to the Maintaining Norms schema and stages five and six are reclassified into the Post-conventional schema.

### ***Scoring***

The four ranking (Most Important, Second Most Important, Third Most Important and Fourth Most Important) of the DIT items given by the participants are taken into

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consideration. For the item marked as most important, second most important, third most important and fourth most important are referred with the chart that exemplifies what stage that item belong to. After finding the item's stage, the choices were weighed by giving 4 to the first rank (most important), similarly, 3 to the second rank (second most important), 2 to the third rank (third most important) and 1 to the fourth rank (fourth most important). After completing the data sheet, the scores under all the stages were summed including all the 4 scenarios to get the raw score and then the stage percentage was obtained by dividing the raw score with 0.04. The raw Principled morality score ("P") was obtained by adding the stages 5A, 5B and 6.

**Table 1. Reference chart for DIT**

ITEMS												
STORY	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Heinz	4	3	2	M	3	4	M	6	A	5A	3	5A
Prisoner	3	4	A	4	6	M	3	4	3	4	5A	5A
Doctor	3	4	A	2	5A	M	3	6	4	5B	4	5A
Newspaper	4	4	2	4	M	5A	3	3	5B	5A	4	3

### *Reliability and Validity of DIT*

The reliability and validity of the DIT has been tested numerous times. In a prominent research, the DIT was administered to junior, middle and high school students and the validity of the P-score with respect to age group was estimated to be 0.48 and its reliability was estimated to be 0.70 (Martin, Shafto, & Vandeinse, 1977). Similarly, there are over 400 publications based on over 1,500 reports about the test's construct validity (Bebeau, 2002).

### *Social Justice Items*

For the procedural and distributive justice criteria the participants were asked to answer questions from the 4 DIT dilemmas based on the previous research (Wendorf et al., 2002). Similar to the DIT, the justice criteria items were designed with five point unipolar importance scale. The five point importance scale include "great", "much", "some", "little" or "no" importance to the moral dilemma. The procedural justice consists of 10 items constructed based on the criteria such as – consistency, bias suppression /neutrality, accuracy, correctability, representativeness, ethicality, voice control, decision control, standing and trust. The distributive justice consists of 5 items which includes criteria such as – equity, equality, need, status and ability. The importance rating of the responses from the 4 dilemmas was obtaining. Similar scoring and interpretation technique was adopted for these social psychological measures.

### *Procedure*

This study was conducted through direct survey as well as online. After the participants read the consent form and agreed to participate in the study, the students were asked to fill out the DIT which consists of four separate social dilemmas: the Heinz, the prisoner, the doctor and the newspaper. In the tale of the Heinz dilemma, the story revolves around a man who is considers stealing a drug in order to cure his wife's disease. The Prisoners dilemma tells the tale of an escaped prisoner, in the story a women faced with a dilemma as to whether report her neighbour who broke away from prison. The doctor's dilemma concerns the doctor decisions over a sick woman who is asking him to kill her as her pain is unbearable. Lastly, the Newspaper dilemma involves a decision made by a school principal following the

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complaints from the parents regarding it. The participants answered 12 items from the DIT and they also ranked the 4 most important questions among the 12 items.

Following the DIT items the participants were presented with the outcome to the DIT scenarios. For example, one such outcome was “Now suppose that Heinz decided to steal the drug and got arrested and was pressed charges for stealing. In the court, whether the judge would treat all the other offenders the same way?”. From the participant’s responses, the importance of procedural and distributive justice were assessed from the 4 scenarios of the DIT, replicating the social justice questionnaire used by Wendorf et. al. The questionnaire was compiled in such a way that the participants first answered all items – both traditional DIT items and then the social justice items – for the Heinz dilemma. This order was followed by the items for the Prisoners dilemma, Doctor’s dilemma and then the Newspaper dilemma.

### *Statistical Analysis*

The data were collected using the Defining Issues Test and Social Psychological Measures of Procedural and Distributive Justice. The data were coded in master data sheet in excel worksheet. The data were then imported to Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23 for further analysis.

### *Descriptive Statistics*

The present study employs descriptive variables which includes the occupation, gender, Personal Interest Schema, Maintaining Norms Schema, Post Conventional Schema, Procedural Justice and Distributive justice among students pursuing law and not pursuing law to achieve the objectives of the study.

### *Inferential Statistics*

With an objective to identify the significant difference in social justice and moral reasoning among students pursuing law and not pursuing law, the present study has used independent sample t-test. And to examine the relationship between the age, moral development and social justice among the population, ANOVA is used to obtain the results. Lastly, to examine the relationship between the gender, moral reasoning and social justice among the population the independent sample t-test is utilized.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *Overview*

The present study attempted to find out the decision making based on moral reasoning and social justice among students pursuing law and not pursuing law. All the data gathered were logged into Microsoft Excel and were analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences version 23. Following the research design mentioned in the previous chapter, the obtained data was put through statistical analysis and will be presented in this present chapter.

