

Understanding the Mass Trance Phenomenon in Indonesia: Between Traditional Beliefs and Community Mental Health

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Abstract. The study on trance phenomenon is hardly ever done, in view of the fact that in Indonesia, trance or known as *kesurupan* tend to be accepted as a common cultural phenomenon, especially at many areas where traditional and mystical beliefs are profound, and spiritual practices are still carried out. While Indonesia is making a hard effort to build up its nation, and whereas modernization could be seen in many parts of Indonesia, mass trance may perhaps be a paradoxical explanation of everyday social problems. By way of culturally based approaches and ways of thinking of the Indonesian societies, an alternative of social participation and increasing access to economic resources were the determinants that came forward among the research results. Access to supportive relationships, social influence, and opportunities for social engagement which create meaningful roles, resources and opportunities for contact were among the problems for a better community mental health approach.

Key words: trance, mass trance, community mental health

Abstrak. Studi tentang gejala kesurupan hampir tak pernah dilakukan, mengingat kenyataan bahwa di Indonesia, kesurupan cenderung diterima sebagai gejala budaya biasa, terutama di banyak daerah yang kepercayaan tradisional dan mistiknya menonjol, dan praktik spiritual masih dilakukan. Ketika Indonesia berupaya keras membangun bangsa dan modernisasi terlihat di banyak tempat, kesurupan massal mungkin merupakan penjelasan paradoksikal atas masalah sosial sehari-hari. Melalui pendekatan berbasis budaya dan cara berpikir masyarakat Indonesia, sebuah alternatif partisipasi sosial dan peningkatan akses ke sumber ekonomi merupakan penentu yang muncul di antara hasil penelitian. Akses ke hubungan yang mendukung, pengaruh sosial, dan kesempatan untuk keterlibatan sosial yang menciptakan peran bermakna, sumber dan kesempatan untuk bersentuhan merupakan bagian masalah untuk mencapai pendekatan kesehatan mental masyarakat yang lebih sehat.

Kata kunci: kesurupan, kesurupan massal, kesehatan mental masyarakat

People and the mass media called it mass trance. It is an episode when someone or a group of people experience a sudden state of screaming, crying and fainting. Some of them couldn't move, while others who tried to help, started to get stiff soon in a kind of domino effect. Other sufferers might develop extraordinary physical strength, and have such a kind of aggressive, wrestling and grappling movements, weeping and jerking their bodies around. Some of the sufferers woke up from the trance in a very exhausted condition, and fell asleep. When they awoke

they remembered nothing. Those conditions are said to be contagious, and in some ways defined as epidemic, since they are rapidly diffused among and adopted by people of the same group well beyond usually expected frequencies (Sirois, 1974).

It was mid 2004 when at least two mass trance episodes were reported to occurred among school-girls in the Riau Province, Sumatera, and in the late 2005 when the same school experienced another episode. Other outbreaks occurred in the beginning of 2006, and since then a series of mass trance took place simultaneously in many parts of Indonesia up until the first quarter of 2008. The outbreaks involved groups of school children and factory workers, almost all of them are female across ages during various occasions. Trance, known in Indonesian language and local dialects as *kesurupan*, obtained more awareness from the mass-media ever since.

This paper has been presented at the International Convention Exploring the Role of Psychology in Creating Healthy Society, June 25-26, 2008 in Surabaya.

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When it comes to the word *kesurupan* (the Indonesian word for trance), people usually think about ceremonial dances and traditional healings. It has been accepted widely, that there are trance conditions of which are intended to be achieved in many parts of the world. Parts of religious or spiritual experiences, the voodoo trances, or exorcisms are among them. However, the trance episodes afflicting Indonesian women and school children are hard to be categorized as those.

Several decades ago, Sirois (1974) brought up in his review literature, that collective hysteriform has been known in the West for centuries. Seventy eight distinct outbreaks of what later on described as epidemic hysteria were found in the world literature of the past hundred years between 1872-1972. The identification of behaviors that are present were recognized as psychopathological, as they were different from behaviors usually shown by a similar group in similar conditions. The alteration is characterized by convulsions, paralysis, tubular vision, abnormal movements, agitation, hyperventilation, echolalia, transitory hallucinations or depressive feelings. In many ways, those syndromes are more or less similar to those reported in possessions.

