Discussion of case studies in ethnological research

Negotiating ethical procedures and the challenges of ethnography: From research proposal to the field

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Ethical and Deontological Think Tank (EDTT)

The Ethical and Deontological Think Tank (EDTT) brings together both junior and senior researchers to explore the ethical implications of anthropological research and the various aspects of knowledge production (fieldwork, analysis, publication, dissemination, etc.) it involves. Its aim is to eschew normative policing of "research ethics" and rather to offer a platform for in-depth debate and exchange on questions of *everyday ethics* in the research process, questions that are often embedded in complex and ambiguous situations. The EDTT promotes "processual ethics" (in contrast to "procedural ethics") as the most appropriate approach to untangling this complexity (or messiness) (see our position papers: Perrin et al, 2018; 2020). The EDTT focuses on the ethical stakes underlying knowledge production, acknowledging that knowledge is produced by anthropologists whose identities, bodies and individualities are rooted in societies shaped by multiple power relations. These concern not only the different aspects of fieldwork, with populations that are othered, sometimes marginalised or in a situation of subordination, but also the conditions of work in academia. The EDTT is thus concerned with issues of academic precariousness and the dependence of doctoral students in the thesis process; with anthropology's relations with funding and ethical certification bodies in Switzerland; with questions raised by our research fields; with relations with partner populations in our projects; and with issues for professors who lead projects, and institutions, regarding how to foster and protect their research teams.

Negotiating ethical procedures and the challenges of ethnography: From research proposal to the field

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Introduction

The original paper on which this article is based, was written following the invitation received by Paola Juan; Sylvain Besençon and Wiebke Wiesigel to present my reflections on 'procedural' and 'processual' ethics (cf. Perrin et al. 2018) in the light of my experience as Principal Investigator of a project sponsored by the European Research Council (ERC)[1]. In their insightful article 'Searching for ethics: Legal requirements and empirical issues for anthropology', Perrin and colleagues (2018) start by briefly characterizing *procedural ethics* (following Felices-Luna 2016), as *'*administrative actions based on legal requirements and aiming to protect participants in advance by means of the application of standardized ethical protocols' (2018: 139). The authors subsequently contrast procedural ethics with the *processual ethics* that tends to be applied 'in the qualitative social sciences' (ibid), before exploring, in the rest of the text, the tensions between these two approaches and different ways of addressing such frictions, alternatively, through 'moralist', 'pragmatist',

and 'dialogic' stances. By *processual ethics*, the authors clarify they are referring to 'approaches which refer to a comprehensive, relational and positional understanding of research ethics and which adapt their principles to the specifics of each research site' (Perrin et al. 2018: 139). The description for the Workshop to which I was invited - titled 'Research ethics in anthropology: which good practices?' and convened by the Ethical and Deontological Think Tank of the Swiss Anthropological Association in March 2021 - built on the insights of Perrin and colleagues. It encouraged reflection on the challenges that can arise, for anthropologists, when engaging and complying with ethical guidelines and procedures, as set for instance by funding agencies such as the ERC.

In this article, I start by briefly introducing my research project, which helps explain part of the challenges I faced in terms of ethics requirements. I then consider the European Research Council's demanding 'Ethics Review Procedure', before addressing some of the effects and translations of such procedures in Cuba,

where I meant to undertake fieldwork. By reflecting on matters of 'procedural' and 'processual' ethics that emerged when preparing and carrying out this research, the article raises questions on how we move from procedural ethical guidelines to the nitty gritty of ethics in the field, and the other way around via critique of the former, in anthropological research at large.

The Research Proposal

The rationale for the ERC project 'Returning to a Better Place: The (Re)assessment of the 'Good Life' in Times of Crisis', stemmed from the realization that the question of 'what makes for a good life' is one that many people in the contemporary world ask themselves. In 2017, when I was preparing my proposal, a review of the literature showed that the question had been mainly addressed through economic indexes, psychological surveys, development indicators, and moral philosophical reflections – approaches that, however insightful, had the disadvantage of remaining largely couched in Western-derived conceptions and biases. Only recently scholars had started uncovering, via qualitative inductive research, how views of the good life varied across cultures and societies in line with different notions of value, morality, and well-being. Knowledge was still lacking, however, on how people themselves assessed and compared different views of the 'good life' and their socio-cultural anchorage, notably as a result of changing structural conditions and transnational connections - such as those prompted by economic crisis and migration.

Addressing this knowledge gap, the project brought together three main scholarly areas of enquiry: 1) the study of morality, ethics and what counts as 'good life'; 2) the study of the field of economic practice, its definition, and 'crises', and 3) the study of migratory aspirations, projects, and trajectories. The initial hunch, to empirically operationalize such broad topics, was that situations of return migration originating in crisis situations could provide an ideal entry point to understand how people (re)assessed what makes for a good and valuable life, and where to look for it. The idea was that when precipitated by disappointment and a breakdown of expectations, migrants' decisions to return to their countries of origin could lead them to revaluate and compare different life scenarios. This meant: comparing, pondering and deliberating on what was best 'here' and 'there', linking such evaluations to one's own circumstances and possibilities, and take action and decisions (cf. Simoni, Voirol, and Hjalmarson 2024). The project focused on the imaginaries and experience of return of Ecuadorian and Cuban men and women who migrated to Spain, were dissatisfied with their life there, and envisaged and carried out the project of going back to their countries of origin. A multi-sited endeavour, the research was designed in three interconnected subprojects with fieldwork in Spain (carried out by Elise Hjalmarson, PhD student), in Ecuador (by Jérémie Voirol, as Post-Doc), and in Cuba (by myself).

Ethnographic methods were used, consisting in a review of documentary sources, participant observation, and interviews, the goal being to generate new understandings of the links between changes in values and aspirations, and the transformations in living conditions resulting from migration trajectories. Departing from the original project proposal, as we advanced with our fieldwork our research foci also started diversifying, as will become apparent when considering certain aspects of my fieldwork in Cuba.

Addressing Ethical Issues and Negotiating Procedural Ethics

When I prepared the project, I was aware that ethical considerations needed to be explicitly addressed in the proposal and in the application form, and that even if the project was to be recommended for funding, it would first have to undergo a thorough

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Ethics Review Panel before any contract could be signed. I must confess that at the time I gave ethical issues less thought than they may have warranted. For the application form, I relied mainly on what the Research Office at the Geneva Graduate Institute advised I should indicate. To the research proposal itself, I added a one-page 'Ethical Issues Annex' (see *Annex 1* after the Reference's list).

