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Public panic over Covid-19 Outbreak: Criticism toward panic theory in collective behavior study

AF Sigit Rochadi, Nur Amalina Putri, Zaky Arsy Fauzi

Sociology Department Universitas Nasional Indonesia

sigitrochadi@yahoo.com, sigitunas1960@gmail.com

Abstract. This article evaluates the issue of public panic over the coronavirus outbreak in Indonesia from March to April 2020. The study was conducted with secondary data analysis sourced from competent online media, and was aimed to expand the panic scope as well as criticize the related theories in a collective behavior study. The results showed inconsistencies in the event of public panic in a crowd. This include while dealing with natural disasters, terror, sinking ships, fires, collapsed buildings or other physical threats, and also over invisible dangers, as observed with viruses. In addition, the individual disposition persists for a long time on occasions where the authorities, both political and academic, fail to immediately strategize a convincing countermeasure. Based on these findings, the study provides a critique of several theories, comprising crowd panic, emerging norms, and moral panic.

Keywords. public panic, COVID-19 outbreak, crowd, collective behavior, criticism

1. Introduction

There was a global outrage after the appearance of coronavirus at the end of 2019, estimated to cause disease in human beings. This virus appeared in Wuhan China, and was spread worldwide through people, and accelerated by very high mobility in this transportation technology era. In addition, life was gripping and seemed to have terminated at a glance, leading to increased incidence of paranoid attitudes and panic behavior. The people of Indonesia initially demonstrated skepticism and provided cold response to the outbreak. However, there was sudden panick after President Joko Widodo announced a positive case of Covid-19 in early March 2020. This statement concluded the debate over the elite, and reduced the government's over-confident attitude. Conversely, the increase in public anxiety was exacerbated by the invasion of distracting information through social media. These were often related to the dangers and spread of the virus, alongside the growing number of patients, lockdown imposed by several countries, and also on potential drugs.

The government initiated efforts to control and lead the formation of public opinion in the fourth week of April, 2020, and assisted by religious leaders, estimated to have mobilized the compliance of believers. Furthermore, Muslims were restrained from celebrating the Mi'raj and Eid prayer in congregation for the first time in history. Similarly, Hindus were absent in the great Nyepi celebrations, Christians were unable to celebrate the Easter and Pentecost feasts in a colossal manner, while the Buddhists refrained from overwhelming ceremonies in the Temple to celebrate Vesak. These days fell between March and May, 2020, known to be the

peak of Covid-19 outbreak. Also, these moments enhance awareness of changes in individual behavior towards collective respect for government decisions, establishing the policy of Large-Scale Social Restrictions (*PSBB*), a form of lockdown, with a few exceptions in some pandemic epicenter cities. Moreover, policies instituted were undoubtedly accompanied by social policies, in order to prevent the incidence of poverty. This purpose was achieved by accelerating the disbursement of Employment Card (*Kartu Pekerja*), direct cash assistance, non-cash food assistance, exempting the poor from electricity costs, and also by continuing existing social assistance programs.

The incidence of public panic was sustained, and consequently adjusted according to the news developments related to virus distribution. These facts confirmed the public to comprise of active media users, and huge waves of panic heightened the tension, conflict, and resistance to government decisions. Moreover, the response of regional heads showed more imagery compared to the extent of coordination and resource utilization in managing the outbreak. The Governor of DKI Jakarta in mid-March 2020 restricted mass transportation (especially TransJakarta), prohibited in and out bus movements, proposed the termination of commuter train services, and prepared a lockdown scenario. Subsequently, a meeting was set with the Minister of Home Affairs, delegated by the President at the City Hall to cancel the decisions and plans (<https://regional.kompas.com>, 2020/03/17/). In addition, a similar event was observed with the Mayor of Tegal (tempo.co, 1327529/), the Regent of Mamberamo Tengah, the Mayor of Sorong, and the Governor of Papua (cnnindonesia.com, 20200327). This power contestation lingered for several weeks, as the central government was considered sluggish. Therefore, the regional authority of Mamberamo Regent declared a statement in response to the lockdown cancelation request, stipulating "We are more knowledgeable of this area, the central government are encouraged to handle problems at the center" (rmol.id, 2020/04 / 02).

Media representation, including social media has inevitably triggered widespread panic among individuals. The coronavirus varies from other viruses known to be prevented by inculcating personal hygiene and maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Initially, the methods proposed by health authorities were perceived as insignificant and contradictory to regular traditions, including avoiding meetings, keeping a physical distance, and thorough washing of hands with soap. For instance, these gatherings, particularly in worship centers, are predominant practices of Indonesians encouraged by every religion. In addition, other products and economic processes also revolve around meeting people, e.g., in local markets, cafes, and malls. Personal concerns, for example, shaking hands, hugging, cheek-kissing, going home, etc., are equally common routines known for hundreds of years to foster connection between people. However, almost every Indonesian find it complicated to shun gatherings, handshakes, or other social arrangements.