*Table 2. Demographic summary of the sample.*

	N	Gender		Age			
		Male	Female	18-19	20-21	22-23	24-25
Students pursuing Law	30	13	17	16	11	3	0
Students not pursuing Law	30	5	25	4	22	4	0

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The table 2 shows the demographic summary of the sample studied. The data were collected from 60 college students of which 30 students were Law major students and the rest were students not pursuing Law. From the table it can be observed that among the student pursuing Law, there are 13 male participants and 17 female participants and from the other sample – students not pursuing Law, there are 5 male participants and 25 female participants. It can also be seen that there are sixteen students around the age range of 18 – 19, eleven students of age between 20 – 21, three students around the age of 22 – 23, among the students who are pursuing their major in Law, respectively. From the sample of students who are not pursuing Law, it can be observed that 4 students who participated were between the age of 18 – 19, 22 students between the age of 20 – 21, four students around the age of 22 – 23 years discretely.

**Table 3. Descriptive Statistics**

		<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
Occupation	Students pursuing Law	30	1.50	0.50
	Students not pursuing Law	30		
Gender	Male	16	1.70	0.46
	Female	44		
Personal Interest Schema	Students pursuing Law	30	11.43	6.29
	Students not pursuing Law	30	14.03	5.07
Maintaining Norms Schema	Students pursuing Law	30	14.10	5.07
	Students not pursuing Law	30	12.70	4.18
Post Conventional Schema	Students pursuing Law	30	8.60	5.43
	Students not pursuing Law	30	8.20	6.41
Procedural Justice	Students pursuing Law	30	32.63	7.77
	Students not pursuing Law	30	27.63	8.20
Distributive Justice	Students pursuing Law	30	4.13	5.36
	Students not pursuing Law	30	9.03	7.10

The table 3 shows the descriptive statistics of the variables used in the present study. The occupation of the sample consists of students pursuing law and not pursuing law, of which 30 participants were from law major and the rest were from other majors. The mean and standard deviation of the occupation of the sample was ( $\mu=1.50 \pm 0.50$ ). In the aspect of the gender, the sample consists of 16 male participants and 44 female participants. The mean and standard deviation of the gender of the sample was ( $\mu=1.70 \pm 0.46$ ).

As the objective of the study, the sample was assessed on moral reasoning criteria which includes personal interest schema, maintaining norms schema and post conventional schema. In the aspect of personal interest schema, the average mean and standard deviation was ( $\mu=11.43 \pm 6.29$ ) among the students pursuing law and on the other hand, the average mean and standard deviation of the students not pursuing law was ( $\mu=14.03 \pm 5.07$ ). In the maintaining norms schema, the students pursuing law scored an average mean and standard deviation of ( $\mu=14.10 \pm 5.07$ ) and the students not pursuing law obtained an average mean of ( $\mu=12.70$ ) with the standard deviation (4.18). In post-conventional schema, the students pursuing law scored an average mean of ( $\mu=8.60$ ) with a standard deviation (5.43) and students not pursuing law scored an average mean and standard deviation of ( $\mu=8.20 \pm 6.41$ )

Similarly, the study also assessed the social justice criteria of the sample which includes procedural justice and distributive justice. The students pursuing law scored an average mean and standard deviation of ( $\mu=32.63 \pm 7.77$ ) while the students not pursuing law scored

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an average mean of ( $\mu=27.63$ ) with a standard deviation of (8.20), in procedural justice. In the aspect of distributive justice, the students pursuing law scored an average mean and standard deviation of ( $\mu=4.13\pm 5.36$ ) whereas the students not pursuing law scored an average mean of ( $\mu=9.03$ ) and standard deviation (7.10).

The descriptive variables will further be analysed as follows to achieve the objective of the study.

**Table 4. The significant difference in moral reasoning among students pursuing and not pursuing Law.**

	Mean (SD)		t	df	p
	Students Pursuing Law (n = 30)	Students Not Pursuing Law (n = 30)			
Personal Interest Schema	11.43 (6.29)	14.03 (5.07)	1.67	58	0.10
Maintaining Norms Schema	14.10 (5.07)	12.70 (4.18)	1.16	58	0.24
Post Conventional Schema	8.60 (5.43)	8.20 (6.41)	0.26	58	0.79
Procedural Justice	32.63 (7.77)	27.63 (8.20)	2.42	58	0.01
Distributive Justice	4.13 (5.36)	9.03 (7.10)	3.01	58	0.001

The table 4 shows the significant difference in moral reasoning among students pursuing and not pursuing Law. From the table it can be observed that, in the case of the student pursuing law, the mean value of personal interest schema ( $\mu=11.43$ ) and the standard deviation (6.29) on the other hand, the students not pursuing law scored the mean value higher ( $\mu=14.03$ ) than the students pursuing law in the aspect of personal interest schema and the standard deviation is (5.07). The p value obtained was (0.10), since the  $p>0.05$  there is no significant difference among the students pursuing law and not pursuing law.

