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Reconstructing Identity after Collective Trauma: A Comparative Study of the 1998 Anti-Chinese Riots in Indonesia and the 2015 European Refugee Crisis

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Abstract. With the rising global displacement and ethnic violence, how collective trauma influences identity and recovery has turned into an immediate interdisciplinary issue. This paper examines the dynamics of collective trauma by conducting a comparative analytical approach to analyze two historic events, including the anti-Chinese riots of 1998 in Indonesia and the European refugee crisis, which happened in 2015. Although these instances occur in very different geopolitical and historical contexts, they show the overall tendency of systematic violence, stigmatization, and institutional inaccessibility that are very much internalized in the marginalized groups. With reference to the theory of chosen trauma by Volkan and structural violence by Galtung, the work researches the nature of development of trauma when it is influenced by identity erasure or existential insecurity. The study concludes that, much as the community based approach is a very critical aspect in psychological recovery as well as identity restoration, the overall policy context largely affects these too. The paper concludes by noting the necessity to fill the so-called cultural competence gap in the trauma-informed care across the globe and announces the need to impose context-specific, cross-cultural responses to trauma recovery.

Keywords: Psychological trauma, cross-cultural comparison, identity crisis, social integration, refugee crisis

1. Introduction

The world has experienced a variety of mass violence events during recent decades that have had considerable influence on social and psychological spheres of the communities involved. The anti-Chinese riots of 1998 in Indonesia and European refugee crisis of 2015 are the most iconic examples among them that provide an insight into the aspects of collective trauma in various cultural and historical contexts. Yet, despite geopolitical environments of an area economic crisis in Southeast Asia, and a military conflict in the Middle East, these events show the mass influence of systemic persecution. The two cases demonstrate that violence does not only seek to attack marginalized or displaced groups of people, but also inflicts lasting psychological damages that is determined by the cultural backgrounds as well as the socioeconomic gaps of the victims. The 1998 riots in Indonesia happened amid an aggregate economic instability, which was aimed at the ethnic minority called the Chinese (3 percent of the population) who had a high effect economically. During the course of many days, Chinese owned businesses and residential places were burned down by angry mobs who

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engaged in sexually violent acts claiming more than 1,200 people [1]. The experience of this trauma disrupted cultural continuity leaving survivors with persistent identity crisis and insecurity. But in sharp worldview comparison, the European refugee crisis witnessed a mass exodus of millions of people escaping conflicts in the Middle East only to experience structural exclusion with added Islamophobia in the countries, and only 12% of them received mental health care with the cultural approach [2]. Refugees did not only experience war trauma, but years of marginalization that made recovery difficult.

The proposed research paper will utilize a combined methodological approach that will suggest the integration of both critical literature review and comparative case study to examine how collective trauma develops and gains momentum across specific sociopolitical backgrounds. The study will provide three fundamental dimensions with the focus on the 1998 anti-Chinese riots in Indonesia and the 2015 European refugee crisis. It will first look how the processes of trauma will be differentiated when mediated by identity erasure as it was the case in the Indonesian scenario and existential threats to survival such was the case during the European refugee crisis. Second, it will examine the differentiated paths of community based recovery politics, namely the building of economic solidarity networks among Chinese Indonesians and political mobilization of refugee communities in Europe. Third, it will determine the possibility of policy interventions as the means to reduce the global issue of the cultural competence gap in trauma-informed care. The research will provide a cross cultural analysis of post-traumatic adaptation by relying on the theory of chosen trauma of Volkan and the theory of structural violence proposed by Galtung. It will also critically question the relevance and constraints of dominant Western paradigms of trauma in the application in the context of both Global South and Global North.

2. Theoretical framework

The paper establishes a multidimensional theoretical framework, which combines the main notions of social psychology and sociology, i.e. social identity theory, structural violence theory, and stigma theory. The social identity theory developed by Tajfel and Turner is a valuable basis of the psychological dynamics of the post-traumatic groups [3]. This viewpoint points out the change in the limits of the group as well as attempts to rebuild the feeling of self esteem among a community in the form of collectivity as further expounded by Branscombe et al, in the determination of the approaches taken by communities in response to violence [4].

The structural violence theory by Galtung is a systemic approach that shows the divisive impact of institutional exclusion in the political, economical, and cultural spheres [5]. Cultural violence as outlined to this theory, which may be defined as the act of justifying violence by use of symbols, language, etc., offers a valuable instrument in this study to examine the discourse and policy texts in the media. Markedly, the subsequent theory developed by Galtung, the so-called positive peace, focuses on the fact that real trauma recovery cannot be achieved without getting rid of structural inequality [6]. This perspective will offer a normative criterion of this research in examining the efficacy of recovery options.

The stigma theory was developed by Goffman and viewed stigma as a relationship process that emanates out of the difference between the socially constructed expectations and the actual identity [7]. The process model of stigmatization by Link and Phelan also comes to play in this analysis because it focuses on the importance of power in influencing social ostracization and institutional discrimination especially in the crime of being a refugee [8]. These theories combined can bring out a total picture where one can study trauma as psychological and structural process in various sociocultural settings.

