

The Attitude and Positions of Insider and Outsiders in Islamic Studies

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ABSTRACT: Researching Islamic studies is not merely done by Muslims (insider perspective) but also by the non-Muslim community or non-Muslim Western scholars (outsider perspective). In conducting religious studies – using religion as the object has two difficulties. The first is the objectify or imprison the object of study. Second, it places the sacred and divine values as a neutral object of study. It will be considered to reduce or even destroy traditional values. This study analyzes the differences between insiders and outsiders in Islamic studies. Outsiders' Islamic studies contribute scientific ideas which generate intellectual movements in Islamic civilization. The main problems in religious studies from insider and outsider perspectives are subjectivity and objectivity, close and distant research experiences, emic and etic positions. The results of outsider research as non-partisan observers who study religion objectively constitute a significant contribution to the study of religion. Likewise, essential information from insiders becomes an integral part of outsiders' scientific series of religious studies. The insider needs the insider's perspective to understand the historicity and phenomenology of the religion. Thus, it enriches the understanding from a normative theological apologist to a complete understanding. Kata Kunci : Islamic Studies, Insider, outsider.

KEYWORDS: *Islamic studies, objectify, insider, outsider.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Islamic study is a discipline that seeks to learn any topic in a way that agrees with Islamic knowledge. It is defined as a conscious and systematic effort to know, understand, and discuss in-depth the ins and outs of matters related to Islam. It deals with its teachings, history and actual implementation practices in everyday life. Learning Islam is not only carried out by Muslims but also by non-Muslims. For Muslims, Islamic studies aim to comprehend, explore, and talk over the issues of Islamic teachings so that they can implement and practice them correctly and make them a guide and way of life. Meanwhile, non-Muslims, as the western countries, aims to study the intricacies of religion and religious practices that apply among Muslims, which are sole as knowledge. However, as is the case with science in general, knowledge about the ins and outs of religion and Islamic religious practices can be utilized or used for specific purposes, both positive and negative. Islamic studies conducted by Islamic scholars/scientists themselves are then known as Islamic studies from an insider perspective. At the same time, Islamic studies conducted by predominantly non-Muslim Western scholars are then called Islamic studies from an outsider's perspective.¹

Islam as a religion and the culture of religious people manifest in social phenomena is an open arena for scientists to study. Islamic studies from various approaches in academic history have been carried out by Muslims themselves (insiders) and by other people (outsiders).² The crucial question is whether the Muslim community can only give a valid explanation of Islam? Is it impossible for a valid picture of Islam to be obtained outside the Muslim community? Is there a universal methodology that can bridge the differences between Muslims and non-Muslims to understand Islam validly? To answer it all, the author will describe the insider and outsider points of view on religious studies or Islamic studies, especially according to Kim Knott's thoughts.

II. THE PROBLEMS IN RELIGIOUS STUDIES

¹Jamali Sahrodi, *Metodologi Studi Islam*, (Bandung : CV Pustaka Setia, 2008) 180-181

² A. Qadri Azizy, *Pengembangan Ilmu-ilmu Keislaman*, (Jakarta : Ditperta Depag RI, 2003), 31

Religious studies³, or making religion a subject of study, as explained by Waardenburgh, has at least two difficulties. The first difficulty is that studying means objectifying the object of study. In religious studies, objectivity is not only to other parties but also to oneself. Studying religion objectively is not easy because every religious person has involvement with religious aspects, from positive to negative, believes in committing to a particular religion to rejecting it altogether. To indeed conduct an objective study requires serious effort, practice and perseverance. The second difficulty is placing something with sacred, sacred and divine values as a neutral object of study that will be considered reducing, harassing or even destroying the value of religious orthodoxy and sacredness. Every attempt to make religion an object of study always has risks, namely getting resistance and sometimes in the form of threats and terror.⁴

The two problems of Islamic studies mentioned before have caused the tradition of Islamic studies to be more vibrant and flourishing among non-Muslims (outsiders), who are often referred to as orientalist rather than among Muslims (insiders). Outsiders do not have any burden to study Islam so that they are free to express their opinions about Islam, not only the religious practices shown in Islam but also to criticize the essential elements of belief in Islam, such as the Qur'an and Hadith. Meanwhile, as followers of Islam, insiders have theological barriers, so they are worried about offending religious groups or other schools of the same religion.