Let me provide some examples of what the ERC application form demanded in its 'Ethics Issues' Table', and the way I went by answering some of its questions. In 'Section 6', concerning 'Third countries', the first question asked: 'In case non-EU countries are involved, do the research related activities undertaken in these countries raise potential ethics issues?' My first thought was that I should choose the 'No' box, but the Research Office advice was that I should indicate 'Yes'. In their opinion – and they were right – the fact that fieldwork was going to take place in Cuba and Ecuador, could raise questions related to the political situation for people leaving the country and returning, especially in the case of Cuba. I thus answered 'Yes', while providing reassurances on issues of consent, trust, confidentiality, and data protection. There was then a question on whether I planned 'to import any material - including personal data - from non-EU countries into the EU?' to which I also had to answer Yes, and a further one on whether 'the situation in the country could put the individuals taking part in the research at risk? For the latter, I though again that this would not be the case, but the advice I received was that I should mark 'Yes', and explain what those risks could be, something that I did in the Ethical Issues Annex I provided.

At the application stage, I broadly referred evaluators to my Ethical Issues Annex, the one-page text that at the time I had deemed detailed enough also for an Ethics Review Panel. In it, I stressed that the project would follow follow ethical guidelines and procedures currently discussed for anthropological and ethnographic research. I referred mainly to a report by scholar Ron Iphofen (2013), titled *Research Ethics in Ethnography/Anthropology*, which I deemed authoritative enough since it was 'drafted by a panel of experts at the request of the European Commission' and set to 'constitute a guidance to raise awareness in the scientific community'. This notwithstanding, Iphofen's text also stated that it did not 'constitute official EU guidance'.

Always in my Ethical Issues Annex, I explained that, the way it was designed, the project presented little risks in terms of research feasibility and for the participants involved, be it researchers or subjects of the investigation. In both the EU and non-EU countries, approvals by local research institutions to safeguard legal and ethical aspects of the research would be obtained, and local and international rules and regulations and applicable legislation would be observed. I argued that no foreseeable potential source of harm could be detected at this stage in the project, and that benefits could arise from it given its focus on people's evaluations of what constitutes a 'good life' and the possible obstacles and paths to achieve it. Briefly addressed were also issues of access, recruitment, and establishment of relationships with research participants, noting that given the little sensitive and often public nature of the themes of the research, I expected voluntary informed consent from participants easily achievable. Finally, I also considered issues of Data protection to protect the privacy, anonymity and confidentiality of research participants.

If this one page Annex mattered little to get the project through the scientific evaluation, I was, in retrospect, rather naive in thinking it would be enough to satisfy the ERC Ethics Review Panel. At about the same time that I got the wonderful news that the project had been recommended for funding, I received an email from the Ethics Review and Expert Management section of the ERC that raised a range of serious points. The terms used unsettled me as they made it clear that the research would not be

funded without the approval of such Review panel. Here a quote to exemplify the force with which ethical issues were stated, and how the whole feasibility of the project hinged on them:

> The information that you, as Principal Investigator, provided to us through the ethics self assessment of your application does not satisfy the ethics issues that were identified by the ethics panel. Indeed, the ethics panel identified ethics requirements that you must now address by providing complementary information or documents. *Failure to comply with the ethics requirements may lead to the rejection of your proposal.*' (emphasis mine)

I had rather naively deemed the research to be not risky, mindless perhaps of the fact that, as Kirsten Bell makes clear (2014: 517), '[i]n contemporary research ethics guidelines, research is framed as an intrinsically risky enterprise'. In the six pages document I received from the Ethics Review Panel, there was some recognition that I had addressed ethical issues in my original proposal, such as informed consent, data protection and privacy, safety for study participants and researchers. However, the review mentioned that 'the information provided is rather general and incomprehensive', and more detail was needed.

'For instance', I was warned, 'for formal interviewees, recruitment and consent procedures need to be further explained, as well as the assurance that the personal information gathered will be managed responsibly and in accordance with EU law'. And there were more key aspects in which my meagre Annex was judged to be lacking. In total, fourteen ethics requirements were singled out and detailed in their report, under the following categories: Humans, Protection of Personal Data, Non EU Countries, and General. The last, fourteenth point, finally stated the following:

'Due to the severity of the ethics issues raised by the proposed research work, it is required that an independent Ethics Advisor is appointed to oversee the implementation the ethical concerns involved in this research. A report by the ethics Advisor must be submitted to ERCEA with the financial reports [i.e. four times during the five years of the project].'

When I thought it was time to celebrate the acceptance of the proposal, I had instead to take 'procedural ethics' matters much more seriously than I had up to then.. In the weeks that followed the receipt of this email, I worked on a response, addressing point by point all their questions, sending back a fifteen pages document. To my response, I also annexed 1) the American Anthropological Association (AAA) statement on ethics (2012); 2) the CV of our Ethics Advisor, with colleague Jérémie Forney kindly agreeing to take on that role; and finally a 3) Data Controller Statement from our Research Office in Geneva.

Among the thorniest issue that called for a convincing and articulated response, was that related to 'informed consent', which was presented as a strict requirement to achieve approval. This aspect required much thought and carefully phrasing, since I wanted the ERC to accept the idea that oral informed consent was the most adapted to the kind of fieldwork planned for the project, based on my previous experiences of fieldwork in Cuba, and with Cuban migrants in Barcelona. In *Annex 2* at the end of this article, I provide some key excerpts of my response for further clarifications, which may perhaps be useful for other qualitative social scientists facing similar ethical challenges.

By Mid-October, I received another email from the Ethics Review and Expert Management Unit, which started exactly with the same trenchant tone and highly prescriptive language as the previous one had – restating that approval for the research would ultimately depend on my response to

their pending queries – except that their overall assessment was slightly more encouraging. 'With the exception of some approvals and authorizations' stated the report 'which are to be obtained and submitted to ERCEA once the project is underway, the ethics concerns arising from the proposal have now been satisfactorily addressed'. It was with great relief that I read these final lines, as they meant the contract could – provisionally at least, and counting on my engagement to send ERCEA such approvals and authorizations as soon as I had them – be signed. I was particularly comforted by the fact that the Review panel approval included the possibility for informed consent to be obtained and (re)negotiated orally throughout the research process. Among the agreements, approvals and authorizations that were still required, were those we were due to obtain from institutions in Ecuador and Cuba, granting us permission to do research and export the obtained data. For Ecuador, Jérémie Voirol was able, not without much effort, to secure a '*convenio*' – a formal protocol and agreement – and to travel there in the Summer of 2018 to start with fieldwork. In my case, with Cuba, another 'procedural' journey began, one that I failed to complete from distance, in spite of a plethora of emails and phone calls to my partners on the island, and which would ultimately take me to discuss and negotiate face to face with institutional representatives there.

