New Marginals, Old Marginals: Building Vulnerability and Resiliency in the Age of COVID-19 in Indonesia

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Abstract

This is an ethnographic study of how certain groups are coping with a global pandemic of COVID-19 caused by a novel pathogenic coronavirus: SARS-CoV-2. We frame our research within the field of disaster studies perceiving the virus as a natural feature which would only turn into a disaster when it meets with vulnerable ecological, social, political and cultural structures. Our research identifies these structures emphasizing on the government's role in creating them and investigate marginality by considering intersectional variables. We focus on how various population managements to control the disease have been marginalizing preexisting vulnerable groups and the creation of new ones. We address two questions: In which ways are preexisting marginal groups vulnerable prior to, in the course of, and in the aftermath of the pandemic? To what extent has the pandemic politics become a new structure of vulnerability for preexisting marginal groups and creating new ones? A consortium consisting of researchers from various backgrounds will conduct a patchwork ethnography to identify certain marginal(-ized) groups in different localities in Indonesia. Relying on our information networks, we focus on the in/capability of the government tackling the crisis as another structure of marginalization. **Keywords:** pandemic; vulnerability; marginality; disaster

Introduction

This is an ethnographic study to address how the marginalizing process of certain groups because of the politics of COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia. We would like to shed a light by focusing on the production, reproduction, and accumulation of multidimensional and intersectional vulnerability following a classic argument saying that individual problems are results of structural constrains and socio-cultural process (Mills, 1959). Specific attention will be focused on how various population managements to contain the virus and the disease in Indonesia have become another structure of marginalization for preexisting vulnerable groups and creating new ones. Throughout this study, we try to address two questions. *First*, in which ways are preexisting marginal groups vulnerable prior to, in the course of, and in the aftermath of the pandemic in Indonesia? And, *secondly*, to what extent has the pandemic politics in Indonesia become a new structure of vulnerability for preexisting marginal groups and creating new ones? To address them, in this study, we frame the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic as a *disaster* and identify the marginalizing process by employing the concept of *vulnerability* widely discussed in the field of disaster studies.

Literature Review

Disaster is a result of complex intertwining of environmental hazards and socio-ecological vulnerabilities (Oliver-Smith, 1999, 2002; Oliver-Smith & Hoffman, 2002). We adopt a definition of *disaster* as "a process/event combining a potentially destructive agent/force from the natural, modified, or built environment and a population in a socially and economically produced condition of vulnerability, resulting in a perceived disruption of the customary relative satisfactions of individual and social needs for physical survival, social order, and meaning" (Oliver-Smith & Hoffman, 2002). Disaster differs from *hazard*,

defined as “forces, conditions, or technologies that carry a potential for social, infrastructural, or environmental damage” (Oliver-Smith & Hoffman, 2002). Recent developments in disaster studies have been meant to prevent the re-occurrence of disaster by looking at ways of people building sociotechnical resiliency (Amir, 2018). Disaster reliefs are intended not only to recover from the damage (mitigation) but to build resiliency towards impending environmental hazards (preparedness). The logic is simple, although hazards are inevitable, we can reduce the level of damages by managing vulnerable structures and building resiliency prior to the occurrence of unexpected, hazardous environments.

Early social and cultural studies into disaster began with the concept of *adaptation*, referring to human capability dealing with environmental hazardous features (Anderson, 1968; Moore, 1956). Within this logic, every human being is seen as an active actor to adapt to environmental features, including the most hazardous ones. Disaster was perceived as a natural feature and therefore human externality (Huet, 2012, p. 4). Since the 1970s, a new concept of *vulnerability* has been widely discussed among scholars and practitioners of disasters. It can be defined as the degree of human dis/ability to adjust to sudden, unexpected, hazardous environments (Bankoff, 2003; Hilhorst & Bankoff, 2004; Oliver-Smith, 1999, 2002). To date, more and more scholars of disasters and risk management acknowledge the so-called “vulnerability theory” in constructing a more comprehensive understanding of disasters for reason that it enables broader analysis of cultural and material impacts of environmental hazards (Oliver-Smith, 2002; Stallings, 2002). The theory enables scholars to elaborate the issue of in/accessibility and control over natural resources which may put some community at risk (Collins, 2008; Watts, 2000) by arguing that although the entire community suffer from the perils, it is usually the marginalized groups who experience the most (Oliver-Smith, 2010; Rozario, 2007). Obviously, the surviving poor communities do not have appropriate socio-economic resources to restore to a normal state as quickly as the rich do (Cernea, 1997, 2003). Many poor people living in a hazard-prone area not because they wanted it, but more because they have been socially, politically and culturally marginalized, so they had no other option than to dwell in vulnerable, risky areas (Bankoff, 2003; McCabe, 2002; Oliver-Smith, 2010). Poverty, then, is a mixture of social, cultural, and political marginalization shaping unequal economic orders for disaster-prone society (Rozario, 2007). We adopt an argument saying that patterns of vulnerability come from a long, complex social, political, and cultural dynamics which we call “development” (Oliver-Smith, 2010). Vulnerability theory suggests an idea that the production, distribution, sustaining and reproduction of vulnerability in a society is cultural, social and political (Hilhorst & Bankoff, 2004). In other words, to study a disaster we need to not only look at vulnerable patterns of certain marginal groups, but also a history of marginalization.

