



Cultural Understandings of the Rule of Law Across Diverse Communities

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore how members of diverse communities in Tehran understand, interpret, and evaluate the rule of law in everyday social, institutional, and cultural contexts. This qualitative study was conducted using semi-structured interviews with 24 participants from Tehran, selected through purposive sampling to reflect variation in gender, age, education, occupation, and community background. Participants included legal professionals, civil servants, university students, private-sector employees, community activists, homemakers, retirees, and ordinary citizens with varied experiences of public institutions. Data were collected through face-to-face and online semi-structured interviews lasting between 45 and 75 minutes. Interview questions focused on participants' meanings of the rule of law, perceptions of fairness, institutional trust, access to justice, informal dispute resolution, and cultural expectations of authority. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached after 21 interviews, followed by three additional interviews to confirm thematic consistency. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis. NVivo software was used for coding, category development, and organization of themes. Trustworthiness was enhanced through member checking, peer debriefing, reflexive memo writing, and maximum variation sampling. Analysis produced four main categories: rule of law as fairness and equal treatment, rule of law as institutional accountability, cultural negotiation between formal law and informal norms, and legal trust shaped by lived institutional encounters. Participants rarely defined the rule of law only as obedience to written rules; instead, they connected it to dignity, predictability, non-discrimination, transparency, and practical access to justice. Many participants described a gap between legal ideals and institutional experience, particularly when bureaucratic complexity, social connections, economic resources, or cultural status appeared to influence outcomes. Informal mediation by family elders, local networks, or trusted intermediaries was viewed ambivalently: sometimes as culturally meaningful and efficient, but sometimes as a substitute for weak formal protection. The study shows that cultural understandings of the rule of law are formed through everyday encounters with institutions, social hierarchies, and community norms. Strengthening the rule of law therefore requires not only legal reform but also culturally responsive communication, transparent procedures, accessible justice mechanisms, and institutional practices that demonstrate equality before the law in ordinary life.

Keywords: rule of law; legal culture; legal consciousness; institutional trust; access to justice; cultural diversity; qualitative research

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Introduction

The rule of law is one of the most frequently invoked concepts in contemporary legal, political, and social discourse, yet it remains one of the most contested. At its simplest, the rule of law refers to the principle that public power should be exercised according to law rather than arbitrary will. Classical accounts emphasize legality, generality, publicity, predictability, equality before the law, and constraints on governmental power (Dicey, 1885; Fuller, 1964; Raz, 1977). More recent socio-legal scholarship, however, has shown that the rule of law is not merely an institutional arrangement or a technical doctrine. It is also a lived social experience shaped by citizens' cultural expectations, everyday encounters with authority, collective memories of justice and injustice, and the practical accessibility of legal institutions (Ewick & Silbey, 1998; Friedman, 1975; Tamanaha, 2004). For this reason, understanding the rule of law across diverse communities requires moving beyond formal legal definitions and examining how ordinary people interpret law in relation to fairness, dignity, trust, power, and social belonging.

The theoretical literature has long distinguished between formal and substantive conceptions of the rule of law. Formal conceptions focus on the features of legal rules and procedures: laws should be clear, public, prospective, stable, and applied by independent institutions. Raz (1977), for example, argued that the rule of law is primarily a virtue of legal systems, concerned with the capacity of law to guide conduct. Fuller (1964) similarly identified internal principles of legality, including clarity, consistency, prospectivity, and congruence between official action and declared rules. Substantive conceptions extend the concept further, linking the rule of law to democracy, human rights, social justice, equality, and protection from domination (Bingham, 2010; Krygier, 2011). Tamanaha (2004) notes that the rule of law functions as a globally attractive ideal precisely because it can carry multiple meanings across political and legal traditions. Yet this flexibility also creates ambiguity: different groups may endorse the rule of law while attaching different expectations to it.

