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Collective Guilt and the Search for Meaning in Post-Communist Albania: An Existential Perspective

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Abstract

This study explores the experiences of individuals who have lived through the post-communist transition in Albania, focusing on their sense of existential collective guilt and their coping mechanisms through meaning-making processes. Twenty written narratives were collected and analyzed, revealing a strong sense of collective guilt related to the communist past, with participants feeling responsible for the harm caused by the regime. The interplay between collective guilt and meaning-making mechanisms was observed as complex, with collective guilt often acting as a barrier but also providing motivation for effective meaning-making. In general, this study emphasizes how crucial appreciating these processes can be, both on personal levels and collective ones, when striving to move beyond the heritage of the past and create a better future. Furthermore, we delved into an analysis of the strengths and limitations of the study, which are also discussed in this paper.

Keywords: Collective guilt, Existentialism, Meaning-making, Post-communist Albania, Written narratives.

Introduction

The year 1989 witnessed a significant downfall of communist regimes in Eastern Europe, resulting in extensive shifts within the political, social, and economic perspectives. The impact was so immense that it had a strong impact on millions of inhabitants' lives across the communist block. Albania, one small Balkan state that had been under communist governance for approximately fifty years, also underwent inevitable changes during this historic period. The post-communist transition in Albania was marked by a variety of challenges, including political instability, economic hardship, social polarization, and identity crises (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005). These challenges were compounded by the legacy of communism, which left deep scars on Albanian society and culture and created a collective sense of guilt and shame (Biberaj, 2019). Despite the progress made toward democratization and integration into the European Union, the country still grapples with the legacy of its communist past, which includes decades of totalitarian rule, political repression, economic hardship, and social fragmentation (Malltezi, 2015). In this context, collective guilt and the search for meaning appear as fundamental psychological processes that can form how Albanians make sense of their past, present, and future.

The idea of collective guilt is a psychological concept that depicts the notion of responsibility, humiliation, and remorse harbored by individuals towards their community or nation for past transgressions or injustices (Volkan, 1997). The aftermath of experiencing such an emotion can lead to either favorable or unfavorable outcomes based on how it's assimilated into one's perception and psyche (Roccas et al. 2006), which in turn reflects its impact.

In contrast, the search for meaning represents an existential construct that pertains to humans' desire for orderliness, purpose, and course in life, particularly when confronted with difficulties, vagueness, or severe problems regarding their existence (Frankl, 1985). The existentialism proposition implies that finding meaning is an all-encompassing inspiration amongst people, which can stimulate psychological development leading towards resilience as well as general wellness (Yalom, 2020). Nevertheless, societal influences rooted in historical foundations coupled with cultural differences may pose significant obstacles hindering one's sense of identity along with self-perception (Baumeister 1991).

Until now, there hasn't been much investigation into how the search for meaning and existential collective guilt converge in post-communist Albania, nor have any studies shown what effects they may have on people's views of both past and present times. As a result, there is insufficient analysis of the relationship between aspects of collective guilt and searching for meaning that derives from an existential viewpoint within this area. To fill this area regarding these constructs as linked together, in this study, we aim to use an existential perspective to examine the role of collective guilt in the process of search for meaning, whereby our research can focus more closely on Albanians' experiences in the post-communist era. Specifically, we will explore the following research questions:

1. How do Albanians experience existential collective guilt in relation to their country's communist past?
2. How did Albanians search for meaning in the aftermath of their country's communist past?
3. What are today's implications of existential collective guilt and meaning-making for well-being and reconciliation in post-communist Albania?

By answering these research questions, our purpose is to provide insights into the psychological and social movements that emerged after communism fell in Albania. This knowledge may serve as a foundation for actionable strategies on how to improve relations, encourage healing processes, and drive societal and psychological changes within Albania, along with other post-communist societies undergoing similar challenges stemming from remnants of communism's legacy. Through active discussion and analysis, we hope our findings may inform future interventions directed toward achieving these goals.

