

Adopting Social Justice as Nothing More than an Academic Jargon: Conceptualisation of Social Justice in Social Work and Social Policy Disciplines*

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Abstract: A just society is not one where everyone is absolutely equal on all terms, nor scholarly literature on social justice is constrained by such a conception of the just. As observed from the broad scholarly literature of social justice, most theories in this field are competing and contending normative political perspectives informed by a sociological conception of inequalities and aiming to identify social, economic as well as institutional conditions under which resulting inequalities are morally necessary and desired, rather than proposing absolute equality. This work primarily aims to explore to what extent this foundational quality of social justice theories is adopted by peer-reviewed scholarly articles published in Türkiye within disciplines of social work and social policy whose identifying characteristic is to serve the establishment of the just society. Departing from this purpose, it methodologically employed a double-layered systematic literature review (n=184) and qualitative content analysis (n=62) to critically scrutinise peer-reviewed journal articles involving the concept of social justice. In addition to some complementary findings, these analyses resulted in three major findings based on which we argue that social justice in Türkiye is (1) primarily addressed as a part of the popular academic jargon along with some generic concepts such as human rights and welfare; (2) interchangeably used with the concept of equality although there are substantial distinctions between them; and (3) stressed in a way that there is a unified/homogenous conception of the just society that overlooks competing and contending normative perspectives in the relevant literature.

Keywords: Social Justice, Equality, Social Work, Social Policy, Peer-Reviewed Articles, Türkiye.

Öz: Adil toplum her bireyin bütünüyle eşitlendiği bir toplum olmadığı gibi, sosyal adalet alanındaki akademik literatür de mutlak eşitlikçiliğe sıkışmış bir adalet tanımı üzerine kurulu değildir. İlgili alandaki akademik literatüre bakıldığında görülebileceği gibi, sosyal adalet kuramları mutlak eşitlikçiliği öneren kuramlar değil, eşitsizliklere dönük sosyolojik bakış açısından beslenen ve bu eşitsizliklerin hangi sosyal, ekonomik, siyasal ve kurumsal koşullar altında etik olarak

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gerekli ve arzu edilir olduğunu açıklamayı hedefleyen, rekabet halinde ve çatışan normatif siyasal bakış açılarıdır. Bu çalışma, sosyal adalet kuramlarının söz konusu bu temel niteliğinin, belirleyici özelliği adil toplumun tesisine hizmet etmek olan sosyal hizmet ve sosyal politika disiplinleri dahilinde, Türkiye’de yayımlanan hakemli akademik makaleler tarafından ne ölçüde benimsendiğini araştırmayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu amaçtan yola çıkarak, sosyal adalet kavramını içeren hakemli dergi makalelerini eleştirel bir gözle incelemek için sistematik literatür taraması (n=184) ve nitel içerik analizinden (n=62) oluşan çift katmanlı bir metodoloji kullanılmıştır. Analizler, bazı diğer bulgularının yanında, Türkiye’de (1) sosyal adalet kavramının esasen insan hakları ve refah gibi bazı genel kavramlarla birlikte popüler akademik jargonun bir parçası olarak ele alındığını; (2) ikisi arasında önemli ayrımlar olmasına rağmen sosyal adalet ve eşitlik kavramlarının birbirinin yerine kullanıldığını ve (3) ilgili literatürdeki birbirleriyle rekabet halinde ve çatışan normatif perspektifleri göz ardı eden bütünlük/homojen bir adil toplum anlayışının hakim olduğunu göstermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sosyal Adalet, Eşitlik, Sosyal Hizmet, Sosyal Politika, Hakemli Makaleler, Türkiye.

Introduction

Justice, more particularly social or distributive justice, is not only a timeless ideal of humanity, but it is also an occupational motivation for scholarly knowledge production in various disciplines of social sciences involving, but not limited to, sociology, political science and philosophy, economics and welfare studies such as disciplines of social work and social policy. However, due to their insufficient engagement with the broad literature on justice, quite a number of academic works in these disciplines are confined to a narrow conception of social justice in which a just decision, action, or policy is merely associated with a vaguely expressed ideal of equality. On the other hand, within the broad literature of social justice where numerous competing proposals of a just society compete and contend with each other, the ideal of equality illustrates only one family of social justice theories where different perspectives about it (e.g. formal equality, equality of opportunity, equality in outcomes) also compete and contend with each other. Despite this, a narrow conceptualization of social justice that is simply confined to the ideal of equality is either implicitly or explicitly presented as an all-encompassing theory of social justice, particularly within social work and social policy disciplines. In fact, contrary to such narrow conceptualization, theories of social justice are not perspectives simply seeking equality, but they are in essence normative and political proposals aiming to identify social, economic and institutional conditions under which resulting inequalities are morally just. In other words, “theories of just society are not built upon claims seeking for conditions to establish absolute equality between individuals; but they are argumentative philosophical perspectives that are primarily concerned with the identification of conditions under which inequalities are deemed to be just” (Arun, 2022, p.1019; 2023, p.764). This is to say that if there is one common quality of competing and contending theories of social justice, it is not the embracement of equality as an ultimate ideal, but is the objective to identify conditions of the just, and thus fair, inequalities.

In this work, we initially aimed to explore to what extent such competing and contending natures of social justice theories that illustrate a quality of seeking to identify morally justifiable inequalities are recognized by scholars who have, one way or another, discussed social (in)justice(s) in their scholarly works. To achieve this purpose, we followed a twofold strategy investigating (1) how social justice is understood within the existing literature of academic works that involve the concept of “social justice” and (2) if these scholarly works recognize such sophisticated nature of social justice as well as its distinct characteristics from the concept of equality. Yet, we pursued to achieve this objective by particularly scrutinising scholarly works published within disciplines of social work and social policy in Türkiye between 2000 and 2023 during which not only a dramatic increase in number of universities, academics and scholarly publications but also serious metrification attempts of knowledge production have been evidently observed (Kınıkoğlu and Özdemir, 2023, p.179). In addition to this, our reasoning to particularly focus on scholarly works in the fields of social work and social policy was associated with the fact that these fields are addressed as disciplines whose primary purposes are keenly identified with serving the establishment of a society that is socially, economically, and institutionally just. Methodologically speaking, the substantial significance of social justice for the fields of social work and social policy has led us to select our data as scholarly works published in these two disciplines where being informed about intricate natures of social justice theories and their conflicting normative proposals are not only theoretically vital, but also inevitable practical necessity for policy development. Our analyses ended up with various findings, including some critical and bibliographic results, which we put forth in detail below. However, among others, the most striking findings of this research have appeared that social justice within disciplines of social work and social policy in Türkiye is (1) predominantly drawn on as a generic concept that is simply addressed as a part of popular academic jargon along with distinct concepts such as equality, human rights or welfare although these concepts demonstrate remarkably distinct traits, (2) interchangeably used with the concept of equality although such a use is excessively reductionist and mostly refused in the existing broad literature, and (3) addressed in a way that there is a unified/homogenous conception and principle of the just society, which overlooks competing and contending theories of social justice. However, before presenting these findings along with their supporting indications, we firstly provide how social justice is discussed as fair inequalities in the existing broad literature.

