



Disproving the myth of racial harassment and trauma among Indonesian Americans

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Abstract: Racial trauma among Asians, including Indonesians, has increased dramatically in the United States. While many studies have been written about the significance of recurring race-related traumatic incidents, the broader meaning of the unexpected and dark side of racial trauma experiences among Indonesians who reside in the United States is under-reported. This study aims to explore the meaning of experience dealing with racial trauma among Indonesians living in the United States using a qualitative phenomenological approach. We conducted in-depth interviews via the Zoom platform with a nationally representative purposive sample of 16 adults aged 26 and older. In analyzing this phenomenological study, all stages of phenomenological reduction were used. The findings demonstrate that racial trauma among Indonesian Americans can be categorized into three themes: 1) feeling sad and angry, 2) being exhausted, and 3) suffering physically. Therefore, the myth that Asian Americans are immune to racism and its effects is not necessarily true. This study also offers implications for future research on racial understanding and discussion.

Keywords: Asian American; discrimination; Indonesian American; phenomenology; racial trauma

Abstrak: Trauma rasial di antara orang Asia, termasuk orang Indonesia, telah meningkat secara drastis di Amerika Serikat. Ada banyak penelitian tentang banyaknya insiden traumatis terkait ras yang berulang, tetapi laporan tentang sisi gelap dan tak terduga dari pengalaman mengalami trauma rasial di antara orang Indonesia yang tinggal di Amerika Serikat masih rendah. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menggali makna pengalaman menghadapi trauma rasial pada masyarakat Indonesia yang tinggal di Amerika Serikat dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif-fenomenologi. Studi ini bersumber dari pengumpulan data wawancara secara mendalam kepada 16 orang berusia 26 tahun ke atas dengan menggunakan *purposive sampling* melalui Zoom. Untuk menganalisis studi fenomenologis ini, studi ini menggunakan semua tahapan reduksi dalam pendekatan fenomenologis. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa trauma rasial di kalangan Indonesia Amerika dapat dikategorikan ke dalam tiga tema, yaitu: 1) mengalami perasaan sedih dan marah, 2) kelelahan, dan 3) penderitaan fisik. Oleh karena itu, mitos bahwa orang Amerika keturunan Asia tidak mengalami diskriminasi rasisme belum tentu benar. Penelitian ini juga memberikan implikasi untuk penelitian yang akan datang mengenai pemahaman dan diskusi masalah ras.

Kata Kunci: Asia Amerika; diskriminasi; Indonesia Amerika; fenomenologi; trauma rasial

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Introduction

Asian Americans, similar to other minorities in the United States, are vulnerable to experiencing discrimination, racism, xenophobia, hate crimes, and other indicators of racial marginalization (Bhargal & Poon, 2020). The atmosphere of racial discrimination has been reported as causing more stress among Asian Americans than the COVID-19 pandemic, notably higher levels of psychological and emotional harm caused by racial trauma (Robert T. Carter, 2007). The perception of racial discrimination is also associated with psychopathology (Chou et al., 2012). However, it has been difficult to corroborate such reports through individual accounts. As a result, further research is needed to better understand how racial trauma is experienced differently by individuals. The lack of a specific study investigating the experiences of Indonesian Americans means that any problems currently facing the Indonesian American community will likely continue to fester, unnoticed and unaddressed.

Incidents of racial discrimination against Indonesian Americans have increased over recent years. For example, in Philadelphia, two Indonesian American teenagers reported that they had been subjected to racist abuse, which underscores how anyone from a particular country or ethnicity can be targeted. They experienced verbal and physical abuse from their assailants while waiting for a train. Specifically, they were shoved and had their faces slapped by a group of four other teen girls in Philadelphia's City Hall Station in March 2021 (Supriyanto, 2021; Wirajuda, 2021). Although the two victims did not report any serious injury, they were left traumatized and afraid to use public transportation.