Literature review

Collective guilt

The concept of collective guilt is a mental phenomenon that refers to feelings of obligation and sorrow felt by people who are members of a group that has committed a harmful action (Branscombe et al., 1999). Besides this existential conception, based on psychoanalytic theory, collective guilt emerges from the interaction between individual and collective dynamics. It occurs when individuals assimilate the group's standards and principles, leading to feeling responsible for its conduct (Volkan, 1997). The incidence of shared responsibility can produce damaging consequences like high levels of anxiety accompanied by reduced self-esteem levels (Bastian et al., 2014). Nevertheless, some research implies that this negative feeling toward one's own group may also pave the way for positive outcomes such as improved empathy or readiness amongst them to act toward reparation processes (Wohl, Branscombe, & Klar, 2006).

Meaning making

The process of meaning-making is a vital aspect of psychological functioning and well-being, involving the interpretation and significance of personal experiences (Park, 2010). According to an existential perspective, meaning-making is an essential component of individual fulfillment and perseverance. Cognitive, emotional, and relational meaning-making are different forms of meaning-making that serve various purposes in promoting resilience and coping with adversity (Janoff-Bulman, 2010). Research indicates that meaning-making is positively linked to mental health and well-being, resulting in a reduction of depressive symptoms and anxiety (Park et al., 2010).

Post-communist Albania

Following the end of communism in 1991, Albanian society experienced a significant period of alterations to its political structure, social norms, and economic system. The changes that emerged during this time were characterized by an overhaul from a centralized economy based on planning to one that operated through market forces. Additionally, democratic institutions and civil society organizations became more widely embedded within Albania (King, 2003). Considering the circumstances unique to Albania as it navigated these times, collective guilt alongside meaning-making may have been prevalent factors affecting people's perception surrounding their experiences throughout such transitions. However, there is limited research on these topics in the Albanian context, and more studies are needed to understand

the psychological impact of the transition on Albanian individuals and society.

Methodology

This study utilizes narrative analysis as a qualitative research method to analyze the collected data. Narrative analysis is a methodological process that studies personal experiences, making it an influential mechanism for comprehending intricate social perceptions and conceptions (Riessman, 2008). This method requires the compilation of narrations in either written or verbal format, followed by dissecting these stories to detect patterns and establish themes and structures.

The sole eligibility criterion for participants was to have attained a minimum age of 65 years. Participants were recruited through self-selection, and the selection process was not random. To maximize recruitment efforts, the researchers employed outreach strategies via community events. The average age of participants in the collective studies was determined to be 70.3 years, with the majority of participants being female, representing 55% of the sample.

They were asked to write narratives about their experiences related to collective guilt and meaning-making in the context of Albania's post-communist transition. This took two weeks. During each day, two participants wrote their narratives, for a total of ten days. The narratives were collected through the SurveyMonkey platform and were anonymized to protect the participants' identities. Initially, the questions and the narratives were chronicled in the Albanian language and subsequently translated into English by the researchers. Then, the narratives were analyzed using a thematic narrative analysis approach, which involves identifying recurring themes and patterns in the narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

To conduct the analysis, the researchers read and re-read the narratives, identifying themes that emerged from the participants' stories. These themes were then coded through NVivo software and organized into categories based on their similarities and differences. The researchers also looked for patterns in the narratives, such as the use of metaphors or recurring descriptions, to gain a more profound understanding of the participants' narratives (Riessman, 2008).

Narrative analysis has a distinctive quality in its ability to apprehend the intricate and elaborate details of individuals' lives. This approach allows researchers to gain insights into people's personal experiences by exploring their subjective meanings, providing an opportunity for further investigation that delves deeper into these aspects (Polkinghorne, 1995). Narrative analysis also provides suitable tools for examining how identities are formed through each person's stories (McAdams, 2006).

To summarize, this study implements narrative analysis as a qualitative method of research to analyze narratives gathered from subjects concerning their experiences relevant to collective guilt and meaning-making processes in relation to Albania's post-communist transformation. By examining these narratives, this study endeavors to gain a deeper understanding of how individuals perceive, interpret, and make sense of their experiences in this context.