Social Justice as Justified and Fair Inequalities

Looking at the distinctive scholarly proposals concerning how a value (*e.g.* income, wealth, respect, admiration, various forms of rewards, or positions of power) ought to be allocated among members of a political community, justification of inequalities appears as a substantially salient characteristic of these normative proposals. The libertarian model of justice, *vis-à-vis* others, is the one that illustrates such a trait quite straightforwardly. Aligning with meritocratic principles and against nepotist distribution, the libertarian model affirms that unequal distribution of desired goods and rewards is just so long as anyone is not discriminated against from being part of a competitive process through which skilful and talented individuals become successful. In this model, everyone is given equal opportunity to be part of a competitive process and is not discriminated against in relation to their gender, age, political view, ethnicity or social class from participating in competition for valued rewards. As everyone is entitled to participate in the competitive process and this right is given to everyone equally at the beginning of the competition, unequal distribution of rewards in the outcome of the competition is justified. In other words, when equal initial opportunity is provided to everyone, those who demonstrate distinctive achievements by making use of their skills and talents in the competitive process are considered as individuals who deserve to be rewarded unequally in outcome due to their meritorious success. As can be noticed, (1) equal initial opportunity provided to everyone without any discrimination and (2) a competitive process where rules are identical for everyone are two leading principles in this model of distribution. Thus, this model of value allocation justifies unequal distribution of rewards in the outcome, if everyone is given equal initial opportunity to compete for these rewards.

This form of reasoning is explicitly observed in the works of Nozick, who can be addressed as the leading contemporary figure of the libertarian model of distribution. Nozick, who identifies principles of holding and acquisition of property (Nozick, 1974, p.151), gives a hypothetical example inspired from the case of Wilt Chamberlain, a famous basketball player of the 1970s. According to him, if fans of the team to which Chamberlain was affiliated were willing to pay to watch his skilful performance in a match, this transaction from fans to Chamberlain was a just transaction even though Chamberlain earned way much larger sum than anyone else (Nozick, 1974, p.161-162). Through this hypothetical example and its corresponding philosophical discussion, Nozick claims that unequal earnings of meritorious individuals are just so long as everyone is given an equal chance to demonstrate skilful performance in a competition. Equality of opportunity (see Roemer, 1998, p.1; Arneson, 1999, p.77) is a well-known and commonly applied institutional policy illustrating this liberal-meritocratic reasoning of unequal distribution and thus, just inequalities.

According to this policy, everyone is given initial equal opportunity to compete for desired rewards (e.g. a position of power in an institution, an educational opportunity to study in a university), and only those who demonstrate skilful performance in a prior competition are unequally given the desired rewards.

Contrary to a common misbelief that Marxism is a fully egalitarian model of the just society, its leading principle of value distribution demonstrates a sort of similarity with the libertarian model in the sense that Marxism also justifies inequality in distribution. Although it greatly aligns with need-based distribution through which everyone's certain (e.g. basic) needs are aimed to be unconditionally satisfied as well as it explicitly refuses private possession of the means of productions, Marxist principles of distribution are commonly addressed as (1) "to each according to his contribution" for the socialist stage of distribution; yet the primary objective is to replace this model with the one suggesting (2) "to each according to his needs" in the communist stage. Even though these two principles are commonly known and addressed as Marxist distributional principles, it should be noted that they are in essence reformed versions of the Saint-Simonian distributional rules (see Taylor, 1982, p.193-194), which have been later modified and commonly embraced by Marxist school of thought. Rather than equal distribution, both of these Marxist principles affirm unequal distribution that is specified in line with one's contribution to the production process in socialism and one's needs in communism (see Gregory and Stuart, 1985, p.126). Even though the measurement criterion for unequal distribution takes the form of "productive labour" in Marxist model, rather than "merit", "talent" or "skill" criteria of the libertarian model, it explicitly recognizes that those who contribute to the production process more than others should be rewarded unevenly. In fact, justification of unequal distribution is observed in Marx's own works explicitly. Recognizing unequal mental and physical capacity of labour for different wage labourers, he addressed the significance of unequal rights for unequal labour (see Marx, 2008 [1891], p.25-26), which was followed by a recognition of sociological diversities, such as being married and having children (Marx, 2008 [1891]), that similarly brought forth justification for unequal distribution as a moral necessity.

Both libertarian and Marxist perspectives on distribution, as can be noticed, recognize the necessity of unequal allocation, although they are politically motivated by quite opposite objectives. For the utilitarian understanding of social justice, however, neither equality nor inequality is the primary concern since its focal point is to elevate "public utility", regardless of whether the public utility stimulates inequality or enhances equality among members of the political community. In this regard, similar to the libertarian and Marxist approaches, any categorical opposition to inequality is not observed in the utilitarian account of social justice either. In other

words, the utilitarian understanding does not involve a normative view considering inequalities in distribution as inherently unjust. This is primarily because the utilitarian perspective is essentially majoritarian, suggesting “greatest happiness of the greatest number” (Campbell, 2010, p.116) of people in evaluating justness of a decision or policy. Taking the aggregative happiness of society as the metric of the overall interest or the cumulative utility, this majoritarian understanding of justice proposes to increase society’s subjective well-being, which is often translated as income level in applied economics (Robeyns, 2005, p.97). Building upon the idea of “the greater good”, the utilitarian understanding advocates that whatever augments the aggregative subjective well-being of society (e.g. happiness, pleasure or desire-fulfilment, life/preference satisfaction), it is the undisputable just action. In line with this, “an unjust society, in this view, is one in which people are significantly less happy, taken together, than they need to be” (Sen, 1999, p.59). Interpretively speaking, if a woman, for example, is paid less than a man despite doing the same job and if this unequal payment policy augments the aggregative subjective well-being of society, then there is no moral concern (e.g. equal pay for equal job) for the utilitarian conception of just action. This is to say that, for the utilitarian assessment of just actions, decisions or policies, inequalities are just, and more importantly desired, so long as they serve to augment the aggregative utility of society.