Methods

As the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic limits our movement for doing ethnographic fieldwork, we address the situation by adopting an experimental approach of “patchwork ethnography” proposed by Gökçe Günel, Saiba Varma and Chika Watanabe (2020) which refer to:

> “ethnographic processes and protocols designed around short-term visits, using fragmentary yet rigorous data, and other innovations … research efforts that maintain the long-term commitments, language proficiency, contextual knowledge, and slow thinking that charaterizes so-called traditional fieldwork, while fully

> attending to how changing living and working conditions are profoundly and irrevocably changing knowledge production."

Instead of only focusing on one location or one group, we work within a consortium consisting of social and humanities researchers living in different locations in Indonesia. Each researcher tried as best as they could to collect first-hand experience in each location and combined the result with other screen-mediated technics. Conventional face-to-face observations and interviews with target informants were our priorities, but phone calls, text messaging applications and social media were used to gain information for developing the context of each group. We focused on the in/capability of the government tackling the enduring multidimensional crisis as another structure of marginalization through the reconfiguration of livelihoods and public space by doing critical discourse analysis into government policies and media reportages. Patchy ethnographic narratives are tailored in a single etnography to figure out a bigger picture on how certain, vulnerable groups cope with the outbreak.

COVID-19 pandemic as disaster

SARS-CoV-2 is an environmental feature which would only turn into a disaster if meeting with vulnerable structures to cause a deathly disease for humans named "COVID-19". Indeed, coronaviruses are not anew on earth (Cui et al., 2019). In 2002, it had stolen human attention with the occurrence of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak in China. We called the virus, SARS-CoV. In 2013, a different type of coronavirus caused another outbreak in the Middle East: Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS). The virus's name was MERS-CoV. Between October 2016 and May 2017, another coronavirus attacked pigs, especially piglets, in Guangdong, China. The disease called Swine Acute Diarrhea Syndrome (SADS) and the virus SADS-CoV. This is the last coronavirus detected to cause problems for humans before SARS-CoV-2.

On December 8th, 2019, a new pneumonia-like disease was detected in the city of Wuhan, Hubei province, China (Nature, 2020a). A cluster of wet fish market in the city was identified on December 31st. The new year marked the market closing. On January 7th, Chinese authority declared a novel coronavirus causing this new disease. Later, it is named "SARS-CoV-2" and the disease "COVID-19"—an abbrevation of "Coronavirus disease 2019". What is different from previous pathogenic coronaviruses, SARS-CoV-2 is using human as its host. It does not require other species to survive. It is to say; the disease is human-to-human transmission making the global spread is inevitable (Wu et al., 2020, p. 268). In less than three months, the novel coronavirus has spread across countries with new cases in China, Iran, Italia and South Korea (Nature, 2020b). When WHO declares a global pandemic of Covid-19 on March 11th, it was 121,546 confirmed cases in more than 110 countries with 4,373 fatalities (Andersen et al., 2020). The number is, sadly, still climbing and we are still waiting for the development of new vaccine or anti-virus for COVID-19 (Kupferschmidt & Cohen, 2020; Shang et al., 2020).

COVID-19 has pushed us to face what IMF calls "the Great Lockdown" which disrupts global economy because the restricted mobilization of people and circulation of products and services. "No activity, no money," says a group of researchers (Sutarsa et al., 2020). Learning from the 2002-2003 SARS outbreak, several countries would experience a slowdown of international supply chain of metals, oil, and other materials (Maffioli, 2020). While people all over the world are still waiting for what is next to come, most countries have never ready and capable to handle plethoric new cases and misleading information on what happened. This includes Indonesia.

