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Conflicted Reflections amongst Civilian Participants in the May 1998 Race Riots in Indonesia

Eunike Mutiara Himawan, Annie Pohlman and Winnifred R. Louis

Abstract: In the final days of Suharto's 'New Order' military regime in Indonesia (1966–1998), large-scale riots broke out across the capital and several other cities. Amid the Asian financial crisis, mounting political unrest and demonstrations calling for an end to the New Order, the military sought to deflect public anger by scapegoating Indonesia's ethnic Chinese minority, blaming them for the financial turmoil. Chinese Indonesians and their properties became the target of killings, looting and destruction. As with other state-led atrocities in Indonesia, there has never been any official redress for the May 1998 riots, and they remain a taboo topic. This article explores the testimonies of thirty-one civilians (twenty-six men, five women) who took part in the riots. All participated in looting, some in a range of other violent criminal activities, including arson and sexual assaults. Using a social psychological approach, we undertake a thematic narrative analysis of the conflicted feelings of those civilians as expressed in anonymous interviews twenty years after these events. We found the trajectory of changing emotions over time, and how identified changes in participants' social identity influence a change in their feelings. This article explores the narrative techniques participants used to avoid acknowledging their complicity in the mass violence, revealing different, sometimes paradoxical, ongoing justifications.

Keywords: May 1998 riots, civilian perpetrators, conflicted feelings, social identity, race riots, Chinese Indonesians

Introduction

In May 1998, race riots broke out across several of Indonesia's cities, targeting the Chinese-Indonesian ethnic minority.[1] In the months prior, social and political tensions had sharpened across the country; hyper-inflation had seen the cost of basic foods spiral, millions had lost their jobs amid the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997–1998, and student-led protests calling for an end to General Suharto's long-standing 'New Order' authoritarian regime had steadily

1 Jemma Purdey, *Anti-Chinese Violence in Indonesia, 1996–1999* (Singapore: Asian Studies Association of Australia in association with Singapore University Press, 2006).

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grown into a mass-supported, people-power movement demanding change.[2] Military leaders attempted to deflect public anger against the government by scapegoating Chinese Indonesians—a minority that had endured a long history of ethnic persecution, prejudice and stigmatisation based on their perceived economic dominance as a 'money-lending' class[3]—blaming them for the economic crisis gripping the country. At the height of the mass protests, on 12 May 1998, troops fired on a group of students in Jakarta, killing four of them; this incident sparked an outpouring of popular rage and grief. Over the following two days, widespread lootings engulfed the capital, Jakarta, with riots spreading to other cities.[4]

Tens of thousands of Indonesians took to the streets to take part in the riots, burning and looting shops and residences thought to belong to the 'rich Chinese', and raping an unknown number of Chinese-Indonesian women and girls.[5] In Jakarta, malls and other properties known to be Chinese-owned were looted and set on fire. A week later, Suharto finally stepped down, ending more than three decades of military rule.

We examine the testimonies of thirty-one Indonesian civilians (twenty-six men and five women) who took part in the riots in Jakarta, recorded in anonymised online interviews in 2021–2022.[6] Participants were recruited using a snowball technique; a participant in a separate anonymous online survey self-selected to take part in a follow-up interview with Eunike. During that interview, the participant

2 See *The Last Days of President Suharto*, ed. by Edward Aspinall, Herb Feith and Gerry van Klinken (Clayton: Monash Asia Institute, 1999).

3 On the historical construction of 'Chinese' and 'indigenous' (*Pribumi*) Indonesians, see Charlotte Setijadi, *Memories of Unbelonging: Ethnic Chinese Identity Politics in Post-Suharto Indonesia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2023).

4 The most intense riots were in Jakarta on 13–14 May 1998, but riots and looting of Chinese properties in Medan had begun on 4 May (see Purdey, *Anti-Chinese Violence*, p. 116). Chinese Indonesian women were also sexually assaulted during these earlier and later riots (see Komnas Perempuan, *Temuan Tim Gabungan Pencari Fakta Peristiwa Kerusuhan Mei 1998 [Findings of the Joint Fact Finding Team for the Event of the May 1998 Riots]* (Jakarta: Komnas Perempuan, 2006). After 12 May, riots spread to other cities, the largest in Solo, Palembang, and Surabaya.

5 The number of rapes has never been thoroughly investigated; see Tim Relawan untuk Kemanusiaan, *Early Documentation No. 3. The Rapes in the Series of Riots* (Jakarta: Tim Relawan untuk Kemanusiaan, 13 July 1998), <http://our21.com/Indo/atrocities.html> [accessed 21 April 2024].

6 Interviews were undertaken by Eunike Mutiara Himawan as part of her PhD research, for which the project held ethical clearance through the University of Queensland (No. 2020000227). Due to COVID-19 pandemic, all participant recruitment and data collection took place online. All participant data has been anonymised.

communicated that she knew people in her community in Jakarta who had taken part in the riots. This participant then referred these people on to Eunike, who recruited further participants through these initial contacts. This anonymous, snowball recruitment was used to identify and interview all thirty-one participants. Interviews were conducted online by Eunike, who is a younger, Chinese-Indonesian woman, and all transcripts were de-identified, and the original recordings deleted to ensure anonymity. Deductive and inductive thematic analysis was conducted through coding of the interview transcripts and the identification of themes. This was initially done by Eunike, then checked by Annie, who is a non-native Indonesian speaker. Afterward, parts of the transcripts were translated into English, allowing the themes to also be examined by Winnifred.[7]

These interviews were the first conducted by researchers with perpetrators of the May riots; despite the scale of these events, there has never been an official accounting for the mass violence.[8] As with other cases of state-sponsored violence in Indonesia, there has never been a full investigation, nor prosecutions of perpetrators, nor redress for survivors, and they remain a politically taboo topic.[9] No research has been conducted with perpetrators from the security services who coordinated and led the violent attacks on Chinese Indonesians and it remains unsafe to do this research. As such, there are limited avenues to explore these individuals' motivations, and how their membership within the security services may have shaped their motivations and actions.[10] The few researchers who have explored accounts of the riots have focused on the experiences of survivors, predominantly members

7 See Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, 'Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3.2 (2006), 77-101.