The conflict over logic and faith philosophies involving religious leaders and health experts, appeared fierce as the police struggled to implement the PSBB rules, despite being opposed by several spiritual authorities. For this reason, the government mobilized the entire forces, including the army and civil instruments to enforce this policy. By this time, the panic level had continued to increase in areas, including shopping, eviction of medical personnel from boarding and rented apartments, rejection of dead bodies caused by COVID-19, and the fear of layoffs. These are collective behaviors and are different from panic theories. Furthermore, theories of crowd panic, contagion, emerging norm, and the dominant moral in the study of collective behavior are unable to comprehend this pandemic panic phenomenon.

2. Purpose and Method

The purpose of this research, therefore, is to critique panic theories in collective behavior using secondary data analysis. Subsequent data were obtained based on reports by 3 mass media agencies with national credibility, and the analysis was conducted by comparing facts and theories. Further comprehension of the resulting concepts was provided after the parameters have been confirmed. This method of analysis was selected due to the availability of abundant data (Schwab (2019), although, the corona outbreaks did not permit researchers to visit several affected locations.

3. Data: Public Panic Bubbles

Precisely on Monday, 2 March 2020 at 11:35 WIB, Indonesian president, Joko Widodo, announced two citizens had tested positive to Covid-19. By 13:00, large crowd was observed at a shopping center in North Jakarta in an attempt to stock up food supplies, including rice, sugar, noodles, eggs, oil, milk, snacks, and even spices. On average, each buyer was spotted in possession of 2 trolleys in a long queue estimated at 20 m with 5 - 8 cashiers (cnnindonesia.com/ekonomi/20200302). In addition, other items purchased were drugstores, pharmacies, masks, hand sanitizers, wipes, multivitamins, and alcohol. However, the prices of these commodities have multiplied by tenfold. A standard mask usually sold for 40 thousand rupiahs per box increased to 350-400 thousand. This incident occurred in the suburbs of Jakarta such as Bekasi, Tangerang, Depok, and Bogor (<https://m.m.detik.com/d-4922328>; <https://regional.kompas.com/read/2020/03/02>).

The growth in public panic was also attributed to live television reports from the home of a suspected Covid-19 patient wearing an anti-tear gas mask and showing "police line". Based on health experts opinion, large crowd were witnessed in shopping centres in an effort to store food reserves for 2 to 3 weeks. This situation, therefore, prompted the Indonesian Chief of Police to issue a letter-number B / 1872 / III / Res.2.1 / 2020 / Bareskrim requesting all minimarkets, malls, and retail stores to limit sales of staples, especially rice, cooking oil, sugar and instant noodles. Furthermore, government disposition in handling the crisis appeared confusing, and subsequently, influenced the panic rate. For instance, in early March 2020, health authorities affirmed the use of masks were only intended for sick people. However, this became mandatory for all residents after three weeks. In addition, the virus was thought to transmit only through fluids, but after a month, was said to spread by air. This attitude was exploited by several religious leaders to reject the PSBB policy, especially the prohibition of worship services. The clash between government policies and faith expressions raised people's emotions about religious gathering.

The rejection of Covid-19 dead bodies further intensified public panic. This incident originally occurred in Semarang when a nurse died. Some community leaders steered the residents to block the ambulance. The family and health authorities submitted a request clarifying the body was virus-free, but the funeral was denied. Finally, the body was returned to the hospital (cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20200410). In addition, a similar case also reported at Lampung and Medan. Furthermore, the community raised banners with contents stressing the Covid-19 funeral rejection. Residents took turns guarding the entrance to the tomb already constructed with stones and wooden blocks to in order to prevent ambulances from gaining access (<https://m.detik.com/news/berita/d-4957959>).