The utilitarian understanding of justice and its disinterestedness in the sociological distortion of the metric of utility (e.g., happiness or life/pleasure satisfaction) have become subject to quite serious criticisms (see Sen, 1979, p.468; 1999, p.62-63; 2006, p.53-55). However, it is perhaps the Rawlsian model of social justice that illustrates the greatest rupture from reasoning of the contemporary utilitarian conception of justice. Simultaneously fulfilling both libertarian and egalitarian concerns, the Rawlsian model of justice that seeks for fairness instead of absolute equality is built upon two broad principles of justice (Rawls, 1999, p.266; 2001, p.42-43) that are identified from what Rawls (see 1999, p.15-19) calls as “original position” which can only be arrived if decision-making parties are situated behind the “veil of ignorance” (Rawls, 1999, p.118-123), a hypothetical device of impartial decision-making. The first principle of justice as fairness that Rawls proposes suggests that “each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive total system of equal basic liberties compatible with similar system of liberty for all” (Rawls, 1999, p.266), which ensures equality in holding basic liberties, such as primary political liberties (see Rawls, 1999, p.53). Although this principle offers equal distribution of basic liberties, Rawls’ second principle explicitly recognizes the significance of inequalities by claiming that “social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both (a) to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged, consistent with the just saving principle,

and (b) attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity” (Rawls, 1999, p.266). Considering that Rawls frequently stresses that these two principles should operate in tandem (Robeyns, 2009, p.107), the first principle cannot be applied to the basic institutional structure of society without the application of the second principle. This means that the first principle seeking for equal distribution of basic liberties is inseparable from the application of the second principle seeking for re-arranging the distributional process in an unequal way. Such re-arrangement, as can be seen in the second principle itself too, aims to regulate social and economic inequalities in a way that the least advantaged members of society receive the greatest benefit, rather than equal benefit, in comparison to relatively more advantaged members. This is the first explicit reference to the significance of inequality in just society within the Rawlsian model of social justice. However, more importantly, the second principle recognizes significance of inequality in a just society in terms of the distribution of offices and positions of power by suggesting that positions and/or offices (e.g. occupational and managerial positions that involve the power of decision making) should not be distributed equally, but be open for competition that everyone can participate in. The competition-based distribution of positions in the Rawlsian model can be observed through the second principle’s emphasis upon “equality of opportunity”. The crucial point in this principle is that Rawls does not suggest arranging the value distribution in a way that aims to achieve “equality of rewards,” but to achieve “equality of opportunity.” The former one aims for equality in receiving rewards as the latter one, namely “equality of opportunity” which is inherently a liberal distributional policy, advocates equal opportunities to compete for rewards (e.g. occupational positions, offices, positions of power). Thus, Rawls explicitly acknowledges the relevance of liberal moral reasoning arranging the value distribution in line with a competitive process from which anyone is not discriminated against, but after which rewards are unequally given only to those who have demonstrated greater achievements with their skills, talents, and/or merits.

Another proposal that recognizes sociological diversities and justifies inequalities, *albeit* implicitly, is the capability approach (see Sen, 1987; 2006; 2008; 2009 and Nussbaum, 2000; 2003; 2011a; 2011b). Even though the capability approach is not a comprehensive theory of social justice, but is more of an evaluative framework to assess various institutional and social policies, it has recently gained prominent fame among scholars studying and writing on social justice. According to the approach, social arrangements should be evaluated in a way scrutinising if they operate to extend people’s freedom to achieve what they have reason to value (Alkire and Deneulin, 2009, p.31; Alkire, 2005, p.122). Thus, the just society is one where the distributional process is arranged in a way that aims to expand individuals’ ability to

achieve a form of life that is compatible with their own conception of the good. Based on this, the capability approach draws a line between holding means (*e.g.* resources, wealth and income, rights) and achieving the good life; and it then suggests that what matters in evaluative exercises concerning various social and economic issues (*e.g.* poverty, quality of life, development, or inequality) is to focus on individuals' ability, or substantial freedom, to achieve what they have reason to value (see Sen, 1987, p.6-11; 2006, p.26-28 and p.36-38; 2009, p.253-257). This means that achieving an opportunity and holding a means to achieve it should be distinguished from each other. This distinction is crucial since most of the social justice theories focus on individuals' holdings whilst the capability approach underlines being capable of using these holdings. Based on this perspective, Sen (2006, p.19-21) addresses that there can be various contingent factors operating in a way that either prevent or facilitate individuals' ability to make use of what s/he holds as a holding. In this regard, these factors that are influential on an individual's ability to achieve valued opportunities should be taken into account in a society deemed to be just. Illustrating this, Sen (1983, p.160) gives his famous example of "bike ownership" through which he distinguishes "owning a bike" and "being capable to make use of this bike to achieve an opportunity", *viz.* transportation or being mobile. A woman who holds a bike may not be allowed to make use of this bike due to, say, the absence of a bike road in her physical milieu, or existing dominant norms preventing her from riding a bicycle in her social milieu. Noting that "biological as well as social factors (related to pregnancy, neonatal care, conventional household roles, and so on) can place a woman at a disadvantage even when she has exactly the same bundle of primary goods as a man" (Sen, 1990, p.116), Sen addresses "conversion factors" (see 1999, p.70-71; 2009, p.255-256) that are influential on an individual's ability to convert a mean (*e.g.* a bike) into achievement of an opportunity that a person values (*e.g.* being mobile). Considering that these factors can operate quite unlikely for different people in different sociological settings, social and economic arrangements developed in line with the capability approach's perspective should be sensitive to various forms of human diversity that inevitably bring forth uneven treatment of unlike individuals. Since what ultimately matters, according to the capability approach, is the achievement of the valued opportunities, uneven treatment of people is justified if these uneven treatment is the way to allow them to achieve what they have reason to value. Thus, Sen's capability approach also appears as an evaluative framework that analytically, *albeit* implicitly, recognizes unequal treatment of people on the ground that unlike conversion factors may lead to variation in people's achievement of valued opportunities.