8 There was a Fact-Finding team established by the interim government four months after the riots whose findings were published in November 1998, but the findings were deemed entirely unreliable; see Marianne Klute, 'Women Against Violence: A Spectator's View on Political Change Within and Initiated by the Indonesian Women's Movement', in *Violence in Indonesia*, ed. by Ingrid Wessel (Hamburg: Abera Verlag Markus Voss, 2001), pp. 210-25.

9 See Katharine McGregor and Ken Setiawan, 'Shifting from International to "Indonesian" Justice Measures: Two Decades of Addressing Past Human Rights Violations', *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 49.5 (2019), 837-61; Eunike Mutiara Himawan, Annie Pohlman and Winnifred Louis, 'Revisiting the May 1998 Riots in Indonesia: Civilians and Their Untold Memories', *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 41.2 (2022), 240-57.

10 A comparative model to that used in our study which integrates individual, intragroup and intergroup level motivations, but which also emphasises contextual factors, might usefully be applied with security service actors, such as the 'Complexity of Evil' model proposed in Timothy Williams, *The Complexity of Evil: Perpetration and Genocide* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2021), p. 42.

of the Chinese-Indonesian diaspora who left Indonesia following the riots.[11] While our participants were not the primary actors in inciting or driving the riots, they voluntarily contributed to the violence and were complicit in perpetrating a range of violent acts targeting ethnic Chinese people and properties. In this article, we examine how participants used a range of narrative strategies to essentially avoid acknowledging their complicity; complicity understood as "committing an act that potentially contributes to the wrongdoing of others in some *causal* way."[12] Through these narratives, participants overwhelmingly downplayed their active perpetration of violent acts and even where they acknowledged their own harmdoing, excused it as socially normative. To show these strategies, we delve into their responses to questions about their feelings and personal reflections on their complicity in the mass violence: specifically, how they felt during the riots (reported to the best of their recollection), and then how they felt when reflecting on their actions, more than twenty years later.[13]

Through thematic analysis, we found three general patterns or trajectories in these self-reported feelings: (1) those who found participation in the riots fun but also frightening at the time, and who regretted their involvement now; (2) those who did not recall 'feeling anything much' or reported feeling 'normal' at the time, but who also felt regret now; and (3) those who found participating thrilling and fun in 1998, and who expressed feeling no regret twenty years later. All five women in this study belonged to the first cohort, and we highlight some of the gendered dynamics that shape participation in violence. Within the first thematic trajectory, we identified a sub-theme; those who found participating in the riots fun and thrilling, with no elements of fear.

11 See Monika S. Winarnita, Carol Chan and Leslie Butt, 'Narratives of Exile Twenty Years On: Long-Term Impacts of Indonesia's 1998 Violence on Transnational Chinese-Indonesian Women', *Identities*, 27.2 (2020), 191-209.

12 Chiara Lepora and Robert E. Goodin, *On Complicity and Compromise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 6, emphasis in original. See also pp. 82-83, on defining complicity (noting that Lepora and Goodin are focused on how we make moral assessments at the time of the action, rather than retrospective judgement).

13 Reported experiences from more than 20 years earlier are likely to contain gaps and distortions but offer, nonetheless, valuable insights; see Ronald J. Grele, 'Oral History as Evidence', in *History of Oral History: Foundations and Methodology*, ed. by Thomas L. Charlton, Lois E. Myers and Rebecca Sharpless (Lanham: Altamira, 2007), pp. 33-94. Interpersonal dynamics (gender, age, class) and socially conditioned expectations for permissible speech may have shaped our participants' narratives; Eunike is a younger, Chinese-Indonesian woman, and she interviewed mostly older male, *pribumi* participants. See Eunike Mutiara, 'The Psychological Perspectives of Civilians and Civilian Perpetrators of the May 1998 Riots in Indonesia' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Queensland, 2023).

Categories	Themes	Sub-theme	N=	Gender	Age (1998)	Age (2022)
General trajectories	Fun and scared in past, regret now.		14	female	21	45
				female	24	48
				female	25	49
				female	32	56
				female	34	58
				male	15	39
				male	24	48
				male	26	50
				male	26	50
				male	27	51
				male	29	53
				male	30	54
				male	30	54
				male	31	55
		Fun in past, regret now.	2	male	16	40
				male	27	51
	Felt 'nothing' or 'normal' in the past, regret now.		9	male	22	46
				male	25	49
				male	25	49
				male	26	50
				male	27	51
				male	27	51
				male	28	52
				male	40	64
				male	46	70
	Fun in past, no regret now.		4	male	18	42
				male	23	47
				male	28	52
				male	38	62
Exceptional themes	Shocked in past, trauma now.		1	male	12	36
	Felt nothing in past, no regret.		1	male	17	41

Table 1: Participants' Thematic Trajectories of Reported Feelings from 1988 to 2022.

There were two outlier patterns or trajectories in self-reported feelings: one man, the youngest of our participants, only twelve years old in 1998, who expressed being shocked and horrified by the violence he witnessed and stated that he experienced ongoing trauma ('I still get flashbacks from the past, it's all still stuck in my brain'), which he attributed to witnessing sexual violence; and one other man who said he felt 'nothing' in 1998 and felt no regret now. A summary of these thematic trajectories, noting the number, ages (in 1998 and in 2022) and gender of participants, is presented in Table 1.

We examine these feelings in view of the dominant narrative strategy that participants used to rationalise their involvement, a socially normative rhetoric of 'just going along with it' (*ikut-ikutan aja*). This narrative allowed them to position themselves as conforming to the group and being carried along by a collective project, rather than being individual agents responsible for perpetrating a crime. Our concern here, however, is with the emotional elements of our participants' stories, rather than their reported motivations or justifications for what they did, examined in-depth elsewhere.[14] We are interested in the trajectory of those emotions over time, and how these reported changes in feelings may reflect changes in how participants understand themselves and their actions. We are also interested in the narrative techniques participants use when articulating those changes, which reveal a range of sometimes paradoxical continuing justifications. These strategies underpinned by the *ikut-ikutan* rhetoric 'aligned' their actions with those of their broader group, removing their agency, thereby enabling them to avoid acknowledging their complicity in the violence.[15]

We explore these three trajectories using a social psychological approach based on Social Identity Theory (SIT) which posits that people who belong to a group have a common collective identity that influences their thoughts, emotions, and behaviours.[16] Strong social identities may encourage people to conform to the social standards (or norms) of their group, including using violence during periods of confrontation and

14 See Mutiara, 'The Psychological Perspectives of Civilians'.

15 As Ivan Stacy points to, complicity in mass violence is often preceded by processes of 'alignment' whereby 'an individual's personal, political, or ideological allegiances shape their behavior' which are part of the 'enabling conditions' that lead to their involvement in wrongdoing. Ivan Stacy, *The Complicit Text: Failures of Witnessing in Postwar Fiction* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2021), p. 22.

