

## ARE WE LIVING IN A FAIR WORLD? COMPARATIVE STUDY BETWEEN CHANGES IN PERCEPTION OF BELIEF IN A JUST WORLD AND DISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE AMONG STUDENTS

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**Abstract:** *The objective of the study was to ascertain the extent to which students' perceptions of the world in which they live and the manner in which resources are allocated evolve over the course of their three-year undergraduate program. To this end, belief in a just world and distributive justice were measured among a sample of 143 students from West University of Timisoara. The Pearson correlation analysis demonstrated that, although the two measures exhibited a positive correlation at the sample level, when each year of study was considered individually, there was no correlation between belief in a just world and distributive justice. The ANOVA analysis demonstrated that students' belief in a just world fluctuates as they progress through the academic years, whereas their perceptions of distributive justice remain relatively stable throughout the undergraduate program.*

**Keywords:** social justice, belief in a just world, distributive justice, emerging adulthood; prosocial behavior.

### 1. Introduction

A fundamental concern in most contemporary societies and governments, social justice is a concept deeply rooted in human nature (Hong et al., 2024). The tenets of social justice find expression in the manner in which social resources are distributed, ensuring a fair and equitable allocation (distributive justice), and in the guarantee of physical and psychological security for individuals, along with the opportunity for full and equal engagement in social matters (procedural justice) (Bell, 2007; Reason & Davis, 2005; Li et al., 2019). In essence, distributive justice concerns the fair and just distribution of resources within a community among its constituent members. The principle utilized in the pursuit of distributive justice is contingent upon the specific type of resource in question and the contextual circumstances. It may be based on considerations of merit, necessity, and/or equality. From a meritocratic standpoint, benefits are distributed in accordance with the level of effort expended, the degree of achievement attained, or the value of the contribution made. In terms of necessity, the quantity of the resource in question is allocated in a manner that reflects a hierarchy of needs, whereby the individuals requiring a greater quantity receive more, while those requiring a lesser quantity receive less. From an equality perspective, it is imperative that all individuals be afforded equal benefits (Bottia et al., 2016). Some authors posit that distributive justice can be realized through a strict egalitarian framework or by aligning with the principle of difference. Strict egalitarianism posits that moral equality is an inherent attribute of all individuals, and that this moral ideal may only be actualized in an environment where equality with regard to material goods and services is achieved. In this context, the concept of distributive justice entails a strict or radical notion of equality (Nielsen, 1979), whereby all members of society are to be allocated equal material goods. At the other extreme is John Rawls's principle of difference (1999), which holds that strict equality may be disregarded when inequality results in the least advantaged in society being better off than under strict equality (Bottia et al., 2016). Alternatively, Michael Walzer (1983) proposes a radically pluralist normative theory of justice. According to the author, each society is characterized by a set of principles of justice that are developed within the framework of its shared meanings and traditions. For example, in democratic societies it is possible to identify different distributional spheres, in which different classes of social goods (for example, education, money, health and safety) are allocated in accordance with the principles corresponding to each sphere. At the same time, the conceptual and social meaning of each class of goods will dictate the principles used to distribute them, so that different principles will apply to different spheres (Sabbagh, 2001). Another concept related to social justice is belief in a just world, defined as the extent to which individuals believe that the world works fairly and that everyone gets what they deserve and deserves what they get (Hong et al., 2024;

