UNITY IN DIVERSITY: ALLEVIATING THE STRAINS OF MENTAL ILLNESS THROUGH COHESION, NOT COERCION

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Abstract: I create a theoretical framework for ways to alleviate the mental health issues that Indonesia faces. My work posits that if disability rights advocates were to try to alleviate this issue from an American perspective, we would not only be attempting to reinforce Western standards of superiority, but we would be, in a way, attempting to colonize and dominate the argument surrounding mental illness services. My argument further suggests that the only way to alleviate any social ill within Indonesia must come from and be invested in by Indonesians. These solutions must be respectful of who the Indonesian people are, their relationship to their families and one another, and their identity. I will look at ways in which Western media provides a narrow scope of how issues surrounding Indonesian mental illness are spread. Furthermore, I will offer possible suggestions in alleviating the mental health issues in Indonesia while keeping in mind that all of these must be done from and with the Indonesian people not by coercion.

Keywords: mental illness; social ill, Indonesia disability

1. Research Background

Many Western countries throughout the course of history have attempted to dehumanize and trivialize the lives of people in non-Western countries. Historically this has been done in order to claim some sort of Western superiority. Those with mental and physical disabilities have, until very recently, been subjected to massive eugenics programs, forced experimentations, and institutionalization (Dyck, 2005). While times have changed, these programs and institutions still exist and continue to serve as a way to dehumanize and devalue people with disabilities in their own countries (Cohn, 2015). This maltreatment has not been solely a Western construct, but it is a common problem around the world.

The idea that different is deficient was a standard model used in both non-Western countries with regards to those with disabilities. My work aims to center the conversation of mental illness or “soul sickness” as it translates from Indonesian and look at ways that people may be able to creatively and consensually alleviate the stigmas of mental illness in their community. If one examines American news outlets such as CNN and search for articles related to mental illness and Indonesia, one will see videos of malnourished people who seem to be treated as convicts rather than patients (Quiano, 2016).

These images serve two purposes for the Western media: for one, it is used as a way to denigrate people in other countries who may have a difficult time dealing with this particular health crisis. These videos and articles provide little if any in-depth reporting on the situations that surround the creation and dissemination of these videos (Mentally-ill Indonesians locked up and shackled, 2016).

To put it quite frankly, they are sensationalized journalism. Secondly, these articles and videos attempt to elevate a Western model of civilization. The videos are presented in such a way that the viewer believes the Indonesian people are lesser based on how they treat a vulnerable sector of society. They are used as a distraction to cloud the fact that the United States also has a poor
way of dealing with mental illness (Cummings & Druss & Lucas 2013). In fact, many people with different types of mental illnesses or disabilities are killed by police in the United States every year (McCarthy, 2015). However, videos of Indonesia drive the conversation away in an attempt to point blame at other countries instead of looking introspectively. The translation and the meaning of mental illness can provide many people at gateway to understanding the way in which Indonesians see such illness. Mental illness translated roughly from Indonesian to mean “soul sickness.” Since it is not a physical disability, it can be often harder to treat or understand (Crowe & Averett, 2015).

There is no one solution to helping alleviate the strain that mental illness can have on a person, a family, or community. One key factor that is ignored in a large faction of Western media is how resources for mental health services affect the ways in which people get care. This is not something that is only overlooked when pertaining to non-Western countries but something that is even overlooked in United States. Poorer communities tend to live shorter lives because of the way the physical and socioeconomic environment affects their health (Madden, 2015). This is similar to the fact that people of color do not getting enough care or consideration for their mental illness in the United States; it is the resources and the premium put on these resources that affect what money goes where since mental illness is, at times, more complex and more expensive to treat than other kinds of disabilities (Richardson & Morgenstern & Crider & Gonzalez, 2001). Furthermore, successful treatments not only take time but money, and Indonesia is not the only country that is dealing with a crisis related to people with disabilities (Hadjimatheou, 2014).

2. Method & Results

One of the first steps to alleviating any problem is the recognition that a problem exists in the first place. Many societies are resistant to change, which can and has become a hindrance for many disability rights advocates. One of the first conversations needed in order to explore the ways in which mental illness and its symptoms can be alleviated is by raising the awareness about how pervasive it is in a society. By removing the idea of the “other,” or, in other words, looking at Indonesians with mental illness as Indonesians whose souls can be helped or healed in the same way a physical illness or disability can be helped or healed, is one way of framing what is needed to raise awareness about mental illness. For one to say that Indonesians do not know anything about mental illness would be a disservice and a discredit to their intellect. The problem with mental illness information is not in its dissemination but the deception of that dissemination. Since mental illness presents itself in a myriad of ways, even the same mental illness can vary greatly from person to person, it historically has been a scapegoat for both wisdom and wickedness throughout the world. In terms of categorizing disabilities mental illness, because of the wide ways in which it manifests itself, it is very elusive and hard to pin down. If there is a campaign to raise awareness it would have to start by looking at what Indonesian people think about mental illness; this comes from examining what causes it and also encourages everyone to think about solutions. This not only shows the Indonesian people that their opinions are valued, but it pushes them to think about ways they can personally invest in the improvement of the lives of thousands of their countrymen.