There is a difference between insider and outsider in Islamic studies. Insiders view Islam as departing from the belief that Islam is a revealed religion. The truth is absolute, has universal values and is *salih li kulli zaman wamakan* (according to every time and place). Insiders studying Islam are unlikely to conclude contrary to the agreed-upon fundamental values. The conclusions drawn are often not based on facts but instead on theological beliefs because the truth for insiders is the extent to which various facts and phenomena are based on the revelation or the revealed text. Thus, reality must be subordinated and subordinated to the revealed text. Meanwhile, outsiders approach Islam as a historical phenomenon. It is a religion that Muslims in history have practised. Likewise, revelation, which Muslims consider something that must be upheld, respected and sanctified. Outsiders see it all as something historical and part of Islamic culture.

However, it should also be noted that Islamic studies from outsiders contributed great ideas in Islamic studies that sparked intellectual movements in Islamic civilization. The critical power of Islam thanks to the studies of outsiders. By thinking critically, Muslim intellectuals know the problems they are suffering from while proposing various solutions that must be done.⁵

III. PROBLEMS WITH INSIDER AND OUTSIDER PERSPECTIVES

As written by Kim Knott, the problem of insider and outsider perspectives in religious studies is motivated by issues in Sikh studies that emerged in the mid-1980s.⁶ The main problem in Islamic studies for insiders and outsiders is the issue of subjectivity and objectivity, close and distant research experience, emic and etic positions, empathy and so on. In the study of social sciences, including in the study of the phenomenon of community religion, this issue is interesting because both the researcher and the community being studied have different lives and perspectives. Society is not like natural objects whose variables are fixed and easy to know. The problem of insider and outsider studies does not apply to natural science studies.

³Studi agama adalah kajian mengenai agama sebagai sebuah system yang utuh dan mandiri. Pada awalnya, nama yang digunakan oleh Max Muller (1823-1900) untuk menyebut studi agama adalah *Religionswissenschaft*. Sedangkan nama Inggris yang dimunculkan adalah *Science of Religion*. Kemudian muncul istilah-istilah lain yang juga digunakan sebagai sinonim dari studi agama, diantaranya : *comparative religions*, *phenomologi of religions* dan *history of religions*.

⁴Sebagaimana dikutip Ahmad Norma Permata dalam Pendahuluan buku kumpulan tulisan yang dieditnya, *Metodologi Studi Agama*, (Yogyakarta : Pustaka Pelajar, 2000), 13-14.

⁵Mudhofir Abdullah, *Sekilastentang "Insider" dan "Outsider" dalam Studi Islam*, dalam <http://mudhofirabdullah.com/> diakses tanggal 15 Oktober 2010

⁶Lihat Kim Knott, "Insider/Outsider Perspective" dalam John R. Hinnels (Ed), *The Routledge Companion of The Study of Religion*, 2005, h. 243. Prof. Kim Knott adalah Direktur Program Riset AHRC pada studi diaspora, Migrasi dan Identities (2005 – 2010) pada Departemen of Theology and Religious Studies Faculty of Art University of Leeds, Leeds UK. Karya-Karyanya yang dipublikasikan : Kim Knott, *The Location of Religion: A Spatial Analysis*, London: Equinox, 2005, Kim Knott, "*Spatial theory and method for the study of religion*," *Temenos*, 41:2, 2005, Kim Knott, "*Insider/outsider perspectives in the study of religions*," in *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*, J. Hinnells, ed., London and New York: Routledge, 2005, Kim Knott, "*Britain's changing religious landscape: Drowning or waving?*," *Berichte zur deutschen Landeskunde*, 78:2, 2004, Kim Knott, "*The sense and nonsense of 'community'*," in *Religion: Empirical Studies*, S. Sutcliffe, ed., Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004, Kim Knott, *Hinduism: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998 (also in Spanish, Italian, German, Russian, Romanian), Prof. Kim Knott juga seorang Sekretaris Umum of the European Association for the Study of Religions. Lihat <http://www.iahr.dk/wsn/knott.html>, diakses tanggal 25 Oktober 2010

In religious studies, the insider perspective is the view from within (adherents) or the practitioner's point of view, often referred to as the emic perspective. According to the adherents of the religion concerned, the emic perspective is a point of view. The emic perspective also means describing the religious views of the informants who are adherents of the religion itself.⁷The insider perspective arises from practitioners, people involved in religious practices and committed to groups or communities that are constantly interacting and experiencing development. The emic perspective is intended as a perspective for religious adherents in which there is faith. In this context, religious adherents as informants are needed by outside researchers to understand the phenomenon of religion for these adherents.