According to Suryani and Jensen (1999), it is not easy to distinguish trance and possession. Both are states in which the consciousness of the individual is different from that of his or her usual state. However,

... the state of trance is essentially and phenomenologically the same as the state of hypnosis, whereas possession is an altered state of consciousness because it is characterized by the experience of being taken over by a power, spirit or god which then acts through the person, causing the person to behave automatically or without self control. (Suryani & Jensen, 1999, p.1)

While at one side Indonesia is facing the world globalization and modernization, on the other side *kesurupan*, whether it is perceived as trance or possession, tend to be accepted as a common cultural phenomenon, especially at many areas where mystical beliefs are profound and spiritual practices are still carried out. The study on trance phenomenon is then hardly ever done, in view of the fact that there are no critical conditions to bring it up.

Until this date, reported incidence of mass trance seems higher every year. Pointing out to already 23 reported cases in beginning 2008, at least 20 cases

in 2005 to 2006 and more than 37 cases previously in 2007 (personal collection from reported cases in newspapers and television news programs since 2006), as well as many unreported and inaccessible cases, it could be assumed that education, religion and development have done little to budge widespread acceptance of the supernatural among Indonesia's diverse ethnic and religious groups. Mass trance became a phenomenon creating a center of attention from the mass media. Mass trance is afterward an area under discussions as well as a renewed object.

According to Kopytoff (1986), objects are culturally constructed, endowed with culturally specific meanings, and classified and reclassified into culturally constituted categories, while Clouse (2008) described that the values of an object is never singular. In his writings, Clouse explained that objects encompass multiple valuation systems simultaneously. Market value, historical value, sentimental value, artistic value and entertainment value are just a few of the ways in which the worth of objects is framed and understood. While at times these valuation systems are in conflict with each other, they always intersect and inform one another. An unestablished situation, rapid change or a growing up process may create confusion and intersections, and that might be one of the reasons behind those mass trance phenomena.

The false beliefs about trance and mass trance, were then supported by a cultural environment, since trance could be a way in distracting them from the real problems, socioeconomics difficulties and crises of a growing up society. The media exposures then caught up the mass trance in a very simple way, just as a similar object to mass hysteria which occurred when a large number of people are together in one place and appear to lose self-control. This type of hysteria is evident at rock concerts, political, sporting events and religious rallies, but have a very much different background to cause a similar look mass hysteria to that of mass trance.

The belief, not to say that it could almost be perceived as mystical beliefs, gives an opportunity to live in an environment, where Shermer (1997) claimed it as providing immediate gratification. Shermer also mentioned that mass trance offers people a morality and a meaning that they can embrace, and that does not appear to them to be impolite, cruel, uncaring, and purposeless, to name a

view, as does required by a civilized society. Mass trance became a rewarding episode, for the sufferer might get enough attention from friends and relatives, attain special treatment as well as tolerable time off work.

Learning from the reported cases, mass trance could be seen as a community mental health problem that should be understood thoroughly on a contextual basis since every culture has its own characteristics. Human behavior is partly shaped through interactions with the natural or social environment, whereas cultural background should be one of the most important factors taken into consideration, as seen in Fig.1.

According to Horwitz & Scheid (1999), people are more likely to engage in behaviors that are rewarded by the social environment, and less likely to engage in behaviors that are disapproved. Horwitz and Scheid has noted that every culture recognizes forms of negatively valued deviant behaviors that are distinguished from merely antisocial behaviors by their interpersonal incomprehensibility within the culture idioms. As people grow up in families, values and behaviors are initially learned in the families, including how to perceive health and "ill or health" and to recognize disability in carrying out social responsibilities.

The relationship between individual and cultural values at one side and the meaning of health and

illness on the other side should be understood all together with personality factors, since personality is a unification of deeply embedded cognitions, emotions and behavioral patterns as well as an outgrowth of interpersonal realm and ongoing social relations. In many trance cases, discourse, attitude and beliefs play a significant role as contributing factors.

Nevertheless, little contribution has been made by empirical disciplines such as psychology. Therefore, an action undertaken in order to change what is happening or might happen in community affairs, especially in order to provide a healthier society, calls for a comprehensive understanding along the crossroads of psychopathology, mystical beliefs and popular culture.

Method

Participants

The research was started with as many as 35 subjects who have taken part in this study in Malang (East Java) and Bali.

