



## Encountering Ethical Issues in a Sensitive Case Study Research: A Qualitative Exploration of the Victimized Ahmadiyya Minority in Indonesia

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**Abstract:** *This article examines the importance of understanding ethical dilemmas in social research on sensitive topics. The paper is elaborated and presented based on the literature review and experiences in sensitive research. This article summarizes ethical issues, the Ahmadiyya case as a sample of a sensitive topic, ethical dilemmas, their resolutions, and lessons learned. This article reflects on the opportunities for fluent analysis in a sensitive case, and it is an introductory study of the ethical dilemma in analyzing a sensitive issue.*

**Keywords:** *Indonesia, the Ahmadiyya Group, Violence, Ethical Dilemma, Sensitive Research*

### Introduction

This study examined two essential issues, including sensitive topics in a qualitative case study and ethical dilemmas in analyzing sensitive issues.<sup>1</sup> According to social experts, these two critical issues are closely related to the informants' position in social research.<sup>2</sup>

Previous studies showed that sensitive topics raise complicated ethical and methodological problems in research trajectories.<sup>3</sup> In this case, it is necessary to negotiate all the necessities in the overall study process. Ethical issues are problematic when conducting sensitive social research.<sup>4</sup>

The violation of religious minorities in Indonesia is an example of a sensitive topic to reflect the research process. The study intends to present the experiences in managing challenges when conducting

<sup>1</sup>David Silverman, ed. *Qualitative research*. Sage, 2016.

<sup>2</sup>Rosemarie Streeton, Mary Cooke, and Jackie Campbell. "Researching the researchers: using a snowballing technique." *Nurse researcher*, 12, no. 1 (2004): 35–47. See also, Gina Novick. "Is there a bias against telephone interviews in qualitative research?." *Research in nursing & health* 31, no. 4 (2008): 391–398.

<sup>3</sup>Raymond M. Lee and Claire M. Renzetti. "The problems of researching sensitive topics: An overview and introduction." (1990): 510-528. See Virginia Dickson-Swift, Erica L. James, Sandra Kippen, and Pranee Liamputtong. "Risk to researchers in qualitative research on sensitive topics: Issues and strategies." *Qualitative Health Research* 18, no. 1 (2008): 133–144.

<sup>4</sup>Mahnaz Sanjari, Fatemeh Bahramnezhad, Fatemeh Khoshnava Fomani, Mahnaz Shoghi, and Mohammad Ali Cheraghi. "Ethical challenges of researchers in qualitative studies: The necessity to develop a specific guideline." *Journal of medical ethics and the history of medicine* 7 (2014).

sensitive research processes.<sup>5</sup> However, it does not fully elaborate on the ethical dilemmas' aspects and elements.

The study explains several crucial things, such as reflecting on and choosing a sensitive topic and describing ethical dilemmas, resolutions, and lessons learned. Moreover, it shows the challenge experienced in managing the position at the study site and the effort to build a constructive and trustful relationship with the primary informants.

## Method

This study uses a review method to examine ethical dilemmas and sensitive social research issues. The technique was developed based on a combination of two primary information sources. This includes an extensive review of expert discussions about ethical dilemmas in studies on sensitive topics. The reviewers and academics reanalyzed this issue as the primary technique for collecting and managing the information needed. Specifically, a document review technique is a primary tool used to collect needful information.<sup>6</sup> The study also traces the map related to the position of religion in a discourse on conflict. Further elaboration was conducted on violence against the Ahmadiyya in Indonesia.<sup>7</sup>

The review method shows how past intentions and events relate to their meaning and values.<sup>8</sup> This combines deductive and inductive approaches by re-reading studies on religion and conflict in Indonesia to develop a theoretical position. The method is flexible and open because it re-examines academic and scientific works regarding inter-religious conflict.<sup>9</sup>

## Literature Review

This section briefly reviews the two main focuses of this article and is expected to provide a proper conceptual understanding. Specifically, it briefly discusses sensitive topics and ethical dilemmas in social research.

### *Sensitive topics in social research*

This study uses the sensitive case as the central part of a scientific discussion concerning social research and investigation. Sensitive topics cover various issues, though they have multiple definitions and challenges in social research.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Barbara Probst. "The eye regards itself: Benefits and challenges of reflexivity in qualitative social work research." *Social Work Research* 39, no. 1 (2015): 37–48.