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3. Reconstructing identity after collective trauma in divergent sociopolitical contexts

3.1. The structural roots and consequences of anti-Chinese sentiment in Indonesia

The long-standing discrimination against Chinese Indonesians stems from their “double minority” status, both ethnically and socioeconomically marginalized. Although the Chinese account for only 3% of Indonesia's population, they control approximately 70% of the private economy [9]. Colonial policies and post-independence laws reinforced their marginalization, particularly during the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis when Chinese Indonesians were scapegoated. The 1998 riots, which led to over 1,200 deaths and targeted Chinese-owned businesses, were driven by racial and economic motives [1]

The trauma inflicted by the riots had severe psychological and social repercussions, but also prompted culturally rooted resilience strategies. Suryani et al. conducted a follow-up survey on 500 survivors and found that trauma symptoms showed significant gender and intergenerational differences: male victims mainly manifested typical post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD, with an incidence rate of 61%), symptoms including flashbacks, excessive vigilance, and emotional numbness; while female victims more often presented dissociative symptoms, such as loss of reality sense and depersonalization (with an incidence rate of 53%) [10]. In terms of intergenerational influence, elderly survivors who experienced the anti-communist purge in 1965 showed a higher degree of post-traumatic growth, while the younger generation more frequently exhibited depressive and anxiety symptoms. This difference may be related to the fact that older generations of Chinese people accumulated more trauma coping experiences [11].

In response to systemic violence, the Chinese in Indonesia have developed a multi-level coping strategy with cultural characteristics. In terms of economic reconstruction, traditional clan organizations have played a key role. Clan associations represented by the Fujian Chamber of Commerce and the Hakka Guild established emergency mutual assistance funds, providing members with interest-free loans and sharing services of business information. According to the World Bank, through this mutual assistance network based on blood and geographical ties, Chinese enterprises restored 73% of their business activities within three years, far higher than the national average [12]. In terms of cultural identity reconstruction, the Chinese community adopted a dual-track strategy of "surface compliance and underground persistence". Although the Suharto regime prohibited the public use of Chinese, the number of underground Chinese schools increased by 300% after 2001, and these schools usually operated under the names of religious tutorial classes or art classes [11]. More innovatively, the younger generation established virtual Chinese learning communities through the Internet, with over 50,000 registered users by 2005 [11]. In terms of political participation, the Chinese achieved a transformation from economic elites to political participants. Through organized support for Chinese candidates and the establishment of political action committees, the proportion of Chinese representatives in local councils increased from 0.3% in 1998 to 5.1% in 2008, and even reached 12% in commercial centers such as Surabaya [11].

3.2. Research on European refugees

The stigmatization process during the 2015 European refugee crisis showed complex institutional characteristics, with Goffman's stigma theory offering a useful framework [7].Research found that mainstream European media constructed the refugee threat through three main discourse strategies: "mobility threat" (referred to as "invasion" in 2015, with an increase of 520% in usage frequency), "cultural threat" (emphasizing the conflict between Islam and European values), and "welfare threat" (exaggerating the burden of refugees on the social security system) [13]. In Germany, the Bild newspaper used the term "Islamization" (Islamisierung) 1,243 times between 2015 and 2016, while

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the British Daily Mail claimed that refugees "consumed 900 million pounds of welfare", while the actual expenditure was only 230 million pounds [14]. This media discourse formed a conspiracy with policy-making, creating a public opinion environment for the introduction of restrictive refugee policies. Germany's 2016 Integration Law emphasized language learning and employment but contained exclusionary provisions. According to the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees [2], two years after implementation, only 29% of refugees reached B1-level German proficiency, far below the expected 60%. Residence restrictions delayed family reunification by an average of 19 months, and complex employment permit procedures meant only 32% of eligible refugees obtained work permits.

The research on the psychological adaptation of refugees has revealed the profound influence of the policy environment on trauma recovery. BAMF conducted a follow-up survey on 4,815 refugees and found that the rate of improvement in mental health among employed refugees (43%) was 3.6 times that of unemployed ones (12%) [2]. However, the strict employment permit system has kept the unemployment rate of refugees at a high level of 68% for a long time. Language ability has been proven to be a key factor affecting psychological adaptation: Among refugees who reached B1 German proficiency, 56% reported an improvement in mental health status, while the proportion among those who did not reach this level was only 18% [2]. This contradiction reflects the difficulties faced by refugees in the process of rebuilding cultural identity.

4. Comparative analysis: identity reconstruction and community resilience under structural violence

4.1. Analysis of similar mechanisms

In the two cases of Chinese Indonesians and European refugees, it can be found that the identities of both groups have been labeled and stigmatized by mainstream society. This social exclusion not only weakens the social status of the group, but also brings deep psychological and collective trauma. Chinese Indonesians are seen as economic ethnic scapegoating and are blamed for the country's economic problems. Mr. Lim's experience in Indonesia is a microcosm of this idea. In 1998, his electronics store and about 700 Chinese shops in West Jakarta were looted and burned. He said. "In 1963 my mother's house was also burned because of anti-Chinese sentiment in West Java and in 1998, I experienced it myself. It was very hard."[15].”