16 Henri Tajfel and John Turner, 'An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict', in *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, ed. by William G. Austin and Stephen Worchel (Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1979), pp. 33-47.

crisis.[17] The social identity account of rioting emphasises these shared understandings amongst group members and what the group deems legitimate and illegitimate action.[18] As particular behaviours become normative (such as looting or sexual violence), crowd members feel entitled and even pressured to act.[19]

Critically for our analysis in this article, a person's feelings may change as their social identity changes. The crowd identity in a riot becomes less salient as the riot subsides, and the rioter must then reconcile their remembered actions with their other day-to-day identities, such as that of a family member, law-abiding citizen, or person of faith.[20] Whether or not participants experience shame, grief, and horror depends on whether the legitimising narratives of the riot can be sustained and whether counter-narratives of bigotry, criminality and degeneracy intrude.[21] Especially when counter-narratives are spread within the person's own networks, so that actions are framed as non-normative from identities that are salient to the perpetrators now, regret and distancing from past actions will dominate.

Generally, participants in the first and second cohorts, whose social identities were challenged in some way by changes in their identity over time (in turn changing their feelings about what they had done), expressed regret. Those in the third cohort, whose identities were not similarly challenged, did not express changes in how they felt and held more strongly to narratives which maintained the justification of the riots as a collective project. We highlight how the maintenance of this socially normative narrative relied on techniques of moral disengagement and neutralisation to position their actions as less blameworthy or wrongful, thereby avoiding acknowledging complicity.[22] These findings from the

17 Winnifred R. Louis, Donald M. Taylor and Tyson Neil, 'Cost-Benefit Analyses for Your Group and Yourself: The Rationality of Decision-Making in Conflict', *The International Journal of Conflict Management*, 15.2 (2004), 110-43.

18 See John Drury and others, 'How Crowd Violence Arises and How It Spreads: A Critical Review of Theory and Evidence', in *The Handbook of Collective Violence: Current Developments and Understanding*, ed. by Carol A. Ireland and others (New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 175-87.

19 John Drury and Steve Reicher, 'Collective Psychological Empowerment as a Model of Social Change: Researching Crowds and Power', *Journal of Social Issues*, 65.4 (2009), 707-25.

20 See Catherine E. Amiot and others, 'Bringing Together Humanistic and Intergroup Perspectives to Build a Model of Internalisation of Normative Social Harmdoing', *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 50.3 (2020), 485-504.

21 Brett T. Litz and others, 'Moral Injury and Moral Repair in War Veterans: A Preliminary Model and Intervention Strategy', *Clinical Psychology Review*, 29.8 (2009), 695-706.

22 See Albert Bandura, 'Moral Disengagement in the Perpetration of Inhumanities', *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 3.3 (1999), 193-209. On moral neutralisation: Gresham M. Sykes and

May riots contribute not only to understanding the sometimes slippery nature of perpetrator justifications for violence in the modern Indonesian context but also to understanding the dynamics of mass participation in political violence elsewhere.

Civilian Complicity in Context

The participants in our study self-identified as 'taking part' in the race riots of May 1998,[23] but to contextualise their complicity and culpability, first we briefly sketch some important socio-political and historical factors. Foremost among these was the deliberate scapegoating of Chinese Indonesians by the New Order military government, as well as the role that the security services played in inciting and coordinating the violence. An investigation by civil society groups in the immediate aftermath of the riots found that they had been instigated by state security actors, and pointed to patterns that strongly indicated coordination by these same actors, particularly in the sexual assaults on Chinese-Indonesian women.[24] For example, the investigation echoed reports made at the time of how 'several groups of men moved systematically from floor to floor' of apartment buildings known to have predominantly Chinese residents, 'attacking Chinese women'.[25] The descriptions given by eyewitnesses for these roving groups of men often drew attention to their combat boots, short haircuts and muscular body types, all euphemistic descriptions commonly used for soldiers.[26]

David Matza, 'Techniques of Neutralization: A Theory of Delinquency', *American Sociological Review*, 22.6 (1957), 664-70. This work has subsequently been adapted across numerous disciplines; for example, in Kjell Anderson, '"Who Was I to Stop the Killing?": Moral Neutralization among Rwandan Genocide Perpetrators', *Journal of Perpetrator Research*, 1.1 (2017), 39-63.

23 Participants' self-reported involvement could not be cross-checked for reliability given the necessity of preserving anonymity, and the online recruitment and collection of data. Their descriptions of events, and riots in particular suburbs of Jakarta, however, were consistent with previous reporting.

24 Tim Relawan untuk Kemanusiaan, Korban Kekerasan Seksual Kerusuhan Mei 1998 (Jakarta: Tim Relawan untuk Kemanusiaan, 15 October 1998); and Tim Relawan untuk Kemanusiaan, Early Documentation No. 3.

25 Susan Berfield and Dewi Loveard, 'Ten Days that Shook Indonesia', Asiaweek, 24 July 1998, cited in The Last Days, pp. 53–64, 60. See also Karen Strassler, 'Gendered Visibilities and the Dream of Transparency: The Chinese-Indonesian Rape Debate in Post-Suharto Indonesia', Gender and History, 16.3 (2004), 689-725.

26 See, for example, *Tim Relawan untuk Kemanusiaan, Sujud di Hadapan Korban: Tragedi Jakarta Mei 1998* (Jakarta: Divisi Data TRK, 1998), 4-5; Greg Poulgrain, 'Tien Dagen in Jakarta', *De*

Thus, popular participation in the May 1998 riots should not be seen either as a case of civilians 'running amok', enflamed to collective violence by deep-rooted enmities,[27] or as the seemingly inevitable escalation to violence by the people-power movement engaged in collective protest.[28] Rather, the May riots follow the pattern of military-civilian perpetration of previous incidents of state-sponsored atrocities during the New Order; whilst the Indonesian state's official narratives often depict these incidents as 'spontaneous' outbreaks of popular fury or aggression, research consistently shows that the primary perpetrators were the Indonesian military, but with civilians coopted to play various roles in the violence.[29] To date, no research has been undertaken with these primary perpetrators of the May riots from the security services into their actions or motivations, and it is unlikely that such research could be conducted safely, given the present context of blanket impunity for state crimes and the high level of risk to potential informants.[30] Our research was conducted with 'secondary' civilian perpetrators, all recruited and interviewed anonymously.