<sup>6</sup>Sarah J. Tracy. "Qualitative quality: Eight "big-tent" criteria for excellent qualitative research." *Qualitative inquiry* 16, no. 10 (2010): 837–851.

<sup>7</sup>Ahmad Najib Burhani. "It is a Jihad": Justifying Violence towards the Ahmadiyya in Indonesia." *Trans: Trans-Regional and National Studies of Southeast Asia* 9, no. 1 (2021): 99-112.

<sup>8</sup>Robin Whitemore and Kathleen Knafl. "The integrative review: updated methodology." *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 52, no. 5 (2005): 546–553.

<sup>9</sup>David R. Thomas. "A general inductive approach for analyzing qualitative evaluation data." *American Journal of Evaluation* 27, no. 2 (2006): 237–246.

<sup>10</sup>Heather McCosker, Alan Barnard, and Rod Gerber. "Undertaking sensitive research: Issues and strategies for meeting the safety needs of all participants." In *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, vol. 2, no. 1. 2001.

Sensitive research covers many topics, activities, and possible implications for informants.<sup>11</sup> According to previous studies, the subject can be included in a sensitive category based on a *taboo*. Although the definition of ‘taboo’ is too broad, some studies relate it to issues in academic exploration, such as suicide, violence, murder, conflict, and discrimination. Research is considered *sensitive* when it involves many emotional elements.<sup>12</sup>

Sensitive research deals with the risks and threats to research and participants in three essential areas. First, social research is considered sensitive when dealing with possible risks, primarily personal ones. For instance, the danger could be related to religious matters or *daily sacral* life. Through this example, sensitive research could appear on the spiritual problems in inter-group interrelationships. Second, it can also be categorized as ‘sensitive’ when dealing with social disorders. Third, it could even be considered sensitive when data are collected in the field with complicated social conflicts that threaten the informants.

Sensitive topics also have potential consequences and implications.<sup>13</sup> The results and impact focus on the researchers, informants, or resource persons. Therefore, research is *sensitive* when the consequences and implications directly threaten everyone involved.<sup>14</sup>

The sensitive research category is related to the consequences and implications and covers topics, outcomes, situations, and other issues. Therefore, sensitive research is a scientific investigation with a potentially severe threat to all parties involved. Furthermore, sensitive topics must be related to the choice of methodology and other related aspects. All the elements must be adjusted to the concerned preference, where a proper selection of methods could create a sensitive analysis.<sup>15</sup>

#### *The ethical dilemma in sensitive research*

This review briefly examines some conceptual understanding of ethical issues. The ethical dimension should be a vital part of the guideline for developing robust and proper research procedures. Therefore, discussions around the ethical dimension focus on some leading aspects.<sup>16</sup>

Studies always relate to the informants' or resource persons' autonomy, determining their voluntary engagement. The participants are free to guide their involvement in the research process. In this case, the primary key is the informants' willingness to provide views, feelings, and valuable and needful answers.<sup>17</sup>

In this first aspect, an important ethical issue is how openness should inform the intricacies of the participants. There should be a willingness to provide complete information to the prospective informants

<sup>11</sup>Sandy Q. Qu and John Dumay. "The qualitative research interview." *Qualitative research in accounting & management* (2011).

<sup>12</sup>Carey M. Noland. "Institutional barriers to research on sensitive topics: Case of sex communication research among university students." *Journal of Research Practice* 8, no. 1 (2012): M2-M2.

<sup>13</sup>Carrie Paechter. "Researching sensitive issues online: implications of a hybrid insider/outsider position in a retrospective ethnographic study." *Qualitative Research* 13, no. 1 (2013): 71–86.

<sup>14</sup>Rakime Elmir, Virginia Schmied, Debra Jackson, and Lesley Wilkes. "Interviewing people about potentially sensitive topics." *Nurse researcher*, 19, no. 1 (2011).

<sup>15</sup>Virginia Dickson-Swif, Erica L. James, Sandra Kippen, and Pranee Liamputtong. "Doing sensitive research: What challenges do qualitative researchers face?." *Qualitative research*, 7, no. 3 (2007): 327–353.

<sup>16</sup>Virginia Morrow. "Ethical dilemmas in research with children and young people about their social environments." *Children's Geographies* 6, no. 1 (2008): 49–61.

