



The Cultural Dimensions of Transitional Justice: Community Perceptions and Legal Meaning

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore how community members and legal stakeholders in Tehran understand transitional justice, cultural memory, accountability, reconciliation, and the social meaning of law in relation to collective harm and institutional repair. This qualitative study was conducted using semi-structured interviews with 24 participants selected through purposive and snowball sampling in Tehran. Participants included community members, lawyers, civil society actors, and university-based legal and social science experts with knowledge or experience related to justice, rights, social conflict, institutional trust, or community mediation. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached; saturation occurred after the twenty-first interview, followed by three additional interviews to confirm the stability of the emerging categories. Interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and were audio-recorded with informed consent. The data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed through inductive thematic analysis. NVivo software was used to organize transcripts, code meaning units, compare categories, and retrieve representative excerpts. Credibility was enhanced through member checking, peer review, reflexive memo-writing, and maintaining an audit trail. Analysis generated four main categories: culturally embedded meanings of justice, memory and silence in community reconciliation, legal mistrust and the demand for institutional recognition, and restorative repair beyond formal punishment. Participants did not define transitional justice only through courts, punishment, or legal procedure; rather, they interpreted justice through dignity, public acknowledgment, cultural respect, social healing, and restoration of damaged relationships. While some participants emphasized legal accountability, others argued that justice would remain incomplete without truth-telling, symbolic recognition, reparative measures, and culturally meaningful forms of community participation. The findings suggest that transitional justice gains legitimacy when formal legal mechanisms are culturally intelligible, participatory, and responsive to community memories of harm. In the Tehran context, legal meaning was shaped by the interaction between institutional expectations and culturally grounded ideas of honor, dignity, forgiveness, social trust, and collective memory.

Keywords: Transitional justice; cultural meaning; community perceptions; legal consciousness; reconciliation; restorative justice

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Introduction

Transitional justice refers to the range of judicial and non-judicial measures through which societies respond to legacies of large-scale human rights violations, political violence, authoritarian governance, armed conflict, or institutionalized injustice. The concept has become a central field of inquiry within international law, socio-legal studies, peacebuilding, and human rights scholarship. The United Nations defines transitional justice as a set of processes and mechanisms associated with a society's attempt to come to terms with past abuses in order to ensure accountability, serve justice, and achieve reconciliation (United Nations Secretary-General, 2004). These mechanisms may include criminal trials, truth commissions, reparations, institutional reform, vetting, memorialization, public apology, and guarantees of non-recurrence. However, although transitional justice has often been described through formal legal instruments, its social effectiveness depends heavily on how affected communities interpret justice, wrongdoing, repair, memory, and legitimacy.

Classical accounts of transitional justice emphasize the legal and institutional dilemmas faced by societies emerging from violence or repression. Teitel (2000) describes transitional justice as a distinctive form of justice associated with periods of political change, where the law becomes a medium through which societies negotiate the relationship between past wrongs and future legitimacy. In this view, law does not merely punish; it constructs political meaning, publicly defines responsibility, and helps societies distinguish between former injustice and a new normative order. Hayner (2011), in her comparative work on truth commissions, similarly shows that truth-seeking institutions often serve multiple functions: documenting violations, recognizing victims, recommending reforms, and creating an official narrative of past abuse. Yet these functions are never purely technical. They involve moral, cultural, and symbolic dimensions because communities do not experience harm only as legal injury; they experience it as humiliation, exclusion, fear, silence, mistrust, and rupture in social relations.

The cultural dimensions of transitional justice have therefore become increasingly important in contemporary scholarship. Transitional justice mechanisms are frequently designed in legalistic, state-centered, and internationally standardized forms. However, communities often interpret justice through local moral vocabularies, religious narratives, family obligations, customary practices, collective memory, and everyday experiences of state authority. Merry's (2006) work on the translation of international law into local justice demonstrates that universal legal norms gain practical meaning only when they are translated into culturally intelligible forms. This insight is highly relevant to transitional justice because terms such as accountability, reconciliation, truth, victimhood, forgiveness, and reparation do not carry identical meanings across cultural contexts. What international institutions may describe as "truth-telling," for example, may be perceived by some communities as healing, by others as exposure, shame, danger, or political performance.