First official report of confirmed case in Indonesia was announced by President Joko Widodo on Monday, March 2nd (two-weekend days following the COVID-19 emergency situation declared by the National Disaster Management Agency (BNPB) on Friday, February 28th). On March 13th, the President formed a Task Force for Rapid Response to COVID-19. A month later, a "national disaster state" was declared with the issuance of a Presidential Decision (no. 12/2020). In the course of emergency status which ended on May 29th, the Government did not show a holistic approach as well as scientific-based policy to address the crisis. Each work unit was producing various, yet conflicting initiatives, regulations, and plans. Mostly focus on addressing economic vulnerability and neglecting preexisting marginal groups, such as migrant workers, nomads, informal sectors, peasants, women, school children, elderly, minority groups. Later, the Government adopted an internal security approach, instead of health crisis approach, by giving priorities more on military and police rather than on medical praticitioners to handle the situation with the issuance of a Presidential Instruction (no. 6/2020).

Like many other environmental disasters (cf. Oliver-Smith, 2002), the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has unearthed various preexisting, unseen marginalizing structures which are more complex than just economic variable. The successes and/or failures of the Indonesian government to handle the outbreak would significantly contribute to the emergence of new marginal groups.

Patching the narratives

Working without guarantee

During the pandemic, some hospitals are in a high demand of medical practitioners and open job vacancies for alumni and students of nursing vocational schools, even when they have yet graduated. However, news on the death of medical practitioners due to COVID-19 have made not all alumni/students took the chance. One alumnus of nursing academy in Surabaya we interviewed said that she has been hired by one reputable hospital in Surabaya because of her perfect grades. But her mother forbade her from taking it since she was unwiling to see her daughter entering a "lion cave."

The story describes the basis of all roots of crisis we face, i.e. the fragile social security, health security and health system/infrastructures in Indonesia. In a "normal" situation, health system and infrastructures were unable to handle regular, routines public health problems in the country. National Health Security (BPJS-Kesehatan) program did not cover patients with COVID-19 (Putri, 2020a) putting some private hospitals in financial crisis (Putri, 2020b). In the meantime, National Employment Security (BPJS-Ketenagakerjaan) program is in limbo to cover all unemployments generated by the pandemic and global economic crisis folows (Wardoyo, 2020).

Farmers in rural areas and street vendors in urban areas are among social groups which have not covered by the government's health and employment security systems. For them, the pandemic is not the only crisis as they are affected by economic crisis. Being non-members of BPJS-Kesehatan and BPJS-Ketenagakerjaan, we observed farmers in rural areas in Pamekasan, Madura experienced a huge loss because of the restriction on large-scale mobilization. They had adapted their crops with the global market demands, such as chilies and onions, and barely could sell their harversts to potential markets. Some farmers let the chilies roting on their branches or let little birds ate them. Birds are no longer interpreted as enemies who steal chilies and become friends to devour them.

In urban areas, street vendors, especially food sectors, had to face the reality of reduced income and limited space which for sustaining their lives. A few months ago, street vendors in several areas in Jakarta had to experience losses from flooding. Before they

could fully recover, the COVID-19 pandemic broke out. In order to survive and fulfill daily needs, they have no other choice but to keep selling. This puts them in a group which is vulnerable to contracting the disease. For long, street vendors have become objects of repressive government policies because they are considered to damage the beauty of the urban environment. Now, new stigmas of causing crowds and potentually increasing the virus spread are attributed to them. In the future, standarization of health and hygiene in food safety would be another source of economic crisis because they must provide the standard by their own without small-to-none subsidy from the government.

From outlander to outlandish

A label of "virus carrier" has been attributed to migrants. Many of them had to accept the fact that their contract was not renewed due to unstable financial condition of the workplace. Returning home, however, is not as simple as before. The Government has strengthenen some regulations for those who wanted to travel. Some problems raised as there was no a regulation to control the test's price and no coverage from BPJS-Kesehatan nor the Government for a self-initiative test. The test is only free if a patient shows at a state-funded hospital with symptoms of COVID-19. However, it is not easy to get access to the result, excluding a more than a week delay. In some places in Indonesia, taking a PCR test with a validity period of 14-days would cost more than three times the montly minimum wage (Massola, 2020).

By the time of observation (mid-June), Rapid test was valid for three days, and PCR seven-days. Each passenger should take a COVID-19 test, whether Rapid or PCR/Swab test, and must show a negative result before the airline could include her/him in a flight. For migrants who were recently fired and wanted to return to their homeland this is a big issue. During the pandemic, some airlines increased ticket prices as a consequence of passengers' limitation in a route. In some places, flights were canceled or delayed for several days because of the airlines could not get a minimum number of passengers. It is very risky to book a flight home.