Lastly, luck egalitarianism, a relatively new framework that has recently started to gain significant attention in the broad literature of justice can be addressed as a perspective that explicitly justifies inequalities under certain conditions. Luck egalitarianism is a term initially coined by Anderson (1999, p.289) to address Ronald Dworkin's (1981a; 1981b; 2000; 2002) authentic distributive proposal which aims to "counteracting the distributive effects of luck on people's lives" (Knight, 2013, p.924). According to this distributional proposal, any factor that is not under an individual's own control should not play a determinative role in his/her advantages. In other words, luck egalitarianism suggests that factors which are beyond individual's control, such as (un)luck, "should not be a function of what a person receives at the end of the process of value distribution" (Arun, 2023, p.754). Deriving from the moral reasoning that any individual cannot be kept responsible for outcomes on which they have no power to change or influence, luck egalitarianism claims that it is morally impermissible to allow individuals suffering from outcomes of decisions, actions or policies that are not under their control. This inevitably brings forth that if any individual suffers from poverty, unemployment or any social malady and if such suffering is not an outcome of this individuals' own choices and decisions, then the moral requirement of justice is to compensate this suffering through redistribution, such as poverty relief programme, unemployment insurance, and so forth. This moral argument is built upon an authentic conceptual framework in which two distinct forms of luck are identified as brute luck and option luck (Dworkin, 1981b, p.293; 2000, p.73; see also Vallentyne, 2002, p.529-538; Barry, 2008, p.137; Knight, 2005, p.56-57 and 2013, p.925-926). While the former one, namely brute luck, refers to various forms of disadvantageous outcomes appearing beyond individuals' own choices and decisions, the latter one refers to predictable and avoidable consequences that emerge as a result of an individual's deliberate and purposive choices or decisions. To illustrate, according to luck egalitarianism, if an individual's choices and decisions led her/him to be poor even though these choices and decisions were avoidable and their consequences were predictable, then it was his/her fault to be poor. Under such a condition, her/his disadvantage and thus her/his unequal conditions to those who are not poor do not require any compensation, since her/his unlucky situation (*e.g.* being poor and unequal to non-poor) is a result of an option she could have avoided. However, if an individual has become, say, unemployed due to factors beyond her/his choices or decisions (*e.g.* discrimination to her/his gender, ethnicity, age), then her/his unequal condition to those who are employed should be compensated as a moral requirement of the just society. Even though luck egalitarianism at first sight seems as a normative framework that closely aligns with egalitarianism advocating that no one should be a victim of factors beyond her/his control, it dialectically also justifies that people should take responsibility for their own choices and decisions,

which is in fact the strongest argument in the arsenal of anti-egalitarian as well as libertarian political positions (see Cohen, 1989, p.933). This justification apparently brings forth that some forms of inequalities are morally deserved and should be preserved. Briefly saying, luck egalitarianism advocates removal of disadvantages and inequalities appearing as results of bad brute luck; yet it dialectically justifies the preservation of both disadvantages appearing as results of the bad option luck as well as advantages and unequal reward distribution appearing as consequences of the good option luck.

Briefly, most theories of social justice and normative proposals of value distribution within the broad literature of justice studies often do not seek for the absolute equality in outcome; but they demonstrate a common quality that justifies inequalities in various ways and identifies conditions under which inequalities are morally desired. In this regard, interchangeable use of the concepts of social justice and equality is not fully admissible terminological use. Beyond this, such a misuse of these two interrelated, *albeit* distinct, concepts demonstrates (1) an explicit theoretical and normative misconception of what social justice means as well as (2) insufficient engagement with broad literature of justice studies. Departing from this point, this research is primarily motivated to explore (1) how social justice is understood within the existing literature of scholarly works that involve the concept of social justice and published in Türkiye and (2) whether these works recognize such a sophisticated nature of social justice and its distinct characteristic from the concept of equality. However, before moving on to present the fruits of our exploration, below we provide (a) methods employed in this research, (b) qualities of our data, *viz.* sources of information, from which our findings are derived as well as (c) the ruling rationale behind the selection of the data, all of which has together played a formative role in shaping the primary arguments of this work.

Method, Source of Information, and the Rationale

Within the given common characteristic of social justice theories briefly discussed above, we aimed to explore and analyse how social justice is understood within peer-reviewed scholarly works of academics who have published both theoretical and empirical works in the disciplines of social work and social policy. The reason for our exclusive focus upon these scholarly areas, namely social work and social policy, to explore academics' perception of social justice is twofold. The first reason is associated with the fact that concept of social justice is theoretically placed at the centre of these disciplines (see Güven, 1997, p.11; Sunal, 2011, p.285; Çoban Kaynak,

2017, p.257-259; Gülmez, 2017, p.14; Altan, 2021, p.22), which inevitably brings forth the need of clarity concerning advanced and comprehensive understanding of social justice in these disciplines. The second one refers to a practical quality of these scholarly disciplines which are not only theoretical areas of the scientific inquiry but are also applied sciences aiming to offer policies converting social, economic, and institutional arrangements into fairer ones.

Regarding methods employed in this research, we needed to combine two methods used frequently in social sciences, namely systematic review and content analysis, with the purpose of both reviewing and evaluating peer-reviewed articles on social justice. Considering that the review method we needed to employ in this research should be “systematic, explicit, comprehensive, and reproducible” (Fink, 2014, p.3) to not miss out any relevant scholarly work, we had to follow a particular review strategy to identify and evaluate the relevant peer-reviewed scholarly works. Keeping this in mind, we first of all employed a systematic review process for the identification of the relevant scholarly works on social justice without any limitation regarding the disciplinary area of these works. In order to achieve this, we conducted a search in the TR-Dizin Social Sciences Index, an initiative of TÜBİTAK (The Scientific and Technological Research Council of Türkiye) starting from August 2000. This date marks a cornerstone after which not only a rapid growth in the number of universities, academics and scholarly publications in Türkiye has begun, but also the TR-Dizin has initiated the process of indexing scholarly publications. Thus, selecting this date as a starting line of our data composition was methodologically convincing since we also aimed to capture the influences of these contextual developments in our research. In addition to this, conducting our systematic search in the TR-Dizin was methodologically a plausible way to alleviate the risk of missing out on any relevant work as well as to access publications in journals that have certain quality criteria¹ appropriate for universal scientific dissemination. In other words, our reason for selecting the TR-Dizin for our systematic review was primarily associated with its quality of being a widely recognized national index for academic promotions to positions of both associate and full-professorship in public- and privately-funded universities in Türkiye. Thus, the TR-Dizin, as a relatively rich source of scholarly publications, allowed us to access an ample number of academic works through which we anticipated to involve all diverse understandings and definitions of social justice. However, apart from this practical necessity of ensuring diversity in our sample and