Most of the civilians who took to the streets in May 1998 took part in looting, but some also committed arson, physical assaults, sexual assaults, and other criminal acts. That these civilians were undeniably incited to violence by state actors in no way lessens their individual culpability. They were also a minority of the population; in Jakarta, for example, the tens of thousands of civilians who reportedly took part represented only a very small fraction of that city's more than ten million inhabitants, most of whom stayed home.[31]

Groene Amsterdammer, 24 June 1998 <groene.nl/artikel/tien-dagen-in-jakarta> [accessed 10 December 2024].

27 Although popular in some reporting, cultural reductionist interpretations of mass violence in Indonesia belie the strong patterns across episodes; see, for example, John T. Sidel, *Riots, Pogroms, Jihad: Religious Violence in Indonesia* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2007).

28 Following Ted Gurr's 'relative deprivation' theory, which he later revised to understand how collective senses of grievance and injustice can mobilise collective violence; see Tedd Robert Gurr, *Why Men Rebel: Fortieth Anniversary Edition* (London: Routledge, 2011).

29 On these patterns, see: for the 1965–1966 massacres, Jess Melvin, *The Army and the Indonesian Genocide: Mechanics of Mass Murder* (New York: Routledge, 2018); on the East Timorese occupation, see *Masters of Terror: Indonesia's Military and Violence in East Timor*, ed. by Richard Tanter, Desmond Ball and Gerry van Klinken (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006); on the separatist war in Aceh, see Matthew N. Davies, Indonesia's War over Aceh: Last Stand on Mecca's Porch (New York: Routledge, 2006).

30 See Annie Pohlman, 'Telling Stories about Torture in Indonesia: Managing Risk in a Culture of Impunity', *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale*, 33 (2013), 1-17.

31 For a discussion of ordinary Indonesians' recollections of the riots, see Himawan, Pohlman and Louis, 'Revisiting the May 1998 Riots'.

Most reports from the time describe these civilians as the urban poor, not the students who had mobilized in their thousands as part of the mass demonstrations protesting the government.[32] They were also *pribumi*, an umbrella term used to encompass a very large range of Indonesian ethnicities to denote 'native' or 'indigenous' Indonesians. The term, however, is highly politicised and exclusionary, specifically, it is used for 'the purpose of demarcating the Chinese as non-*pribumi*, as non-native.'[33] These characteristics observed in reports from the time reflect those of our participants. All were poor, *pribumi*, and (as with most Indonesians) Muslim: most of the men were manual labourers or worked in other low-paid jobs (aside from the five teenage boys who were still in school), whilst for the women, two were housewives, two were cleaners, and one worked in a factory. Of the thirty-one participants, four had finished middle school, twenty-five high school, and two had done further study. The participants were between twelve and forty-six years old in 1998; five were teenagers, eighteen were in their twenties, six in their thirties, and two in their forties. The range of criminal acts in which they had engaged varied: all thirty-one participants had engaged in looting, with most taking groceries but some also taking luxury goods such as jewellery. Six of the men had committed physical assaults and arson. Three of the men had taken part in multiple assailant sexual assaults against Chinese-Indonesian teenage girls.[34]

To examine how our participants felt during the riots and now, more than twenty years later, we note here briefly our findings on their motivations. We applied an integrative framework that examined these motivations across individual, intragroup and intergroup factors, and our analyses showed the dynamic interaction between those factors. These findings pointed to how, for example, incitement from peers (an intragroup factor) played a significant role in motivating participation, but so too did thrill-seeking, greed, and other personal factors. Intergroup motivational factors, such as the historical antagonism and prejudice between Chinese and *pribumi* Indonesians, were also reported: the majority of participants frequently brought up anti-Chinese sentiments, by openly admitting that they were targeting Chinese people or by implicitly agreeing that

32 See the various news reports compiled in *The Last Days*, n.p.

33 Setijadi, p. 3.

34 Given our small sample size, we have not attempted to differentiate distancing and neutralising between those who undertook looting and those who committed more serious crimes (assaults, sexual assault, arson). A separate paper examining these sexual assault perpetrators is in preparation.

Chinese Indonesians were acceptable targets for violence.[35] Further, while none explicitly noted direct incitement by state security actors, many recounted how 'the Chinese' were blamed by those actors.

In our findings regarding their motivations, the 'just going along with it' narrative spoke to the strong intragroup dynamics at play and their adherence to their group's social norms at the time. In interviews, participants explained how the encouragement of friends, family members and other peers was a strong motivator. Consistent with previous research, this *ikut-ikutan* narrative of going along with the group's norms also allowed for personal responsibility to be disavowed, meaning that they no longer felt that they bore personal accountability but rather that responsibility was shared by the group as a whole.[36] According to social psychologists Robert Cialdini, Carl Kallgren and Raymond Reno, there is a descriptive or behavioural norm that describes violent behaviours as conceivable and expected, and an injunctive norm that justifies these acts as proper and socially acceptable.[37] From a social identity perspective, within groups, people are motivated to align with social standards by strong norms and social identities, regardless of the nature of the action.[38]

We turn now to the discussion of the three thematic trajectories. We have selected quotes from only some of our participants and these should be seen as indicative rather than exhaustive of the identified themes. We focus on how changes in individuals' identities challenge the social normative ikut-ikutan narrative, and the changes that this then brings to how individuals understand their past involvement in the riots. We also highlight the moral disengagement and neutralisation techniques that emerged in their narratives to minimise their wrongdoing, revealing the shifting dynamics by which civilian perpetrators found ways to minimise or deny culpability for their actions.

35 A further finding related to the culturally specific expression of aggressive masculinity and physical prowess (the term in Indonesian is '*jago*') in the context of seeking status within peer groups. See Mutiara, 'The Psychological Perspectives of Civilians'.