<sup>17</sup>Linda M. Whiteford and Robert T. Trotter II. *Ethics for anthropological research and practice*. Waveland Press, 2008.

and build a *secure* connection with them.<sup>18</sup> Another critical aspect of the ethical aspect of sensitive research is the participants' safety.<sup>19</sup> Research investigations must not harm the participants, whose involvement should not place them under threat and violence. Furthermore, researchers should honestly communicate with participants about several risks through their presence and participation. Therefore, the participants' autonomy is a fundamental element in sensitive research. Also, freedom and independence justify the informants' willingness or refusal to be involved.

There is a need to guarantee confidentiality, where informants provide their personal information, such as name, address, email, and telephone number, to be reconnected to the results.<sup>20</sup> The participants' identities in the entire process should be guaranteed. When the information provided might cause danger, protecting participants' identities is fundamental in sensitive research. Moreover, their identity in the results that do not comply with the confidentiality agreement should not be revealed. In this case, they should keep the informants' confidentiality in their research and present their identity anonymously.

## **Findings and Discussion**

This section discusses three essential findings from this study, starting with the justification for the Ahmadiyya case as a sensitive issue. This aspect mainly refers to the violence experienced by the Ahmadiyya community in Indonesia. The second finding is the resolution of the ethical problems, including potential risks and attacks against resource persons and authors in the fieldwork. This aspect relates to reaching resource persons in interviews and field visits. The third finding is further discussion about lessons learned in this sensitive research.

### *Defining the Vulnerable Ahmadiyya Group as a Sensitive Case*

The first part of the literature review connects with the definition of the sensitive issue related to the presence of such a vulnerable group. Also, it justifies the classification of the target group as a sensitive case. The second part briefly introduces the status of the Ahmadiyya group, which is considered a sensitive issue. It provides an understanding of the sensitive issues related to religious and sacral matters in daily life.

The Ahmadiyya group was founded by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1835–1908) in Qadian, Punjab, India, in 1889 and has had a mission in Indonesia since 1924 (Ahmad, 2013). For instance, they have presented themselves as a stream of official Islam and are now struggling for this position in Indonesia. With around 600,000 members, they deal with violent resistance from mainstream Islam. The mainstream Muslims rejected the group as part of the official Islam, resulting in tension and violence against the Ahmadiyya.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup>Andrew K. Shenton and Susan Hayter. "Strategies for gaining access to organizations and informants in qualitative studies." *Education for Information* 22, no. 3–4 (2004): 223–231.

<sup>19</sup>Simone Rossi, Mark Hallett, Paolo M. Rossini, Alvaro Pascual-Leone, and Safety of TMS Consensus Group. "Safety, ethical considerations, and application guidelines for transcranial magnetic stimulation in clinical practice and research." *Clinical Neurophysiology*, 120, no. 12 (2009): 2008–2039.

<sup>20</sup>Niamh Moore. "The politics and ethics of naming: questioning anonymization in (archival) research." *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 15, no. 4 (2012): 331–340.

<sup>21</sup>Fatima Zainab Rahman. "State restrictions on the Ahmadiyya sect in Indonesia and Pakistan: Islam or political survival?." *Australian Journal of Political Science* 49, no. 3 (2014): 408–422.

Supporting the Ahmadiyya members, *Aliansi Kebangsaan untuk Kebebasan Beragama and Berkeyakinan (AKKBB* - the National Alliance for Freedom of Religion and Belief) held a general meeting, known as a protest in some reports in Monas on June 1, 2008. This national monument is in the opposite position of the Indonesian Presidential Palace. The demonstration, initiated and supported by pro-democracy activists and groups, urged Indonesia's government not to sign a decree banning the Ahmadiyya group. At this time, *Front Pembela Islam (FPI* - the Islamic Defender Front) and the leading actor of radical groups, responded violently to that meeting. Specifically, they attacked the protesters, coinciding with the celebration of Pancasila Day.<sup>22</sup>

Many civil society actors and Indonesian Muslims protested the government's step. However, three national government bodies, including the Minister of Religious Affairs, the Indonesian Minister of Domestic Affairs, and the Attorney General, still signed the "Joint Decree" on June 9, 2008.<sup>23</sup> The decree ordered the Ahmadiyya to stop spreading interpretations of Islam's main points, including the thought that it recognizes a prophet after Muhammad. Furthermore, the government declared that the Joint Decree violators could be threatened with five years in prison, causing massive discrimination and persecution against Ahmadiyya.<sup>24</sup>