1 With the purpose of having more comprehensive information regarding these criteria, the official page of the TR-Dizin Social Science Index can be reviewed through the following link: <https://trdizin.gov.tr/en/about/>.

thus developing a robust and insightful analysis, one another significance of drawing upon TR-Dizin was due to a certain level of reliability of the index. Since TR-Dizin applies several criteria to index a journal, we had a plausible reasoning to accredit that all publications in journals indexed by TR-Dizin have unexceptionally undergone some basic editorial evaluations. Speaking more technically, when we conducted the systematic review, we ran a search in TR-Dizin at the beginning of September, 2023 with the keyword “social justice” both in Turkish and English. However, since TR-Dizin does not allow for a search within keywords, we conducted our exploration within abstracts of articles. This exploration resulted with a sum of 184 articles in 114 different journals and published between 2003 and 2023 with abstracts involving the concept of “social justice”. These articles were afterwards tabulated according to their several properties such as titles, journals, authors and their institutional affiliations, publication year, language, and their scientific disciplines.

Following the systematic review, we employed quantitative and qualitative content analysis. For the quantitative content analysis, we converted numeric findings into forms of tables and graphs outlining manifest characteristics of identified articles such as their publication year, main area of study, journal, orientation (theoretical or empirical) and data collection method. This has provided us to observe the broader trend concerning these publications’ manifest characteristics. Then, we moved on to qualitative content analysis in which we focused particularly on the papers within the disciplines of social work and social policy. Our rationale behind employing the qualitative content analysis was associated with its well-known characteristic of assisting researchers to grasp and interpret latent content and deeper connotations of text in addition to manifest content (Duriau et al., 2007, p.6). In this regard, since we aimed to understand how the concept of social justice is understood in peer-reviewed scholarly publications in Türkiye, underlying theoretical assumptions behind such understandings, and scholars’ engagement with the existing theoretical frameworks in the broader literature of social justice, we were persuaded to employ the qualitative content analysis approach through deeply reading of the previously identified scholarly works published in disciplines of social work and social policy in Türkiye.

Below, we will first present the outcomes of the systematic review to address certain qualities of all published scholarly works involving the keyword of “social justice”; and this will be followed by the findings derived from our qualitative content analysis of the works published in disciplines of social work and social policy.

Findings from the Systematic Literature Review

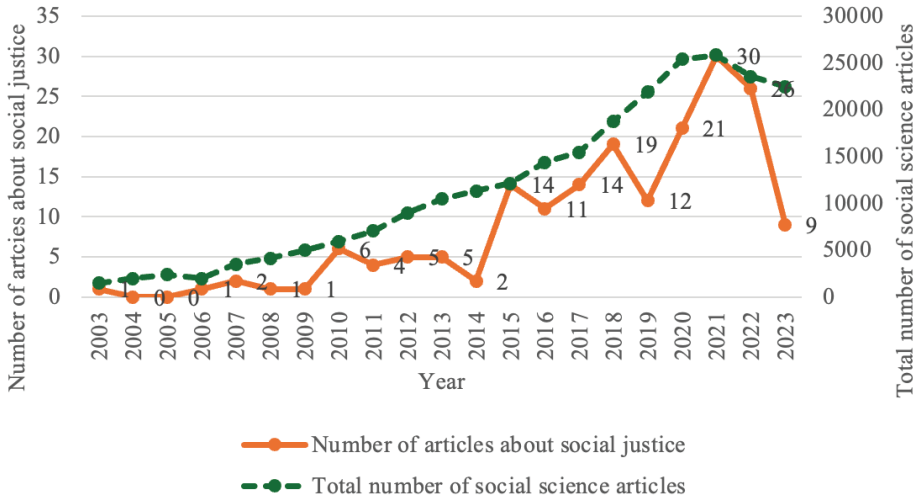


Figure 1: Number of Publications Using the Concept of Social Justice and Total Number of Social Science Articles in TR-Dizin by Years

Figure 1 shows the distribution of 184 articles referring to the concept of social justice in TR-Dizin by years. It is clearly seen that the number of articles increased rapidly after 2010 along with the total number of social science articles indexed by the TR-Dizin. The first reason for this fact is that the number of journals indexed by TR-Dizin has increased dramatically during the 2010s. Furthermore, following the foundation of many new universities throughout the 2000s in Türkiye, the number of academics has also increased dramatically during the 2010s. We can spot another leap during and after the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. As a final note, the relatively low number of articles found in 2023 is because our search took place in September 2023; and we anticipated that a comparatively low number of publications in 2023 occurred due to the fact that it often takes a few months for TR-Dizin to index articles once they are accepted by journals.

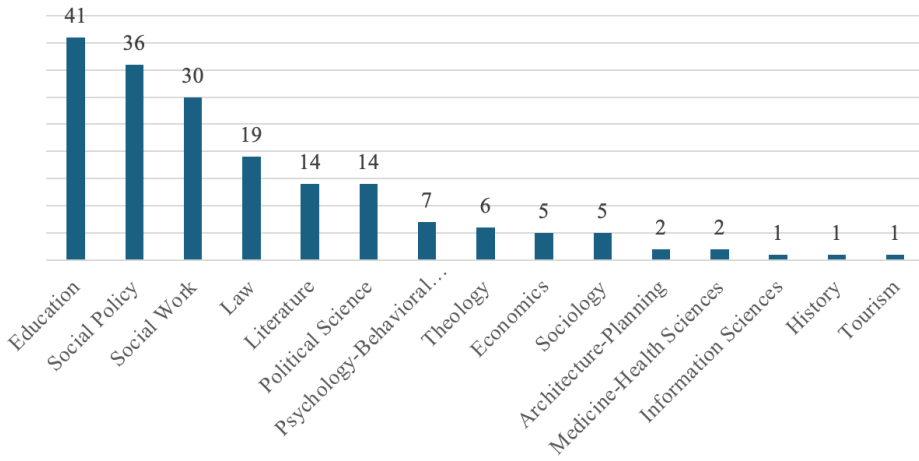


Figure 2: Frequency Distribution of Scholarly Publications among Different Scientific Disciplines

The distribution of articles reviewed according to their scientific disciplines is presented in Figure 2. As can be followed, more than one-third of the articles are in areas of social work and social policy although educational sciences *inter alia* have the highest frequency. Yet, it is worth noting that most of the articles in educational sciences focus on the objective of measuring and applying the social justice leadership index rather than involving either a distinct perspective of social justice or an explicit understanding of what social justice means.