36 See Bandura, 'Moral Disengagement'. On agency within violent groups becoming 'transindividual' and depersonalised, see also Allen Feldman, *Formations of Violence: The Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 46-84.

37 Robert B. Cialdini, Carl A. Kallgren and Raymond R. Reno, 'A Focus Theory of Normative Conduct: A Theoretical Refinement and Reevaluation of the Role of Norms in Human Behaviour', *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 24 (1991), 201-34.

38 See Louis, Taylor and Neil, 'Cost-Benefit Analyses for Your Group and Yourself'; Clifford Stott, John Drury and Steve Reicher, 'On the Role of a Social Identity Analysis in Articulating Structure and Collective Action: The 2011 Riots in Tottenham and Hackney', *British Journal of Criminology*, 57.4 (2017), 964-81.

Theme 1: Fun and scared in the past, regret now

For this largest cohort—half (sixteen out of thirty-one) of our participants—there was a change between how they felt during the riots in 1998 and how they felt about their participation more than twenty years later. When recounting their feelings during the riots, their narratives reveal the dynamics of tumultuous emotions and feelings, with people experiencing swings in delight and fear. For example, one man (aged fifty in 2022), reflected:

> I have really mixed feelings about it actually, Miss. I felt afraid, but then I also felt really good. It felt great to be out there taking things. It was so exciting for us to be out grabbing things, even though [we were] afraid, afraid of being taken by the police.

As for this man, the sources of fear described by participants were mostly the threat posed by police or other authorities. For a few, the presence of the police seemed to heighten what they described as a collective feeling of excitement. This is seen in the narrative of another man (aged thirty-one) who recalled oscillations between the fear of being caught by the police, and feelings of excitement and fun:

> For sure I was pretty nervous, Miss [he laughs], that's for sure. I mean, I felt afraid but I just went along with it, but still I was afraid. At the road intersection at C__[a major road intersection in South Jakarta], there were heaps of police [...] heaps of police, [and I thought], what happens if I'm arrested? What'll happen to me then? [...] Although I was afraid, my heart was pounding! And then I was also feeling happy, and then my heart was beating fast! And then I was happy, but then I was also tired because it was also exhausting, Miss. Tired from running, tired from screaming out and calling out to my friends, 'Come on, let's do it!'

All sixteen in this cohort spoke of the 'fun', 'thrilling', or 'exciting' aspects of the riots, with fourteen of those also expressing that they had been afraid at the same time or highlighted the risks they faced while looting; the remaining two only spoke of taking part as fun or thrilling.

Also as seen in this thirty-nine-year-old man's account, for most, they linked their feelings of fun or excitement to the social and peer group aspects of joining in with friends and 'going along' with looting

and other acts of violence.[39] Participants spoke of joining large groups of people to run from place to place, ransacking shops. Also, as shown in one fifty-six-year-old woman's account, for some participants the larger group presence also reduced the perception of danger, or at least the threat of direct consequences to her as an individual:[40]

> Yes, [my heart] was beating hard, I was really nervous. I was scared too, scared, scared that the police would show up. My [heart] beat really hard, I was scared, but I [thought], why not? When I could see so many other people [looting]? 'Yeah, let's just do it', [I thought], so I made up my mind, 'let's just go grab things!' There were so many other people [I thought], 'if I get arrested then it'll be with lots of other people, heaps of other people.'

For all sixteen, when asked about how they felt now about their involvement in the riots, they then expressed some level of regret. However, how participants expressed regret for past actions and whether they continued to justify those actions varied. For some, their regret saw them categorise their past actions as clearly wrongful or harmful, and this was often marked by an identity transition from youth to adult, when they took on greater responsibilities, especially in work and toward family. One fifty-one-year-old man, for example, reflected:

> Back then, well, I felt just fine taking things. I was happy that I got the things I took. Except, afterwards, I started to feel sorry, pity, guilty, and my thoughts started changing. I became more, I don't know, more introspective about what I'd done. I thought to myself, for example, if I get married and have a family, if I had a shop, how would I like it? What if my shop had been looted? More to that way of thinking, thinking about karma.

For this man, who later empathised with the victims, he imagined he too were a father and a shop owner. He also linked this change in feelings and identity to *karma*, one of a range of justice beliefs expressed by participants (i.e., belief in a just world where there are consequences for past deeds), most of them associated with their religious beliefs.[41]

39 Similar to Neil Ferguson and James W. McAuley, 'Radicalization and Reaction: Understanding Engagement in Violent Extremism in Northern Ireland', *Political Psychology*, 41.2 (2020), 215–30.

40 See Armand E. Tedeschi and others, 'Fear in Groups: Increasing Group Size Reduces Perceptions of Danger', *Emotion*, 21.7 (2021), 1499–1510.

41 See Cindel J. M. White, Ara Norenzayan and Mark Schaller, 'The Content and Correlates of Belief in Karma Across Cultures', *Personal and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 45.8 (2018), 1184–1201.

For participants whose religious identity came to dominate their perceptions of the riots, they focused on spiritual consequences for past misdeeds. The expression of these religiously framed justice beliefs, however, rarely led participants to specifically link acknowledgement of wrongdoing with any kind of consequence for their complicity in the mass violence. Only one forty-eight-year-old woman spoke explicitly about her fears of being punished in the afterlife (*azab*) for what she had done. Rather, most articulations of regret remained abstract, as seen in the narrative by the same thirty-nine-year-old man cited above (who was fifteen at the time). This man also regretted his involvement, and he explained how his feelings changed as he got older and reflected on his faith, leading him to seek out guidance from a spiritual leader to help him wrestle with his thoughts. In his narrative, although he claims ignorance for why the riots happened, his identity as a man of faith became the lens for judging his past:

> The way I feel [now], about the things that I did, [I ask myself], what do they mean? Was I wrong or were my actions right? Things like that. I don't know how the whole story started, what the roots of the problem were, things like that. Why did the riots happen? I've thought about that, yes, later after I graduated from high school. It's a question of conscience that I've asked myself, and in the end it was something I had to ask my spiritual teacher about, [later] after I had started working and when I had time to do some self-correction work for the things in the past, the actions in my past, about whether they can be forgiven or whether they are mortal [sin] errors.