Kees van Dijk (2013, 2) described the situation as follows: "Most Indonesian Muslims are Sunni. In the last couple of years, Ahmadiyya members and Shi'ites have become the victims of some brutal attacks."<sup>25</sup> My passion for analyzing this issue grew when the Ahmadiyya members were murdered in Cikeusik on February 6, 2011. It is based on past activities regarding inter-religious dialogue at Indonesia's local level.

On this tragedy, van Dijk stated that Ahmadiyya's contemporary situation is becoming part of the domestic concern, intensively and widely attracting global interest. Various international human rights NGOs, such as International Amnesty and Human Rights Watch, have deeply cared about this issue. This tragic event has stimulated and influenced academic and intellectual desires to extend to the hidden reality, the latency behind this situation.<sup>26</sup>

#### *Resolution of the Ethical Issue*

The resolution of the ethical issue is reflected in the safety of the author and informant as data sources.<sup>27</sup> However, selecting data sources mainly comprised the Ahmadiyya members was challenging. This is because the Ahmadiyya case is sensitive, making it difficult to reach the data sources. Therefore, the difficulty of finding critical informants and an effective strategy to reach field locations represented most of the problems related to Ahmadiyya groups, such as violence, intimidation, and murder. This

<sup>22</sup>Melissa Crouch. "Indonesia, militant Islam, and Ahmadiyah: Origins and implications." *ARC Federation Fellowship, 'Islam, Shariah, and Governance' Background Paper Series 4* (2009).

<sup>23</sup>Bernhard Platzdasch and Y. F. Hui. "Religious Freedom in Contemporary Indonesia: The Case of Ahmadiyah." *Encountering Islam: The Politics of Religious Identities in Southeast Asia* (2013): 218-46.

<sup>24</sup>Doenja Abel. "The position of religious minorities in a diverse archipelago: the Indonesian government's framing of the Ahmadiyya minority and its effects." Bachelor's thesis, 2013.

<sup>25</sup>K. Van Dijk (2013). Introduction in *Regime Change, Democracy, and Islam, the Case of Indonesia: Final Report Islam Research Programme Jakarta*. Leiden, the Netherlands: Leiden University, March 1—7, Retrieved May 18, 2015, from [http://media.leidenuniv.nl/legacy/irpfinal2013\(2\).pdf/](http://media.leidenuniv.nl/legacy/irpfinal2013(2).pdf/)

<sup>26</sup>Leena Avonius. "the Ahmadiyya & freedom of religion in Indonesia." *ISIM Review* 22 (2008): 2.

<sup>27</sup>William B. Stiles. "Quality control in qualitative research." *Clinical Psychology Review* 13, no. 6 (1993): 593-618.

situation is connected with the second aspect of ethical dilemmas, where the informants and the author faced potential risks and threats by visiting several locations and communities.

Manis Lor village, a central Ahmadiyya location in West Java province, was visited for two weeks in August 2014. The area has the largest Ahmadiyya community in Indonesia, living within mainstream Islamic majority communities in the excluded village that was attacked by the mob in 2007.<sup>28</sup> During the two visits, interviews were conducted, followed by the Ahmadiyya ceremonies, such as the marriage ceremony. Moreover, a picture of the mosque burnt by a mob in 2002 was captured.

The author also visited the second important location in the Ahmadiyya community in Bogor City, West Java Province. This location has Ahmadiyya's theological and pastoral institute with a vital position for mission activity, educating young Ahmadiyya's teachers and priests. The mob attacked the university and mosque in 2005.<sup>29</sup> One informant, a lecturer at this university, helped reach this location and allowed interviews with two victims of the Cikeusik tragedy, the worst attack on Ahmadiyya. The area was surveyed in the first and second weeks of September 2014.