Results

In this section, we present the results of the narrative analysis of 20 written narratives collected from participants who have experienced the post-communist transition in Albania. We have analyzed the narratives to explore how individuals make sense of the existential collective guilt associated with the communist past and how they engage in meaning-making processes to cope with the changes brought about by the transition.

Collective guilt

Our analysis discovered that most of the stories conveyed a perception of collective guilt concerning the communist historical period. Respondents believed they were constituents in a system that was oppressive and unfair and felt regretful for not demonstrating more opposition to it. The guilt extended beyond those who took active roles within the regime but also included individuals who accepted its existence passively.

Antecedents and Consequences of Collective Guilt

The forerunners of collective guilt encompassed emotions like remorse and shame over past events, as well as a recognition of responsibility regarding the destruction fostered by communism. Those who partook in this also experienced an intense feeling of abandonment from their previous leaders and fellow inhabitants who had worked together with the regime. This emotion was most profound among those who actively opposed it all and were persecuted because they refused to comply with its demands.

In the meantime, the consequences were observed from experiencing collective guilt. These included emotions such as shame, anxiety, and depression. People who participated in these guilty feelings felt powerless and hopeless, which ultimately led them to be unable to partake in practical actions that could lead to change or resolution of their guilt-ridden actions.

Meaning-making

Our analysis also revealed that participants engaged in various forms of meaning-making to cope with the changes brought about by the transition. These included:

- I. Making sense of the past: Participants aimed to comprehend the motives behind the communist government and its aftermath, alongside their personal part in it. This encompassed investigating historical, political, and social elements that contributed to establishing and abolishing the regime while also introspecting and reflecting on their individual experiences and motivations.
- II. Re-evaluating values: The participants inquired about the morals and doctrines that had been enforced by those in power during the communist era, aiming to form fresh ones that were more relevant to their individual principles. This required a process of analytical contemplation and reflection regarding the values and beliefs that had been absorbed during communist rule, along with investigating different outlooks and ethical systems capable of steering them throughout life within this new post-communist period.

III. Creating new narratives: Participants created novel narratives that helped them make sense of their situations and deal with alterations started by the transition. This entailed formulating new meanings and analyses of their past experiences, as well as altering how they perceived guilt and responsibility through a more optimistic lens.

Relationship between Collective Guilt and Meaning-making

Our analysis revealed a complex relationship between collective guilt and meaning-making. The persistent feeling of collective guilt that reflected shared responsibility often created difficulty in reaching a profound meaning-making; however, in some cases, it motivated participants to engage actively. Various individuals believed that coming face-to-face with guilt was vital for progression and creating a better future within their society. However, others felt overburdened by the sense of guilt and found themselves unable to proceed constructively forward as they struggled through these emotions alone. In such cases where guilt proves too heavy as an emotional load on participants, psychological interventions may still be necessary so that effective meaning-making processes can take place and ultimately improve overall well-being and mental health.

Overall, our narrative analysis suggests that collective guilt and meaning-making are significant developments in the post-communist evolution in Albania. Understanding these processes can help individuals and groups who still feel stagnated to move beyond the legacy of the past and craft an enhanced future.

Discussion

The main focus of this study was to explore how individuals in Albania who lived through the communist era make sense of and come to terms with the collective guilt surrounding their past. This research aims to understand how they engage in meaning-making processes during a time when change was necessary for progress. The results indicate that most participants involved experienced an overwhelming feeling of shared responsibility concerning events related to communism - not just those actively implicated but others as well. There were several causes leading up to these feelings, such as deep regret and shame tied back to previous actions (or lack thereof) taken, ultimately resulting from being responsible due to harm created by the prior regime.

The consequences of collective guilt were primarily negative, including feelings of shame, anxiety, and sadness. It has been discovered in previous studies that a correlation between negative emotional outcomes and guilt exists (Tangney, Stuewig & Mashek, 2007), which is consistent with our findings. Participants noted their feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness when experiencing guilt often stalled constructive behavior. Nevertheless, we observed collective guilt as motivating individuals to participate in the process of meaning-making to past experiences.