Institutional Arrangements in Cuba: 'Protocol' from a Different Perspective

Preparing my presentation for the Workshop, I gradually realized that this section of the talk, to which I had initially given little thought, had the potential to become more significant and insightful. Readings helped raise the stakes of what I wanted to address, starting from Didier Fassin's (2006: 523) work. In an article provocatively titled 'The End of Ethnography as Collateral Damage of Ethical Regulation', Fassin argued:

'In countries of the South, nationalism has been a strong incentive in the development of ethical regulation. Demanding more attention to ethics, imposing a formal frame for the authorization process, and often rejecting proposals and asking for their rewriting are acts of sovereignty that are regularly legitimized by public revelations of ethical scandals, often in medical experimentation, sometimes in anthropological research. Recognition of national ethical cultures and nationalism in ethical demands suggests that ethics is also a matter of politics.' (Fassin 2006: 523).

In Cuba, not to my surprise, ethics was indeed, quite clearly, 'also a matter of politics'. This would become inclreasingly clear as I embarked in the process of obtaining permits to carry out research in the country. Preparing my keynote for the Workshop, I searched the threads of emails I had had with my institutional partners in Cuba. Most were with my key sponsor and friend, a Professor at the *Instituto Cubano de Antropología* (ICAN) with whom I had had fruitful exchanges since I started fieldwork on the island for my PhD research back in 2005. I first wrote to him concerning the new research project I was preparing for the ERC application as early as in April 2016, enquiring about his interest and willingness to be part of an Advisory Board. At that time, over a year before I got the favourable review of the project from the ERC, his response had been very encouraging and enthusiastic. We stayed in touch, since that first exchange, and in the summer of 2018, when I finally received the ERC response, and the concomitant requests from the Ethics Review panel, I contacted him with some urgency, to enquire about the research's possible affiliation with the *Instituto Cubano de Antropología*.

His first reaction was not what I had been expecting, and rather worrying. He seemed reluctant to endorse my request for research permits in his institution, knowing

this would be a complex and time-consuming process, and possibly an uphill struggle with some of his colleagues, notably those that followed a stricter '[communist] party line', he explained. These were colleagues with whom, I later discovered, he already had had issues in the past, after inviting a foreign scholar subsequently judged to be 'unfriendly' to Cuba and its regime. In one of our first email exchanges, he told me I should anticipate the following question from the Director of ICAN: '*que gana la institucion y el pais con eso?*', 'what do the institution and the country gain from this?' – 'this' meaning the research I was proposing. My immediate answer was that the project, with its focus on Cuban migrants who suffered the crisis in Europe and returned to live in Cuba, ought to be of interest to Cuban institutions. I enclosed the project's abstract in Spanish.

After four months, and several reminders from my part, in February 2018, with the project just formally started, I received a response from him telling me that to his own 'surprise', the Director of the *Instituto Cubano de Antropología* had found some interest in the theme, and was open to discuss the possibility of a collaboration. I was asked to send several documents to this effect, including a letter from my institution requesting such collaboration. His additional advice was that on such letter, it would be helpful to emphasize how the project could lead to fairer and more equal public policies, or at least a raising of critical consciousness. I thought this was well in line with the scope of the project, and was happy to do as he suggested. Those documents had to be presented to ICAN's 'Scientific Council' first. If, and when approved by the Council, he explained, the request would then move up to the 'Direction of International Relations of the Cuban Ministry of Science and Technology'. Three months later, in response to one of my emails asking for news on how the procedure was moving along, my Cuban colleague answered that 'what was left was in the hands of bureaucrats'. We now had to 'pray god for it to be quick enough' ('*lo que queda está en manos de los burócratas. roguémosle a dios por que se rápido*').

My intention had been to travel to Cuba in the summer to start with field research. I gradually came to terms with the idea that I would go there primarily to try and finalize these procedural matters, only after which could my field research be approved by the ERC, and officially start. When I went to Cuba in July 2018, there was therefore still a measure of uncertainty as to the feasibility of the research. I find it useful to recall here some reflections of Martin Holbraad, written in a special section on 'Anthropologies in/of Cuba' in the *American Anthropologist*. His insight would have served me well in those moments, but were published shortly after and I had no knowledge of them at the time. Holbraad (2018: 741) astutely questions the frequent normative assumptions of foreign scholars doing research in Cuba, namely the view that the world at large' is 'one big open field in which anthropologists (funded and supported by "global" institutions lodged in Europe and North America) can roam freely to conduct research on anything and everything'. This view, he suggests, 'clashes fundamentally with the way social research has been understood throughout the revolutionary period in Cuba, and still today', and whose value is also assessed in terms of its contribution to the 'national project (*proyecto nacional*) of revolutionary transformation' (ibid.). 'Visiting researchers' tendency to ignore this', Holbraad continues, 'or treat it merely as a bureaucratic obstacle or a peculiarity of local political culture', is itself a barrier to a fully symmetrical engagement with Cuban colleagues' (2018: 742)[2]. In his article, Holbraad concludes with the following considerations:

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[2] Holbraad (2018: 742) pertinently adds that '[T]he implicit value judgment in the liberal stance of free and all-encompassing research, according to which Cuban conceptions and sensibilities of

what constitutes research are ultimately dismissed as parochial, can also be grating—a sign of arrogance.'

'[t]he requirement, obviously, is not for foreign anthropologists to embrace Cuba's national political project or render the aims of their research compatible with the revolutionary authorities' objectives. It is to take seriously, as a basic point of reference for Cuban intellectual life, these ideas about what research is for, and to take them into account as a significant condition for efforts to forge channels of meaningful communication and collaboration with Cuban colleagues' (Holbraad 2018: 742)

Holbraad's piece came out five months after my stay in Cuba to establish a partnership agreement in which I met repeatedly with fellow anthropologists at the *Instituto Cubano de Antropología*, discussing the nature and goals of the research, and the kind of fieldwork I planned to do. As my sponsor at the *Instituto* had anticipated, discussing these terms face to face, proved much easier than via email. The research topic was broadly appreciated by the members of the Institute's Scientific Board. The notion of Cubans being disappointed by life in a Europe in crisis, and who decided to return to live in Cuba, was well received. Everyone had a story or anecdote to share about such and such person they knew who was coming back to live on the island: the subject, overall, resonated well with my interlocutors at ICAN. Eager to follow my proposal's intention of interrogating and troubling the dominant script that situates a 'better life' for migrants in the Global North, most of them were interested in knowing more about the stories of those Cubans who had returned, and possibly found renewed value in living in Cuba.