In the United States there is big drive to have one unified homogenized American culture. The idea of having just one dominating unifying culture does not translate the same way in Indonesia. This is not to say that Indonesians do not see themselves nationally as Indonesians, but they understand that there are different ways of living and accept that difference. This ethic tolerance stems from Gotong-Royong or custom and local culture. There is no one way to be an Indonesian person; local cultures within the great nation are celebrated as part of what makes Indonesia a beautiful and diverse country. Local culture does not conflict with national identity rather it complements it. If one is looking at ways to help change the face of mental illness, they must work through Adat and not against it. We should look at ways in which each local culture can contribute to the reintegration of those with mental illnesses and find ways to work with people from local areas in order to find solutions for empowerment. It is those in
Indonesia who will help give the place to the voiceless, those suffering behind the physical and mental walls brought on by mental illness. Another manner in which Indonesian culture differs from the United States is the way in which laws can be and are often enforced without the consent of the people. The United States, because of its investment in the militarization of the country compared to other countries such as Indonesia, is a police state (Why Militarized Police States Don’t Work, 2014).

This can be seen through not only government expenditures in the military at home but also its military bases abroad. It can also be seen in the amount of money that has been given to city and state police departments all over the United States (Why Militarized Police States Don’t Work, 2014). With this increase in funding and military equipment we have also seen a sharp increase in documented cases of excessive force and police brutality. Suffice to say it is not strong cultural ties that prevent deviants in the United States rather it is the fear of the multibillion-dollar industrial prison complex. When people are beaten and jailed for petty offenses, the state rules through coercion more so than consent. Indonesia, by comparison, has a smaller police force, and culture trumps laws and their enforceability. This means that if a new law was forced upon the Indonesian people that they did not consent to, the government does not have the same overarching ability to police its people into submission. This is why the theoretical framework suggests that we need to look at local cultures and beliefs surrounding mental illness in order to help alleviate the strain that people with mental illness and their families are going through. By not only reaffirming that people with mental illnesses are still mothers, daughters, sons, husbands, brothers, cousins, and simply members of the human race and above all part of Indonesia, there is a possibility for cultural shift in the way Indonesians view those with mental illness. If a government policy is not enacted by the will of the people, the ability to enforce it on any level local or national will not be possible.

The United States and Indonesia also differ in the way their healthcare industry works. Whereas many Americans are on at least one prescription pill, the same cannot be said for almost any other country in the world, including Indonesia (Study shows 70 percent of Americans take prescription drugs, 2013). Where mental illness is concerned, medication is not always a viable or necessary solution. While medication can help, it is not a cure for everything. Compassion, mental health care and wellness services, and understanding are also aspects of dealing with mental illness, whether they are acute cases or not. A community of care is the only viable holistic solution to helping alleviate the strain that people with mental illness face in their day-to-day life (Juwa & Newhill, 2011). With Indonesia’s tolerance ethics that accept differences more than the United States, the idea of one homogenized society arises. Indonesia has compassion and care in abundance. This is apparent through Indonesia’s strong ties to family, and its social model of identity and meaning is not formed based just on the individual but how they relate to one another as family and countrymen. By rethinking the ways in which mental illness makes causes one to be sick can transform this sickness through love and compassion. This is not to say that medication is not needed entirely to help patients cope with mental illness, but is not the only catchall solution for many people (James & Peltzer, 2012).

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the idea of unity, diversity, and the ethical tolerance whether it be religious or social is a part of the Indonesian culture, and its people believe that once everyone realizes this, their compassion and care can help to lift thousands of people who suffer every day out of darkness and that equitable steps can be taken. While it seems apparent that the government has a responsibility both socially and financially to help those with mental illness, without the consent and will of the Indonesian people, this cannot be done. To alleviate the strains of mental illness the Indonesian people need not to look at the West but only within their hearts and minds to find creative and sustainable ways to help heal some of the blows that mental illness has dealt to their fellow Indonesians.

4. References