This ambiguity becomes especially important in culturally diverse societies. Communities do not encounter law as abstract doctrine alone; they encounter it through courts, police, administrative agencies, schools, workplaces, municipalities, family networks, and media narratives. Legal culture, as Friedman (1975) explains, includes the values, attitudes, expectations, and opinions that people hold toward law and legal institutions. Legal consciousness research further demonstrates that people may experience law as distant and majestic, as a game to be strategically navigated, or as a power structure to be resisted (Ewick & Silbey, 1998). These orientations are not simply individual preferences. They are shaped by class position, education, gender, ethnicity, religious norms, migration history, generational experience, and prior encounters with institutional authority. Therefore, cultural understandings of the rule of law may vary not because communities reject legality, but because they evaluate legality through different histories of recognition, exclusion, vulnerability, or institutional dependency.

The relationship between law and culture is particularly complex in contexts where formal legal institutions coexist with informal social norms. Socio-legal scholars have used the concept of legal pluralism to describe situations in which multiple normative orders operate within the same social field (Merry, 1988; Moore, 1973). In everyday life, people may rely on state law, religious norms, family authority, professional ethics, neighborhood mediation, or customary expectations at the same time. This does not necessarily mean that formal law is absent or irrelevant. Rather, formal law is interpreted through other sources of moral authority and practical problem-solving. For example, a citizen may believe in equal treatment before law while still preferring family mediation for a marital dispute, workplace negotiation for an employment conflict, or local community intervention for a neighborhood problem. Such choices may reflect cultural values of reconciliation, privacy, respect for elders, or avoidance of public conflict. However, they may also reflect fear of bureaucracy, cost, delay, stigma, or distrust of formal institutions.

The rule of law is also closely connected to legitimacy. Tyler's (1990) procedural justice theory suggests that people are more likely to view legal authorities as legitimate when they feel they have been treated with neutrality, respect, voice, and trustworthy motives. This insight is central to understanding cultural perceptions of law because compliance and trust do not arise from punishment alone. People may obey legal rules because they believe authorities have a legitimate right to govern; conversely, they may comply outwardly while privately viewing law as selective, inaccessible, or biased. Procedural fairness therefore matters not only in courts but also in ordinary administrative encounters: obtaining permits, accessing public services, reporting complaints, dealing with police, resolving property disputes, or navigating employment regulations. When citizens experience these encounters as opaque, disrespectful, or dependent on personal connections, the cultural meaning of the rule of law becomes weakened even if legal rules formally exist.

Access to justice is another major dimension of the rule of law. Contemporary global frameworks increasingly define the rule of law in relation to inclusive institutions and equal access to justice. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 16 emphasizes peaceful and inclusive societies, accountable institutions, and access to justice for all (United Nations, n.d.). Similarly, the World Justice Project evaluates rule-of-law performance through factors such as constraints on government powers, absence of corruption, open government, fundamental rights, regulatory enforcement, civil justice, and criminal justice (World Justice Project, 2025). These frameworks highlight that the rule of law is not only a constitutional ideal but also a practical question: Can people understand their rights? Can they seek remedy without unreasonable cost or fear? Are procedures predictable? Are institutions responsive to ordinary citizens? Do social status, wealth, gender, or connections influence outcomes? Such questions are especially important in diverse urban settings where social groups may experience state institutions differently.

Tehran provides a meaningful context for examining these issues. As a large metropolitan center, Tehran contains diverse social, educational, occupational, generational, and cultural communities. Residents encounter law through multiple channels: formal legal institutions, public administration, employment systems, property relations, family law, traffic regulation, education, digital platforms, and informal community networks. In such a context, the rule of law is not understood only through constitutional language or legal education. It is interpreted through everyday questions: whether similar cases receive similar treatment, whether officials explain decisions, whether citizens can complain without fear, whether legal procedures are affordable, and whether dignity is preserved in institutional interactions. These everyday interpretations provide insight into how legal ideals are translated into social trust or skepticism.