Procedure

The research was intended to be a descriptive ex-

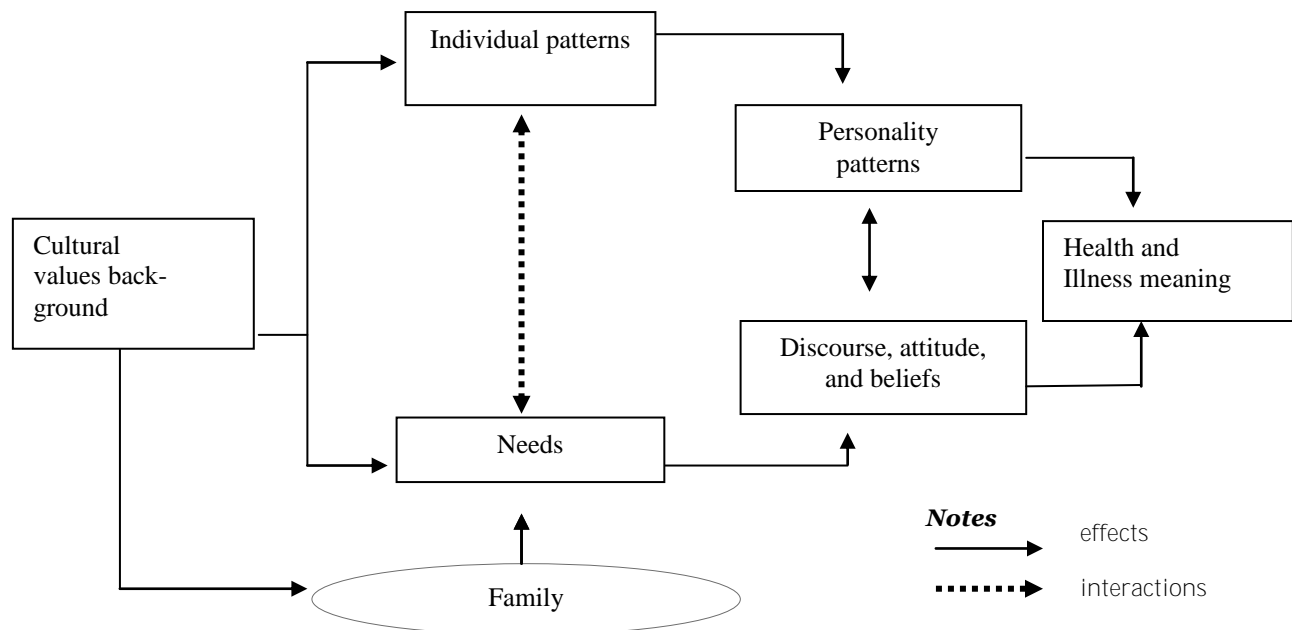


Fig. 1. The relationship between culture, health and illness behavior (Hidajat, 2005)