The National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) (2020) reported that, compared to 2019,

stress-related disorders increased sevenfold among Asian Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic. Asian Americans especially are more prone to mental health problems, which have been exacerbated not only by existing gaps in mental health access but also by anti-Asian prejudice during COVID-19 (Misra et al., 2020). Prior investigation on mass trauma and disease outbreaks has found that people with mental health problems and subclinical stress reactions (Ahrens, 2020) can have symptoms for months or even years (Goldmann & Galea, 2014; Jeong et al., 2016). Increasing alienation as a result of the politicization of the pandemic and scapegoating (Hay & Caspani, 2020) can have serious and long-lasting harmful effects (Chen et al., 2008), and it may lead to an increase in suicidal thoughts and ideation (Hay & Caspani, 2020). In comparison with recent disasters and other forms of mass trauma, the current pandemic has had a monumental impact on social and economic environments around the globe. There is a chance that these factors could result in more Asian groups in the US having poorer mental health outcomes and using fewer mental health services.

Racism is a traumatic experience that impacts everyone, especially people of color who have traditionally been subjected to oppression and segregation (Ruteere, 2016). While Sue et al. (2007) broadened the discussion to include other marginalized and oppressed groups based on characteristics such as gender, physical appearance, ethnicity, religious minorities, and sexual orientation (Nadal et al., 2012), racism is directed at a certain group of people and is generally more overt. Roberts and Rizzo (2021) stated that racism exists, regardless of whether White people recognize it or embrace it as a fact. Although racism is no longer seen as acceptable, discrimination can still live and thrive in society.

Racism is a system comprising structures, practices, and norms that have many effects on

individuals' mental, emotional, and physical health (Gee et al., 2009), social activities, behavioral responses (Karlsen & Nazroo, 2002), and spiritual health through multiple pathways (Paradies et al., 2015; Phelan & Link, 2015) that can be temporary and/or long-lasting. Racism has a tremendous impact on people's sense of self and their lived experiences. Racial-ethnic identity formation and outcomes are influenced by many forces from various domains that surround victims, with the cumulative effect ranging from stress and internalized racism to resilient self-concepts and the development of positive racial-ethnic identity formation.

Racial trauma is a cumulative experience, where every personal or vicarious interaction with racism contributes to the development of a more insidious, chronic stress response system (Robert T. Carter, 2007). Racial trauma is so detrimental and potentially destructive that it has been highlighted as a risk factor for mental disease (Williams et al., 2003). After encountering racism, individuals often experience fear and hypervigilance, intrusive thoughts, despair, wrath, physiological sensitivity, avoidance, physical symptoms, numbness, lowered self-esteem (Carter & Pieterse, 2020), memory difficulties, self-blame, confusion, shame, and guilt. These symptoms are similar to those experienced by survivors of other types of trauma (Carlson, 1997; Carter, 2007; Helms et al., 2010). Furthermore, when people of color encounter racism, they typically report that their symptoms worsen (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005).

Incidents of racism can engender feelings of insecurity and a heightened awareness of the world as intrinsically dangerous. Unsurprisingly, several prior studies have demonstrated that racial stigma and exposure to expressions of racial trauma are harmful and potentially damaging. Racial discrimination is a sort of "traumatic stress" (Carter, 2007) and even a form of violence (Helms

et al., 2010) that can impede behavioral adjustment in a variety of situations (Benner et al., 2018). It can also lead to more delinquent and criminal behavior (Burt et al., 2012).

Studies on the effects of racism on health in the US have mostly focused on Black people or African Americans (Pieterse et al., 2012; Sanchez & Awad, 2016), whereas Asian Americans, including Indonesians, have not received a comparable amount of research attention. Indonesian Americans are the 15th largest group of Asian Americans documented in the US. Asia matters for america (2019) stated that approximately 129,000 Indonesians live in the US (Budiman, 2021). However, few systematic efforts have been made to define, clarify, and explain the issue of racial trauma among Asian Americans, especially Indonesian Americans. Likewise, while much has been written about the significance of recurring race-related traumatic incidents, comparatively little has been advanced concerning the broader meaning of individuals' personal experiences with racial trauma among Indonesians living in the US. This study therefore explores how Indonesian people living in the United States interpret their personal experiences with racial trauma using a phenomenological qualitative framework.