Insider views on studying religion are often criticized. The insider perspective is often considered non-objective because it often represents the world they understand (subjectively) and what they want. Insider perspective reveals more about their knowledge (insider) about their own beliefs, motives, the functional uses of their rituals, and the various symbols that exist in the traditions they partially adhere to or believe in. But they never understand their own life in their entirety. The system that surrounds them cannot be explained in their minds. They cannot understand organized socio-religious structures.

From the insider's perspective, no matter how intelligent an insider is, he cannot fully realize the system and structure of religious life and behaviour every day. The adherents of religion (insider) will not be able to understand the overall outline of their religious structure, which is manifested in their religious culture. The insider view is dominated by way of thinking that classifies various things in religious life to explain its cosmological and social views. Both are used as the basis for making decisions. But how high is the subjectivity in the insider perspective, and how biased it is. An insider says about his religious life remains essential information in a scientific construct.

The outsider perspective is the view of an outsider (not an adherent of a particular religion) who uses an ethical-theoretical point of view where the observer who observes does not affect what is observed. It can be called the academic or ethical perspective.⁸The ethical perspective in question is a follow-up effort made by people who observe to retrieve descriptive information collected for information organization, systematization and comparison.⁹The ethical perspective is a way of looking at life as it appears from the outside. The ethical perspective in the study of religion is intended to observe how religious life is formed and preserved and the changes in society from a religious perspective.

The most obvious manifestation of the outsider perspective in religious studies is the studies conducted by orientalists and Islamologists.¹⁰Orientalism studies eastern (Asian) cultures and civilizations related to language, literature, history and religion, including smaller units. The Islamologists are part of the orientalists who conduct special studies on Islam. Both orientalists and Islamologists use an outsider perspective in Islamic studies.

Unlike the exact sciences, researchers are faced with complex problems in the study of religion. A researcher (outsider) has his problems different from religious adherents (insider). In the phenomenological approach to religious life, outsider researchers are faced with the problem of observing according to the conceptual category of the adherents of the religion concerned.

The religious life of the community from the outside (outsider perspective), objective scientific activities are vital, especially for researchers who are not satisfied with the views of the adherents of the religion concerned who see religion according to the understanding of its adherents which tends to be subjective and normative. The outsider perspective is needed as part of a building theory that explains religious life in a society that involves rituals, social structures, symbols, and matters related to the community's religious life.

An outsider perspective is an approach that does not assume any religious commitment. The position is pure as a researcher and upholds neutrality. Such an approach is used to understand the reality of religion as a historical and empirical phenomenon and its organization. This outsider perspective is needed in religious studies activities to obtain a more objective picture of religious life in a society. Suppose an insider perspective dominates the conceptual category of people's lives. In that case, the concept that emerges is born from religious adherents' interpretation of their environment and life. It has a weakness because the insider perspective often conveys views and ideas that benefit their group, is full of ideas and has limited concepts.

In contrast to the insider perspective, which has a normative style of thinking and becomes the basis for acting according to the values believed, the outsider perspective wants to determine the equivalent of one religious life with another with significant criteria. Significant or not, these criteria are not viewed from the insider's point of view but the outside with the theories that exist in the outsider's mind. Because of this, the outsider perspective can see the suitability and discrepancy and the relationship between elements of religious life, all of which escape the insider's view. The categories made by the researchers (outsiders) have a more substantial basis.

⁷*Ibid*, 246

⁸*Ibid.*, hlm.246.

⁹*Ibid.*, hlm. 246.

¹⁰ William Montgomery Watt, " *The Study of Islam by Orientalis*" dalam *Islamochristiana*. Edisi 14 th. 1988, hlm. 2.