Several empirical studies have shown that transitional justice may fail when it assumes that formal legal categories automatically correspond to community understandings of harm and repair. Shaw's (2005) research on Sierra Leone demonstrated that some local communities did not necessarily view public testimony and truth-telling as therapeutic. In some contexts, social healing was connected less to public verbal disclosure and more to practices of reintegration, silence, ritual, and the restoration of everyday coexistence. Kelsall (2005) similarly argued that truth commissions can become culturally complex arenas in which official expectations about truth and local practices of speech, respect, and social survival do not always align. These findings challenge the assumption that transitional justice mechanisms are universally meaningful simply because they follow international legal standards. Instead, they suggest that transitional justice must be analyzed as a culturally mediated process.

The relationship between transitional justice and culture also raises questions about legal consciousness. Legal consciousness refers to the ways people understand, use, avoid, respect, distrust, or resist law in everyday life. Ewick and Silbey

(1998) argue that legality is not confined to courts and statutes but is produced through ordinary narratives, social practices, and perceptions of authority. This perspective is useful for studying transitional justice because communities may evaluate justice mechanisms not only by their formal legality but also by their perceived fairness, accessibility, dignity, and responsiveness. A court may be legally valid but socially distant; a truth commission may be institutionally legitimate but culturally unintelligible; a reparation program may be administratively correct but morally insufficient. Therefore, community perceptions are not peripheral to transitional justice. They are central to whether transitional justice is experienced as meaningful justice or as another form of institutional speech.

The problem of legalism has been widely discussed in critical transitional justice scholarship. McEvoy (2007) argues that transitional justice has often been dominated by legalism, meaning an excessive reliance on formal law, legal experts, and institutional procedures at the expense of broader social, cultural, and political understandings of justice. Legalism can provide clarity, due process, and accountability, but it may also narrow the meaning of justice to trials, evidence, guilt, and punishment. Nagy (2008) similarly warns that transitional justice can become a global project that reproduces external assumptions about what societies need after violence or repression. When this occurs, local communities may become objects of intervention rather than participants in defining justice. A culturally grounded approach does not reject formal law; rather, it asks how legal mechanisms can be made responsive to the meanings, fears, memories, and expectations of affected communities.

Reconciliation is one of the most contested concepts in transitional justice. For some, reconciliation means coexistence after violence; for others, it means forgiveness, truth, punishment, apology, institutional reform, or the restoration of trust. Minow (1998) argues that societies confronting atrocity must navigate between vengeance and forgiveness, neither of which alone can fully resolve the moral burden of past wrongs. Lederach (1997) understands reconciliation as a process rooted in relationships, requiring truth, mercy, justice, and peace to be held in creative tension. These perspectives reveal that reconciliation cannot be imposed by law alone. It requires a social process through which people come to believe that their suffering has been recognized, that perpetrators or institutions have been held accountable, and that the future will not reproduce the harms of the past.

Community participation is therefore essential. Lundy and McGovern (2008) argue for a “bottom-up” approach to transitional justice, emphasizing that affected communities must help define priorities, procedures, and outcomes. Participation matters not only because it improves institutional design but also because it transforms the symbolic meaning of justice. When communities are excluded, transitional justice may appear as an elite, state-led, or internationally sponsored process. When communities are involved, justice becomes more likely to reflect lived experience. This is especially significant in societies where public trust in formal institutions is fragile or where people have historically experienced law as selective, distant, or politicized.

The cultural meaning of transitional justice is particularly important in urban contexts such as Tehran, where legal consciousness is shaped by a complex interaction of formal law, religious and moral norms, family structures, educational background, political history, and everyday institutional encounters. Tehran is not examined here as a post-conflict setting in the conventional sense, but as a dense socio-legal environment in which community members and legal stakeholders can articulate how transitional justice concepts are understood, accepted, questioned, or culturally translated. In such a context, concepts such as accountability, public apology, social healing, victim recognition, and institutional reform may carry meanings that differ from those assumed in dominant international models. Studying these perceptions can contribute to a broader understanding of how transitional justice travels across cultural and legal settings.