Table 1

Distribution of Publications by Language, Orientation and Data Collection Method

	Language		Orientation		Data Collection Method		
	English	Turkish	Empirical	Theoretical	Qualitative	Quantitative	Mixed
n	29	155	64	120	38	21	3
%	%15.8	%84.2	%34.8	%65.2	%61.3	%33.9	%4.8

Lastly, as can be observed in Table 1 above, 155 of the articles that we reviewed were written in Turkish, while only 29 of them were in English. This unbalanced distribution hints at a narrow focus of social justice literature in Türkiye and misses out ongoing discussions in the broad international literature, which will be addressed further in the following section. Two-thirds of the 184 articles are theoretical

papers; and one-third of them have an empirical orientation. Most of the papers in the social justice literature are not based on any empirical evidence. Among the empirical papers, the majority of them (61,3 percent) drew upon qualitative data collection techniques while approximately one in every three articles (33,9 percent) drew upon quantitative techniques; and only three articles (4,8 percent) pursued their exploration through mixed data collection methods.

Findings from the Qualitative Content Analysis

For the qualitative content analysis, a sum total of 66 articles referring to the concept of social justice were identified in the disciplines of social work and social policy. Among these, four articles were deliberately excluded from the analysis due to two reasons. The first one was associated with the fact that two of these four excluded articles were written by one of the authors of this work; and thus the reason for objectivity to preserve integrity of the analysis was required to exclude them. Second one was associated with inaccessibility of other two articles whose credentials were observable in the TR-Dizin index page but their full-texts were not accessible. Thus, the source of information, in other words the data of the qualitative content analysis of this paper, is composed of 62 articles.

After reading these articles in detail and pursuing a method of critical reflection upon them, they were put into an evaluative process formed around five themes. Even though the primary objective of the analysis was to shed light upon how different authors make use of the concept of social justice and to unfold their conceptions regarding what social justice is as well as how it should be conceived, four additional themes were considered as crucial aspects and indispensable facets of an insightful inquiry. In this regard, we first of all pursued an investigation regarding the primary focus of these articles and questioned whether they are substantially about social justice or whether the concept of social justice is merely used by authors with the purpose of aiding their discussion on, for example, well-being, poverty, (in)equality, welfare or freedom which are conceptually and philosophically distinct subjects. Following this, the originality of the published works was questioned on the grounds of whether they provide an authentic argument, are descriptive or argumentative in nature, and just a review/summary of existing findings or discussions. Afterwards, the methodologies of the articles were evaluated by inquiring whether there is a clear methodological selection and justification that are given explicit space. Subsequently, the targeted audience of the articles was evaluated with a focus on the language of the article and the share of the references from Turkish and international literature. Finally, we explored what conception of social justice, if any, these articles inappropriate and propose.

Among these 62 articles which were subject to our qualitative content analysis, only about one-third of them were identified as having a primary focus on social justice. Although all of these articles referred to “social justice” as a concept either in their abstracts or in many instances in their keyword sections, most of them do not discuss social justice in detail. It appeared that social justice was predominantly used along with distinct concepts such as human rights, (income) equality, empowerment, human dignity, welfare or freedom (see AR43, p.626; AR22, p.1796; AR18, p.155; AR9, p.644; AR3, p.417); yet neither social justice nor any of these concepts are explained in detail despite the fact these concepts are not only distinct from each other but also involve contending meanings and competing perspectives. Among others, one of the most striking examples of such misuse of the concept of social justice is given below:

“In such a situation, what kind of path will social work follow as a profession defending basic values such as social justice, equality, freedom, human rights, dignity and dignity of individual?” (AR19, p.597)²

According to the quotation above, for example, the profession of social work defends conflicting values such as freedom and equality! In addition to this, the quotation above treats the concept of social justice as a unifying/homogenous idea, as if there are no competing and contending understandings of social justice about which an academic of social work is in fact supposed to be informed as he identifies social justice as one of the central themes of his own profession. In fact, we observe many other examples illustrating such generic use of the concept of social justice in TR-Dizin which is significantly influential on the allocation of academic positions and titles in Türkiye. In such publications, the concept of social justice is mostly used as academic jargon rather than being given a substantial attention to varied conceptual frameworks forming and guiding conflicting normative positions in the broad literature.

In line with the criticism above, it is a considerably common manner in social work publications that academics use the concept of equality inattentively along with the concept of social justice without even any explanation regarding the question of “equality of what?” (see Sen 2006, p.10-16). To illustrate this, an article (AR58) on social work in Northern Cyprus claims that “... human rights, social justice and equality principles are the three foundational principles of social work...” (p.665, 668, and 684). Here, the article does not identify what form of social justice is the

2 Referring to the articles that compose this work's data, we use a specific model of identification through which “AR” addresses “article” and “19” indicates its place in the appendix section at the end of this work.

foundational principle of social work, nor how the authors conceptualise equality such as formal equality, equality of opportunity, or equality of outcomes all of which are both conceptually and normatively conflicting proposals of equality (see Heywood, 2004, p.285-294). Thus, such a perspective of social work does not only demonstrate an unawareness of the contending principles of different social justice theories but also their insufficient engagement with the literature of equality, where there are various and distinct forms.

Among others, one of the most important findings of this work is that, in Türkiye, scholarly publications involving social justice as either a theme or a concept are mostly³ not aware of the competing and contending natures of social justice theories. This is to say that although social justice is the identifying characteristic of social work and social policy disciplines, publications in these areas tend to use the concept of social justice as a part of established academic jargon and lean to address it as a generic term which is simply perceived as the absolute egalitarianism. However, as discussed in great detail above, (1) social justice is a concept that primarily seeks to identify conditions under which inequalities are morally just and desired; and (2) theories of social justice are not unified/homogenous perspectives, *albeit* competing and contending normative views. In this regard, a very common drawback observed in most of the publications from social work and social policy disciplines in Türkiye appears as unawareness of intricate and sophisticated argumentative natures of social justice theories that move beyond absolute egalitarianism. The following quotations illustrate this drawback explicitly.