According to the insider's perspective, they are broader in scope than the categories in religious life. According to outsiders, religious explanations narrated by insiders are not objective and do not wholly accommodate all outsiders' goals. However, it is also beneficial for outsiders. It means that the explanation of religious phenomena put forward by insiders becomes an essential material for outsiders to analyze, both in terms of categories, concepts and symbols. As an important note, so as not to misunderstand this issue, researchers from insiders can also conduct studies from an outsider's perspective. It is the absence of religious commitment in the research. Muslim scholars mostly do this in various regions of the world.

Outsider perspectives used by researchers from insider and outsider circles must maintain a neutral and value-free attitude. In addition, there is no need for psychological and theological burdens. What is more critical in this perspective, as stated by Fazlur Rahman, is the importance of strengthening the basics and methodologies needed in studies, such as having the proper methodology, sensitivity, and the absence of antipathy and religious subjectivity support from qualified scientific dimensions.¹¹ The study of religion is not a matter of theological commitment. It is not related to religious experience or spiritual experience (mystic experience of religion). Religion is positioned as human culture, not a divine doctrine in this context.

Thus, it is clear that religion is seen as a social phenomenon from an outsider's perspective. To study religion, it is necessary to use the methodology of the social sciences.¹² It means that the outsider perspective will only be a possible perspective if the methodology developed in the social sciences can be appropriately used. Therefore, scholars in religious studies centers need to encourage the outsider perspective. It is time for Muslim scholars to actively create a climate where an outsider's perspective is not taboo, forbidden and dangerous.

From an outsider's perspective, it needs to be emphasized that religion is a socio-cultural reality manifested in the faces of culture and civilization in society. The outsider perspective is not intended to examine the essence of religious teachings to strengthen religious doctrine beliefs. Religion is seen as a historical reality and a phenomenon of religious communities that gave birth to traditions, culture and social systems. Religious life, including social institutions, symbols, religious behavior and social ethics, is a dynamic social fact. The manifestation of religious teachings in historical contexts is not sacred and absolute, even though it is based on sacred dogmas. The outsider perspective observes the phenomenon of religion as a socio-historical reality and becomes a culture in society.

IV. INSIDER AND OUTSIDER ATTITUDES IN RELIGIOUS STUDIES

In conducting religious studies, researchers, both insiders and outsiders alike, must have an open mind. Insider researchers need to learn how to step imaginatively beyond their religious perspective to develop many of the same ideas as outsiders. Meanwhile, outside researchers should imagine what a world would look like when there is a sacred area.¹³ As the two groups do, the imagination opens up and enters each other's world.

As Cornelius Tiele put it,¹⁴ the attitude that insider researchers in studying their traditions must possess is that they can place religion in a distant position from itself. They must be able to distinguish between his position as a religious believer and his position as a researcher. Can they be neutral in examining their traditions? And see religion as an object of open study? In this case, personal development is needed, namely preparation to see one's religion as others (outsiders) see an insider's religion. The insider perspective with the participant model can be done neutrally and objectively by prioritizing a middle attitude (not taking sides) and regulating the attitude of participation to avoid changes to the data being studied.

For Van Deer Law, Otto, Eliade, Cantwell Smith and Ninian Smart, all religions are unique phenomena, autonomous and cannot be compared.¹⁵ Religious studies must be done with empathy for anyone who conducts religious studies, whether insiders or outsiders and how the model is used.¹⁶ Religious studies can be carried out with a neutral and subjective bias, even by insiders. In the context of pure science, religious researchers, both insiders and outsiders, must be as neutral and objective as possible to obtain a fundamental picture of the structure of the community's religious life being studied.¹⁷ The study of religious phenomena is not intended to judge the truth of religion but only to explain religion empirically and historically. It needs to be understood so that there is no longer a view that only insiders have the right to conduct religious studies because there is no bias in viewing religion.

¹¹ Lihat Fazlur Rahman, "Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies : Review Essay" In Richard C. Martin, *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*, (Arizona : The University of Arizona Press, 2005) hlm. 199-201.

¹² Atho'Mudzar, *Pendekatan Studi Islam dalam Teori dan Praktek*, (Yogyakarta : Pustaka Pelajar, 1998), hlm. 26. lihat juga Fazlur Rahman, *Approaches.*, hlm. 260.