Despite the expansion of transitional justice scholarship, important gaps remain. First, many studies focus on institutional mechanisms while giving less attention to how ordinary people interpret the moral and cultural meaning of those mechanisms.

Second, much of the literature examines transitional justice in societies with formally recognized transitions, while fewer studies explore how transitional justice is understood in non-transitional or indirectly transitional contexts. Third, the relationship between cultural values and legal meaning remains underdeveloped, particularly in Middle Eastern urban settings. This study addresses these gaps by exploring how participants in Tehran perceive the cultural dimensions of transitional justice and how they define meaningful legal response to collective harm.

Accordingly, this study asks: How do community members and legal stakeholders in Tehran understand transitional justice? What cultural meanings do they attach to accountability, truth, reconciliation, reparations, and institutional recognition? How do they interpret the relationship between formal legal mechanisms and community-based expectations of dignity, memory, and repair? By answering these questions, the study aims to contribute to socio-legal and transitional justice scholarship by showing that justice is not only a legal outcome but also a cultural process through which communities interpret harm, responsibility, belonging, and the possibility of social repair.

Methods and Materials

This study used a qualitative research design to explore the cultural dimensions of transitional justice and the legal meanings attributed to justice, accountability, reconciliation, and social repair by participants in Tehran. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the purpose of the study was not to measure attitudes statistically but to understand how participants constructed meaning around complex socio-legal concepts. Qualitative inquiry is particularly suitable for research questions concerned with lived experience, interpretation, cultural meaning, institutional trust, and social perception. The study was informed by an interpretivist paradigm, assuming that legal meaning is produced through interaction between formal institutions, cultural narratives, personal experience, and collective memory.

Participants consisted of 24 individuals from Tehran. Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants who could provide rich information about justice, rights, institutional response, community life, or legal meaning. Snowball sampling was also used after initial interviews, as several participants introduced individuals with relevant experience or knowledge. The sample included 10 community members, 6 legal professionals, 4 civil society actors, and 4 university-based experts in law, sociology, political science, or human rights-related fields. Inclusion criteria were residence in Tehran, age above 18 years, willingness to participate, ability to communicate in Persian, and familiarity with or interest in issues of justice, rights, collective harm, reconciliation, or institutional reform. Exclusion criteria included unwillingness to provide informed consent, inability to complete the interview, or direct involvement in any situation that could place the participant at emotional or legal risk during the interview process.

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews. The interview guide included open-ended questions designed to encourage reflection on transitional justice concepts without imposing technical legal definitions. Questions included: “When you hear the term transitional justice, what does it mean to you?” “What makes a legal response to past harm meaningful for a community?” “How should society balance punishment, forgiveness, truth, and reconciliation?” “What role should culture, religion, family, or community values play in justice processes?” “What kinds of institutional responses increase or reduce public trust?” Follow-up questions were used to clarify meanings, explore examples, and deepen participants’ accounts. Interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and were conducted in Persian in private and secure settings chosen by participants. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim.

Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached. Saturation was considered achieved when additional interviews no longer produced substantially new codes or conceptual insights. In this study, saturation occurred after the twenty-first interview. Three further interviews were conducted to confirm the stability and adequacy of the emerging categories. This

approach allowed the research team to refine the coding structure and verify that the main categories were sufficiently grounded in the data.

Data analysis was conducted using inductive thematic analysis following the general procedures proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The researchers first read the transcripts repeatedly to become familiar with the data. Initial codes were then generated line by line, focusing on expressions related to justice, legal trust, cultural norms, memory, silence, reconciliation, accountability, and repair. Codes were then compared across transcripts and grouped into broader categories. NVivo software was used to organize transcripts, manage codes, retrieve excerpts, and compare patterns across participant groups. The analysis moved from descriptive coding to interpretive theme development, with attention to both semantic meanings and underlying cultural assumptions. Reflexive memos were written throughout the analytic process to record decisions, emerging interpretations, and potential researcher assumptions.