For others within this cohort who expressed regret for past actions, while they also framed their feelings in terms of adult group identities and empathised with the victims of the riots to deem their past actions wrongful, they nevertheless continued to justify those actions. These justifications were framed using various techniques of moral disengagement and neutralisation as ways to avoid acknowledging their complicity in the violence. This was seen, for example, in one fifty-four-year-old man's narrative of how he felt in 1998 and in 2022:

> Back then I was still young, my spirits were high, you see! I just went along with it, didn't I? 'C'mon, let's go here! Let's go here! Let's go!' But now I think, what if it had been my son's shop? Or, what if I had had a shop? What if it had been a family member? That's how I feel now, Miss.

> [...] I mean, just about everyone, all the citizens in Manggarai [a suburb of Jakarta] you could say were out there, just about all of them! They were all out looking to get things, [saying] 'Let's go! Let's go loot it all!' Some went to the markets, some went to the shops. That's the thing that really made an impression on me, a bad impression [he laughs]. I was scared though, Miss, I was scared but I still just went along with it, even though I was scared, it was scary.
>
> But I feel now that I did wrong, I just went and grabbed things and then went home. I feel bad about it now that I took those things. But here's the thing, I think too that I had to eat, didn't I? My younger siblings had to eat, my parents had to eat, Miss. Because getting enough money to get by was really tough back then, Miss, that's the truth, Miss. It's wrong though, actually, to take someone else's things, looting everywhere like that causes harm to society, Miss. But on the other hand, too, what about all the poor people who were doing it tough back then, Miss? Maybe that's true too, but I still feel sorry for what happened, Miss.

This actor first attributes his behaviour to being a part of wider groups of youth and past neighbours, identity frames which now have been superseded by his adult present identity, leaving him able to label the wrongdoing. But the legitimisation of the looting due to the need to provide for family members and the desire to escape poverty is still available to the speaker in the present day. Put differently, as for other members of this cohort, the socially normative 'going along with it' narrative remained throughout this man's interview, but it was challenged by other aspects of his identity, creating dissonance. This man's narrative of regret contains both empathetic engagements expressed through his adult identity as a father and a family man and, at the same time, techniques of moral neutralisation that continue to justify his actions. Here, those techniques are expressed again in terms of his identity as a member of his family (i.e., a need to feed his family) and through a social (intra-group) identity, that of a member of the urban poor, those who had been hardest hit by spiralling food prices during the Asian Financial Crisis. The techniques employed offer an appeal to family duties as well as a denial of responsibility and a claim to the normative support for the looting at the time, reducing the moral cost of his actions, and allowing him to avoid naming his complicity as

such.[42] Similar disengagement and neutralisation techniques were used by other members of this cohort, with most related to claims about the normality of their actions (i.e., many others were looting, so my actions simply conformed to my group's) and appeals to higher loyalties (in particular, to help one's family) in difficult economic times.

The five women in this study expressed similar challenges to the socially normative narrative when articulating their regret. At the same time, apparent gender norms that prohibit women from harm-doing, and encourage them to maintain compassionate relationships seemed to intensify present regret and distancing. As in other parts of the world, in Indonesia, dominant gender discourses contain both proscriptive and prescriptive gender norms that tend to channel more men than women into active violent roles during periods of mass violence.[43] In Indonesia, these norms are often tied to concepts of biological destiny (*kodrat*) which strongly inhibit women's direct participation in violence.[44] In the rare occurrences historically where women participated in group violence, powerful legitimising narratives, such as their need to join in a collective fight against a greater injustice, were mobilised.[45] For the small number of women who took part in our study, all expressed regret but continued to justify their actions with the same distancing technique (they were seeking to help their families in difficult financial times), mobilising this injunctive social norm to condone what would otherwise be deemed aberrant behaviour for women. The women also talked about their changes in feelings and regret in ways that tended to emphasise empathy with the victims. One woman (forty-eight years old), who had spoken of her fears of punishment in the afterlife, also highlighted a personal relationship with a victim as a prompt for her regret.

> I felt sorry for them, I mean, even though most of the Chinese people are really rich and all. My boss is Chinese, and so I asked him about what had happened during the looting and all that and my boss told me about how his brother's place had been looted too, and he was telling the truth. It was frightening, scary, just terrible, all of it.

42 Here, we draw on Anderson's modified 'genocidal techniques of neutralization' framework; see Anderson, '"Who Was I to Stop the Killing?"', p. 46.

43 See, for example, Sara E. Brown, '"They Forgot Their Role": Women Perpetrators of the Holocaust and the Genocide Against the Tutsi in Rwanda', *Journal of Perpetrator Research*, 3.1 (2020), 156-85.

44 See Saraswati Sunindyo, 'When the Earth is Female and the Nation is Mother: Gender, the Armed Forces and Nationalism in Indonesia', *Feminist Review*, 58.1 (1998), 1-21.

45 See, for example, Elizabeth F. Drexler, 'Victim-Warriors and Iconic Heroines: Photographs of Female Combatants in Aceh, Indonesia', *Critical Asian Studies*, 50.3 (2018), 395-421.

In other parts of her narrative, however, this woman continued to justify her involvement using similar neutralisation techniques to other participants ('everyone was doing it', 'the Chinese were rich', 'the poor were doing it tough') to avoid acknowledging her complicity, yet nevertheless, a personal relationship challenged those social identities and normative rhetoric. The other four women's narratives contained similar forms of moral neutralisation and disengagement (e.g., the fifty-eight year old's 'I was just a household maid… financially things were really tough') and similar challenges to the 'going along with it' normative social rationalisation, expressed through changes in social identities. These challenges were expressed through some form of empathetic engagement with the victims or an appeal to a common humanity; as one woman (forty-nine years old), stated, 'I mean, [they] were Chinese, but they were still people, right Miss? So we shouldn't have done what we did, so [I'm] sorry for them now, Miss.'