Despite the extensive theoretical literature on the rule of law, less attention has been paid to how culturally diverse community members define and evaluate the concept in their own language of experience. Much rule-of-law scholarship remains institutional, comparative, or doctrinal, focusing on courts, constitutional design, corruption indices, or governance indicators. These approaches are valuable, but they may overlook the micro-level meanings through which people decide whether law is fair, trustworthy, or relevant to their lives. A qualitative approach can address this gap by exploring the narratives, metaphors, examples, and emotional evaluations that people use when discussing law. Semi-structured interviews are particularly suitable because they allow participants to define the rule of law in their own terms while also reflecting on concrete institutional encounters.

Accordingly, the present study investigates cultural understandings of the rule of law among diverse communities in Tehran. The study is guided by the following research questions: How do participants define the rule of law in everyday terms? What cultural values and social experiences shape these definitions? How do participants perceive the relationship between formal law, informal norms, and institutional trust? What barriers do they identify in experiencing the rule of law as fair, accessible, and equal? By addressing these questions, the study contributes to socio-legal scholarship by showing that the rule of law is

not only a legal doctrine or governance indicator, but also a culturally mediated experience of fairness, accountability, and recognition.

Methods and Materials

This study used a qualitative research design based on semi-structured interviews. A qualitative approach was selected because the aim was not to measure legal attitudes statistically but to explore how participants construct meanings, narratives, and interpretations around the rule of law. The study was informed by socio-legal perspectives on legal culture, legal consciousness, procedural justice, and legal pluralism. Thematic analysis was used as the analytic framework because it provides a flexible and systematic method for identifying patterned meanings within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The reporting of the study was guided by the principles of transparency and rigor recommended in qualitative research, including reflexivity, detailed documentation of sampling, and attention to credibility and dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tong et al., 2007).

Participants were 24 residents of Tehran who were selected through purposive maximum variation sampling. The inclusion criteria were: being at least 18 years old, residing in Tehran for at least five years, willingness to participate in an interview, and ability to discuss experiences or perceptions related to law, public institutions, justice, or community norms. Participants were selected to include diversity in gender, age, education, occupation, and social background. The sample included legal professionals, civil servants, university students, private-sector employees, community workers, homemakers, retirees, and citizens without professional legal training.

Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. Saturation was considered reached when additional interviews no longer generated substantially new codes or categories related to the research questions. In this study, saturation was reached after the 21st interview, and three additional interviews were conducted to confirm the stability and adequacy of the thematic structure. The final sample therefore consisted of 24 participants.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted in Tehran. Interviews were carried out between March and June 2026. Depending on participant preference, interviews were conducted either face-to-face in a quiet and private location or online through secure audio communication. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 75 minutes. Before each interview, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw at any stage. Verbal and written informed consent were obtained.

The interview guide included open-ended questions such as: “What does the rule of law mean to you?”, “Can you describe a situation in which you felt the law was applied fairly or unfairly?”, “How do people in your community usually resolve legal or social conflicts?”, “What makes people trust or distrust legal institutions?”, “Do cultural expectations influence how people use or avoid formal law?”, and “What changes would make the law feel more equal and accessible?” Probing questions were used to clarify meanings and encourage participants to provide examples.

All interviews were audio-recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim. Identifying information was removed from transcripts, and participants were assigned codes from P1 to P24. Field notes were written after each interview to document contextual observations, analytic reflections, and emerging concepts.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis followed six stages: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). NVivo software was used to organize transcripts, code data, retrieve coded segments, compare categories, and develop thematic maps. Coding was initially inductive, allowing categories to emerge from participants’ narratives. In later stages, emerging codes were compared with sensitizing concepts from legal culture, legal consciousness, procedural justice, and legal pluralism.

To enhance trustworthiness, several strategies were used. First, member checking was conducted with six participants, who reviewed summaries of the interpreted themes and confirmed that they reflected their experiences. Second, peer debriefing was conducted with two qualitative researchers familiar with socio-legal research. Third, reflexive memos were maintained throughout the study to identify potential researcher assumptions. Fourth, maximum variation sampling helped capture diverse perspectives rather than a single community viewpoint. Finally, an audit trail was created, including interview guides, coding decisions, memos, and theme development notes.