¹³ Peter Connolly (ed), *Aneka Pendekatan Studi Agama*, terj. Imam Khoiri, (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 2002), hlm. 3.

¹⁴ Lihat Kim Knott, *Insider*, 244

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 245

¹⁶ Ninian Smart, *Concept and Empathy : Essay in the study of Religion*, Ed. Donaid Wiebe (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986) hlm. 211

¹⁷ Amin Abdullah, *Studi Agama, Normatifitas atau Historisitas?* (Yogyakarta : Pustaka Pelajar, 2004), hlm. 212.

However, insiders sometimes demand that the researchers (outsiders) also commit to the religion they believe in, as the insider is committed to their religious beliefs.¹⁸ The method of empathy from outsiders is actually enough to be a fair way to research religious phenomena. Thus, insider suspicion of outsiders should not need to be developed.

Insiders' suspicions of outsiders are not always to blame. Some of the studies conducted by outsiders are considered to be non-objective.¹⁹ There are many criticisms of outsiders, especially against orientalist whose skills in understanding people's religion are often external and forget about internal aspects. It is also a challenge for outsiders to be neutral in studying Islam, not to make Islam a frightening primitive ghost or enemy that needs to be exterminated.

The issue of objectivity and neutrality is not only a problem for insiders but also outsiders. Objectivity and neutrality become essential because they are often contaminated by elements of beliefs from insiders or vile allegations from outsiders. For outsiders, it is necessary to emphasize being open and willing to hear what the insider says. It means that outsiders must disclose the central view of religious adherents (insiders). They are the way they explain religious and universal social phenomena or their subjective ideal view of the world of their own religious life. The essential is that outsiders are required to be able to disclose how all of these things are related to the constructs and theories that exist in the outsider's mind. Outsiders also need to view religion as not just an ordinary social phenomenon. It can eliminate the sacredness of religion. A complete understanding of religion will be created by not making religion exactly like ordinary culture.

Therefore, even in pure science, a phenomenological approach is needed so that insiders and outsiders can understand well the essence of religion. The phenomenological approach is intended to obtain a more complete and fundamental picture of the community's religious life.²⁰ Therefore, researchers need to use an empathic-objective approach or a religious phenomenological approach, which is one approach that involves disciplined empathy in the area of its methodology. The empathy in question attempts to make what is understood and experienced by religious adherents and their religious views regarding their complex religious life accessible to outsiders.

A researcher (outsider) tries to describe, interpret, and explain existing phenomena through a phenomenological approach. It can work well if the researcher tries to enter and feel the experiences of other parties (insiders). It is based on a basic assumption that all humans share the same experiences. Therefore a researcher can bridge the gap between insiders and outsiders by generalizing their personal experiences and then applying them to the experiences of others.

Researcher in Religious Studies according to Kim Knott

Kim Knott's Model of Religious Studies

In the study of insider and outsider perspectives in religion, there is a known position of the researcher as a participant and a pure researcher. Kim Knott wrote that there are 4 (four) categories of this problem: full researchers, participatory researchers, participant researchers, and total participants.²¹ The term participant refers to people who are fully engaged in religious activities while observing. Participants who are fully engaged in religious activities and become adherents are included in the category of complete participants. For more details regarding the position of researchers in religious studies, we will describe them below.

First is the position of researchers as complete participants. They do not make objectivity essential and are not the goal of his research by taking a distance from criticizing religious traditions. They are scholars who write their religion, such as theological scholars, rabbis, muftis, priests, etc. The benefits of this model for scientific development in their own beliefs. Kim Knott included Fatimah Mernissi in this group. Mernissi is an insider who is critical of understanding Islam, particularly the importance of contemporary Muslim women and their roles in socio-political processes. Fatimah Mernissi herself admits as an insider but still views Islam critically. In Mernissi's perspective, the concepts of democracy, human rights, freedom and the issue of participation in the socio-political sphere. It is taken from Islamic values.

Second, the position of researchers as complete observers are scholars who thoroughly examine religious phenomena from the outside and abstain from participation. This second position usually exists in studying the sociology of religion and psychology. Some scholars who often use this second attitude usually make a structured list of questions to respondents or informants. Researchers observe religious phenomena and analyze answers from respondents or informants from the outside (critical distance) using specific scientific frames. This attitude model is what Festinger, Riecken and Schachter did in the 1950s.