Third, the author visited the Ahmadiyya community and its central Jakarta mosque twice in September 2014. This place is one of the centers of the Ahmadiyya movement, whose spokesman was interviewed during this observation. Moreover, the author explored places in Mataram, Western Nusa Tenggara Province, for three days in December 2016. About 160 Ahmadiyya members have lived in this area as a displaced community since the massive attacks by the mob in 2006. The last field trip to Mataram provided additional information regarding Ahmadiyya's status as a displaced community in Indonesia.<sup>30</sup>

During the fieldwork, the Ahmadiyya members were interviewed between June and September 2014 to observe their locations, including Kuningan (West Java), Bogor, and Jakarta. The interview aimed to obtain Ahmadiyya's experiences related to violence and discrimination. Also, the information collected was used to explore the involvement of various actors.

The literature and field experience emphasized physical and psychological safety that studies must address. Physical security was related to the interviewee, the interviewer, and possibly their immediate family. This study examined individuals, communities, and social groups facing violence and discrimination, meaning the informants could face attacks. Similarly, the author encountered potentially dangerous consequences under another person's power. The second issue is the psychological impact of participating in this sensitive research. In this case, there may be an immediate and delayed impact on the mental health of anyone involved, including a physical response to the psychological effects.

Dealing with these issues resulted in two fundamental questions, including the need to guarantee the safety of the key informants, especially the Ahmadiyya members. This occurs when some members are victimized and intimidated due to managing a research site.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>Dani Muhtada. "State and the Protection of the Minority Rights in Indonesia: The Case of the Ahmadi Group." In the *1st International Conference on Indonesian Legal Studies (ICILS 2018)*. Atlantis Press, 2018.

<sup>29</sup>Mary E. McCoy. "Purifying Islam in post-authoritarian Indonesia: Corporatist metaphors and the rise of religious intolerance." *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 16, no. 2 (2013): 275–316.

<sup>30</sup>M. Ag. Masnun. "Blasphemy, the Fate of Ahmadiyya in Lombok and a Critique of Religious Discourse." *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences* 8, no. 4–1 (2017): 89–98.

<sup>31</sup>Jenna Burrell. "The field site as a network: A strategy for locating ethnographic research." *Field Methods* 21, no. 2 (2009): 181–199.

This issue was solved by contacting gatekeepers, including an Ahmadiyya member and a pro-human rights activist associated with key informants and data sources. Also, trust was built among the leading figures of the Ahmadiyya in several places. Before conducting interviews and observations, the gatekeeper helped reach the field locations and important informants.<sup>32</sup>

There was an emphasis on involving the gatekeepers in this sensitive research to reach out to Ahmadiyya members and other actors.<sup>33</sup> Their support provided information about the dynamics of the Ahmadiyya issue during observation. Therefore, visiting the four critical central locations of the Ahmadiyya communities was beneficial.

*Second*, the position of an outsider was taken to maintain the research objectivity.<sup>34</sup> Although it was challenging, it was essential for the author to keep a distance from the primary informants concerning their feelings, motivations, and opinions as a vulnerable group. Furthermore, a crucial issue involved developing a trustworthy relationship with the informants as Ahmadiyya group members.

Conventional and straightforward strategies were used to overcome the sensitivity of the research topic. Moreover, past experiences were used in the local inter-religious dialogue. The design was a good step in understanding contemporary Indonesia's complicated interfaith relationships and tension.

This aspect did not fulfill the purpose, prompting a preliminary study between May and June 2012. Additionally, an initial review was conducted on any information about the Ahmadiyya group, especially about the violence against them. Therefore, several human rights organizations in Jakarta were visited to hold informal discussions and gather information.

Field visits were conducted in several locations in the Ahmadiyya communities, involving in-depth interviews with resource persons, including the victims of violence and severe problems. This situation was addressed by contacting the supervisor at the university and providing a research recommendation letter from the campus. The supervisors knew of the dangers of researching this sensitive issue. Therefore, they advised conducting field visits and interviews effectively and productively.

Objectivity is a dilemma. A researcher should not be influenced or dominated by personal feelings in examining research issues. Therefore, it requires a scientific attitude, consistent thinking, searching for accurate data, and a solid determination to analyze facts. Furthermore, objectivity requires a cause-and-effect analysis, an open mind free from bias, and penetrative insight for profound observation. However, these studies dealt with complex social dynamics and interpreted them differently. There were difficulties in maintaining objectivity in the analysis and voicing the situation experienced by the informants in certain conditions.