The study followed ethical principles for qualitative research involving human participants. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Participants were assured that their identities would remain confidential and that interview data would be used only for research purposes. Audio files and transcripts were stored securely, and all personal identifiers were removed during transcription. Participants were informed that they could decline any question or withdraw from the study without consequence. Because the topic involved perceptions of legal institutions and possible sensitive experiences, interviews were conducted respectfully, and participants were not pressured to disclose personal legal cases.

Findings

A total of 24 participants from Tehran took part in the study. The participants included 12 women and 12 men. Their ages ranged from 22 to 63 years. In terms of age distribution, 6 participants were between 20 and 29 years old, 7 were between 30 and 39, 5 were between 40 and 49, 4 were between 50 and 59, and 2 were 60 years or older. Regarding educational level, 5 participants had a high school diploma or associate degree, 8 held a bachelor's degree, 7 held a master's degree, and 4 had doctoral or professional legal education. Occupationally, the sample included 5 legal professionals, 4 civil servants, 4 university students, 4 private-sector employees, 3 community or NGO workers, 2 homemakers, and 2 retirees. This variation allowed the study to capture understandings of the rule of law from both legally trained and non-legally trained participants.

The thematic analysis produced four main categories: **rule of law as fairness and equal treatment**, **rule of law as institutional accountability**, **cultural negotiation between formal law and informal norms**, and **legal trust shaped by lived institutional encounters**.

The most dominant category was the understanding of the rule of law as fairness and equal treatment. Participants did not usually begin with technical legal definitions. Instead, they described the rule of law as a condition in which “everyone is treated the same,” “no one is above the law,” and “ordinary people are not ignored.” Equality before the law was therefore understood not only as a formal principle but as an emotional and practical expectation. Many participants associated the rule of law with the absence of discrimination based on wealth, family connections, occupation, gender, or social status. For them, the core meaning of the rule of law was not simply that laws exist, but that rules are applied consistently across persons and situations. One participant explained, “For me, rule of law means that if two people have the same problem, their result should not depend on who they know or how much money they have” (P7, female, 34). Another participant stated, “People respect law when they feel the law also respects them. If the law is only strict for weak people, then people do not call it justice” (P15, male, 46). This theme shows that participants evaluated legality through perceived equality. Written rules alone were not enough; the moral credibility of law depended on whether people believed that rules applied to both powerful and ordinary citizens.

The second category concerned institutional accountability. Participants repeatedly connected the rule of law with the idea that public officials, administrative bodies, and legal authorities should be answerable for their decisions. Accountability was described in terms of transparency, explanation, complaint mechanisms, and the possibility of correcting mistakes. Participants emphasized that legal authority should not be exercised silently or personally. Rather, citizens should know why a decision has

been made, what rule supports it, and how it can be challenged. Several participants described bureaucratic encounters in which unclear procedures created feelings of helplessness. A civil servant noted, “Sometimes the problem is not the law itself. The problem is that the citizen does not know who decided, why they decided, and where to object” (P3, male, 39). A university student similarly said, “When an office gives you an answer without explanation, you feel the person behind the desk is stronger than the law” (P11, female, 23). Participants viewed accountability as a protection against arbitrariness. In their narratives, the rule of law required institutions to justify their decisions in accessible language and to provide realistic channels for appeal. Without accountability, legal procedures were seen as formal but not trustworthy.