“Social justice aims to reduce social inequalities between people.” (AR64, p.140)

“The fact that social workers refer to the concept of human rights by considering social work values in their professional practices is also ensured by their advocacy roles in equality in social rights, social justice, and social welfare policies.” (AR9, p.644)

“Social justice, in its plain expression, means equal distribution of social resources and opportunities among all members of society; in other words it refers to a common consensus shared by all that there is fair distribution in society.” (AR50, p.22 quoted from Tuncay and Erbay, 2006; Sunal, 2011, p.286)

“Equal access of people to resources and opportunities as well as a balanced income distribution are important for securing social justice.” (AR31, p.145)

3 There are only a few works that involve a more advanced and nuanced perspective. They either implicitly or explicitly recognize diversity of social justice theories (e.g. AR51, AR46, AR40, AR36, AR34, AR28, and AR17). However, quantitatively speaking, these works are way much less in number, roughly saying 10 percent, *vis-à-vis* those mentioned above.

These quotations where social justice is identified with reference to equality or where social justice and equality play a complementary role for each other demonstrate that these publications involve a serious misconception regarding social justice that, in essence, primarily seeks the identification of conditions under which inequalities are just and morally desirable (see Arun, 2022, p.1019; 2023, p.764). In fact, as also put by a leading political philosopher, namely Heywood (2004, p.285), “... no serious political thinker has ever advocated absolute equality in all things”. However, such a misconception regarding social justice, or how it should be conceptualised, is a quite common drawback of the scholarly works published in journals indexed by TR-Dizin (see also AR65, AR42, AR33, AR32, AR30, AR29, AR27, AR22, AR21, AR20, AR19, AR7, AR5, AR4, and AR3).

In addition to the drawback perceiving social justice simply as equality, another commonly observed flaw in the relevant literature appears as treating the conflicting proposals of the just society as coherent normative perspectives. A striking example of such flaw is provided below:

“Social justice that is concerned with distribution of utilities and costs in a society, is now used not only to address the distributional relations, but also processes and policies shaping distributive relations. Based on the view that everyone has a right to satisfy basic needs and to live a life above certain living standards, there should be an appropriate planning aiming to create a social order that will increase social welfare and meritocracy in urban services.”
(AR26, p.111)

The quotation above is from a scholarly work published by an established TR-Dizin indexed journal about which we legitimately expect a certain level of quality standards regarding editorial and peer-review processes. However, within the quotation above, we observe three competing and contending social justice perspectives advocated by the author in two sequential sentences. These are utilitarian (e.g. “distribution of utilities” and “increasing social welfare”), Marxist (e.g. “satisfaction of needs”) and libertarian (e.g. “meritocracy”) models of social justice. These normative perspectives of social justice are not only different from each other, but their positions and claims conflict with each other too, which apparently makes it impossible to draw upon three of them simultaneously in the distributional process and policy arrangements. Thus, such a use of the concept of social justice is an explicit indicator of the publication’s insufficient engagement with the broad literature on social justice. However, the staggering issue is that such a flaw is not exceptional to the publication cited above, but also quite prevalent in other scholarly works (see also AR41, p.123; AR27, p.1798; AR23, p.250; AR16, p.934; AR12, p.860; AR6, p.206).

In addition, we also need to address one another point regarding the originality of the published works. Although almost all of the 62 articles are listed as original research articles in the journals, more than half of them are a summary, review, collection, interpretation of a theory, or an unsystematic discussion on a case study. Moreover, some of them conducted original research, yet they do not involve a clear-cut argument underpinned empirically or theoretically, which means that their analyses of the empirical data are merely constrained to descriptive discussions without any argument engaging with the extant literature. However, this does not illustrate only a problem associated with the profoundness of articles and their arguments but also rigour of the peer-review and editorial processes. This is to say that even though almost all journals in TR-Dizin have separate sections for original and review articles, neither the editors nor the reviewers have seemed to pay sufficient attention to this distinction. Moreover, among those articles that used any form of empirical data, only seven of them attempted to explain their data and methods in detail. Undoubtedly, this indicates a particular form of negligence regarding the value and significance of methodological rigour in social research as well as a lack of depth and originality of social justice research in Türkiye.

Conclusion

This work has initially been motivated to explore how social justice is understood within the existing literature of scholarly works that, one way or another, involved the keyword of social justice and were published in Türkiye. In addition, it also aimed at whether these works implicitly or explicitly recognize sophisticated and intricate natures of social justice theories primarily concerned with seeking for identification of conditions under which inequalities are morally justifiable, rather than simply and merely denote the ideal of equality. With the purpose of achieving these objectives, it firstly provided an extensive review of existing theories of social justice and explained how these theories demonstrate a common quality that justifies inequalities in outcome even though they are built upon competing and contending normative arguments. Following this, taking into such intricate natures of social justice theories that move beyond ambiguous conceptualisation of equality, it particularly focused on scholarly publications involving the keyword of “social justice” and published in the last two decades within the journals indexed by TR-Dizin Social Sciences Index. In this exploration, we followed a double-layered methodology of analysis consisting of a systematic literature review and qualitative content analysis. In the first phase of this analysis, 184 articles from 114 different journals were tabulated according to their several properties and quantitative content analysis was provided in relation to the manifest characteristics of the articles which shed light on when scholarly

interest in social justice has sparked, in which disciplines this interest has become dominant, what type of research has been followed, and so forth. In the second phase of the analysis, we focused upon the scholarly publications particularly in social work and social policy disciplines to achieve the aim of revealing how social justice is understood and how it is conceptually and normatively drawn on by scholars. The reason to constrain our qualitative analysis in the second phase with merely peer-reviewed articles published in social work and social policy disciplines was associated with the fact that social justice was both conceptually and theoretically placed at the centre of these disciplines whose foundational purposes involve serving the establishment of just society in line with redistributive economic, institutional and political arrangements. In this regard, these disciplines *vis-a-vis* others are the ones whose academics are supposed to be informed about intricate characteristics of social justice theories that do not only compete with each other but also involve contending normative arguments.

Focusing on 62 peer-reviewed articles published by academics of social work and social policy, this work addressed three major findings demonstrating serious scholarly drawbacks embedded in the literature composed by peer-reviewed articles referring to social justice in Türkiye.

Firstly, the concept of social justice in these works is mostly addressed as a generic concept to comply with the dominant academic jargon in a way where distinct concepts such as welfare, equality, freedom, human rights are arbitrarily and simultaneously employed. However, let alone that these concepts are distinct from each other, some of them also represent contending positions and incompatible policy arrangements, such as social, economic and legal regulations proposed by freedom and equality-based perspectives. In addition to such arbitrary and ambiguous use of these concepts, attaching social justice to these concepts even leads to more substantial trouble since social justice is hardly an ideal compatible with these concepts. Libertarian social justice, for example, is not intrinsically concerned with policies prioritising societal welfare in line with utilitarianism as well as some versions of the Marxist conceptualizations of the just society. Thus, such an arbitrary use of these concepts with the purpose of identifying a discipline, *viz.* social work, is not only a problem in terms of what these concepts stand for but also demonstrates an author's insufficient engagement with the existing literature in her/his own field of expertise.