I should stress that far from having a consensual and homogeneous opinion on the matter, the members of the Scientific Board at the *Instituto* also showed diverse and complex appreciations. This point resonates with Holbraad's (2018: 742) recognition, based on his assessment of the work of several Cuban intellectuals, that the

'nature and value of intellectual production in general, and social research in particular, are as subject to debate in Cuba as they are anywhere else'. The opinions of the Cuban scholars at ICAN with whom I engaged and discussed some of the premises and preliminary findings of my project varied. They showed contrastive normative stances and appreciations regarding the direction their country was heading – more or less optimistic - and concerning the reasons that could inform and justify Cuban migrants' returns. Albeit I am simplifying the complexity of such stances, it is important to recognize their heterogeneity. I provide here two contrasting examples. On the one hand, I sensed a sense of pride for the achievements of the Revolution, its realisations in terms, for instance, of universal social, educational, and health services, or the deeply seated values of sharing and solidarity that guaranteed every citizen would not be left alone and abandoned to his or her fate. These could be contrasted to the bitter side of life under 'capitalism', where everyone had to fend for his or herself, were socio-economic 'safety nets' were lacking, and which could ultimately explain why Cuban migrants who had struggled to make it 'out there' (*allà*), and felt disillusioned by individualist, 'fittest will survive' competitive logics, were now lured back to their home country. . On the other hand, there were more sceptical and less idealistic views, who questioned whether such returns were really based on a revalorization of life in Cuba, or, more likely, the result of mismanaged and badly conceived migratory trajectories and motives, lack of effort and initiative from the returnees, and ultimately their 'failure' in making something useful out of the opportunities one could find aboard..

The more palpable and immediate concern of my institutional partners in Cuba, in terms of finding the best procedural path to get my research approved by their superiors in the Ministry, however, seemed not so much (or not solely) related with what the research was about, but with the ways in

which I intended to proceed, empirically, with fieldwork. In this respect, I found that what was most reassuring to them was the fact that my research did not seem to require permits and authorizations to access other Cuban institutions, or interview members of governmental agencies and official entities. The fact that I would proceed informally, via participant observation designed to recruit participants among migrants who had returned, meant that I was unlikely to cause any potential frictions with other governmental offices, and thus avoid the risk of raising trouble with colleagues in other branches of officialdom.

In terms of my part in the collaboration, integral to the mutuality of the arrangement, what was formally agreed was that I would provide the *Instituto* with copies of all the outputs from the research, and a written report in Spanish at the end of it. As it turned out, in 2022 I was also invited to contribute to the Institute's *Diplomado en antropología* - a postgraduate programme in anthropology – by teaching an intensive course, which constituted another important way to give something back to the institution and nourish our partnership, and proved to be a very stimulating experience. A key material benefit stemming from my affiliation to the *Insituto*, was also the payment of a rather hefty monthly fee – for Cuban standards – seen as formal retribution for the *asesoramiento* – the supervision – that ICAN would formally provide. I was happy to pay that fee, which I could allocate to my project's research budget. My monetary contribution would contribute to the institute's meagre finances, providing a much-needed inflow of hard currency to cover research expenses for their members, who often lacked funds to carry out their projects, starting with the challenges of paying for local transportation, food and accommodation when their

researches took them outside of their immediate zone of residence, for instance.

A more informal part of my 'deal' with the institution was that I would invite one of their members, in this case my closest colleague, for a seminar in Geneva, which we did in May 2023 and resulted in a much appreciated collaborative seminar. With the typical flair and humor to which my colleague had accustomed me, he himself jokingly hinted at notion of *jinetear* to refer to that part of the agreement, calling it, with an ironic grin on his face, a form of *jineterismo académico*. As I have addressed elsewhere (Simoni 2016), *jineterismo* is a neologism given to the activities of outgoing Cubans who, broadly speaking, seek to make contact with foreigners and tourists in order to gain something from the encounter. My friend was blatantly using the expression in public, within the *Instituto*'s precinct, as a cunning provocation, simultaneously causing consternation, jokes and laughter from his more reserved colleagues. It was also a way for him to signal our close relationship and complicity[3]. In the five stays I had in Cuba during the project, I also took care to always bring technological devices I knew members of the *Instituto* would found it hard to acquire, including USB flash drives drives, and once, upon request, a new Hard Drive to replace the one that was currently failing ICAN's main PC.

Retrospectively, it may be said that the ERC Ethics Review drove my effort to clinch this collaboration and to officialise my association with the Cuban Institution. It was a form of 'procedural' ethics, as Perrin and colleagues (2018) put it, which responded to normative and legalistic drives, and which could be seen to run counter a more pluralistic and contextually attuned 'processual' approach to ethics, one more aligned with the principles and stances advocated in current anthropological

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[3] Deriving from the Spanish for 'rider' (*jinete*), the metaphor of 'tourist riding' tends to evoke notions of tourism hustling and instrumental relationships, and is employed in Cuba to

designate various informal engagements in tourism.

debates on ethics in anthropology (ibid.). Responding to the ERC Ethics Review was a time consuming and nerve-wracking process. The possibility of carrying out a research project that had the ambition to contribute to the very understanding of how people worked over and potentially changed their ethical dispositions in connection with crises and migration, hinged on the ability of satisfying a set of pre-defined and prescriptive normative criteria, largely derived from medical research (Hoayer et al. 2005). This seemed like a contradiction: I was aiming for a better understand how morality and ethics functioned in specific instances of everyday life, part of complex 'moral and ethical assemblages' (Zigon 2010). This included approaching the subject with a highly reflexive methodological posture (Fassin 2008) that could help reveal the implicit biases and potentially nefarious consequences of hegemonic views of morality and of reductive, potentially oppressive normative regimes. However, to be able to do so, I first had to subscribe to and comply with state and bureaucratic driven hegemonic framework, which approached ethics in a universal, somewhat mechanistic procedural manner.

Could it be that my way of seeing and contrasting the two approaches - a 'procedural' and a 'processual' one – was an oversimplification? In their article, Perrin et al. (2018: 148-149) identify and reflect on three main postures that anthropologists may adopt toward the 'procedural' ethics imposed by evaluation committees and ethics review panels. They distinguish them as 'moralism', 'pragmatism', and 'dialogue'. Paraphrasing these authors, the 'moralist' stance is the most radical, rejecting the authority of ethics committees due to their inadequate criteria for ethnographic research and questionable effectiveness in protecting participants. This position resists the formalization of research relationships, emphasizing ethnographic engagement, and aims to advocate for the distinct nature of ethnography to secure differentiated ethical treatment (Perrin et al 2018: 148). The

'pragmatic' stance, on the other hand, navigates ethical regulations with minimal engagement, using institutional loopholes to preserve anthropological freedoms while complying with procedural ethics. The risk of this approach, however, is that it may reduce ethics to bureaucratic compliance and alter ethnographic research by discouraging sensitive topics and participant observation (ibid.). The third approach relies instead on a will to dialogue with 'procedural' ethical frameworks and the institutions stetting them. Such stance advocates engagement with ethics committees to improve their handling of ethnographic research, and actively advocating for and promoting a more 'processual' understanding of ethics. While aiming for institutional reform, this last posture also carries the risks, however, of reinforcing rigid structures – in cases of failed dialogue and misunderstandings, for instance - and of undermining broader resistance to bureaucratic 'procedural' ethics. In the conclusion to this article, I will reflect back on these three postures in the light of the ethical vicissitudes of my project and research.