Method

This study is primarily concerned with identifying the meaning of self-reported racial trauma among Indonesian Americans. Therefore, it uses qualitative research based on the flexibility it provides to highlight human experience, emotional responses, and feelings (Burns, 1989), as opposed to focusing more on quantitative characteristics. The qualitative approach uniquely enables unexpected insights to be obtained from the original data (Bernard, 2012); this can include insights into the dark side of traumatic experiences (Wincup, 2017).

The current study uses phenomenological analysis to rigorously classify, code, and categorize the data on racial trauma experiences into themes. Analysis of the meanings as they are lived by people from an individual perspective, using phenomenological investigation, can be highly informative (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008) and lead to a deeper understanding. As a form of qualitative research, phenomenology aims to describe shared meanings based on individuals' lived experiences in relation to a given phenomenon that yields "rich (quality) and thick (quantity) data" (Fusch & Ness, 2015, p. 1409). In striving to capture the essence of an individual's lived experience, we aim to explore the world as those individual experiences it while "encourag[ing] an open perception [with a type of] unbiased looking and seeing" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 89). Our study not only provides insight into the everyday lives of Indonesian Americans but also aims to humanize a community in which people's voices are frequently disempowered, not recognized, or muted. This approach attempts "to reach some person" (Murray & Holmes, 2014) and understand the meaning of experiences that are at times difficult to comprehend or digest (Murray & Holmes, 2014).

The topic of this study is sensitive and challenging, which means that some people are reluctant to be interviewed. As such, only 16 respondents agreed to participate in this study. The interviewer provided a brief overview of the study. Once the potential respondents had expressed an interest, a message was sent with the offer of an interview time. We ensured that all respondents agreed to participate in the study before beginning any of its processes. Once permission had been gained, the researcher sought the consent of each interviewee to record the interview. The participants were then asked open-ended questions about their experiences of racial trauma, allowed to respond in their own time, and probed with follow-up questions as necessary.

In this study, we struggled with how to obtain informed consent directly from the participants. Since the data collection process was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, we were compelled to think reflexively and to keep in mind that, as researchers, our questions had to probe the participants deeply. While gathering the data, we maintained a relaxed and informal atmosphere. This was considered helpful in making the participants feel comfortable (Salama et al., 2020) and that they were participating in a dialogue as opposed to an interrogation. The respondents nevertheless agreed to participate in the virtual interview and provided their consent to be interviewed as part of the research project. They voluntarily consented to both the interview and the intended use of the data obtained from it. We ensured that there were no risks associated with their participation.

The participants' age, education, occupation, and length of time living in the US varied. The interviews were conducted via Zoom video calls using purposive sampling among Indonesian Americans in the US. Each interview lasted for approximately 50 minutes. During the data extraction, the participants' names were anonymously coded; this enabled them to respond in their own words and encouraged them to share sensitive concerns with the guarantee of secrecy.

This research was concerned with answering one key question: What are the meanings of experience dealing with racial trauma among Indonesians living in the United States? In answering this question, it is important to consider that while the interviews were conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, the participants' involvement in different social contexts was not only due to the pandemic. During this time, online interviews eliminated the geographical and temporal limits imposed by in-person interviews. The use of online interviews also provided the participants with a sense of control, as they felt they were able

to respond using their own words. This simultaneously brought the interview into sharp focus while allowing the participants to express themselves freely. We held an informal preliminary talk with the informants who had agreed to participate in this study to determine the feasibility and relevance of the proposed investigation.