The meaning-making processes that participants engaged in included making sense of the past, re-evaluating values, and creating new narratives. These processes are consistent with previous research on coping with trauma and loss (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). Making sense of the past allowed participants to understand the reasons behind the communist regime and its legacy, as well as their own role in it. Re-evaluating values allowed participants to question the values and beliefs

that had been imposed by the regime and establish new ones that were more aligned with their own values. Creating new narratives helped participants make sense of their experiences and cope with the changes brought about by the transition.

The relationship between collective guilt and meaning-making is complex. One more important finding from this study reveals that despite how collective guilt can block the effective creation of meaning, feeling collective guilt could also spur individuals to participate in the process itself. A large number of participants who provided their narratives believed in confronting their own feelings of being guilty as a crucial step towards progress and bettering conditions for themselves along with those around them.

Thus, the findings deriving from this study bear great significance for societies that have been affected by communism in the past. The comprehension of collective guilt and meaning-making processes can make it simpler for individuals and communities to overcome the aftermaths of communism, thereby establishing a brighter future. However, it is imperative to acknowledge that these mechanisms are complicated; hence, long-standing backing and resources may be required. Further research should examine how effective interventions are aimed at assisting individuals as well as communities to confront collective guilt while participating in meaning-making endeavors.

Generally, this research offers a glimpse into Albanians who lived during and after communism. The results indicate that collective guilt and meaning-making processes are substantial elements in such a context that can empower people to forge ahead toward brighter horizons for themselves and their communities.

Strengths and Limitations

This study presents a thorough examination of the collective guilt and sense of meaning-making related to the shift from communism in Albania. Similarly, this research obtained ample information by eliciting written narratives that allowed participants to scrutinize their emotions and experiences more contemplatively. Additionally, there was a diverse selection of participants who experienced these changes, which provided a broad perspective on the subject matter. As the first study of its kind, one of the study's strong aspects is the integration of theory, which offers a theoretical framework for acknowledging the processes of collective guilt and meaning-making in post-communist Albania.

Meanwhile, it is important to recognize that this study was carried out in Albania, and its results may not be able to be generalized effectively into other nations or contexts. Additionally, those who willingly participated in this study were self-selected, which could potentially mean that they contained stronger guilt emotions or had more heightened interactions with their communist background than others would have. Moreover, limitations within the study include social desirability bias in which participants provided responses they thought were expected of them rather than expressing genuine responses.

Overall, despite its limitations, this analysis offers valuable insights into the collective guilt and meaning-making processes associated with the post-communist transition in Albania. The conclusions of this research could be utilized in developing measures and strategies with regard to advancing rejuvenation, conciliation, and societal evolution within areas plagued by aftermaths from post-communist experiences.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this study delved deep into the personal narratives of those who endured Albania's post-communist transition by concentrating on how they experienced collective guilt from their communist past and found ways to cope with it in response to all that had happened during the transformation. The findings we made underscored just how powerful an influence communism was on both individuals and groups alike - along with their efforts at reconciling themselves with what came before them.

Our analysis revealed a pervasive sense of collective guilt among participants, which was tied to feelings of shame, regret, and a sense of responsibility for the harm caused by the regime. Unfortunately, this collective sense of guilt led to predominantly adverse effects on individuals, including an overwhelming feeling of impotence and despair, which made positive initiatives challenging to achieve.

However, our study also showed that meaning-making processes – such as making sense of the past, re-evaluating values, and creating new narratives – were crucial in helping individuals handle the changes brought about by the transition. While collective guilt could be an obstacle to effective meaning-making, it also provided motivation for individuals to engage in this process.

As a whole, this study emphasizes the significance of acknowledging the impact of collective guilt and existential meaning-making processes within the setting of transitioning from communism to pluralism. We hope that our findings will contribute to the ongoing efforts to come to terms with the past and create a better future for individuals and communities in Albania.

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Conflict of Interest

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