After these considerations on the two may types of 'procedural' ethics I was confronted with – that of the ERC and of Cuban institutions –, in the next section of the article I address ethical issues as they pertained to the nitty-gritty of field research and my relations with research participants. Beyond the purported intentions written in the original proposals and the procedural responses addressed so far, the question here becomes: what could be the more practical and immediate interest, value, and effect of my research for my research participants?

Ethics in the Field and in Relations with Research Participants

The conclusion of my written response to the ERC Ethics Review reminded the panel that anthropology, 'has been debating issues of ethics and morality since its foundation, and that in the last

decades, the discipline has made new headways in terms of reflexively acknowledging the impact that investigations can have on the realities we study'. My response also stemmed from my interest in the so-called 'ethical turn' in anthropological research (Fassin 2014), which since the 2000s has seen a flurry of interventions calling for renewed approaches to ethics and moralities to departed from the still prevailing Durkheimian paradigm, accused (wrongly or not, cf. Fassin 2014), of reducing morality to a system of norms governing societies. According to Fassin (2014: 430) 'With the ethical turn, a remarkable convergence occurred from various horizons and traditions of the anthropological world in an approach focused on the moral subjects and their subjectivities. Not only was the shift from the collective to the individual but also from the social to the experiential.'

Among the explicit aims of the proposed research, was to contribute to the growing debates in this field of anthropological scholarship[4]. A first consideration in this respect, is that the situation I had chosen to study, that of return, was still rather marginal in Cuba, a country in which the desire to leave, to migrate, is much more present than that of returning. It proved not to be that easy to meet with Cubans who had returned. In the last six years, I have ended up working mostly with about twenty such returnees. They did not all come back from Spain, but from a mix of countries including also Italy, France, Germany, and Slovenia, for instance. Their return to Cuba raised questions for those fellow nationals – and there were many - who saw migration as the road to a better life. The prevailing assumptions, when facing someone that had returned, tended to be twofold. The first, valued one, was that you had been successful in your migration and you were now duly coming back to 'your country'. The presumption was that you did so to dwell again among your family and 'your own', to set up a profitable business, a *negocio*, live the life of a *dueño* – a business owner - and thus make the most and enjoy the profits of the sacrifices and the money you had earned abroad. The second, much less valued reason, was that you had somewhat failed: that you were back because something went wrong, because you couldn't make it any longer 'out there', because you had been unable to make money, or adapt to life abroad, or gotten yourself into trouble (cf. Simoni 2025). The reality I found out about, engaging with people who had returned, is that they all dedicated much effort in trying to avoid the stigma of a 'failed migration', to carve some value out of their trajectory, even and especially when material signs of 'success' were far from clear.

In one of our first encounters, Roberto[5], a white Cuban man in his forties who had lived for over a decade in Rome, presented his return to Havana as a sort of natural process and very reasonable trajectory. His being back, however, prompted much scrutiny from Cubans who had never migrated. What this reveals, is that the question of return, which was at the center of my research, interested also most of the people that interact with Roberto in his everyday life. It was an absorbing question, and to some degree, an exhausting one for people like him (Simoni 2025). In this sense, it did not take much for me to get into the core of my research subject.

There is a much I could say about my relationships with research participants, regarding, for instance, ongoing negotiations of consent, what we mean by it, and what it

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[4] Acknowledging the existence of different empirical foci, theoretical approaches and conceptual propositions (see Mattingly and Throop 2018 for a useful review), my engagement with the growing body of anthropological literature on ethics and morality was necessarily partial, and ended up focusing only on some of its debates and issues of contention.

[5] To protect confidentiality, I changed all personal names and some details in the examples presented. Translated conversation excerpts draw on recollection after the events occurred.

does to those we work with. Much of it still nourishes my ongoing reflections on the matter. What I want to evoke here, in relation to research ethics, is the effect of my research and of my presence on the realities I was trying to explore, and to which I became entangled, namely the experience of return. I wish to briefly sketch a reflection, and raise questions, on whether these effects may be judged helpful and positive for my interlocutors, as I intended and would have liked them to be. On the one hand, my research participants mostly appreciated having me around and spending time with them. I was someone with whom they felt comfortable to confide aspects of their migratory choices and experiences that they had more trouble explaining to other Cubans, many of whom remained doubtful about their decision to return.

An example, drawing again on the case of Roberto. In his social interactions with other Cubans who had never left the island, Roberto rarely failed to raise the topic of his life in Italy, underscoring the interest, value, and superiority of certain ways of doing and living life there. Once, he brought up the subject during a dinner conversations we were having with his mother and partner, describing Italy as a far more enjoyable place than Cuba. His partner reacted sharply, questioning why he had returned if Italy was so much better, and expressing frustration at his constant comparisons between the two countries, which ended up positing Italy and Italian ways of doing a somewhat 'better' when compared to Cuban ones. While I seemed to provide a supportive space for Roberto to voice these thoughts, blending Spanish and Italian in his reflections as he know I was fluent in both, his mother and partner seemed largely uninterested. They also resented the boastful attitude and the condescending tone with which he laid such

aspects on the table[6], casting 'foreign' qualities as superior and contrasting them with an inferior Cuban reality, as the only one his partner and mother would know.

At Jorge's home, I observed similar dynamics. A white Cuban man in his forties coming from an impoverished family of farmers, Jorge had been back in the rural but touristic town of Viñales for five years when we first met, after twenty in France laboring in the construction sector. His wife once admitted that his migration initially made him especially attractive to her, setting him apart from those who had never left Cuba. However, this prized distinction had better include her, as Jorge's chosen partner. When Jorge's digressions on his cosmopolitan experience emphasized instead her lack of experience of the world, it created tension. George's migration could either foster shared pride, or deepen feelings of alienation among those close to him. The challenge lay in framing these experiences abroad in a way that others could embrace and validate as valuable, requiring careful persuasion and inclusion to recognize their worth (Graeber 2013)[7].