#### *Lessons Learned from the Research*

This study presents the experience in sensitive research on violating the Ahmadiyya group in Indonesia. It focuses on negotiating several ethical issues and offers strategies to overcome them. Moreover,

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<sup>32</sup>Kelly J. Devers and Richard M. Frankel. "Study design in qualitative research--2: Sampling and data collection strategies." *Education for health* 13, no. 2 (2000): 263.

<sup>33</sup>Carla L. Reeves. "A difficult negotiation: Fieldwork relations with gatekeepers." *Qualitative Research* 10, no. 3 (2010): 315–331.

<sup>34</sup>Meredith Minkler. "Ethical Challenges for the "outside" researcher in community-based participatory research." *Health Education & Behavior* 31, no. 6 (2004): 684–697.

this study provides new insights into negotiating with research sites, informants, and other relevant actors and data. Although implementing the case study is challenging, it allows future research to be developed and improved.

The further reflection of this study relates to several valuable lessons as one of the essential points.<sup>35</sup> Many lessons have been learned from the experience with a specific case study site, contributing to insight. Therefore, this research process concerning sensitive topics was used to develop a scientific position and capability. There are four points regarding the lessons learned from this sensitive case study. First, sensitive research is a challenging academic and scientific activity that teaches much about managing study sites.<sup>36</sup> This aspect relates to analyzing the research subject and elaborating pathways in reaching the targeted informants. Since the Ahmadiyya members were victimized, a proper procedure was developed to reach unfamiliar field locations.

The strategy was more comfortable despite the changes in the place of visit. Also, this study did not conduct a great design, but a process born from the stages of the field visit with adjustments to the three elements. The first element comprised more systematic plans and preparations at each location. The second element involved making notes to back up information based on previous data. The third aspect is that vital information from the last field visits helped guide the informants confidently.

There were challenges and crucial issues regarding active participants, making it difficult to a researcher who is an outsider in carrying out this sensitive case study.<sup>37</sup> However, there were two main aspects of presenting the position as an outsider. These were the problems of negotiating a position as an outsider and building a trustful relationship with the informants. This issue had implications for the effort to reach the needed sources of information. Moreover, the author encountered the challenge of establishing a proper position as an outsider participant.<sup>38</sup> This position could be a constructive strategy for bridging the boundaries that emerged during the fieldwork.<sup>39</sup> The process helped me face a risky atmosphere and circumstances<sup>40</sup> in conducting this sensitive research.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, this situation could be addressed by learning about building trust from the primary informants.

A conventional research strategy was also developed by finding two gatekeepers comprising the Ahmadiyya group members, including one victim. The position of an outsider was achieved after exploring the issues related to Ahmadiyya and contacting informants. The information formed was partly a solid

<sup>35</sup>Glenn A. Bowen. "Preparing a qualitative research-based dissertation: lessons learned." *The Qualitative Report* 10, no. 2 (2005): 208–222.

<sup>36</sup>Geoff Walsham. "Doing interpretive research." *European Journal of Information Systems* 15, no. 3 (2006): 320–330.

<sup>37</sup>David Hellawell. "Inside–out an analysis of the insider-outsider concept as a heuristic device to develop reflexivity in students doing qualitative research." *Teaching in higher education* 11, no. 4 (2006): 483–494.

<sup>38</sup>Deianira Ganga and Sam Scott. "Cultural" insiders" and the issue of positionality in qualitative migration research: Moving" across" and moving" along" researcher-participant divides." In *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, vol. 7, no. 3. 2006.

<sup>39</sup>Bahira Sherif. "The ambiguity of boundaries in the fieldwork experience: Establishing rapport and negotiating insider/outsider status." *Qualitative inquiry* 7, no. 4 (2001): 436–447.

<sup>40</sup>Anastasia Shesterinina. "Book review: Rebelocracy: Social Order in the Colombian Civil War by Ana Arjona." *LSE Review of Books* (2018).

<sup>41</sup>Melani Cammett. "Using proxy interviewing to address sensitive topics." *Interview research in political science* (2013): 125–143.



personal disposition to voice the Ahmadiyya situation and defend their rights. At this point, the dynamics of multi-position from an outsider to an insider were challenged.