In this study, the interviews with participants about their self-reported experiences of racial trauma provided critical data for understanding societal inequality and racism. The process for selecting and determining participants in qualitative phenomenological research differs from that of the logical positivism employed in quantitative research (Salama & Chikudate, 2021). In this type of study, we put ourselves in the shoes of the selected participants, regardless of who or what they are. In terms of analysis, the study employed each step of phenomenological reduction, including epoché or bracketing, horizontalization, and clustering of the meaning into themes. Through epoché (bracketing), we temporarily put aside previous understandings and knowledge, prejudgments, biases, beliefs, and assumptions about the phenomenon of interest (Sanders, 1982) while listening to the informant's narration. This enabled us to clarify preconceived notions and fully explore the phenomenon (Gearing, 2004; Raffanti, 2008).

Results

In undertaking this phenomenological investigation, the interviews present a narrative that explores the essence of the personal experience. We rigorously coded, classified, and categorized the interviewees' data into themes. We then defined the themes based on the words or topics that emerged frequently and repeatedly throughout the data set. The grouping of data codes into themes enables the researcher to summarize sections of the data that are beneficial for answering the research question and achieving the research purpose. Three themes emerged from the data gathered: 1) feeling sad and angry, 2) being exhausted, and 3) suffering physically. Figure 1 illustrated the meaning of racial trauma.

Feeling Sad and Angry

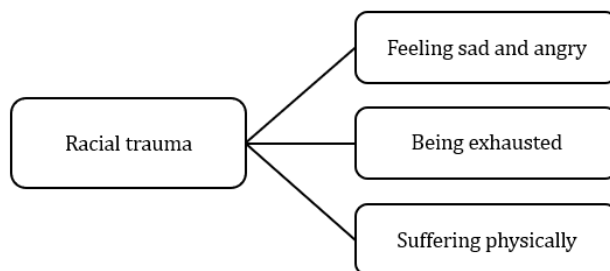
This subtheme describes how racial trauma affects the participants' feelings of sadness and anger. For example, P1 said:

I definitely felt sad, upset, and angry. In the past, I thought America was a developed country whose people thought far ahead. Unfortunately, I was wrong. The more developed the country is, the more racial discrimination occurs.

While many of the participants felt upset, hurt, and disappointed, some felt too weak to fight

Figure 1

The Meaning of Racial Trauma



systemic racial discrimination because they recognized their position as a vulnerable group in the country. As mentioned by P3:

However, I *cannot* counter their treatment to me. *Even*, I do not have the ability to ask why you treat me like that

In another case, P8 was frequently asked ridiculous questions by local people about her home country. They assumed that "*People in my home country still wear Koteka¹, loincloths, and other traditional attributes.*" However, she tried to understand and forgive her surroundings by maintaining a "smile" and accepting the reality that she was part of a minority group in the US. Nevertheless, this repeated situation led to one participant's claim:

I'm just depressed here. We know, God created us equally. It is only the color of our skin that distinguishes person from one another, but why do White people have to divide other people in such a way? (P6)

In this study, most of the participants experienced racial trauma based on negative racial stereotypes. They reported that while such stereotyping had existed for years, it had become much more intense and blatant after September 11th, 2001 and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Being Exhausted

In this subtheme, most of the participants who had experienced racism said it had a serious impact on their day-to-day lives. For example, P4, as a master's student, reported feeling hurt and disgusted by incidents of discrimination against her. Consequently, she felt exhausted by it. Similarly, P5, who worked in accounting and had lived in the US for around 20 years, claimed that:

I think this condition affected my emotions. It drains my thoughts and feelings. (P5)

¹ The *Koteka* is a traditional cover for the genitals that is frequently worn by men from the Dani tribe (an indigenous tribe of Papua, Indonesia) as part of their traditional attire.

P7, as an underwriting analyst, explained that:

Although the Black Lives Matter movement had not yet gained momentum, the feeling of unease had been with me for quite some time. When I visited a foreign country, I felt I was labeled a "nerd." It affected my mental health indirectly. (P7)

Some of the participants also remained uncomfortable socializing with White people. They felt belittled and frustrated.