Theme 2: Felt 'nothing' or 'normal' in the past, regret now

Nine of the participants (all male) described feeling 'just normal' (a fifty-one-year-old) or 'not feeling much of anything at all' (a forty-nine-year-old) during the riots but expressed regret for their actions in 2021–2022. For a few, they described these feelings in 1998 as 'not thinking about it' (a seventy-year-old). The expressions of 'normal' feelings, or no feelings/thoughts, however, were all tied to the dominant socially normative narrative of 'going along with it'. All nine men articulated remembered absent or 'normal' feelings in terms of this descriptive social norm (everyone was doing it) which also diminished personal responsibility and positioned them as seemingly passive actors, as demonstrated in this sixty-four--year-old man's explanation:

> The day it happened, I didn't really have any thoughts, the important thing was that I went along with it, grab all the stuff, you know? I just had to get stuff, Miss, I just went [looting] here and there. I think it was a pity though. Now, I think it's a pity, Miss, and I wouldn't want to do it again, that's my point. On the day that it happened, I wasn't thinking at all, I just went along with it, went to grab as much as I could, had to get things, Miss. I went here and there [...] At the time, maybe it was just a way to survive, Miss. You see, after I'd gotten all that stuff, then I thought about it afterwards, now that I'm older, with a family. I mean, now that I'm

> older and have my own children, I'm worried about the next generation, even though we're the ones who did all those things. It wasn't us who did those things to them [the Chinese], but I'm afraid [because] what if things had been the other way around? What would have happened then? I feel sorry for it now.

In this man's testimony, he frames the prompt for his regret more than twenty years later in terms of his identity as a parent, challenging the socially normative youth identity that he remembered in 1998. Among the men in this cohort, most brought up similar challenges, articulating how their feelings about their actions had changed over the years, particularly since having children. Although there was a similar range of techniques to displace responsibility and to continue to justify their actions as in the first cohort, for most of these men (eight out of the nine), their change in social identity to that of a parent challenged their earlier socially normative narrative. As with the first cohort, where there were expressions of regret, these distancing and neutralisation techniques allowed participants to deny personal agency—and thereby avoid acknowledging their complicity—in their acts of wrongdoing.

Other later social identities were also tied to their change in feelings and expressions of regret. In the case of one seventy-year-old man, for example, his feelings of regret were articulated using his parent identity ('what it if had been my child?') but his identity had also changed because he had become more financially secure over the past two decades and now had his own small shop; in his narrative, he begins to identity with the victims of the looting as workers and business owners trying to get by, imagining how he would feel if it were his shop:

> I wasn't thinking anything at all, miss, I just grabbed stuff and I didn't feel sorry about it either. [...] But I was wrong. On the second day, I did really bad things. I'm ashamed of myself now when I talk about 98 actually. The things is, taking other people's things, judging them so harshly like that, it's just not right. I have a child now, a daughter. If I did those things now, I'd be terrified someone would do them to my child, and if I looted someone else's shop, I'd be afraid someone would come and take things from mine. Now I wonder what it would feel like if it happened to me.

As seen in this man's narrative, some participants in this cohort also expressed regret by articulating fears of negative consequences for past actions, though they stopped short of directly acknowledging

complicity. This man expressed a fear of retribution, visited upon his child and his shop. As with some participants in the first cohort, in this second group there were also those who came to view the riots through the lens of their religious identity, fearing spiritual consequences or retributive divine justice. One forty-nine-year-old man (like the fifty-one-year-old man discussed in Theme 1) conceptualised his fear of retribution in terms of karmic justice:

> I didn't [feel] anything much at all, what was important was that we grabbed things, that's what, I didn't feel anything at all about it. [...] Maybe after I had children, there were feelings though. Yeah, I felt in my heart, oh, this is wrong, the things that I did. Yeah, after I got married, I started to think about my family, I mean I started to think more about karma. Because there is definitely karma for the things that you do. And so, yes, I'm afraid that the same thing will happen to my family later on.

Again, as for most members of this cohort, this man's adult social identity as a parent/family man challenged his earlier social identity, leading to feelings of guilt and distancing.

Theme 3: Fun and frightening in the past, no regret now

For this final, smallest cohort (four men), they described similar remembered feelings of fun and excitement during the riots as the first cohort, each remembering the mass violence as thrilling and exciting, while also highlighting their fear. Similar also to the first cohort, these four men emphasised the social aspects of 'going along with it'. One man (forty-seven years old) spoke at length of how much fun he and his brothers had had taking part in the riots, and how 'great' it had been to get involved in physical fights and attack the police, while at the same time saying how 'scary' it had been. In the testimonies by this cohort, although their remembered social identity during the riots was sometimes challenged by other salient social identities in the present (particularly that of a parent), in their narratives they mobilised a range of techniques to justify their actions, expressing no regret. None of them framed their actions as wrongdoing and, in some cases, rather than the ikut-ikutan narrative eliding personal responsibility or complicity, these men described their actions as contributing to a greater good. One of the men (forty-two years old), for example, explained:

> I felt satisfied, Miss, when I grabbed hold of those bricks, then I was brawling like that. Yeah, I was happy to be going up against the police like that. Because, what do you do, Miss, if you don't like it? Getting in his face [the policeman's], what's wrong with that? [...] Back then, we'd call that still being young, barely finished school, and so we were just happy to get out there and see it, Miss, all this looting because we had no idea what the impacts would be, right? [He laughs].
>
> I feel much the same about it all now, Miss. Back then, if I'm not mistaken, during the transition, Amien Rais [a leading political figure in the Reformasi movement], he was the one who invited us all out to do the shouting and the demos, that's what it was for me. I was actually right to do it, was obligated even, Miss. Because it was the change, you see Miss, from the New Order, if you don't get out and move like that then nothing would have changed.
>
> [When asked if he would do the same thing again, he replied:] The difference is, I'm old now, Miss, I wouldn't be able to now. Back then I was still young, still just hanging out with friends here and there, but now that I have a family, that's the difference, I think, Miss! [He laughs.] But I wouldn't want my kids to do something like that!

While this actor did not fully escape the adult parent lens which allowed him to identify the potential wrongdoing of his actions ('now I have a family… I wouldn't want my kids to do something like that!'), by positioning the riots within the continuing narrative of dutifully responding to his leaders' call to fight oppression, his legitimisation is persistent. As a justifying technique, this man deliberately conflated the student-led (generally peaceful) mass demonstrations against the New Order military government of the months prior with the rioting, looting and state-led violence targeting Chinese Indonesians following the 12 May shootings. His social identity was not challenged and so his feelings did not change, and he felt no regret; rather, the socially normative identity of joining in and 'going up against' the police and the New Order's apparatus offered an intergroup lens through which he could see his past behaviour as still conforming with his social identity today.