The third category reflected the cultural negotiation between formal law and informal norms. Participants explained that many conflicts in family, neighborhood, workplace, and community life are first addressed through informal mechanisms such as mediation by elders, respected relatives, local figures, managers, or trusted intermediaries. These mechanisms were not necessarily perceived as anti-legal. In many cases, participants viewed them as culturally appropriate, faster, less expensive, and less damaging to relationships. For example, one participant said, “In our culture, people often try to solve the issue inside the family first. Going to court is seen as the last step, especially when relationships are involved” (P18, female, 52). However, participants also recognized risks in informal dispute resolution. Some argued that informal norms may silence vulnerable people, especially women, younger family members, workers, tenants, or people with fewer resources. A community worker explained, “Mediation is good when both sides have equal voice. But sometimes culture tells the weaker person to be patient, to forgive, to stay silent. That is not justice” (P9, female, 41). This category demonstrates that cultural understandings of the rule of law are not based on a simple opposition between law and tradition. Participants often valued reconciliation and social harmony, but they also wanted formal legal protection when informal arrangements became unequal or coercive.

The fourth category showed that trust in the rule of law was shaped by lived encounters with institutions. Participants’ understandings were strongly influenced by personal or family experiences with courts, municipalities, police, employment offices, universities, banks, and administrative agencies. Positive experiences involved respectful treatment, clear guidance, predictable procedures, and timely responses. Negative experiences involved delay, confusion, lack of information, perceived favoritism, or fear that complaints would not be taken seriously. A retired participant said, “My opinion about law is made from small experiences. When I go to an office and they guide me clearly, I feel there is order. When every room sends me to another room, I feel law is only on paper” (P22, male, 63). Another participant explained, “People do not lose trust suddenly. They lose it after many small moments when they feel nobody listens” (P5, female, 37). This theme indicates that the rule of law is experienced cumulatively. Even when participants endorsed the ideal of legality, repeated negative institutional encounters weakened their confidence that law could provide equal and meaningful protection. Conversely, respectful and transparent interactions strengthened the belief that law could function as a shared public standard.

Discussion

The present study explored cultural understandings of the rule of law among diverse community members in Tehran. The findings indicate that participants understood the rule of law less as an abstract legal doctrine and more as a lived expectation of fairness, accountability, protection, and dignity. Four main categories emerged: rule of law as fairness and equal treatment, rule of law as institutional accountability, cultural negotiation between formal law and informal norms, and legal trust shaped by lived institutional encounters. These findings suggest that the social meaning of the rule of law is constructed through the interaction between legal institutions and cultural experience. Participants did not reject the importance of formal law; rather, they evaluated law according to whether it could produce equal treatment, transparent decision-making, and practical access to remedy in everyday life.

The first finding, rule of law as fairness and equal treatment, aligns with classical and contemporary theories emphasizing equality before the law as a core component of legality. Dicey's (1885) traditional account placed equality before ordinary law at the center of the rule-of-law ideal, while later theorists emphasized generality, clarity, and non-arbitrary application (Fuller, 1964; Raz, 1977). However, the present findings extend these legal-theoretical discussions by showing how ordinary citizens translate equality into concrete social expectations. Participants associated the rule of law with whether wealth, personal connections, occupational status, or social position influence outcomes. This supports Tamanaha's (2004) argument that the rule of law is not a single fixed formula but a family of ideas that becomes meaningful within specific social and political contexts. For participants, equality was not only a legal principle; it was a measure of whether law recognizes people as equally worthy. This finding also resonates with Bingham's (2010) substantive account of the rule of law, which links legality with human dignity, fairness, and protection against arbitrary power.

The second finding, rule of law as institutional accountability, shows that participants viewed transparent explanation and answerability as essential to lawful governance. This finding is consistent with rule-of-law frameworks that emphasize constraints on authority, open government, and access to mechanisms of review (World Justice Project, 2025). Participants' narratives suggested that arbitrariness is experienced not only when officials violate law, but also when decisions are unexplained, procedures are unclear, or appeal pathways are inaccessible. In this sense, accountability has both formal and communicative dimensions. Institutions must not only follow rules internally; they must also make decisions intelligible to citizens. This finding supports Krygier's (2011) view that the rule of law is valuable because it reduces the possibility of arbitrary power and makes power more controlled, predictable, and accountable. In culturally diverse settings, this communicative dimension becomes particularly important because citizens may differ in legal literacy, bureaucratic familiarity, and confidence in approaching institutions.