Trustworthiness was enhanced through several strategies based on Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria. Credibility was supported through member checking with selected participants, peer debriefing among the research team, and the use of direct interview excerpts. Transferability was addressed by providing detailed contextual information about the participants and research setting. Dependability was strengthened through an audit trail documenting recruitment, interview procedures, coding decisions, and theme development. Confirmability was supported through reflexive memo-writing and repeated comparison between interpretations and original transcripts. Ethical considerations included informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymization of participant identities, secure storage of audio files and transcripts, and participants' right to withdraw from the study at any stage.

Findings

The demographic characteristics of the 24 participants showed variation in gender, age, education, and social role. Thirteen participants were women (54.2%) and 11 were men (45.8%). Participants ranged in age from 25 to 61 years. Seven participants were between 25 and 34 years old (29.2%), 8 were between 35 and 44 years old (33.3%), 6 were between 45 and 54 years old (25.0%), and 3 were 55 years old or older (12.5%). Regarding education, 4 participants held a bachelor's degree (16.7%), 11 held a master's degree (45.8%), and 9 held a doctoral or professional legal degree (37.5%). In terms of social role, 10 participants were community members (41.7%), 6 were legal professionals (25.0%), 4 were civil society actors (16.7%), and 4 were university-based experts (16.7%). This variation allowed the study to capture both everyday and professional understandings of transitional justice.

Culturally embedded meanings of justice. The first main category showed that participants understood justice not only as legal punishment but also as the restoration of dignity, honor, social balance, and moral recognition. Many participants argued that a justice process becomes meaningful when it speaks in a language that people can culturally recognize. Legal vocabulary such as "accountability" or "reparation" was often interpreted through familiar concepts such as respect, shame, family reputation, moral responsibility, and public acknowledgment. Several participants explained that a formal judgment may be necessary but insufficient if the harmed community continues to feel ignored or humiliated. One community participant stated, "For people, justice is not only that someone is punished. Justice is when the pain is seen and when the person who suffered feels that society has not forgotten them" (P7, female, community member). A legal professional similarly explained, "The law has its own language, but people have another language. If the legal response does not translate into dignity, people may say the case is closed, but the wound is still open" (P12, male, lawyer). This category suggests that transitional justice in community perception is culturally mediated. Participants did not reject formal legal mechanisms, but they emphasized that law should connect with moral and cultural understandings of harm.

Memory, silence, and reconciliation. The second main category concerned the tension between remembering and remaining silent. Participants described memory as necessary for justice because communities need acknowledgment of what happened. However, they also viewed public remembering as potentially painful, divisive, or risky if it is not handled respectfully. Some participants believed that silence can protect social coexistence, especially where direct confrontation may produce conflict within families or neighborhoods. Others argued that silence reproduces injustice by preventing victims from being heard. One civil society participant stated, “Sometimes people say forget the past because they want peace, but forgetting is different from healing. If silence is forced, it becomes another injustice” (P18, female, civil society actor). Another participant offered a more cautious view: “In our culture, speaking publicly about some harms can bring shame to the family. So truth-telling must be careful. It should not turn victims into people who are exposed again” (P4, male, community member). This category indicates that reconciliation was not perceived as simple forgiveness. Rather, participants described reconciliation as a culturally sensitive process requiring careful management of truth, privacy, shame, and public recognition. Many participants preferred guided, respectful, and community-aware truth processes over unrestricted public disclosure.

Legal mistrust and the demand for institutional recognition. The third main category revealed that participants’ perceptions of transitional justice were strongly shaped by their level of trust in formal institutions. Several participants distinguished between “law as written” and “law as experienced.” They argued that legal mechanisms become credible only when institutions recognize harm transparently, treat people equally, and communicate decisions in ways that communities can understand. Participants repeatedly used terms such as “trust,” “recognition,” “voice,” and “being taken seriously.” For many, transitional justice required institutional humility: the willingness of authorities to acknowledge failure, listen to communities, and accept responsibility. One university expert noted, “People do not only ask whether the law exists. They ask whether the law hears them. If institutions deny pain, then even a legal procedure may be interpreted as performance” (P21, female, academic). A legal professional added, “Recognition is a legal act but also a cultural act. When an institution admits that people were harmed, it changes the meaning of the relationship between citizens and law” (P15, male, legal consultant). This category shows that legal meaning is relational. Participants evaluated justice not only through outcomes but through the quality of institutional engagement, transparency, and public acknowledgment.