Lerner, 1965; Li et al., 2019). The concept was first introduced into the academic literature by Lerner (1965) as a means of describing individuals' perception of their lived reality as just and ordered, in which the distribution of outcomes aligns with the underlying principles of meritocracy and reciprocity (Hu et al., 2024; Valero-Moreno et al., 2020). The justice motive theory (Dalbert, 2009), which suggests that the motive or need for this belief originates in childhood and develops as children learn to forgo immediate gratification and pursue long-term goals, is one theory that researchers have used to explain individual differences in belief in a just world (Hafer & Sutton 2016). Others propose social learning as the origin of just world beliefs, fostered through a variety of processes including ideological teachings, popular culture, and parental influence (Dittmar & Dickinson 1993; Gunter & Wober 1983; Schönplflug & Bilz, 2004; Hafer & Sutton 2016). From a social perspective, believing in a just world creates confidence that a person will be treated fairly, provides a conceptual framework for understanding events and making attributions, and establishes a personal contract with society to uphold shared values (Thomas & Mucherah, 2016). Thus, by helping individuals establish a sense of control, increasing their willingness to follow social rules, and providing the motivation needed to achieve long-term goals, this type of belief plays an important role in adapting to a complicated social environment (Tian 2019). In another approach, believing in a just world is a stable personality trait based on believing that people get what they deserve and that what they get is what they should get (Lerner & Miller, 1978). From this perspective, this belief plays an important role in maintaining social order by providing a motivation for individuals to engage in prosocial behavior (Yang et al., 2024). There are authors who believe that belief in a just world serves an adaptive social function, helping individuals restore their sense of rightness, increasing their sense of control, and reducing anxiety (De Caroli & Sagone, 2014; Hu et al., 2024). Thus, on the premise that only the deserving will be punished, the individual has a sense of control over his or her own destiny and a sense of shelter from harsh realities (Furnham, 2003; Nudelman & Shiloh, 2011). Believing in a just world compels individuals to behave justly and motivates them to use just means to achieve their personal ends. In addition, when individuals witness injustice being committed, those who strongly believe in a just world are more likely to engage in altruistic behaviors and actions aimed at restoring justice (Hu et al., 2024; Hong et al., 2024). Studies have also shown that believing in a just world is associated with trust and psychological health and is beneficial for social cooperation. Its long-term goal is to improve the quality of life on the assumption that a society functions better when it is populated by more productive and happier people (Hafer & Sutton, 2016). However, creating a just society requires not only building and improving a social system that provides equal opportunities and a fair distribution of resources. It also requires educating young adults to be good citizens (Li et al., 2019).

Since the 1960s, it has been observed in high-income countries that the gradual achievement of psychological milestones, such as making independent decisions or taking responsibility for oneself, replaces leaving home, and becomes characteristic of the transition to adulthood (Arnett et al., 2014). This has led to the term "emerging adulthood," which refers to the period between 18 and 29 when people feel they are too old to be teenagers and not yet ready to become full-fledged adults (Reifman et al., 2007). Arnett's (2015) theory of emerging adulthood is based on research showing that a series of complex and dynamic changes occur at this stage, both neuroanatomically and developmentally (research shows that brain development occurs by the late twenties), as well as personally, emotionally, and socially (Spear 2000; Wood et al., 2018). In this context, the author offers a new perspective on the transition from adolescence to adulthood, considering it as a separate, theoretically and empirically distinct period of the life course, characterized by the fact that the individual's subjective experience during this period has implications for long-term development (Wood et al., 2018; Petrovic et al., 2024). Thus, emerging adulthood is considered a unique period in human development, characterized by complex neurobiological, psychological, and social changes (Luo et al., 2024). The foundations of the worldview, defined as a set of basic beliefs and assumptions about social and physical reality, are also laid during the emerging adulthood period. Studies have shown that a college education has an impact on the development of a student's worldview through exposure to new ideas and by providing the necessary framework for intellectual and spiritual growth (Gutierrez & Park, 2015).

## 2. Methodology

The aim of the study was to examine how the belief in a just world and the perception of distributive justice of UVT students change during the three years of their undergraduate studies. The following hypotheses have been formulated:

- 1) Among students in the undergraduate program, there is a relationship between belief in a just world and distributive justice.

- 2) Students' beliefs about a just world change over the course of their three years of undergraduate study.
- 3) Students' perceptions of distributive justice change over their three years of undergraduate study.