The third finding, cultural negotiation between formal law and informal norms, is strongly aligned with socio-legal research on legal pluralism. Participants described law as operating alongside family authority, neighborhood mediation, workplace hierarchy, religious or moral expectations, and community-based forms of reconciliation. This supports Merry's (1988) argument that legal pluralism exists when multiple normative orders shape social behavior within the same social space. Moore's (1973) concept of the semi-autonomous social field is also relevant: families, workplaces, and communities generate their own rules and sanctions while remaining connected to state law. The present findings show that participants did not necessarily see informal norms as opposed to the rule of law. In many cases, informal mediation was valued for preserving relationships, reducing cost, and preventing escalation. However, participants also recognized that informal mechanisms may reproduce inequality when weaker parties are pressured into silence. This ambivalence is important because it shows that strengthening the rule of law does not require dismissing culture, but it does require ensuring that cultural practices do not override basic rights, voice, and equal protection.

The fourth finding, legal trust shaped by lived institutional encounters, is consistent with legal consciousness and procedural justice scholarship. Ewick and Silbey (1998) argue that law is experienced in everyday life through narratives and social practices, not merely through formal institutions. Participants in the present study similarly described their understanding of the rule of law through ordinary encounters with offices, courts, police, municipalities, universities, and service agencies. Tyler's (1990) procedural justice theory provides a strong explanation for this finding. According to Tyler, people are more likely to view law as legitimate when authorities treat them with respect, neutrality, voice, and trustworthy motives. The participants' narratives reflected these dimensions clearly. Respectful treatment and clear guidance increased trust, while delay, confusion, and perceived favoritism weakened it. This indicates that institutional legitimacy is built cumulatively through

repeated micro-level interactions. The rule of law is therefore not only maintained by courts and legislation but also by the everyday behavior of frontline officials.

A broader interpretation of the findings is that cultural understandings of the rule of law combine normative, practical, and emotional dimensions. Normatively, participants valued equality, fairness, and accountability. Practically, they wanted accessible procedures, clear information, and effective complaint channels. Emotionally, they associated the rule of law with dignity, being heard, and not feeling powerless before institutions. This multi-dimensional understanding is consistent with Friedman's (1975) concept of legal culture, which emphasizes public attitudes, expectations, and values toward law. The findings also suggest that legal culture should not be understood as a static set of traditional beliefs. Rather, legal culture is dynamic and shaped through ongoing interaction between citizens and institutions. When institutions act transparently and respectfully, they can strengthen legal trust. When institutions appear opaque or selective, they may reinforce informal avoidance strategies and skepticism toward formal law.

The study also has implications for access to justice. Participants' accounts suggest that access to justice is not limited to physical access to courts or formal legal rights. It includes legal information, affordability, procedural simplicity, emotional safety, and confidence that complaints will be treated seriously. This interpretation is consistent with global approaches that link the rule of law with equal access to justice and accountable institutions (United Nations, n.d.; World Justice Project, 2025). In the present study, participants often described barriers in ordinary administrative and social contexts rather than only in courtroom settings. This suggests that rule-of-law reform should not be limited to judicial institutions. Administrative agencies, public service offices, municipalities, police stations, universities, and workplace dispute systems all shape citizens' legal consciousness. Improving the rule of law therefore requires attention to the full ecology of institutional contact.

Another important point is the role of diversity within a single urban context. Tehran is not culturally uniform; it includes differences in education, occupation, gender, class, generation, and community background. The findings suggest that people with greater legal literacy or institutional familiarity may be more able to navigate formal procedures, while others may rely more heavily on informal networks. This does not mean that informal reliance reflects cultural backwardness or lack of legal awareness. Rather, it often reflects rational adaptation to perceived institutional complexity, cost, or uncertainty. Legal empowerment efforts should therefore avoid blaming citizens for using informal mechanisms and instead ask why formal systems may feel distant, risky, or inaccessible. A culturally responsive rule-of-law approach should build bridges between formal institutions and community-based forms of trust while protecting individuals from coercive or unequal informal pressures.