However, casual leaders in Pasuruan mobilized youths with weapons (machetes) to block the hearse (<https://regional.kompas.com/read/2020/04/13>). Also, residents of 6 villages declined a body about to be buried in Bolaang Mongondow. The hearse had gone to several villages looking for a place to bury, but was refused. A village head highlighted the fears of

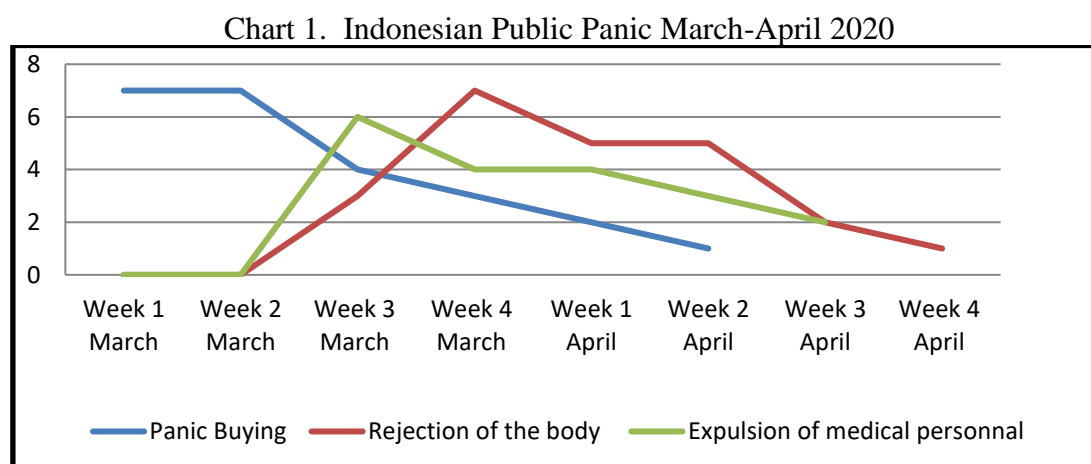
infecting the entire community with virus originally from Wuhan if a Covid-19 body was allowed to be buried (<https://regional.kompas.com/read/2020/04/07>). More tragically, the tomb of a victim was demolished in Banyumas, where the body was previously refused for two days by several villages. The rejection was directly led by the village head, while Banyumas Regent was responsible for the destruction (<https://regional.kompas.com/read/2020/04/03>).

Various panic behaviors were portrayed by people discriminating against medical personnel. These health workers were evicted by owners of residences (boarding, rented house) due to being considered as virus carriers. An initial event occurred in Sukoharjo district where three nurses were ejected by the homestay owner, despite also being a midwife. The decision was triggered by the insistence of other residents worried about contracting the virus (<https://news.detik.com/berita/d-4995283>). Further discrimination was also recorded in several big cities, including Jakarta, Palembang, Banda Aceh, Lampung, and Medan. Medical personnel such as doctors and nurses were poorly treated by neighbors and were also evicted. The hospital where they worked became a resort before the local government provided a special hotel (<https://megapolitan.kompas.com/read/2020/03/25>).

The panic also hit financial market players. In addition, exchange rate of the rupiah against several foreign currencies, including United States dollar, Yen, and Euro dropped significantly in just a few weeks, e.g., the rupiah against US dollars fell by 2,250 in 3 weeks. The capital outflows also scaled, immediately followed by a declining national economy. Furthermore, thousands of companies reported plans to cut down jobs. This resulted to government providing incentives such as delaying payment of installments for 6 months and providing tax incentives valued at 123.01 trillion rupiahs or a 30% discount, in an effort to cushion the effects, although, layoffs were inevitable. The laid-off workers up until mid-May 2020, reached 15 million (<https://www.cnnindonesia.com/ekonomi/20200501181726>).

The enactment of the PSBB policy in big cities caused a complicated situation for laid off workers with a high standard of living. In addition, many were stranded and unable to return to their hometowns due to travel prohibitions. However, some devised various forms in order to survive, such as acting as homeless people or looking for other unguarded routes or short cuts. Also, some were forced to live on the streets or uncontrolled public spaces, e.g, under bridges and empty government buildings due to inability to pay rent. Meanwhile, others fortunate to have returned home, were rejected by several residents for fear of contacting the virus, although few were discovered to be carriers. Therefore, hospitals in small towns were reported to treat the influx of Covid-19 patients after the Eid Al-Fitr 1441 H.

Three cases of panic shown in the graph below.



4. Data Analysis

Several concepts and theories have been developed to explain human behavior in the face of emergencies. The earliest proposal by Le Bon in 1895 indicated the higher tendency for a unified mind amongst individuals in crowds exposed to strong group pressure and panic situations, therefore leading to irrational behavior (2004). This postulation is the foundation for studies related to collective behavior. In addition, the related theories developed in the early twentieth century argue about possibility of identity loss by individual's comforted with physical threats. This is followed by an immersion in group emotions, elimination of rational considerations, and an increase in mob mentality (Drury, 2002).