Restorative repair beyond formal punishment. The fourth main category showed that participants viewed punishment as only one dimension of justice. While many participants supported accountability for serious wrongdoing, they emphasized that punishment alone could not repair damaged lives, restore trust, or rebuild community relations. Reparations, apology, guarantees of non-repetition, educational reform, memorialization, and psychosocial support were frequently mentioned as necessary components of meaningful transitional justice. Participants also emphasized symbolic forms of repair, such as public acknowledgment ceremonies, memorial spaces, and official statements that validate victims’ experiences. One participant stated, “If someone is punished but the victim remains alone, poor, ashamed, or forgotten, then what kind of justice is this? Justice must return something to life” (P9, female, community member). Another participant explained, “Reparation is not only money. Sometimes people need an apology, a document, a memorial, or a promise that the same thing will not happen to their children” (P20, male, civil society actor). This category indicates that participants interpreted transitional justice through a restorative lens, where legal accountability must be combined with material, symbolic, and social repair.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that transitional justice is understood by participants in Tehran as a culturally embedded process rather than a purely legal or institutional mechanism. Across interviews, participants emphasized dignity, recognition, memory, trust, and repair as central components of meaningful justice. This finding is consistent with socio-legal scholarship arguing that law gains meaning through everyday cultural interpretation rather than through formal validity alone.

Ewick and Silbey (1998) show that people encounter law as a social and cultural phenomenon, not merely as an abstract system of rules. Similarly, Merry (2006) argues that international legal norms must be translated into local moral worlds if they are to become socially meaningful. The present study supports this argument by showing that participants interpreted transitional justice through culturally familiar concepts such as respect, shame, honor, public acknowledgment, family dignity, and moral responsibility. These concepts did not replace formal law; rather, they shaped the conditions under which formal law could be perceived as legitimate. Therefore, the first major implication is that transitional justice mechanisms must be culturally intelligible. Courts, truth commissions, reparations programs, and institutional reforms may fail to produce public legitimacy if they communicate only through technical legal language and ignore the moral vocabulary through which communities understand suffering and repair.

The first main category, culturally embedded meanings of justice, aligns with critical approaches that challenge overly legalistic models of transitional justice. McEvoy (2007) argues that the field has often been dominated by legalism, privileging formal procedures and expert-driven institutions over broader social understandings of justice. The participants in this study did not deny the importance of punishment or legal accountability, but they repeatedly argued that justice must also restore dignity and acknowledge pain. This supports Minow's (1998) argument that societies confronting past harm must move beyond the simple opposition between vengeance and forgiveness. Justice is not reducible to punishment, nor can reconciliation be achieved through forgetting. Rather, meaningful justice requires a public moral response that communicates recognition to victims and responsibility to the wider society. The findings also support de Greiff's (2006) emphasis on reparations and recognition as essential to transitional justice. For participants, legal judgment without social recognition was perceived as incomplete. This suggests that transitional justice programs should be designed not only to determine legal responsibility but also to communicate moral acknowledgment in culturally resonant forms.

The second main category, memory, silence, and reconciliation, reveals one of the central tensions in transitional justice: the relationship between truth-telling and social healing. Dominant transitional justice models often assume that public truth-telling contributes to healing, accountability, and reconciliation. Hayner (2011) shows that truth commissions can provide official acknowledgment and create a public record of abuse. However, empirical studies have also complicated this assumption. Shaw's (2005) work on Sierra Leone demonstrated that some communities preferred forms of social recovery based on reintegration and "forgive and forget" practices rather than public verbal disclosure. Kelsall (2005) similarly showed that truth commission hearings may interact unpredictably with local norms of speech, ritual, and social order. The present findings echo these complexities. Participants in Tehran did not reject truth, but they questioned the assumption that all truth must be public, immediate, or confrontational. Some participants viewed silence as potentially protective when disclosure could produce shame, retaliation, or renewed conflict. Others viewed silence as harmful when imposed by power or fear. This suggests that transitional justice should distinguish between chosen silence, protective privacy, and coerced silencing. A culturally sensitive approach to truth-telling must protect victims from re-exposure while also preventing institutional denial.