Similarly, the students pursuing law scored higher ( $\mu=14.10$ ) than the students not pursuing law ( $\mu=12.70$ ) in maintaining norms schema with the standard deviation 5.07 and 4.18, respectively. The p value obtained was 0.24. Since,  $p>0.05$  it indicates that there is no significant difference among students pursuing and not pursuing law.

Likewise, in the post conventional schema, the students pursuing law has slightly higher scores ( $\mu=8.60$ ) than the students not pursuing law ( $\mu=8.20$ ) with the standard deviation 5.43 and 6.42, respectively. The p value obtained was (0.79), since the  $p>0.05$  it indicates that there is no significant difference among students pursuing and not pursuing law. Thus from the table it can be interpreted that the data results accepts the proposed hypothesis ( $H_{01a}$ ) - there will be no significant difference between students pursuing law and not pursuing law in moral reasoning. This outcome may be due to the fact that law involves ethical studies and following the ethics may predominate moral reasoning criteria in decision making (Lamar, 2003). There are also past researches which supports that the type of education has an effect on moral development (Doyle & O'Flaherty, 2013) and law could be one such major that has an effect on moral reasoning. This perspective opens the scope for the further study on the factors that influence ethics education and its effect on moral reasoning.

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From the table 4, it can also be inferred that, in the procedural justice criteria, the students pursuing law scored higher ( $\mu=32.63\pm7.77$ ) than the students not pursuing law ( $\mu=27.63 \pm 8.20$ ). The p value obtained for the criteria is 0.01, since the  $p<0.05$ , it can be said that there is a significant difference among students pursuing law and not pursuing law in procedural justice criteria.

It can also be observed that in the aspect of distributive justice criteria, there is a significance between the students pursuing law and not pursuing law, as the p value (0.001) is lesser than 0.05. The mean value and the standard deviation scored by students pursuing law ( $\mu = 4.13 \pm 5.36$ ) is lesser than the score of students not pursuing law ( $\mu=9.03 \pm 7.10$ ). Thus, from the analysis, it can be noted that the data results rejects the proposed hypothesis ( $H_{01b}$ ) – there will be no significant difference between students pursuing law and not pursuing law in social justice. In the study conducted by (Wendorf et al., 2002) suggests that for a lay man, the social justice (distributive criteria in this case) is justified by the outcomes that are favourable to oneself. For instance, every common man place heavy importance on personal relevance and involvement (“Did I get what I deserve?”) rather than placing importance on lawful concerns (“Was the criminal given life sentence after the trial?”). The results indicate that the students pursuing law place less importance over distributive justice than procedural justice.

**Table 5 The correlation between moral development and age.**

		N = 60					
		Age of the population	Personal Interest Schema	Maintaining Norms Schema	Post Conventional Schema	Procedural Justice	Distributive Justice
Age of the population	Pearson Correlation	1	0.03	- 0.017	0.09	-0.24	0.25
	p	-	0.81	0.896	0.46	0.05	0.05
Personal Interest Schema	Pearson Correlation	0.03	1	-0.33	-0.65	- 0.21	0.17
	p	0.81	-	0.01	0	0.09	0.18
Maintaining Norms Schema	Pearson Correlation	-0.01	-0.33	1	-0.19	0.09	-0.13
	p	0.89	0.01	-	0.12	0.46	0.31
Post Conventional Schema	Pearson Correlation	0.09	-0.65	-0.01	1	0	0.08
	p	0.46	0	0.12	-	0.97	0.50
Procedural Justice	Pearson Correlation	-0.24	-0.21	0.09	0	1	-0.88
	p	0.05	0.09	0.46	0.97	-	0
Distributive Justice	Pearson Correlation	0.25	0.17	-0.13	0.08	-0.88	1
	p	0.05	0.18	0.31	0.50	0	-

The table 5 shows the relationship between moral development and age. From the table, it can be observed that the age does not have any significant relationship with the moral reasoning criteria (Personal interest schema, maintaining norms schema and post conventional schema) showing p values 0.81, 0.89 and 0.46, respectively, which indicates that  $p>0.05$ , hence it can be said that there is no significant relationship. Thus, the data results accepts the proposed hypothesis ( $H_{02a}$ ) – there will no significant difference between age and moral development among the population.