People talk about my background like they know everything, like when they talk about my traditional food and other things. I know my country more than they do. Why do they seem to know too much? That's why I had a strong desire to go back to Indonesia... However, I have to get good grades and finish my study as soon as possible. (P8)

From this case, P8 appears to feel depressed and to be experiencing a "problem" from which she wants to "run"; however, she feels the only option is to finish her studies as this is what her parents have asked her to do. As such, there were "prices" connected to her time in the US. She therefore had to accept the conditions, regardless of what they might entail.

Many of the participants felt exhausted and conflicted at the same time. While they felt they should be proud of their race and ethnic origins, these aspects appeared to have become a source of separation rather than unity. Some of the participants admitted that they had difficulty getting along with their peers, particularly White people. As stated by P8:

I became too lazy to go to university and socialize with White people. I feel inferior about socializing, attending class, asking questions, and even it is difficult to carry out daily conversations with my friends. I truly feel like I'm in the minority. (P8)

In this context, racism affects an individual's relationships with others and their daily functioning at school, work, or home. The participants felt exhausted and purposefully shunned by their friends and other people.

Suffering Physically

This subtheme reflects how the interviewees have suffered physically, as described below:

When my campaign for Asian Americans was not successful, it had a negative impact on my physical health. Also, when I have a lot of thoughts at the same time, I get stomach acid. As a result, my stomach started to churn and I had a headache. (P9)

Similarly, P12, as a doctoral student who had lived in the US for 10 years, illustrated his experience:

I have difficulty in sleeping since I have spent a lot of time thinking about racism. I wondered why racism continues to exist in this advanced country. (P12)

Racial trauma has been linked to an increased risk of physical health issues. However, this participant's belief that such issues are attributable to racial trauma is meaningful.

Discussion

This study may be the first of its kind to examine the complexities of Indonesian Americans as subjects of racial trauma through personal experiences. The study could be groundbreaking because no prior research has been conducted on racial trauma among Indonesians living overseas. Most previous studies about racial discrimination in the United States have explored the cases of African Americans (Seaton & Iida, 2019; Seaton & Zeiders, 2021; Zeiders et al., 2018), Hispanics (Chapman, 2020; Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2014), and Asian Americans (Abrams, 2021; Misra et al., 2020; Yip et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2021). However, in most previous studies, Chinese people have been cited more often as experiencing racial discrimination than other Asian American racial groups (Cao et al., 2020; Cheah et al., 2020; Ha et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2021). The relative lack of literature on racial experiences among Indonesians therefore inspired this study to explore racial trauma among Indonesians living in the United States. In addition,

the previous lack of a narrative on such themes has prevented the discovery of numerous accounts, which have provided this study with further information concerning the complicated issue of systemic racism. As such, the result of this phenomenological study is significant because it provides an in-depth analysis of an unusual topic to help readers appreciate the distinctions between ethnic Indonesians and others related to racial experiences.

It is crucial to emphasize that while these mechanisms can vary from person to person, racial trauma can result in extremely serious medical and mental health difficulties. When people are viewed as less important and are excluded from society, they are more likely to internalize stigma and negative messages about themselves, which can lead to poor mental health and poor self-perception in the long run (Goldmann & Galea, 2014; Jeong et al., 2016).

According to Husserl's theory of phenomenology, any experienced phenomenon of thought, emotion, or memory can be investigated and analyzed (Reiners, 2012), including anti-foreigner slurs. The phenomena of xenophobic insults, such as "go back to your home country" and "go back to where you came from," indicate the ostracization of Indonesian Americans as foreigners. Despite being born and raised in the US, they are nonetheless viewed as outsiders (Gover et al., 2020; Tessler et al., 2020). This racial profiling of Indonesian Americans leads to the re-establishment of the stigma of the lower class. Furthermore, the racial slurs that derogate Asian labels have made non-American-looking people feel "othered" in society since childhood. Consequently, they have suffered psychological distress as a result of this name-calling. These and other such orientalist depictions illustrate how comments about, for example, exoticizing Asian culture and dietary habits (e.g., eating strange-smelling food) appear so coarse and uncivilized.