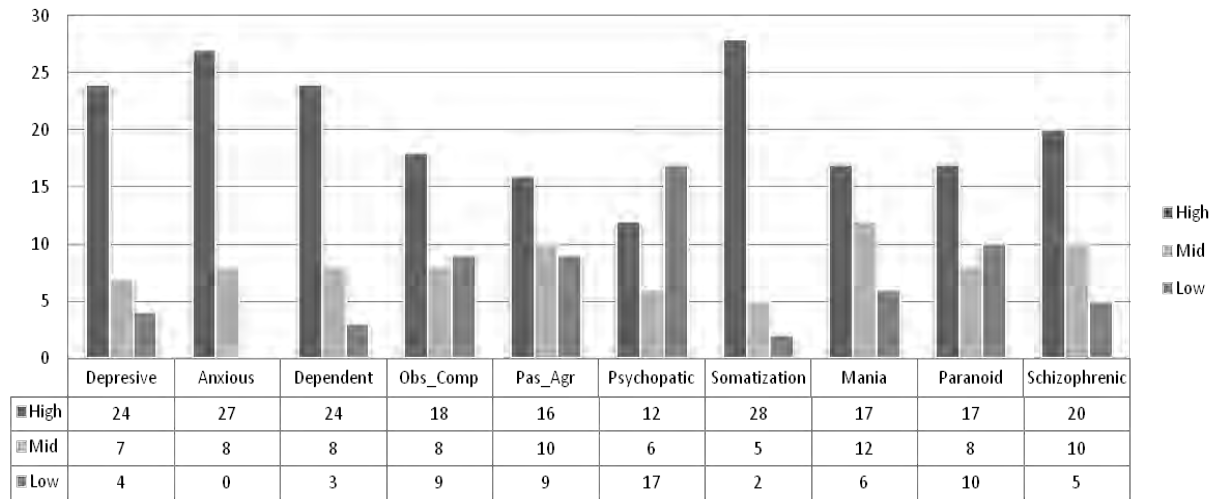


Fig 2. Personality predispositions

planatory research, and was done through a mixed method approach. Personality predisposition of those who have had a state of trance, were measured using the *Gadjah Mada University Personality Scale* (Utami, Partosuwido, Hasanat, Subandi, 2002; 2003), a self report inventory consisting of 150 i-tems, measuring either pathological and non-patho-logical personality predispositions. Validity of eleven scales composing the *Gadjah Mada University Personality Scale* has been examined using *Clinical Analysis Questionnaire* as external criterion, whereas an internal consistency has also shown a Cronbach $\alpha = .70$ ($p < .001$).

This small number of participants were also invited to Focused Group Discussions (FGD). In depth interviews following the group discussion were focused on feelings and expressions prior to and after the episodes, as well as to their backgrounds and childhoods. Medical and psychiatric examination were also carried out.

Results & Discussion

The participants of this preliminary research provided evidence of personality predispositions, some emotional patterns and psychiatric symptoms as well as some ecocultural and psychosocial factors contributing to their trance episodes. Somatization, depression, anxiety and dependence came forward

to be the most significant predispositions among the research participants.

The participants are those who have been experiencing trance and mass trance, most of them are breadwinners, hardworking persons, are very religious and also stated that they feel under pressure. Either the female workers who made their money in cigarette factories or the Balinese dancers who participated in interviews and in FGD came generally from low socio-economic backgrounds. Many said they didn't have happy childhoods, and some of them got through traumatic child abuse events.

The findings goes together with the previous work on the meaning of health and illness in relation to motivational values and personality predispositions among Javanese and Balinese people (Hidajat, 2005), that individuals dealing with mental disorders are likely to be engaged in symptoms that are most disturbing as to their normal psychic needs and self-image, whereas those aspects could be determined by patterns that are persevered within the culture. From previous cultural related mental health investigation, somatization, depression and dependency personality predispositions dealt with an overloaded cultural values embeddedness. On a pathological stage, either lack of values fulfillment or an over emphasized course of action may trigger off mental disorder symptoms.

Many factors contribute to the formation, the spread of collective delusions, and a kind of hysteri-

cal symptoms which are closely related to mass media exposures, rumors, extraordinary anxiety or excitement, the social and political context, and reinforcing actions by authorities, or institutions of social control. Those are some aspects that should be taken into consideration. Consumerism, modernization and cultural transformation are likely to become new precipitating factors to health, illness and mental disorder courses as well (Hidajat, 2005). Episodes are also distinguishable by the redefinition of mundane objects, events, and circumstances and reflect a rapidly spreading folk belief which contributes to an emerging definition of the situation.

According to the mass trance phenomena, solidarity and empathy to others were also among the cultural aspects which are incorrectly implemented due to the lack of values perception among new generations.

Conclusion & Implication

In relation to this preliminary result, mass trance had more to do with traumatic events, exhaustion, overwork, underpayment and stress than evil spirits, if they are still to be claimed as an explanation to many. Reports on the numerous mass trance cases later on also give a better picture that many common factors are contributing to the episodes. Mass trance have also a tendency to occur mostly in not first-rated educational institutions. Trance would then be mean of harm's way to deal with everyday life pressures. Moreover, the flourishing role of media and television throughout many parts of Indonesia might also have its contribution.

Since the younger generation is the most afflicted by this trance phenomenon, there should be an intensive research concerning the issue to bring the hysteriform to a halt. There should be a better way to empower school children and lower class workers to have a good coping pattern to stressful conditions. Enhancement of well being and competence are also major goals in this area. Therefore, some further investigations are really needed, for the involvement of empirical based approach from many disciplines such as psychology is still not as much as necessary. The demand of a more practical and

acceptable approach of community mental health practices should also come back with a prompt act in response.

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