

## **Beyond witnessing: ethical imperatives in action-research on suffering, victims of violence, and structural harm in mental health systems**

**Abstract:** Qualitative research in mental health often exposes systemic contradictions: the researcher listens to testimonies of harm while institutions demand silence. This paper interrogates the ethical tensions of conducting action-research in settings where mental health care reproduces coercion, erasure, and institutional betrayal. Grounded in a five-year, multi-sited ethnographic inquiry across Spain, Italy, Sweden, and Indonesia -conducted under the auspices of European COST Actions FOSTREN, ReMO, and the author-founded EU BEACON One Health Education action- this study integrates lived experience, scientific fieldwork, and participatory methods. It identifies how dominant legal and institutional frameworks in Europe obstruct accountability by shielding professionals through laws that protect subjective annotations, prevent access to clinical records, and frame complaints as symptoms. Drawing from first-hand documentation of abuse and policy engagement at national and international levels, the paper argues for a shift toward radically ethical, open science infrastructures. It advocates for dynamic, reflexive protocols that empower researchers to respond to harm ethically and structurally-transforming qualitative inquiry from observation into intervention. The work responds to urgent calls from affected persons, professionals, and policymakers to end epistemic violence, improve safeguards, and uphold the principle that suffering must not be rendered invisible for the sake of institutional comfort. In doing so, it proposes a framework for ethically sound, action-oriented, and justice-driven qualitative research in mental health.

**Keywords:** Ethics, action-research, qualitative methods, structural violence, epistemic injustice, mental health systems, institutional betrayal, open science, human rights, psychiatry, COST, ReMO, FOSTREN, EU BEACON One Health Education.

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