European refugees are often portrayed as social destabilizers or "cultural threats" due to their religious and cultural backgrounds. Syrian refugee Anas The selfie of Modamani and German Chancellor Angela Merkel is a very obvious example. His selfie was supposed to symbolize his identification with German society and his desire to integrate into it, but he was used as a spokesperson for a "terrorist" by the far right on social media [16]. This stereotype also reflects the mainstream society's inherent prejudice and cultural stigma against refugee identity.

In response to such exclusion and stigmatization, both communities have developed self-recovery strategies centered on economic survival, cultural preservation, and community solidarity. After the 1998 violence, many Chinese Indonesians turned to traditional clan-based networks such as the Fujian Chamber of Commerce and the Hakka Association, which provided financial assistance and business support to help affected members recover. Cultural identity was maintained through underground schools and informal cultural activities. At the same time, cultural identity was maintained through underground schools and cultural activities. In Europe, refugee groups use transnational social networks and grassroots political mobilization to fight for rights and promote social integration. Despite language, cultural barriers and social exclusion, refugees try to rebuild their identity and social status by establishing mutual aid networks and participating in social movements. Using Branscombe's group self-esteem recovery model, it can be seen that the two groups took similar

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collective coping paths when facing stigma: by strengthening internal identity and social support, improving group self-esteem, and resisting external discrimination and pressure.

4.2. Difference mechanism

Despite their commonalities, Chinese Indonesians and European refugees show significant differences in institutional environment and recovery paths. As "long-term residents within the country", Chinese Indonesians face profound and "endogenous" collective trauma. Indonesia's nation-state mechanism emphasizes a single ethnic identity, and Chinese have been marginalized for a long time, so the recovery of the Chinese community mainly relies on internal community resources and mutual assistance networks, and support at the national level is relatively limited. In contrast, as "outsiders", the identities of European refugees are constantly conditioned and restricted by residence rights and citizenship. European countries and governments play a leading role in refugee acceptance and integration, but related policies often lack cultural sensitivity, resulting in policy gaps and poor actual results. Refugees' identity is repeatedly adjusted under the pressure of multiculturalism, and the recovery path is more complicated and dependent on the external policy environment. Through Volkan's chosen trauma theory, we can understand the difference in historical memory between the two groups [10]. The multiple anti-Chinese violence in the history of Chinese Indonesians has been selectively remembered by the group, strengthening internal cohesion and collective identity boundaries; while European refugees focus more on the trauma of escape and exile, prompting them to find a balance between traditional culture and the new environment.

5. Discussion

In the context of increasing globalization and more people moving across borders, identity has become a central issue for marginalized groups trying to keep their cultural roots and feeling of belonging. That is to say, in this process, the international community plays a very important role both in helping and in dealing with identity rebuilding, while marginalized groups themselves face complicated challenges in handling multiple layers of identity. Based on these two aspects, this paper offers several thoughts and suggestions. To put it simply, first, the international community should strengthen respect and tolerance for different identities and avoid putting labels on groups or making them seem single. Through cultural exchanges across countries and understanding, reduce wrong ideas and unfair treatment, promote talking and working together between different cultures, helping refugees and immigrant groups build positive identities in new places. Secondly, marginalized groups themselves can make their group pride and belonging stronger by strengthening cultural passing down and sharing within their own communities. Using modern communication tools and networks that cross countries to keep cultural memory alive and make the group stick together, while also taking part in the social life of the country they are in and encouraging two-way cultural mixing. In addition, when making help and mixing policies, the international community also needs to pay more attention to the complexity of identity, respect the choices groups make for themselves, and avoid pushing them to "blend in." Marginalized groups should keep confidence in their culture, flexibly deal with the challenges of having many identities, find a balance point between different cultures, and help their own fitting into society and mental well-being.

6. Conclusion

This study, through a comparative analysis of the 1998 anti-Chinese violence in Indonesia and the 2015 European refugee crisis, examines how collective trauma evolves within distinct sociopolitical contexts and influences the reconstruction of group identity and psychological recovery. Despite their differing historical and structural origins, both cases revealed shared patterns of victimization,

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including labeling, stigmatization, and institutional exclusion. In response, affected communities developed coping mechanisms centered on economic mutual support, cultural continuity, and grassroots mobilization. The findings also highlight the decisive role of structural policy environments in shaping trajectories of psychological adaptation and identity reconstruction.

Nevertheless, the study has several limitations. First, its reliance on literature review and case comparison makes it difficult to capture the nuanced individual experiences of trauma survivors at the micro level. Second, data constraints limit the ability to assess the long-term effectiveness of national policies on trauma recovery. Future research could adopt a cross-cultural comparative approach to further investigate the transferability and limitations of institutional recovery frameworks. Integrating fieldwork and psychological assessment methods would also offer deeper insights into subjective experiences and coping strategies in the aftermath of collective trauma.

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