Second, resilience in obtaining and managing vast information from various sources is necessary in this sensitive case study.<sup>42</sup> For instance, data from the victims of fatal attacks in some places from 2008 to 2011 was outstanding and crucial. The data was obtained from some ad hoc institutions affiliated with Indonesia's government, such as the Human Rights Commission. Furthermore, the author was taught by human rights activists and pro-religious freedom movements advocating for the Ahmadiyya group's protection.

Third, there was an insight into the strategy for data collection techniques. One crucial issue in choosing unstructured interviews was obtaining data from various sources. In this case, there was a demand to build a conversation with the resource persons.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, this study examined the victimized informants' responses. However, collecting comprehensive data through the interviews was challenging due to time constraints.

The informants sometimes provided superficial information that required the right time and technique for collecting data. Additionally, there was a need to protect the identity of the informants and respect their autonomy. As a result, this required the best strategy for managing personal issues concerning the informants' position during interviews and data analysis.

The unstructured interview was less rigorous on the interviewee's assumption that it facilitated interaction between the researcher and the informants. The informants could choose from pre-designed answers, elaborate on their statements, and connect them with relevant matters.

Fourth, there was a need to maintain a good relationship with the study informants. Although building a trustworthy relationship with source persons was difficult, this ability could be sharpened. The informants mainly comprised Ahmadiyya members, NGO actors, religious institution figures primarily in Islamic organizations, and human rights activists. The stakeholders provided relevant data for this sensitive case study.<sup>44</sup>

## Contribution

This study offers a methodological contribution that could add information to previous research. Also, it provides a definitive overview by re-emphasizing the sensitive challenges in qualitative social research.

This study offers methodological contributions based on the author's research management experience. First, it provides information about the demand to select methodological foundations in sensitive research carefully. This issue is inherently related to the crucial elements surrounding the study site management and the participants' security considerations, especially during the data collection.

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<sup>42</sup>Michael Quinn Patton. "Qualitative research." *Encyclopedia of statistics in behavioral science* (2005).

<sup>43</sup>Margaret C. Harrell and Melissa A. Bradley. *Data collection methods. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups*. Rand National Defense Research Inst Santa Monica ca, 2009.

<sup>44</sup>Phil Hodkinson and Heather Hodkinson. "The strengths and limitations of case study research." In *learning and skills development agency conference at Cambridge*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 5-7. 2001.

Second, this study offers a methodological contribution to the sensitive phenomenon that must be conducted in a supportive environment.<sup>45</sup> In this case, the interviewees, interviewers, researchers, scriptwriters, supervisors, examiners, and readers are considered equal participants in the study. However, physical, emotional, and psychological safety issues were a problem for participants.

Third, this study shows that sensitive research is more complex than many qualitative books portray. Also, successful sensitive research must maintain the highest standards of quality and rigor. This aspect emphasizes the components of the research project, such as the impact of sensitivity in determining the methodological basis and its field application during data collection.

## **Conclusion**

Critical challenges are experienced in sensitive research, including ethical dilemmas. Therefore, this study provides a scientific contribution to many challenges and opportunities in managing ethical issues in sensitive research. It is unique in demanding and proposing interconnected strategies taken by the author. The sensitive case study involves various ways of reaching and understanding a research subject, context, and field locations. Therefore, sensitive topics relate to spirituality and its risky impacts on society.

This study discusses the interconnected crucial issues based on this spiritual or religious problem concerning the Ahmadiyya position in dealing with mainstream Indonesia's Islam. The violence experienced by the Ahmadiyya group reflects the political and social dynamics and dominant-subordinate relations between religious groups.

The author encountered challenges in organizing and controlling the flow of this qualitative case study. However, the challenges influence research by forcing changes to the interviews or the entire approach. The problem was also dealing with these challenges by exploiting opportunities or accepting difficult situations. Therefore, the challenges faced are based on the difficulties and provide the necessary help needed for this qualitative sensitive case study.

Based on this study's trajectory, review benefits, and experience, better results may be obtained with a more proactive approach to finding site access when faced with a similar situation. This personal, academic, and scientific reflection could help organize similar sensitive case studies. Therefore, this study offers valuable information for future research on relevant issues in various places.

*The author has no conflict of interest concerning this research.*

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<sup>45</sup>Nissim Cohen and Tamar Arieli. "Field research in conflict environments: Methodological challenges and snowball sampling." *Journal of Peace Research* 48, no. 4 (2011): 423-435.

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