This theory is limited in explaining public panic over the COVID-19 outbreak. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) recommendations, people are expected to maintain a distance between 1-2 meters from each other in crowds. The coronavirus is easily transmitted through physical contact, which is facilitated by close contact with one another. Le Bon's concept indicates the inability for communities to feel the pressure of groups or masses. Therefore, people are assumed to be relatively independent in acting and making decisions on a broad and macro scope. This indicates the protection of individual identity and also known to have not formed from Le Bon's description of a collective mind.

Contagion theory stipulates collective behavior as irrational, and also as a product of interpersonal transmissions. Le Bon (2004) analyzed specific subconscious processes, where information or beliefs were spread throughout social groups, in the form of mass transmission. Therefore, individuals outside the main actor were considered as passive, featuring a tendency to easily hypnotize. Despite the wide refutation of this theory through empirical studies, the popularity is retained due to the ease to proffer an explanation for several events, e.g., mass behavior in dealing with natural disasters, including the 2004 and 2018 Tsunami in Aceh and Palu, respectively. In addition, groups of people influence individuals, and instigate the development of mob mentality, as well as the loss of thinking ability. The crowd is trapped in the experience of a small group of people, followed by the demonstration of emotional and irrational behavior. Furthermore, sociologists engaged in this field were implicated in empirical researches from the 1960s, featuring the rejection of concepts and theories, as observed with Smelser (1963), Turner and Killian (1973). The arguments constructed were contrary to classical theory, as Smelser attributed collective behavior as motivated by generalized beliefs associated with demand change. These opinions were related to political and economic conditions, alongside deviations, violations of norms, and others. Contagion is more driven by ongoing interaction where the parties interpret the meaning of actions as demonstrated by Blumer (1969) and recent studies of Burgess et al. (2018) in educational institutions.

Public panic over the dangers of COVID-19 was not quickly transmitted, and also had no influence on the formation of mob mentality or hypnosis of individuals. In addition, the respective social identity was determined to be very clear, with the capacity to mobilize measures needed to counter the danger of this outbreak. However, the transmission of panic to various places was indicated by the expulsion of nurses from personal homes, rejection of sufferers' bodies in various areas, refutation of residents returning to villages, and various other forms. In addition, the patients' identity is not lost, and the ability to think rationally facilitates panic. The informal leaders in Semarang responsible for the mobilization of residents to block the ambulance of the corpse carrier argued saying, "if there is a tomb of COVID-19 sufferer in this village, we are all threatened". Despite the fallacies of logic, rationally reasoning is discerned as the citizens reportedly moved.

In the midst of doubts about the accuracy of crowd theory and contagion, emerging norm theory emerged from Turner and Killian (1973). This affiliated group behaviors, including

crowd formation, riots, and others with the development of new norms, in response to crisis or panic. Furthermore, the novel customs are unstable, appear immediately, and justify the individuals' behavior in response to external factors assumed to threaten safety. These characteristics are formed through a brief experience and are modifiable by means of crowd development (Lemonik Arthur, 2013). The process is initiated by the sudden exposure to a new or foreign situation, alleged to be significantly different from daily events. Therefore, the norms justify members' actions, both to survive and escape quickly from threats. Hence, collective panic results in joint action, with no absolute pattern. The novel customs in this study are not observed in the general sense of tens or hundreds of years old social institutions. These are only a quick "agreement" between members, aimed at accelerating escape from threats.

The emerging norms theory has some disadvantages, and various studies have shown the prevalence of old panic norms in the crowd. The public response towards related situations is contrary to the predictions. For example, people prioritized saving women and children during the terrorism against the World Trade Center in 2001, and also demonstrated acts of mutual assistance (Antao, 2013). Meanwhile, mass panic rarely occurs and is short-lived on appearance. The persistence of rational disposition in cases of extraordinary events indicates the inability for panic to hit the entire community. This condition has been observed in the WTC terror, the sinking of Titanic, as well as the bombings in Bali in 2002, 2004 (Gurtner, 2004; Henderson, 2008) and Jakarta in 2016.

Panic shopping, rejection of bodies, and expulsion of medical personnel from personal homes are not customary, as these actions were performed rationally to protect the community. However, the norms emerged in confronting crises, following the governments' suggestions after heeding the advice of health authorities. These include the act of washing hands with soap, wearing masks, maintaining a physical distance from one another, avoiding crowds, and staying at home. In addition, the norms are expected to be observed as the daily behavior of the community, in order to successfully form a healthy lifestyle. The public panic demonstrated in dealing with Covid-19 does not eliminate old norms, but is rather used to help people manage the current crises. Meanwhile, Indonesian people have strong social capital in several places, including cooperation, *arisan*, *tulung-tinulung* (mutual help). These help the government deal with the economic crisis, estimated to have resulted from the outbreak.