This study revealed that racial trauma experienced while traveling on public transportation, shopping, and attending worship had the most detrimental effects. Given the crucial importance of social interaction to individuals' quality of life and mental well-being, this is expected to lead to the first theme, namely feeling sad and angry. Social interaction often concerns situations based on a continuous set of relationships and interactions, although, in other situations, these relationships and interactions can be one-off or intermittent. Preventing access to public amenities can have a significant impact on an individual's quality of life and well-being. Furthermore, people who experience racial discrimination may be at greater risk of developing dissociative symptoms, where they temporarily disconnect from reality as a reaction to a threatening situation that is perceived to be emotionally exhausting and results from a loss of control over their environment (Carlson et al., 2012).

Personal racial trauma may result in Indonesian Americans taking other social risks that could lead to criminal behavior. At a personal level, Indonesian Americans face a painful condition that will only intensify their negative experiences if the situation is allowed to continue. This represents a form of abuse that exacerbates other types of maltreatment and also has the potential to produce long-term criminogenic effects. Those who are subjected to racial trauma daily have a significant primary risk factor that jeopardizes their long-term well-being and that of their families and friends. Although the legacies of these experiences can be and quite often are transcended, Haney (2020) emphasized that doing so means shouldering a significant and often life-altering burden that others are not required to endure. In a wider context, racial trauma has the impact of socially, economically, and politically marginalizing Asian people by limiting the places where they can live, their access to high-quality education and jobs, and

their degree of civic participation. Such phenomena have also been identified among Hispanics (Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2019), Black Americans (Bird et al., 2021), and American Indians (Skewes & Blume, 2019). Therefore, being born in the US and earning a college degree provide no guarantees against the possibility of experiencing widespread discrimination in health care, education, and other areas of life.

The legacies of racial trauma experiences can be and quite frequently are transcended. However, racial trauma is real and painful, which is something that its victims cannot deny. The adverse impact of anti-Asian racism on mental health cannot be disregarded. Rising anti-Asian hate has left many Asian Americans feeling fearful, worried, and helpless, with the associated negative impacts on their mental health and social networks. Meanwhile, it is critical to identify and support Asian Americans' ways of healing and resisting, such as reporting abuse, seeking social and community assistance, and raising awareness of these practices.

Conclusion

In this study, we investigated the lived experiences and meanings of being a victim of racial trauma among Indonesian Americans. Racial trauma can generate sentiments of empathy, compassion, and concern, just as it has the potential to provoke defensiveness, hostility, anger, and a wide range of other behaviors. Each participant uniquely experienced racial trauma, depending on his/her lived experiences, critical consciousness, level of self-awareness, and position in a socially stratified society. The results demonstrate that racial trauma permeates many aspects of lived experiences among Indonesian Americans and can have a weathering or corrosive effect on physical and mental health, suggesting that further attention and social policy efforts to abolish discrimination are required.

Although this research process has limitations related to indirect participant observation, its findings and implications are valuable in terms of highlighting the difference between Indonesians and other racial minority groups in the United States regarding racial trauma. Furthermore, the results will enhance readers' deeper and broader understanding of the racial trauma experienced by people who live in other countries as foreigners. For future studies, it is important to expand the racial trauma literature to encompass the

experience of racial trauma toward racial minority groups. Given the exponential rise in racism, mental health practitioners must provide the most effective treatment possible to help address its consequences. This study also proposes that activists, religious leaders, legal advocates, and academics should look to global movements for lessons on how to solve the issues and create a healthy environment in social life, as well as how to respect and tolerate different races both within and outside the Indonesian American diaspora.[]

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