But to find a sympathetic audience – one willing to give credit to the different delineations of migration-related value expressed by the returnees – was hardly an easy affair. Attempts to find such recognition and validation could fail miserably, prompting frustration and sometimes leading to heated disagreement. A last example will help me further illustrate this point. Ozmin, an Afro-Cuban in his forties, returned to Cuba after spending over ten years in Japan. As he wandered through Old Havana, he became the subject of gossip, with old acquaintances questioning why he had come back and speculating about his supposed lack of success. One evening, while drinking rum in a park, Yaniel, another Afro –Cuban man

and close friend of mine who longed to migrate abroad, reproached him for wasting the opportunity to secure a better future abroad, even insinuating that he might have been deported. In response, Ozmin defended his decision, highlighting the difficulties of living in Japan, particularly for non-Asian, non-White foreigners like himself. He spoke of racism, social isolation, and the absence of deep connections, contrasting this with the lively street culture of Havana.

Gesturing around him, Ozmin declared, 'This is life!' However, to those around him, his return was seen as evidence of a failed migration, with little tangible proof of success from his years abroad. As the debate between Ozmin and Yaniel heated up, the former stunned everyone by asserting that there was no point in trying to explain his experience to Cubans who had never left the island. In his view, they simply lacked the ability to comprehend, and he refused to waste any more time trying to make them understand what 'real life' *allá*— out there—was truly like. With this, he positioned himself as someone with unique knowledge and authority, gained through firsthand experience. Proud but furious, he walked away, leaving his companions hurt and offended, while Yaniel seethed with anger. In this moment, as in other cases, it was clear that returnees sought to define new forms of meaning, recognition, and value tied to migration—beyond the conventional economic markers of 'success'. Drawing on Ghassan Hage (2009), we may argue that they were striving to preserve a sense of 'existential mobility', the notion that, in spite of being back in Cuba, they were moving forward in life and 'going somewhere' (cf. Jackson 2013; Lems & Tošić 2019; Lucht 2019; Schielke 2019) as opposed to 'being stuck' or 'back to zero' (Hernández-Carretero 2016: 123).

In their efforts to articulate resourcefulness, potentiality, and vision for the future, there's little doubt that the returnee who took part in my research found in me a complicit ear, perhaps even a therapeutic recipient sensitive to the doubts,

dilemmas, and feelings of estrangement related to their coming back to the island. Predicaments that their Cuban peers would find harder to understand and empathize with. I sensed that they were seeing me as someone that would understand and appreciate the broader gains and personal enrichment of their migration, beyond the strictly material dimension. Considering my role as a sympathetic listener in validating such migration-related 'existential empowerment' (Lucht 2019: 56), in contrast to the tepid, dismissive, or downright hostile reactions that people like Roberto, Jorge, or Ozmin received from fellow Cubans, makes me wonder if I was not inadvertently nourishing a form of 'cruel optimism' (Berlant 2011; Coates 2019; Pettit and Ruijtenberg 2019). For Lauren Berlant (2011:1), who coined the expression, '[a] relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing'. Berlant cites, among the most obvious examples, 'a new habit that promises to induce in you an improved way of being' (ibid.), something that resonates with the situations I described above and with my interlocutors wish to be (recognized as) 'different' and 'improved'. According to Berlant, optimism is formed through 'clusters of promises', which become problematic when what defines them is inherently contradictory, ultimately preventing their fulfillment. In this sense, as Coates (2019: 474) makes clear, the concept of 'cruel optimism' does not primarily refer to suffering, but rather highlights the paradoxical nature of contemporary attachments and desires.

My question is whether in my interactions with my returnees' research participants, I was unintentionally encouraging their expression, attachment to and cultivation of modes of being and of differentiating themselves as 'returnees' in Cuba. Whether I was stirring and stimulating their sense of being 'different' and 'better' persons. All this, in a context where I clearly perceived that their efforts to highlight migration-related differences and

'improvements' tended to lack public recognition, and could easily turn out to be counter-productive — an object of scorn, a source of jealousy, a sign of alienation. Their efforts to mark a difference (Simoni 2025), which my presence seemed to encourage, and whose chronicling I found fascinating for my research, were simultaneously sources of frustration and disaffection in their everyday lives and relationships with other Cubans.

In the light of Zigon's (2019, 2021) proposed 'anthropology of potentiality' and his 'relational ethics' approach, the ties forged through my research did seem to encourage the disclosure of 'the normalizing limits' of my interlocutors' 'everyday existence' back in Cuba. Such ties, we may argue, were thus participating in 'the opening of new possibilities for thinking, saying, doing, or being' (2019:15) and in the cultivation of a 'relational ethics' of 'attuned letting-be' (2021:8). What I am less sure about, is the value that such attunement and opening could acquire. All the more so when it also seemed to inspire rather clumsy (if not arrogant) recollections and re-enactments of other lives and lifestyles that threatened to further distance my returnees research participants from peers, families, and the local lifeworlds in which they were also struggling to find recognition and a sense belonging.

Concluding thoughts

To conclude, let me first go back to the three stances and positions identified by Perrin and colleagues (2018: 148) when reflecting on the 'room for manoeuvre… to researchers and representatives of the anthropology profession in the face of the institutionalization and bureaucratization of research ethics' – i.e. 'procedural' ethics. To be clear, it is not my intention to come up with prescriptive recommendations in relation to the three postures these authors identify, namely 'moralism', 'pragmatism', and 'dialogue'. By looking back at my trajectory, in dealing with the procedural requirements

of both the ERC Review and of Cuban institutions, I can say that throughout my research and in response to these formal demands, I seemed to have been shifting between each of such three stances.

My initial annoyance with the plethora of question received from the ERC Ethics Review was conducive of feelings of moral outrage, of unfair misunderstanding for the specificities of our discipline. Brought to its telos, such 'moralist' posture could have meant refusing to engage with what the ERC was requiring from me. This, however, would have meant renouncing the project, which was not an option for me at the time, both in the light of my eagerness to carry out the research, but also for the more down-to-earth reason that I needed the funding to keep my professional life afloat and secure an employment (my former contract had ended at the time).

Along the Ethics Review journey, I also came to see these procedural demands under a very pragmatist lens. 'Ok', my reasoning went at times, let us 'play the game' and be the good pupil that complies with procedural regulations, so as to get the project approved. Once in the field, I though, I will then proceed as I deem appropriate for an ethically sound anthropological study, and, if necessary, only superficially comply with some of the normative strictures to which I had agreed to subscribe. I believe that such stance is quite diffuse among anthropologists today, if I judge also by what several colleagues tell me about their ways of dealing with Ethics Review's requirements. In the current context, which sees text generating AI software (e.g. ChatGPT) booming, I would not be surprised if exasperated scholars confronted with lengthy ethics review evaluations asking a plethora of details on how they will ensure respect of x, y, z regulations in the field, resorted to one such tools to elaborate equally lengthy, deferential, and ultimately successful responses.