The theory of moral panic was generated following the public reaction to threats of declining morality, which result from crowd behavior. This concept was postulated by sociologist Stanley Cohen (1973) after the examination of mass clashes on the coasts of South England. Cohen interpreted these event or situations as threats to the interests of the wider community, and rhetorically expanded by the media. This representation creates "folk devils" and victims, including societal morality. In addition, the publications further create public panic, because of the threats to moral and social values. This condition prompted government actions by formulating rules to prevent a wider public panic, aimed at controlling the behavior of groups, and tempering public anger (Eversman, 1233) (Eversman MH and Bird JD, 2017; Mannion and Small, 2019).

The public panic observed in the first half of 2020 was not a reaction to the violation of community norms. This perception prevents the classification as a moral panic, based on the statement by Cohen. In addition, the invisible danger from viruses increased the challenges experienced during the prevention and resistance. The continuous spread to astonishing number of sufferers is worthy of questioning the scientific authority of health institutions. However, peace and trust in a community is only possibly realized through prompt and effective management. The delayed use of a large state budget answers the problems, increases public cynicism, and further reduces trust for government and health authorities. Moreover, these

parastatals not exactly referred to as folk devils, or discrimination against ethnic Chinese. The term 'folk devils' is proper to be given to terrorists who threaten social order (Dingley & Hermann, 2017) and organizations or groups (Alonso & Delgado, 2020).

Based on the analysis above, more focus is possibly drawn to public panic characteristics in dealing with Covid-19. First, the cause is viruses, and not natural disasters, fires, bombings, terror, sinking ships, or other accidents. Therefore, the impending danger is invisible and requires special countermeasures or expertise. The panic bubble continuously increases after the owners of academically proven expertise become victims, with no reliable power to neutralize the event. In addition, each party is expected to conduct self-defense by following the prevention protocol, although freedom from infection is not necessarily guaranteed. This condition creates an atmosphere of mutual suspicion for one another, assuming an individual to be a potential source of transmission. Despite the reason to care for each other, thousands of people are separated from family members, thus negating friendship and worship.

Second, individuals estranged from the crowd are expected to perform social and physical distancing. Furthermore, recommendations for Indonesians with primary institutions, characterized by community groups, including cooperation, *arisan*, patrolling, and community service to maintain distance are not easily realized. Moreover, asocial behavior is commonly opposed by the community, resulting from the views contrary to cultural values. Third, the public in panic are free to move, despite the restrictions, especially on the large-scale or based on local social limitations. This freedom promotes the individuals ability to act rationally. However, panic spending, rejection of bodies, expulsion of medical personnel, decreasing value of the rupiah, and layoffs were performed precisely through reasonable calculations. Fourth, regarding the macroscope and long duration, the community deliberated on preferable ways to overcome the current threat.

Based on the incidence of Covid-19 threats, the study of collective behavior is enriched with a different type of public panic, compared to previous studies introduced by Le Bon (2004), Turner and Killian (1973) and Cohen (1973). These forms occur on a macro scale, with a long duration in individuals with limited rationality, especially in the face of invisible dangers. Furthermore, the authorities, both political and academic, are unable to immediately devise a convincing remediation approach.

5. Conclusion

Based on the above analysis, new findings are obtained in the study of collective behavior, indicating the uncertainty of panic incidence in a crowd. This is observed especially in situations where people scramble to locate a way out of life-threatening danger. In addition, there have also been similar manifestations amongst people absent from a limited locus, but in open spaces, as observed in the Coronavirus experience. The efforts made are aimed at developing a defense from the invisible virus attacks. Also, the human characteristic of community togetherness as a social creature ought to be modified into the maintenance of distance and wearing protective equipment.

The behavior of limited rationality was demonstrated by a fraction of community members, through the purchase of staples, medical equipment, rejection of corpses, the expulsion of medical personnel from the neighborhood, and market panic. However, people were able to think rationally and convert panic into vigilance. The government efforts assisted by religious leaders have been successful in controlling individual behavior, and also play an important role in preventing dangerous situations. In addition, a new lifestyle, previously campaigned for in the mid-2000s and popularly known as the Clean and Healthy Lifestyle (PHBS) was accomplished as the new norm, following the Covid-19 protocol. This study

established the occurrence of public panic, not only in the face of terror, fire, natural disasters, dead ships, towers collapse, but also with the incidence of invisible dangers, including viruses. The situation is expected to last long enough under circumstances where the political and academic authorities fail to quickly devise a convincing solution to the public.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declare that there are no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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