One migrant in Mataram, Lombok island, we interviewed, for instance, could not return to his home in Sumatera after his job termination. It was not because he did not have enough money but because his family prohibited him from returning home as he might carry the virus. He was stranded in foreign land and become an outlandish. Indonesian migrant workers who had returned from overseas after they lost their job because of the pandemic had to deal with the same stigma in their homeland.

Lacking information, confusing statements

In daily routines, there has been a growing "social distancing". One of us has become increasingly cautious and suspicious with social gatherings, especially when they include people without maskers. It is just because he has knowledge about the high death rate of COVID-19 in Indonesia because of the incapability health facilities to handle patients. We observed a wide information gap among members of society. This is because of lack of transparency of COVID-19 information from the Government. Instead of giving a valid information, government officials tend to cover up or hide some facts about COVID-19 in this country (Riyanto, 2020). Some others consider the disease as a joke instead of taking it seriously which adds the confusion of people amidst the plethoric flows of information, misinformation, and disinformation about COVID-19.

One intriguing response came from the Minister of Agriculture Syahrul Yasin Limpo announcing and endorsing the use of an "anti-COVID necklace". This logic followed some local communities' perception on disease. In Jombang, East Java, for instance, we had

information of people wearing "magic bracelet" made of woven coconut or banana leaves which had given a prayer from Islamic leader, *kyai*. That said, the bracelet will serve to ward off all kinds of calamities, including the current outbreak. In Tulungagung, a different part of East Java, people used liquid chalk, *kapur*, to coat fronds before drawed human face on them with charcoal (Hasani & Endi, 2020). The logic behind these actions is similar to the Minister's with the necklace. What is new is the Minister uses scientific claims saying eucalyptus could protect the coronavirus from entering everyone who used it.

Learning inequality from home

COVID-19 pandemic has forced us to change our teaching/learning method which previously required a *face-to-face* in classrooms. The "work from home" situation forced people to attend online study, or *screen-to-screen* in cyberspace. Students at various levels, from pre-school to higher education, are required to be ready and able to endure this new screen-to-screen method. This had opened our eyes to various facts of development gaps. The gaps are not only of human resources but also of education facilities and infrastructures.

The slogan of "We are not on holiday. We are only asked to study at home" does not apply to students living in rural areas. Online methods do not only require tools, such a computer, laptop, or smartphone, but also a strong and stable Internet network which becomes problems for students living in rural, remote areas. Even the Minister of Education and Culture, Nadiem Makarim, was surprised with the fact that there is still a number of regions in Indonesia which not only experience limited Internet access but also not yet had electricity (Febryan, 2020). We observed one elementary school in Balawaian village, Piani district, Tapin regency, South Kalimantan which all students from first to sixth grades did not receive online lessons from their teacher. Students thought that it was school holidays.

Lessons from the lonely dying

German sociologist Norbert Elias decribed how the challenge to prepare death is the greatest biosocial anxiety for elderly people (Elias, 2001). Each day they have to face the fact that one-by-one person they know dies and the images of death become more real and apparent. Such images are being reproduced and generating various rational actions in preparing the death. Biologically, the elderly is increasing susceptible to diseases, become senile and unable to perfome tiring physical activities. Sociologically, being elderly means to enter a stage of "loneliness." A combination of the two makes a person's dependence to others increase with age. The elderly needs other people to monitor their biophysical conditions and accompany them in their old days for socialization.

Even without the current pandemic, every human being will experience social distancing as he/she enters his/her golden age. In the view of an elderly, social distance widened when spouse, relatives or friend died before him/her causing the decrease of sense of intimacy when the configuration of their social environment changes, whether due to death or migration. COVID-19 health protocols did not make any difference to daily routines of two old people we observed. As the only living space is their house, they do not have anyone to distance from. Social distance needs to be understood beyond physical or geospatial distance but also about reduced intimacy of one with others (Rogers, 1999; Simmel, 1971).

Conclusions

As many of us have been spending more time not only to do "anything from home" but also getting used to "making home for anything", some have started to adjust to this turbulent situation. From there, more and more people are increasingly aware of, studying,

and to some extent experiencing the continuing marginalization. This awareness, lessons and experiences, ironically, are becoming more present just as we are able to manage our remaining time in the realm of death which is getting more real in the age of COVID-19.

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