The third path, that of 'dialogue', can be an arduous one, as Perrin et al. (2018)

make clear, but also one that seems worth venturing on. As these authors put it, such position 'is based on the hope that ethics committees will become more open to *processual ethics* and to progress in the quality of the treatment of ethical questions in the cases specific to ethnographic research'. (Perrin et al 2018: 148). An example of this may be found in the lengthy response I provided to justify the use of oral informal consent procedures in our project (see Annex 2 below), and which was ultimately approved by the ERC Ethics Review. Another retrospective realization, when thinking of what these formal requests engendered, was that they fed into and helped reveal for me another procedural protocol, another ethical-political formation - with my research and its interest being assed and evaluated by Cuban anthropologists and institutions.

As described in the section on 'Institutional Arrangements in Cuba: 'Protocol' from a Different Perspective', the path to achieve the required permits to carry out research on the island was far from straightforward. Ultimately, however, it was by engaging in dialogue, in the kind of 'meaningful communication and collaboration with Cuban colleagues', as Holbraad puts it (2018:742), that I gained awareness of other ways of apprehending the project's potential purpose and use. I was glad to have the partnership with the *Instituto Cubano de Antropolgía* sealed and formalized, as it allowed me to contribute to their research and teaching activities, developing fruitful exchanges, while at the same time ensuring that an institution badly in need of resources could benefit from part of my project's budget. At ICAN, I engaged with colleagues that were genuinely interested in my ethnography and the analytical pathways I was exploring, and who in turn shared their own insights and interpretations on the phenomena I was addressing.

Such mutual exchanges disrupt any simplistic view of anthropology in Cuba as being subservient to the normative injunctions of governmental agencies and prescriptions concerning which kind of research is worthy and which is not. Within the institution, there was much leeway to discuss examples and ideas that could be seen as running counter dominant, 'party line's' morals. There was scope, for instance, to exchange opinions on, including criticizing, state policies with which the returnee research participants I was engaging with in my fieldwork also took issue. Not every interlocutor I encountered in the institution would be equally receptive or pleased with the candid tone in which some such criticisms were expressed, proof once again that I was not dealing with a monolithic and univocal collective sharing the same moral and ethical dispositions. In turn, learning to engage on an equal footing with Cuban colleagues helped raise awareness of other possible interpretations of the situations that were the focus of my investigations. For instance, I was repeatedly reminded of the importance of keeping in sight issues related to socio-economic inequality, the privilege that several of the returnees I engaged with still had, when compared with the majority of the Cuban population - be it in terms of economic resources, connections with the outside world, or the foreign passports they held. These were issues that anthropological approaches to ethics more focused on notions of self-fulfilment and self-realization could lead to neglect, as Englund (2008) also points out.

Finally, the considerations on some of the shapes and connotations that ethics took in relationships with my research participants, raised other important questions, mostly related to the effects that my research could have on the realities I participated in, on returnees sense of self and of belonging, and on how they reassessed their migratory trajectories. Which role was I given, and which role was I was taking, in the course of such interactions, many of which developed into friendships that I keep cultivating to this days? Did my presence and the topic of my

research act as a trigger that encouraged returnees to recall their lives abroad, what they had left behind, the challenges of finding people in Cuba who could empathize with their sense of 'difference', as well as their resentment at not being understood and valued as they thought they should? Was I, in my relations with them and in their consequences once I left, a source of satisfaction, or one of relative suffering, further estranging them from the Cuban realities and the people from which they also such recognition and a shared sense of belonging? I am aware of the risk of giving my research and my interactions with research participants too much importance, when placed within the broader context of their lives in the long term, given also that the time we spent together represented only a small portion of the six years that have elapsed since I first met most of them. This notwithstanding, I think that such questions are worth asking. They are charged with potentially significant ethical implications, as well as epistemological ones once we consider how the ways we approach a research subject can influence the very realities we strive to understand. I hope that these questions, briefly sketched and only incipiently addressed in this article, can to stimulate the ethical reflections of other ethnographers and anthropologists. Ethical reflection on the nature of our fieldwork engagements, on the kind of relations and forms of understanding we co-produce and willingly or unwillingly encourage, and their potential ramifications in our research participants' lives.

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[Annex 1]
ERC Starting Grant Research proposal
ETHICAL ISSUES ANNEX

The project will follow ethical guidelines and procedures currently applicable for anthropological and ethnographic research (Iphofen 2013).

The way it is designed, BETLIV presents little risks both in terms of research feasibility and for the participants involved, be it researchers or subjects of the investigation. In both the EU and non-EU countries in which field research will take place, statements will be obtained by local research institutions to safeguard the ethical aspects of the research. Local and international rules and regulation and applicable legislation will be observed. Taking place in three large cities (Madrid, Quito, Havana), appropriate contextual measures to safeguard participants' safety will be taken in consideration. Researchers will be insured against risks by the host institution, the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, who has specific insurance to cover participants overseas. The training of researchers in anthropological field research methods will ensure that necessary precautions are taken and ethical guidelines for ethnographic fieldwork are followed.

No foreseeable potential source of harm can be detected at this stage in the project, and benefits may arise from it given its focus on people's evaluations of what constitutes a good life and the possible obstacles and paths to achieve it. Previous research among Cuban migrants in Spain and Cuba by the principal investigator, albeit focusing on different themes, indicates widespread interest for, and largely public nature of debates on the issues of economic crisis, return migration, and the ideals of good life that are at the core of the project. Based on preliminary conversations with colleagues, similar levels of interest and the largely public nature of debates such issues is also present among the Ecuadorian population targeted by the project. This will facilitate access to the target population, and the recruitment of, and establishment of relationships with, research participants.

Given the little sensitive and often public nature of the key themes of the research, it is expected that voluntary informed consent will be easily achieved from participants. The long term nature of the planned ethnographic fieldwork is designed to ensure the establishment of relations of trust between the researchers and their interlocutors. The common language (Spanish) shared by researchers and the research participants will also help towards the establishment of relationships guided by the principles of equity, transparency and mutuality. This will help make it clear which issues can be treated and discussed openly in research interactions, and avoid any sense of intrusiveness and coercion in the research process.

The expected ease in terms of access and relationships with research participants is an element that supports the overall feasibility of the project. Such feasibility will be further enhanced by the continuous cooperation and the sharing of insights among researchers, which is facilitated by the identical design of the different subprojects and their supportive and complementary dimension. All researchers will be able to productively contribute to ongoing conversation among team members on the best suited research techniques and methods, on the possible problems and obstacles encountered in field research, and the suitable solutions, readjustments and adaptations in research methods and design. The presence of an Advisory Board that includes renowned experts in the main topics addressed by the project, some additionally working in the countries where field research will take place, and the possibility of obtaining guidance and suggestions from them at all stages of the research process, is another important element guaranteeing the feasibility of the project.