For two of the other men in this last cohort, there were similar expressions of remembered fun and excitement during the riots, as well as similar techniques to justify their actions. The fifty-two-year-old participant, for example, spoke about the fun that he and three of his friends had had looting and beating a Chinese man in his shop as opportunities 'to show his teeth' and perform in front of peers, while continuing to repeat exclusionary justifications for attacking the man ('well, the Chinese are all rich') and highlighting the normative support for their actions ('everyone was doing it […] we were all doing it tough'). Throughout his interview, the same forty-seven-year-old man cited above repeatedly emphasised his social identity as a member of the urban poor struggling with the financial crisis along with appeals to family duty (finding food for his family) and claims to normative support for the violence (everyone was doing it). This man too, presented these normative appeals as legitimation. When asked whether he would take part if the riots would happen again, he replied 'Yes. It was a difficult financial situation at the time, and so we'd have to loot again. Get involved, [whether] you like it or not. It's better than us all dying of starvation, isn't it?'

Conclusion

In this article we have examined the reported changes in feelings among participants in the May 1998 race riots in Jakarta in connection to how their social identities have changed in the two decades since, revealing a range of narrative strategies used to disavow complicity in mass violence. Our thirty-one anonymous interviewees were amongst the thousands of Jakarta's urban poor who took to the streets to burn and loot Chinese-owned shops, and to attack Chinese Indonesians, who the military government claimed were responsible for the financial crisis. These thirty-one men and women were not those primarily responsible for instigating or coordinating the mass violence, but they were direct perpetrators of harm and readily took part in the mass looting. Some of them also committed arson and physical and sexual violence. In Indonesia, where talking about state-sponsored atrocities remains a politically taboo topic, these interviews with civilians who participated in the May 1998 riots reveal for the first time the perspectives of those who were directly involved in harmdoing during this pivotal period.

Drawing on social identity theory, we examined the trajectories between how our participants reported feeling during the riots and how they felt about what they had done, more than twenty years later. Almost all participants used the same *ikut-ikutan* narrative, a socially normative framing connected to their more youthful, rioter social identity. Whether they remembered experiencing fun and feeling excited and sometimes fearful (Cohorts One and Three), or remembered feeling 'normal' or 'nothing much' in 1998 (Cohort Two), all participants drew on this narrative, which suggested they had internalised their looting and other violent acts as acceptable and also rejected their personal agency or responsibility for those acts, allowing them to avoid acknowledging their complicity. As time passed, however, other social identities emerged and so most participants' feelings changed along with how they understood their past actions. For the majority, their more salient current social identities, typically associated with becoming a parent or a person of faith, challenged their earlier rioter social identity, leading to feelings of regret (Cohorts One and Two). Only five participants (Cohort Three and Exceptional Two) did not feel regret. Whether they felt regret or not, however, most participants used a range of strategies to justify their involvement in the riots, in ways that reflect comparable findings on continuing justifications from studies with former perpetrators in other contexts.[46]

Taken together, the three trajectories highlight that participants' recollections of how they felt during the riots, and how they feel now, must be read in the context of intergroup, intragroup, and individual motives and social dynamics. The historical context of state-citizen unrest has abated, but it is still taboo to implicate state actors as instigators in the violence. Nonetheless participants who were directed towards violence by authorities show less internalised responsibility and regret. Where participants' neighbours, family, and peer-groups participated in the riots, they also expressed less distress.

In contrast, exposure to counter-narratives that delegitimise violence are associated with increased distress and distancing, particularly when interpreted through the lens of religious identities and ongoing relationships with victims as neighbours, for example. Most attributed their participation to being part of a youth identity group which they outgrew. For these respondents, their adult identities as workers and

46 For example, Anderson, '"Who Was I to Stop the Killing?"'; Ivana Maček, 'Perpetrators among Ourselves', in *Researching Perpetrators of Genocide*, ed. by Kjell Anderson and Erin Jessee (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2020), pp. 91-114.

parents were more likely to create shared identities with victims, and where this was the case, participants found it more challenging to reconcile with the crimes they perpetrated, resulting in regret and acknowledgement of harmdoing.

This study highlights the range of emotions that people can experience when reflecting on violence and harmdoing, as affected by individuals' personal circumstances and how they interpreted events based on their shifting identities. For many participants, there was a discrepancy between their present principles and their past behaviour, which created regret and a need for present-day rationalisations. Only rarely, however, did participants genuinely reflect on how their actions harmed their victims.

The broader implications from our study, however, need to be considered within the context of current-day Indonesia. Given that there has been no official investigation or acknowledgement of the harms perpetrated, and certainly no redress, why would civilians who took part in the riots be prompted to understand the negative consequences of their actions beyond the narrative frames available to them now? The dominant *ikut-ikutan* socially normative narrative that denies their agency and allows them to avoid acknowledging that they were complicit in the mass violence has never been challenged. It is implicit throughout the participants' narratives that a culture of impunity blankets the May riots: there have been no negative consequences for the state security actors who orchestrated and coordinated the atrocities, and it is unlikely there will be any in the future.[47] For the civilians who participated in the riots more than twenty years prior to being interviewed, the political lens makes the event invisible and taboo, closing off space for acknowledgement of their complicity in and perpetration of harm. For this to change, normative acknowledgement of past crimes and atrocities by leaders would need to occur to open the door to public discussion and reconciliation, but there is little likelihood that Indonesia's culture of impunity for past state-led crimes will be challenged any time soon.

47 See Idhamsyah Eka Putra and others, 'A Theoretical Model of Victimization, Perpetration, and Denial in Mass Atrocities: Case Studies from Indonesia, Cambodia, East Timor, and Myanmar', *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 28.4 (2024), 398-426.

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Eunike Mutiara Himawan (Ph.D., University of Queensland, 2024) is a clinical psychologist and a psychology lecturer at Pelita Harapan University, Indonesia. Her research focuses on why some ordinary people are so vulnerable to compromise their personal attributes and moral values by committing immoral actions because of identifying themselves with a group, particularly in the context of the May 1998 riots in Indonesia.

Annie Pohlman (Ph.D., University of Queensland, 2011) teaches Indonesian at The University of Queensland. Her research areas are Indonesian history, genocide, gendered experiences of mass violence, torture, and oral testimony.

Winnifred R. Louis (Ph.D., McGill, 2001) is a Professor in Psychology at the University of Queensland. She has published over 140 scholarly publications, and her research examines how identity and norms influence social decision-making. She has studied this broad topic in contexts from political violence to health to environmental choices.