Secondly, it seems that there is a common misconception leading to the use of the concept of social justice interchangeably with the concept of equality, which in fact demonstrates that social justice is simply reduced to the ideal of equality. Let alone that equality itself quite an ambiguous concept because of which diverse forms

of it (e.g. equality of outcomes, formal equality, or fair equality of opportunity) are identified in the existing literature, even the most radical principles regarding the value distribution confirm the need for an unequal distribution, such as the Marxist normative position of the value distribution. Therefore, interchangeable use of social justice and equality demonstrates both (1) being not informed what these concepts stand for as well as (2) being unaware concerning underlying normative propositions of social justice theories.

Thirdly, looking at the peer-reviewed articles published by journals indexed by TR-Dizin and referred to social justice within disciplines of social work and social policy, it seems that most of the authors of these articles have a unified/homogenous conception of social justice. However, normative proposals of social justice theories are inherently contending ones, which makes it impossible to address one unified/homogenous theory of social justice. In this regard, referring to social justice as there is only one unified/homogenous perspective is an inattentive use of the concept which illustrates an author's negligence regarding a foundational subject of her/his own field of expertise.

Lastly, we would like to speak a few words regarding the norms and processes of academic publishing in Türkiye. Along with the sharp increase in the number of universities and academics, we observed a surge in number of scholarly publications in Türkiye after 2000. Despite the increasing quantity, quality and rigour of scholarly articles and publishing practices in recent years, there are still serious shortfalls explicitly observed in academic publishing practices. Even though most of the articles we analysed seemed to satisfy certain technical qualities of academic journals, they were, kindly saying, far away from being even informed about the existing foundational perspectives of their own fields as well as basic rules of argumentation and conceptualisation merits. Considering that scholarly publication is not only valued in terms of contributing to our accumulated common knowledge but also a criterion for distributions of titles and positions of power in the academia of Türkiye, paying sufficient attention to basic scholarly qualities of submitted articles appears as a moral necessity to protect the desert of those who have gained these titles and positions in just and fair ways.

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Appendix: Articles Involved in the Qualitative Content Analysis

- AR1: Keleşoğlu, F., & Akyüz, M. (2022). Sosyal Hizmet Uygulamalarında Birey Merkezli Yaklaşım: Carl Rogers ve Rogeryan Terapi. *Üçüncü Sektör Sosyal Ekonomi Dergisi*, 57(2), 1040-1053. <https://doi.org/10.15659/3.sektor-sosyal-ekonomi.22.05.1804>
- AR2: Güldal, O. (2018). Baskı Karşıtı Sosyal Hizmet: Modern Dünya-Sistemi Açısından Eleştirel Bir Değerlendirme. *Toplum ve Sosyal Hizmet*, 29(1), 228-244.
- AR3: Selçuk, O. (2022). Yeni medya ve sosyal hizmet: Sosyal medyanın sosyal hizmet alanındaki yeri. *İmgelem*, 6(11), 413-434. <https://doi.org/10.53791/imelem.1104481>
- AR4: Işık, S., & Mert, M. (2011). İşsizlik ve Yoksulluk Sorununu Çözmeye Yönelik İstihdam/Gelir Garantisi Politikalarının Uygulanabilirliği: Antalya Örneği. *İş, Güç, Endüstri İlişkileri ve İnsan Kaynakları Dergisi*, 13(1), 51-80. <https://doi.org/10.4026/1303-2860.2011.0164.x>
- AR5: Namal, M. K., Yumurtacı, A., & Arpat, B. (2021). Non-Contributory Social Security Application for Elderly and Individuals with Disabilities': The Case Of Turkey. *Mehmet Akif Ersoy Üniversitesi İktisadi ve İdari Bilimler Fakültesi Dergisi*, 8(3), 1321-1342. <https://doi.org/10.30798/makuiibf.803737>
- AR6: Küçükakal, A. (2013). Sosyal Politika Uygulamalarında Kalkınma Ajansları: Kudaka Örneği. *Atatürk Üniversitesi İktisadi ve İdari Bilimler Dergisi*, 27(3), 205-219.
- AR7: Güzel, B. (2021). Yükseköğretimde Toplum Örgütlenmesi: Recep Tayyip Erdoğan Üniversitesi Uluslararası Öğrenci Topluluğu Örneği. *Toplum ve Sosyal Hizmet*, 32(3), 1215-1240. <https://doi.org/10.33417/tsh.755297>
- AR8: Gül, H., & Sallan Gül, S. (2007). Sosyal devletten çalışma refahına geçişte sosyal haklar ve yoksullar. *Amme İdaresi Dergisi*, 40(3), 1-30.
- AR9: Yıldırım, B., & Aslan, H. (2019). İnsan hakları ve sosyal hizmet: Ortak bir kader mümkün mü? Nasıl bir ilişki, ne çeşit bir etkileşim? *Toplum ve Sosyal Hizmet*, 30(2), 643-664.
- AR10: Öztürk, Ş. (2020). Ahlak ve Sosyal Refah İlişkisi: Güney Afrika Örneği. İnsan ve Toplum Bilimleri Araştırmaları Dergisi, 9(5), 4016-4042. <https://doi.org/10.15869/itobiad.777464>
- AR11: Zengin, M. A. (2019). Sosyal Adalet Kavramının Bazı Temel Haklar ile Ceza ve Vergi Adaletine Etkileri. *Ankara Hacı Bayram Veli Üniversitesi Hukuk Fakültesi Dergisi*, 23(4), 297-323. <https://doi.org/10.34246/ahbvuhfd.637943>
- AR12: Kirişoğlu, M., & Tekin, H. H. (2019). Sosyal Adalet Savunuculuğu Ölçeğinin (SASÖ) Doğrulamalı Faktör Analizi. *Dokuz Eylül Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi*, 21(3), 859-874. <https://doi.org/10.16953/deusosbil.502282>
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- AR15: Balkiliç, Ö. (2019). Amerikan İşletme İdeolojisinin Türkiye'ye Gelişi, Yayılışı ve Ücret Tartışmaları, 1960-1980. *Ankara Üniversitesi SBF Dergisi*, 74(4), 1297-1327. <https://doi.org/10.33630/ausbf.536436>
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