Data protection will be guaranteed to protect the privacy, anonymity and confidentiality of research participants. Personal data collected and managed in the course of fieldwork will not be disclosed unless explicitly authorized by interlocutors and deemed essential for the dissemination of research findings. The research design contains internet/e-research (see 'review of policy documents and online/media sources' and 'participant observation' sections). The researchers' engagement in online forums to recruit and engage with research participants will be based on the full disclosure of the research purpose and the principles of informed consent. Possible biases in terms of authenticity and demographic representativeness of the online community considered (Iphofen 2013) will be taken into account and assessed in the light of the other methods, (namely participant observation of 'offline' contexts) guiding access and recruitment of participants, balancing any potential biases of online research.

Reference cited: Iphofen, R. 2013. *Research Ethics in Ethnography/Anthropology*. European Commission

[Annex 2]

Excerpts of the response to ERC Ethics Review request for more details on how informed consent would be secured (August 18, 2017)

'Being open and honest about one's work and obtaining informed consent from research participants are well-established ethical principles of ethnographic research. The three researchers in BETLIV, in their respective research contexts – Spain, Ecuador, and Cuba – will ensure that these principles guide their ethnographic endeavours and are adhered to throughout the duration of the project. As detailed in the research proposal, three main methods will be used in the project: a) Review of policy documents and online/media sources, b) Participant observation, c) Interviews. Each of these methods calls for adapted informed consent procedures.'

In the course of my fieldwork in Cuba, I relied on participant observation, and avoided carrying out formal interviews, particularly since this had proven impractical in my former field stays on the island. Here an excerpt of how I explained how informed consent would be ensured when using such research technique:

'Participant observation is arguably the method of choice in socio-cultural anthropology (Jorgensen 2000; Spradley 2005). It enables researchers to observe and participate in the everyday lives of research participants, and rests on the mutual agreement of the researcher/research project and participant(s) in the study. While discretion is generally advised in view of minimizing one's impact on the normal course of events and avoid disruption to research participants' lives, this does not mean concealing the researcher's role and aims, which need to be explicitly articulated during the investigation process. The method of participant observation, as employed in the project, will be based on the understanding and collaboration of the participants involved and the full disclosure of the research process and the nature of participants' involvement, along the lines of the informed consent form and information sheet. As argued by Iphofen (2013), in anthropological studies '[c]onsent should be gained in the most convenient, least disturbing manner for both researcher and researched' (3). For this project, it is expected that during participant observation informed consent will be mostly sought orally rather than in writing, the procedure of choice ultimately depending on what is deemed more suitable for the research participants in the given situation ... In both cases, the procedure will involve giving participants the required information, as contained in the information sheet, on the purpose of the study, the nature of their involvement, its potential risks and benefits, the persons in charge of the research and their funding, as well as their right to confidentiality, anonymity, and withdrawal at any time from the research process (see information sheet, Annex 2). In situations in which the information sheet becomes unpractical and disruptive, such information will be given orally, the overall aim being the same, namely that participants are informed and give their consent to the research.

The collaborative posture of participant observation also requires constant monitoring, bearing in mind that the consent gained initially may need to be renegotiated and re-actualized throughout the course of a research project. Researchers will ensure that participants are always aware that their participation remains voluntary, and that they can withdraw their participation – including destruction of the data already gathered from them - at any time without any consequences. To this end, researchers will ensure that research participants will know how to contact them and their institution (electronic and telephone contact information will be provided) to have questions answered, receive additional information, make complaints, announce withdrawal, or resolve a grievance. In informal contexts of interaction and in public spaces and events it may be difficult and ineffective to obtain explicit informed consent from all the people that are present, but researchers will always take extreme care to inform the community under observation and its potential gatekeepers of their research, based on a 'duty to inform' principle…'.

When addressing interviews, I provided other important contextual information that I was hoping could leave the door open, for Elise, Jérémie, and myself, to obtaining informal consent orally rather than in writing. Here an excerpt of my response to the ERC Ethics Review:

'As outlined in the proposal, the interviews will build on prior knowledge and familiarization with the persons at stake, thus ensuring that their situation bears a clear connection to the research's focus and that the interview will be grounded in relations of trust and confidentiality so that topics can be

discussed openly and in depth. Each participant will be asked for informed consent in explicit written or oral form. The written form will be the procedure of choice for researchers, and include signing the informed consent statement [(see 2.2 and informed consent template, Annex 1)]. The oral form will replicate the written one in terms of the information provided to research participants, but exclude the singing of the informed consent statement. In this regard, the PI is aware that in some contexts the written procedure may constitute an obstacle and discourage participants from taking part in the project. Participants who would otherwise be willing to collaborate in the research may for instance fear that signing consent forms can jeopardise their confidentiality and anonymity (notwithstanding the researchers' reassurances on anonymity and confidentiality), or be reluctant to sign any official document whatsoever.

The PI's longstanding experience in ethnographic research in Cuba has taught him that in contexts in which intrusiveness of official institutions is felt, resented, and openly avoided, participants may prefer to grant their approval of research protocols in a verbal and less formalized way. Following the 'do no harm' principle and putting the safeguard, protection, and well-being of research participants first, researchers will adapt the informed consent procedure – written or oral – depending on the best interest of the person at stake, and record consent accordingly: in written form (signature), orally (audio recording), or documented by the researcher in writing. In this latter case, researchers will create a register of the persons who have given oral consent that is anonymized, with individual entries taking the following form: 'Respondent n [n designating a number] was presented the consent form and has agreed to participate in the interview orally, [date and place]'.

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[Abstract]

This article explores ethical challenges faced in anthropological research, particularly in navigating 'procedural' and 'processual' ethics (Perrin et al. 2018). Drawing from the author's experience as Principal Investigator of a European Research Council (ERC)-funded project, it examines the ethical complexities of transitioning from research proposals to fieldwork. The case study focuses on return migration and the reassessment of the 'good life' among Cuban migrants who left Europe due to economic crises. Ethical considerations emerged both in obtaining project approval and during fieldwork, particularly in Cuba, where research required negotiating national institutional procedures and political sensitivities. The article highlights how procedural ethics, as mandated by funding agencies, often contrast with the practical ethical dilemmas encountered in the field. Subsequently, it illustrates how Cuba's regulatory framework for authorizing research posed distinct challenges, as ethics was intertwined with issues of political sovereignty and national interests. The study further reflects on the relational ethics of engaging with research participants, underscoring how ethnographic interactions can shape participants' self-perceptions and aspirations, potentially reinforcing tensions between personal migration experiences and local social expectations. By critically examining these ethical negotiations, the article contributes to broader discussions on how anthropologists navigate ethical obligations in complex sociopolitical contexts.