The third main category, legal mistrust and the demand for institutional recognition, highlights the importance of trust in transitional justice. Participants' accounts showed that legal meaning is shaped by the perceived relationship between citizens and institutions. This finding aligns with Teitel's (2000) argument that transitional justice is connected to the reconstruction of legality during periods of political and moral change. Law in transitional contexts does not merely apply rules; it helps redefine the relationship between state authority and public legitimacy. When institutions acknowledge wrongdoing, listen to affected communities, and provide transparent responses, law may acquire a reparative function. When institutions deny harm or communicate defensively, legal procedures may be interpreted as symbolic performance. This finding also corresponds with Lundy and McGovern's (2008) bottom-up approach, which emphasizes that transitional justice must involve affected

communities in defining priorities and evaluating outcomes. In the present study, participants repeatedly linked justice with “being heard.” This indicates that participation is not only a procedural requirement but also a form of recognition. A justice process that excludes community voices may reproduce the same hierarchy that transitional justice is supposed to overcome.

The fourth main category, restorative repair beyond formal punishment, supports the view that transitional justice requires a comprehensive response to harm. Criminal accountability may be necessary, particularly for serious violations, but it cannot alone address the social, emotional, economic, and symbolic consequences of collective harm. Stover and Weinstein (2004) argue that justice after mass atrocity must be understood in relation to community life and social reconstruction. Lederach (1997) similarly emphasizes that reconciliation requires attention to relationships, truth, mercy, justice, and peace. The participants in this study viewed reparations, apology, memorialization, institutional reform, and guarantees of non-repetition as essential elements of justice. These findings are consistent with the United Nations Secretary-General’s (2004) broad understanding of transitional justice, which includes both judicial and non-judicial mechanisms. They also align with Nagy’s (2008) critique of transitional justice as a global project, because participants emphasized locally meaningful forms of repair rather than standardized institutional models. In practical terms, this means that transitional justice initiatives should integrate legal accountability with reparative policies, psychosocial support, symbolic acknowledgment, and culturally appropriate memorial practices.

A broader interpretation of the findings suggests that transitional justice should be understood as a process of legal meaning-making. Participants did not evaluate transitional justice only by asking whether a formal mechanism exists. They asked whether justice is visible, respectful, truthful, and capable of changing the relationship between people and institutions. This supports the argument that law has symbolic and cultural dimensions. A legal response can punish but still fail to heal; it can recognize rights but still fail to communicate dignity; it can produce documentation but still fail to generate trust. Therefore, the cultural dimension of transitional justice is not an optional addition to legal design. It is central to legitimacy. Transitional justice programs that ignore cultural meaning may be formally correct but socially weak. Conversely, culturally grounded justice can strengthen public trust when it combines accountability with recognition, participation, and repair.

The Tehran context adds further complexity to the discussion. Participants’ perceptions reflected an urban environment in which formal legal knowledge, cultural values, religious and moral norms, family reputation, and institutional experience intersect. This suggests that transitional justice concepts can be studied beyond conventional post-conflict settings. Even in contexts without an official transitional justice process, people hold rich understandings of how societies should address past harm, institutional wrongdoing, public memory, and social repair. These perceptions matter because they reveal the cultural preconditions for any future justice-oriented reform. If transitional justice is ever to be implemented meaningfully in a given society, it must be designed with attention to the moral and cultural frameworks through which people already understand justice.