¹⁸ Ibid, hlm. 212-213.

¹⁹ Akh. Minhaji, *Sejarah Sosial dalam Studi Islam, Teori, Metodologi dan Implementasi*, (Yogyakarta :Sunan Kalijaga Press, 2010), 96.

²⁰ Amin Abdullah, *Studi Agama.*, hlm. 11.

²¹ Kim Knott, *Insider*, 246-254

This attitude is characterized by perspective ethics, where the language of social science describes religious behavior that results from belief. From this perspective, the basic principles of science are neutrality, objectivity, demonstrating the validity of results and generalizing from those results. They adopt insider roles (as informants) in conducting research, but the research is unknown to insiders. It is to avoid engineering the group under study.

Third, the researcher (observer as a participant) uses a participatory attitude towards the studied community. The methodological agnosticism strategy carried out by Ninian Smart (1973) belongs to this category. Most phenomenological approaches are also part of the example of the observer of participant attitudes. The limitations of the researcher's understanding and the complexity of the research required the researcher to be participative in developing an understanding of the meanings and symbols of the society under study.

As Eileen Barker quoted by Kim Knott, the observer as a participant rejects the complete observer model research carried out in secret for practical or ethical reasons. When researching the Moony (church fellowship), Eileen Barker lives in the center of the church, conversing with them, listening as a member and asking them questions. With this attitude as a participant, Eileen Barker can ask questions that researchers who are not Moony members should not be able to ask. Moreover, information about Moony can also be traced from former Moony members. It is crucial to know Moony's weaknesses. Usually, former Moony must have a bad relationship with the institution or figure in the alliance when leaving the membership. As the Moony members, they have the right to ask and listen. Besides, it finds out Moony members who left the group to gain information.

The approach used by Eileen Barker in researching the Moony people is *verstehen*, which is a research process in which researchers draw understanding and conclusions from the perspective under study. In other words, to see the religious world from an insider's perspective.

Fourth is the researcher's position as a participant-observer in the participating scholars. They take on the role of the observer amid their religious community. They prioritize critical thinking rather than as total participants in their religion. An example of a researcher who falls into this category is Samuel Heilman, a sociologist and Jewish modernist in the 1980s. Religious scholars in this category also argue that insiders can examine their own religious life critically and fairly. They write about their own religious life as if they were objective and critical researchers.

The attitudes provide outsiders with an understanding of their religion to be understood, both religious beliefs and practices. In other words, the outsider perspective is used by insiders to accept a code of ethics for scientific methodologies. By using an outsider perspective, religious scholars will be able to explain their system of religious life to outsiders.

The essential thing is how a researcher can take a role neutrality attitude, whether as a full researcher, participant researcher, research participant or full participant. The neutral role in question is an impartial role, such as the role of judges in a court process or the role of referees in sports. Thus neutrality is a demand and a necessity, not a trait inherent in the insider or outsider.

V. CONCLUSION

The study of religion or religious life, in essence, places more emphasis on a neutral, empirical, objective orientation and provides a value-free assessment so that it is different from a theology which tends to prioritize the strengthening of the religious beliefs in question. Because of this, the problem of insider and outsider perspectives in religious studies emerged, which initially started with the study of the Sikh religion in the mid-1980s, marked by a debate about which of the researchers understood the Sikh religion better.

The main issues are subjectivity and objectivity, close and distant research experiences, and emic and etic positions. In the context of Islamic studies, outsider studies are accommodated in the form of orientalism or Islamology. In contrast, insider studies are more practically eschatologically oriented with apologetic patterns as an antidote to orientalist views (outsiders) which are considered attacks on Islam. In contrast, insiders' suspicion towards outsiders should have been removed. The results of outsider research as non-partisan observers who study religion objectively constitute a significant contribution to the study of religion. Likewise, essential information from insiders becomes an inseparable part of the scientific series of religious studies conducted by outsiders. The insider's perspective is needed to understand the historicity and phenomenology of his religion, thus enriching his understanding, which was initially a normative theological apologist, into a complete understanding. Thus, every researcher (both insider and outsider) should prioritize an empathic, objective and phenomenological approach by upholding correct and accountable methodological principles.

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