A sociological survey was used as a research method, which was carried out between June and September, by applying a questionnaire to a sample of undergraduate students at the UVT. Before completing the questionnaire, participants were informed that their answers would remain anonymous. They were also assured that the data collected would be statistically processed for strictly academic purposes. The questionnaire was divided into three sections. The first section contains identifying information about the respondents: gender, age, year of study, and religious affiliation. The second section contains questions about the extent to which respondents perceive the world to be a just place and was constructed by selecting 6 items from the original scale measuring belief in a just world proposed by Lipkus (1991), which were recoded with a positive meaning. The third section includes questions about respondents' perceptions of resource allocation and was constructed by selecting 2 items related to equality principle and 2 items related to fairness principle from Hülle et al.'s (2018) original distributive justice scale. Both scales have been translated into the Romanian language (Mimura & Griffiths, 2004). Sections 2 and 3 were developed using a Likert scale model in which participants assigned a value from 1 to 5 (1 - *very little*, 5 - *very much*) to the statements in the question. The scores of the corresponding responses were summed to obtain the total score of the two constructs. Statistical analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics 21 software. The one-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used to determine the distribution type of the variables. The association between the two constructs was determined by means of correlation analysis. One-way ANOVA analysis was used to determine differences in students' perceptions of believing in a just world and distributive justice according to year in college.

### 3. Results

The sample consists of 143 students, most of whom are 21 years old ( $M = 23.9$ ,  $SD = 6.557$ ). 33.3% are first-year students, 41.7% are second-year students, and 25% are third-year students. The Orthodox religion is the predominant one (73.6%), followed by the Neo-Protestant religions (12.5%).

The total scores for the two dependent variables were tested for normality using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. The results showed that both of them follow a normal distribution (exact  $p > .05$  (2-tailed)). Homogeneity was assessed using the homogeneity of variance test. According to the results obtained (Table 1), homogeneity is respected for both dependent variables ( $p > .05$ )

**Table 1. Test of Homogeneity of Variance**

		<i>Levene Statistics</i>	<i>df1</i>	<i>df2</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Belief in a just world	Based on Mean	.429	2	140	.652
	Based on Median	.301	2	140	.740
	Based on Median and with adjusted df	.301	2	127.587	.740
	Based on trimmed mean	.416	2	140	.661
Distributive justice	Based on Mean	1.310	2	140	.273
	Based on Median	1.308	2	140	.274
	Based on Median and with adjusted df	1.308	2	133.064	.274
	Based on trimmed mean	1.396	2	140	.251

The association between belief in a just world and distributive justice was analyzed using Pearson's correlation, and the result was  $r(141) = .214$ ,  $p < .05$ . The direction of the correlation is positive, meaning that students who have a high belief in a just world have high distributive justice scores. The coefficient  $r^2$  indicates that about 5% of the variance in distributive justice is explained by the belief in a just world. This relationship was then analyzed separately for each of the three years of study. In all cases, nonsignificant correlations were obtained, namely  $r(45) = .242$ ,  $p = .101$  for students in the first year,  $r(58) = .140$ ,  $p = .284$  for students in the second year, and  $r(34) = .327$ ,  $p = .052$  for students in the third year (Table 2).

**Table 2. Pearson correlation for studied variables**

Variable		Belief in a just world	Distributive justice
<i>All sample</i>	Belief in a just world	-	.214*
	Distributive justice	.214*	-
<i>First year</i>	Belief in a just world	-	.242
	Distributive justice	.242	-
<i>Second year</i>	Belief in a just world	-	.140
	Distributive justice	.140	-

<i>Third year</i>	Belief in a just world	-	.327
	Distributive justice	.327	-

$p < .05$

ANOVA analysis was used to determine whether year of study influenced how students perceived justice in the world. Table 3 shows the mean and standard deviation for belief in a just world for each of the three categories. The highest average value was obtained for the first-year students and the lowest value for the second-year students. These findings are consistent with Adoric's (2011) theory that belief in a just world decline with age. This decline begins in adolescence and continues into adulthood (Valero-Moreno et al., 2020). The results show that students have different perceptions of justice in the world depending on the year they are in college,  $F(2, 140) = 6.267, p = .002$  (Table 4). The value  $\eta^2 = .082$  implies that the effect is medium according to the criteria proposed by Cohen (1988) (Kinnear & Gray, 2006).