Overall, the findings contribute to socio-legal literature by demonstrating that the rule of law is culturally interpreted through lived experience. Participants valued law when it appeared fair, explainable, accessible, and protective. They questioned law when it appeared selective, bureaucratic, expensive, or dependent on social power. These findings support the argument that the rule of law cannot be reduced to legal texts, institutional design, or international indicators. Such frameworks are essential, but their social legitimacy depends on whether people experience legality as meaningful in daily life. In diverse communities, the challenge is not simply to teach citizens the meaning of the rule of law, but to ensure that institutions enact the rule of law in ways that citizens can see, understand, and trust.

This study has several limitations. First, the sample was limited to 24 participants from Tehran, and the findings may not represent the experiences of people in rural areas, smaller cities, or other national contexts. Second, although maximum variation sampling was used, the study did not focus on one specific ethnic, religious, migrant, or socioeconomic group in depth. Future research may produce more nuanced findings by focusing on particular communities. Third, the data were based on self-reported perceptions and narratives, which may be influenced by memory, personal experience, or social desirability.

Fourth, because interviews addressed potentially sensitive views about institutions and law, some participants may have avoided discussing specific experiences in detail. Finally, the study explored cultural understandings of the rule of law qualitatively and did not measure the prevalence of these attitudes across the wider population.

Future studies should examine cultural understandings of the rule of law in different regions and compare urban, rural, and peri-urban communities. Comparative qualitative research could explore how gender, class, ethnicity, age, migration background, and legal literacy shape perceptions of fairness and institutional trust. Future research may also focus on specific institutional encounters, such as courts, police, municipalities, labor offices, universities, or family-law settings. Mixed-methods studies could develop survey instruments based on the themes identified in this study and test them with larger samples. Longitudinal research would also be valuable for examining how major legal reforms, public events, digital legal services, or civic education programs change people's legal consciousness over time.

Practical efforts to strengthen the rule of law should focus on making legal and administrative procedures more transparent, understandable, and accessible. Public institutions should provide clear explanations for decisions, user-friendly complaint mechanisms, respectful frontline communication, and accessible legal information for citizens with different educational backgrounds. Community-based legal education programs can help people understand their rights while also recognizing the cultural importance of mediation, family negotiation, and social harmony. However, informal dispute resolution should be accompanied by safeguards to ensure that vulnerable individuals are not pressured into silence. Legal institutions should also invest in training officials in procedural fairness, cultural sensitivity, and respectful communication, because everyday encounters with institutions play a central role in building or weakening public trust in the rule of law.

Conclusion

This study examined how diverse community members in Tehran understand the rule of law in everyday cultural and institutional contexts. The findings show that participants interpreted the rule of law primarily through fairness, equality, accountability, cultural negotiation, and lived institutional experience. Rather than defining the rule of law only as obedience to written legislation, participants connected it to the practical question of whether ordinary people can expect equal treatment, transparent procedures, respectful communication, and meaningful access to remedy. The study also revealed that formal law coexists with informal norms and community-based mechanisms of dispute resolution. These informal practices may support social harmony, but they may also reproduce inequality when vulnerable individuals lack voice or protection.

The study contributes to socio-legal scholarship by emphasizing the cultural and experiential dimensions of the rule of law. Legal systems may formally contain rules, institutions, and procedures, but the public meaning of legality depends on how people encounter those systems in daily life. Strengthening the rule of law therefore requires more than legal reform; it requires institutional behavior that demonstrates fairness, accountability, and respect in ordinary interactions. A culturally responsive approach should recognize community values while ensuring that dignity, equality, and access to justice remain protected for all members of society.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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