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Women's Semantic Construction of the Tradition–Modernity Dichotomy within Charmaz's Constructivist Grounded Theory Framework

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
<p>Article type: Research Article</p> <p>Article history: Received: 16 September 2025 Received in revised form: 17 October 2025 Accepted: 13 November Published online: 21 January 2026</p> <p>Keywords: <i>Identity,</i> <i>Modernity,</i> <i>Strategy,</i> <i>Tradition,</i> <i>Women.</i></p>	<p>Introduction</p> <p>The present study examines the interplay between tradition and modernity in the daily experiences of Iranian women, emphasizing cultural, social, and political dimensions. The lives of women encompass the actuality of existing within the historical norms and traditions of Iranian society, alongside the influences of modernity, globalization, and expanding social opportunities. This duality influences their identities on both personal and social levels, as well as their social and political engagement. This study also examines how women construct new meanings regarding their roles and identities, as well as the strategies they employ in response to the conflicting context; ranging from deliberate adaptation to resistance and the redefinition of social boundaries. The significance of this study lies in its contribution to our understanding of the processes involved in women's identity formation, the reproduction or transformation of political culture, and the implications for policymakers, civil institutions, and social change advocates in developing new and innovative strategies to enhance women's agency and their social and political engagement. To this end, it adds value to the existing corpus of literature on theory as well as to practical efforts related to the development of policies and programs for women.</p> <p>This study adopts micro-level perspectives from Goffman and Butler to conceptualize women's interactions with the dichotomy of tradition and modernity not merely as a macro-ideological phenomenon, but as the quotidian social performances of individuals. From a Goffman perspective, individuals perform duties within various moral frameworks while carefully managing impressions and sustaining ongoing control over the presentation of their self (appearance and body). Importantly, Butler emphasizes that gendered-social identities become constituted and stabilized through both articulated and habitual repeated acts of practice and discourses. Together, these perspectives demonstrate both the methods of reproducing meaning in commonplace performances and the potential for resistance and redefinition. At the structural level, drawing from Bourdieu, Giddens, and Foucault, emphasizes that the boundaries of tradition and modernity are part of the social structures tied to institutions, distributions of capital, and relations of power. Bourdieu underscores the concept of habitus and the unequal distribution of capital; Giddens examines reflexivity and the processes of disembedding in the context of modernity; Foucault offers significant insights into power/knowledge relations and the disciplinary functions of institutions, highlighting key historical moments as contextual and influential to subjectivity and normative classifications of bodies. In the context of related research, these extant symbolic boundaries can function as both stabilizing and contested sites of meaning. Additionally, cultural self-theorists, Markus and Kitayama, and social identity theorists, Tajfel and Turner,</p>

offer further, complementary insights into individual and collective sense-making: Cultural contexts influence whether domains of practice are associated with individuality or a sense of belonging, while group-based categorization and comparison processes offer additional means to reinforce or diminish symbolic boundaries.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative methodology based on Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory, which emphasizes the interpretation of lived experiences and social meaning-making as processes to uncover the underlying dimensions of the subject under investigation. The research design was selected to examine how women perceive and negotiate their identities within the tension between tradition and modernity, employing a methodology that explicitly acknowledges the researcher's role and emphasizes reflexivity in the process of meaning-making. The fieldwork was conducted with women from diverse social and cultural contexts in Tabriz, selected through purposive sampling based on age, marital status, education, and lived experience, supplemented by theoretical sampling until saturation was achieved. A total of 23 women participated in semi-structured interviews conducted in Turkish, tailored to their convenience, and subsequently translated into Persian during the coding process to ensure accuracy.

Results

The context of women's experiences of modernity and tradition in Iran arises from multiple layers of unconscious assumptions and simplistic foundations. Gender systems, patriarchal norms, and religious narratives restrict women's participation, agency, and authority, whereas the ideals of modernity, education, media, and globalization present new and expanded avenues for engagement. Women's lived experiences—encompassing family discussions, exclusionary encounters, and the redefinition of their identities—serve as the foundation for understanding women's positionality within this intricate dualism. These origins engage with socially constructed formative conditions, including familial structures, cultural pressures from wider society, state regulations, institutional provisions, and economic factors, as women move through contested spaces at the intersection of traditional and modern discourses. Women's positioning is rooted in tensions across three levels: the individual (self-discernment, non-entitlement related decisions, and political consciousness), the social group (familiarity, generational ties, and peer social networks with similar backgrounds), and the public domain (statutory institutions, media, laws concerning moral righteousness, and societal cultural discourses). These spaces establish multilayered contexts of publication for the elements that define women's political and social subjectivities, which are consequently reshaped as women challenge their constructed circumstances.

In this context, women adopt two primary strategies which I refer to as acquiescence and resistance. Acceptance encompasses an aspect of prudent traditionalism, selective redefinition of identity, and gradual engagement rooted in harmonizing cultural legitimacy with a more contemporary experience. Resistance, on the other hand, emphasizes stimulating modernity, a critical reconstruction of gendered distinctions, and more active participation in civic and political life. Enabling factors—such as familial support, cultural discourses concerning women and community engagement, institutional policies or environments, and individual self-efficacy—have played a significant role in influencing whether women tend toward acceptance or resistance. There are significant consequences; acceptance preserves a degree of social legitimacy, fosters solidarity among participating women, and encourages incremental involvement, yet it limits any comprehensive redefinition of identity. Resistance prioritizes independence, agency, and visibility but is often at a cost that can be social or emotional. Eventually, the resistance strategies will contribute to gender norms transforming

and women's space growing in the public and political sphere. This serves to recognize women as catalysts for transforming their cultural and political identities.

Conclusion

This study explored the tension between tradition and modernity in the lives of women in Tabriz through a qualitative, constructivist grounded theory approach. Drawing upon the lived experiences of women, this study examined how identity construction is influenced by structural foundations (including tradition, historical legacies, contemporary values, and personal awareness), environmental influences (such as family, institutions, culture, and economic systems), and intervening factors (social, cultural, institutional, and individual). It delineates two primary approaches: a cautious acceptance, marked by a gradual inclination to accommodate and garner social legitimacy, and resistance with a critical aim to attain autonomy, enhance engagement, and redefine gender roles. Although acceptance facilitates continuity, resistance fosters change. The study emphasizes that identity is a dynamic, reflexive process constructed through everyday practices, relational power dynamics, and group affiliations, thereby affirming that women's negotiation of tradition and modernity is simultaneously constraining and transformative.

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