The findings also contribute to debates about universalism and localism in transitional justice. Universal legal norms are necessary because they protect victims, define obligations, and prevent cultural relativism from being used to excuse impunity. However, universal norms must be implemented through processes that are locally meaningful. Merry’s (2006) concept of translation is useful here: the issue is not whether international justice should be abandoned in favor of local culture, but how rights-based justice can be translated without losing its normative force. The participants in this study wanted justice to be both principled and culturally understandable. They valued accountability, but they also wanted justice to respect dignity, privacy, social relationships, and collective memory. This indicates that the most legitimate transitional justice model is neither purely universal nor purely local; it is dialogical, combining legal standards with community-based interpretation.

Overall, this study shows that community perceptions are essential to understanding transitional justice. Participants interpreted justice through four interrelated dimensions: dignity-based cultural meaning, careful negotiation of memory and silence, institutional recognition, and restorative repair. These dimensions suggest that transitional justice must be designed as a participatory and culturally responsive process. The central contribution of this study is to show that legal meaning is not produced only by statutes, courts, or official mechanisms. It is produced through the way people recognize law as fair, respectful, truthful, and connected to their lived experience.

Limitations: This study has several limitations. First, the sample was limited to 24 participants in Tehran; therefore, the findings cannot be generalized statistically to all communities or legal stakeholders in Iran or other cultural settings. Second, the study relied only on semi-structured interviews, which allowed deep exploration of perceptions but did not include observation, document analysis, or focus groups. Third, because transitional justice involves politically and emotionally sensitive topics, some participants may have limited their responses or expressed views cautiously. Fourth, the sample included educated participants and professionals, which may have shaped the level of legal and conceptual language used in the interviews. Future studies with broader community samples may reveal additional everyday meanings of transitional justice.

Suggestions for future research: Future research should examine transitional justice perceptions across different Iranian cities, rural communities, and minority cultural groups to compare how cultural background shapes understandings of justice, reconciliation, and institutional trust. Comparative studies between legal professionals, victims' groups, civil society organizations, and ordinary citizens would also deepen understanding of how legal meaning differs across social positions. Future studies may combine interviews with focus groups, discourse analysis, or ethnographic observation to examine how justice is discussed in families, communities, universities, media, and civil society spaces. Longitudinal research would also be valuable for understanding whether perceptions of justice change after public apologies, legal reforms, reparative programs, or institutional acknowledgment.

Suggestions for practice: Practitioners and policymakers should design transitional justice mechanisms that combine legal accountability with culturally meaningful recognition. Community consultation should occur before designing truth-telling, reparations, memorialization, or reconciliation programs. Legal institutions should communicate in accessible language and acknowledge the emotional and symbolic dimensions of harm. Truth-telling processes should protect dignity, privacy, and cultural sensitivities while avoiding forced silence or denial. Reparations should include material, symbolic, educational, and psychosocial elements. Finally, institutional reform should be framed not only as administrative change but as a public commitment to rebuilding trust, preventing recurrence, and restoring the moral relationship between citizens and law.

Conclusion

This study explored the cultural dimensions of transitional justice through the perceptions of 24 participants in Tehran. The findings showed that participants understood transitional justice as a multidimensional process involving legal accountability, cultural recognition, memory, dignity, institutional trust, and restorative repair. Justice was not perceived merely as punishment or formal procedure; rather, it was interpreted as a culturally meaningful response to harm that must acknowledge suffering, restore dignity, repair relationships, and prevent recurrence. Four main categories emerged from the data: culturally embedded meanings of justice, memory and silence in community reconciliation, legal mistrust and the demand for institutional recognition, and restorative repair beyond formal punishment.

The study concludes that transitional justice mechanisms are most likely to gain legitimacy when they are culturally intelligible, participatory, and responsive to community perceptions. Formal legal mechanisms remain important, but they must be connected to the social and symbolic meanings through which communities understand harm and justice. In the Tehran context, participants emphasized that law must “hear” people, not only judge cases. This indicates that transitional justice

should be understood as a process of rebuilding the relationship between citizens, institutions, and collective memory. A culturally responsive model of transitional justice should therefore integrate accountability with recognition, truth with dignity, and legal reform with social repair.

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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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