**Table 3. Means and Standard Deviations Comparing**

Anul de studiu	Belief in a just world		
	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>Firtst year</i>	47	20.36	3.721
<i>Second year</i>	60	17.95	3.422
<i>Third year</i>	36	18.31	3.905
Total	143	18.83	3.779

**Table 4. ANOVA**

<i>Source</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Year of study					
Between groups	2	166.632	83.316	6.267	.002
Within groups	140	1861.340	13.295		
Total	142	2027.972			

**Table 5. Multiple comparisons**

Year of study (I)	Year of study (J)	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
<i>Firtst year</i>	<i>Second year</i>	2.412*	.710	.003	.73	4.09
	<i>Third year</i>	2.056*	.808	.032	.14	3.97
<i>Second year</i>	<i>Firtst year</i>	-2.412	.710	.003	-4.09	-.73
	<i>Third year</i>	-.356	.769	.889	-2.18	1.47
<i>Third year</i>	<i>Firtst year</i>	-2.056*	.808	.032	-3.97	-.14
	<i>Second year</i>	.356	.769	.889	-1.47	2.18

The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Post hoc Tukey's comparisons were used to determine differences between the groups (Table 5). Significant differences were observed between the first year and the second year ( $p = .003$ ) and between the first year and the third year ( $p = .036$ ). There were no significant differences observed between the second year and the third year ( $p > .05$ ).

**Table 6. Means and Standard Deviations Comparing**

Anul de studiu	Distributive justice		
	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>Firtst year</i>	47	12.638	3.04621
<i>Second year</i>	60	12.833	2.41581
<i>Third year</i>	36	12.722	3.04829
Total	143	12.741	2.77999

**Table 7. ANOVA**

<i>Source</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Year of study					
Between groups	2	1.020	.510	.065	.937

Within groups	140	1096.407	7.831
Total	142	1097.427	

To examine students' perceptions of distributive justice over the three years of study, the same type of analysis was used. For each of the three categories, the mean and standard deviation for distributive justice are shown in Table 6. The results of the ANOVA analysis indicate that there are no statistically significant differences in students' perceptions of distributive justice in relation to the academic year,  $F(2, 140) = .065, p = .937$  (Table 7).

#### 4. Conclusions

In this study, we analyzed perceptions of believing in a just world and distributive justice of the UVT students across the three years of the undergraduate program. In relation to the sample under study, belief in a just world has a positive correlation and explains about 5% of the changes in students' distributive justice. However, the first hypothesis is only partially confirmed as the correlation between the two constructs at the level of each year of study is insignificant. One possible explanation may be that changes in perceptions of justice in the world do not occur at the same time and with the same intensity as changes in students' perceptions of resource allocation. The results of the ANOVA analysis showed that students' perceptions of justice in the world differed by year of study, thus confirming the second hypothesis. However, significant differences were only observed between the students in the first and second year and between the students in the first and third year. It was also observed that 2nd and 3rd year students scored lower on belief in a just world than 1st year students. The findings are in alignment with existing research indicating that as individuals age, there is a corresponding decline in their perception of the world as a fair and just place (Adoric 2011; Valero-Moreno et al., 2020). With regard to distributive justice, there is a consistency in students' perceptions over the course of their three-year undergraduate studies. Therefore, the third hypothesis was not confirmed.

There are certain limitations to the study. The sample consists of undergraduate students with an average age of 23 years. As the period of emerging adulthood extends up to the age of 29, a future line of research will involve a comparative analysis of students enrolled in bachelor's, master's, and doctoral programs. Future studies could also include a comparative analysis of how female and male students perceive the two constructs.

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