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However, in the aspect of social justice criteria (procedural justice and distributive justice), it can be observed that there is a significant relationship between age and social justice criteria as  $p \leq 0.05$ . The data results rejects the proposed hypothesis ( $H_{02b}$ ) – there will be no significant difference between age and social justice among the population.

From the table, it can also be observed that the age has negative correlation ( $r = - 0.01$ ) with maintain norms schema and procedural justice ( $r = - 0.24$ ). The reason for this type of outcome can be reasoned by the fact that the sample used in the present consists of students in their early and late adolescents. From the developmental psychology perspective, adolescents often indulge in gang formations and breaking norms in the process of transition from adolescence to early adulthood. Having this point in view, it also explains that the procedural justice criteria may matter less to the youth as they age (Murphy, 2015).

**Table 6. The relationship between moral reasoning and social justice among males and females.**

Moral Reasoning	Mean (SD)		t	df	p
	Male (18)	Female (42)			
Personal interest Schema	13.94 (6.02)	12.21 (6.15)	1	58	0.32
Maintaining Norms Schema	12.62 (5.10)	13.74 (4.48)	0.85	58	0.39
Post Conventional Schema	7.67 (5.75)	8.71 (5.99)	0.62	58	0.53
Procedural Justice	28.83 (8.34)	30.69 (8.34)	0.79	58	0.43
Distributive Justice	8 (6.78)	5.98 (6.67)	1.07	58	0.28

The table 6 shows the relationship between moral reasoning and social justice among males and females. From the table, it can be observed that the gender has no significant relationship with moral reasoning criteria (personal interest schema, maintaining norms schema and post conventional schema) as the p values are 0.32, 0.39, 0.53 respectively and the  $p > 0.05$ . Hence, the data results accept the proposed hypothesis ( $H_{03a}$ ) – there will be no significant difference between gender and moral reasoning.

Similarly, from the table, in the aspect of social justice, it can be inferred that the gender has no significant relationship with social justice as 0.43 and 0.28 respectively and the  $p > 0.05$ . Hence, the data results accept the proposed hypothesis ( $H_{03b}$ ) – there will be no significant difference between gender and social justice.

Previous research findings (Muuss, 1988); suggests that females score more than males in moral reason as male and female follow different voices or consider different criteria. The previous literatures reveal that males tend to organise social relationships in a hierarchical order and subscribe to a morality of right, where females on the other hand value interpersonal aspects such as connectedness, care, sensitivity and responsibility to people (Murray, Feurestien, & Adams, 2002). Yet, in the present study, as hypothesised there is no significant difference among males and females in moral reasoning.

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### SUMMARY

The present study aimed to explore the moral reasoning and social justice among students pursuing law and not pursuing law. According to Rest's four component model, moral reasoning is one of the components necessary for moral behaviour. Also, law is enforced based on the written principles and regulations by the people who have been bestowed with the power to do so such as magistrates or judges. Thus, this study examines the moral reasoning criteria and social justice criteria among students pursuing law and student who are not pursuing law. The study used a sample size of 60 of which 30 participants were student pursuing and the rest were students not pursuing law. There were 16 males and 44 females participated in the study. The objectives of the study was to identify the significant difference in social justice and moral reasoning among students pursuing and not pursuing law. The relationship between the age, moral development and social justice among the population were also examined. Lastly, the relationship between gender, moral reasoning and social justice were also examined in the present study. The collected data was statistically analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS).

### CONCLUSION

The findings from the results of the present study revealed that there is no significant difference between students pursuing law and not pursuing law in moral reasoning. However, there is a significant difference in social justice among students pursuing law and not pursuing law. Also, there seem to be no significant relationship between age and moral reasoning. The results indicate that there is a significant difference in social justice among the population. The findings also revealed that there is no significant relationship between gender, moral reasoning and social justice.

### *Implications*

From the results obtained from the study, it can be said that students not pursuing law place more importance on distributive justice than procedural justice whereas it is the vice-a-versa for the student pursuing law. That is, the students pursuing law places more importance procedural justice than distributive justice. Hence, it indicates that lawyers consider procedural justice while policy making and considers it important while practicing law and order.

### *Limitations*

- The present study adopted an empirical approach to explore the social justice and moral reasoning missing the important nuance of the factors that attributes to social justice and moral reasoning which could be achieved through qualitative research.
- In the present study, the variables (social justice and moral reasoning) were considered as two distinct entities rather than integral components hence, it was hard to study the variables in isolation.
- The variables do not hold any universally accepted definitions and it requires knowledge to pay attention to the distinct difference with the help of extensive literature review.
- The questionnaire used in the present study was found to be quite tedious and time consuming by the participants. The shorter version of DIT is recommended for further research.

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## **Social Justice and Moral Reasoning: An Exploratory Study Among College Students Pursuing Law and Not Pursuing Law**

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### ***Conflict of Interest***

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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