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Plurality, transdisciplinarity and consensus: utopias of research ethics committees

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Abstract

Research Ethics Committees must promote sensitive, reliable, and truthful science by ensuring the validity and traceability of studies, maintaining ongoing dialogue with the scientific community, and protecting participants. It is essential to assess whether their management fulfills these guarantees. Understanding the challenges faced by Research Ethics Committees regarding pluralism, transdisciplinarity, and consensus is therefore necessary. Interviews were conducted with members of Research Ethics Committees from Latin American countries to explore challenges, consensus, and experiences through a phenomenological analysis. A disconnect is observed between the normative utopia and the practical reality of Research Ethics Committees, with epistemological tensions related to ethical conceptions and decision-making models, as well as political tensions influenced by personal and institutional interests. To move toward plural integration, multidisciplinary, inclusive, and deliberative teams are required, with ethical training and a commitment to research integrity.

Keywords: Ethics committees. Plurality. Transdisciplinarity. Consensus. Deliberations.

Resumo

Pluralidade, transdisciplinaridade e consenso: utopias dos comitês de ética na investigação

Os Comitês de Ética em Pesquisa devem promover uma ciência sensível, confiável e veraz ao assegurar a validade e a rastreabilidade dos estudos, manter um diálogo permanente com a comunidade científica e proteger os participantes. É fundamental avaliar se sua gestão cumpre essas garantias. Torna-se necessário compreender os desafios enfrentados pelos Comitês de Ética em Pesquisa em torno do pluralismo, da transdisciplinaridade e do consenso. Foram realizadas entrevistas com membros de Comitês de Ética em Pesquisa de países latino-americanos, a fim de explorar desafios, consensos e experiências por meio de uma análise fenomenológica. Observa-se uma desconexão entre a utopia normativa e a realidade prática dos Comitês de Ética em Pesquisa, com tensões epistemológicas relacionadas às concepções éticas e aos modelos de decisão, bem como tensões políticas influenciadas por interesses pessoais e institucionais. Para avançar em direção a uma integração plural, são necessárias equipes multidisciplinares, inclusivas e deliberativas, com formação ética e compromisso com a integridade na pesquisa.

Palavras-chave: Comitês de ética. Pluralidade. Transdisciplinaridade. Consenso. Deliberações.

Resumen

Pluralidad, transdisciplinariedad y consenso: utopías de los comités de ética en investigación

Los Comités de Ética en Investigación deben promover una ciencia sensible, confiable y veraz al asegurar la validez y la trazabilidad de los estudios, mantener un diálogo permanente con la comunidad científica y proteger a los participantes. Es fundamental evaluar si su gestión cumple estas garantías. Se pretendió conocer los desafíos que enfrentan los Comités de Ética en Investigación en torno al pluralismo, transdisciplinariedad y consenso. Se realizaron entrevistas a miembros de Comités de Ética de países latinoamericanos para explorar retos, consensos y experiencias mediante un análisis fenomenológico. Hay una desconexión entre la utopía normativa y la realidad práctica de estos órganos, con tensiones epistemológicas en torno a las concepciones éticas y a los modelos de decisión, así como tensiones políticas influenciadas por intereses personales e institucionales. Para avanzar hacia una integración plural, se requieren equipos multidisciplinarios, inclusivos y deliberativos, con formación ética e integridad en la investigación.

Palabras clave: Comités de ética. Pluralidad. Transdisciplinariedad. Consenso. Deliberaciones.

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Research

Research is a social, methodical, rational, systematic, and organized process, whose purpose is to obtain results that can produce knowledge applicable to strategic actions or proposals for contemporary issues and societal needs. Its objectives include promoting innovation in information systems, transmitting and renewing training, understanding social transformations, and recording the digital and historical footprint.

Considering that research is becoming increasingly complex, it is necessary to establish mechanisms that promote best practices and protect living beings and the environment. This implies considering aspects and perspectives that foster responsible, honest, and ethical research practice; that is mainly achieved through research ethics committees (REC), which have been studied by various authors and perspectives [1].

These collegiate groups must be autonomous, plural, multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary, and consultative. Furthermore, they are considered social institutions established as representative spaces of citizenship, with diverse approaches and interests in the reflection and discussion of research proposals. They also have an approach with multiple views and perspectives on the advances in knowledge and the tensions resulting from conceptual discrepancies.

RECs are responsible for recommending, suggesting, proposing, forming, transforming, and guiding research, as part of social processes [2]. This task implies the development of an interdisciplinary, dialogical, contextual, and situational deliberative capacity that enables the visualization of all possible perspectives for a theme, line, approach, area of research, or creation that will be developed as a social good, especially in latitudes where this is significantly demanded, as in Latin America [3-6].

The complexity of research in Latin America, as well as the diverse approaches and contexts in which it is developed, requires rigorous, honest, critical, and proactive research teams that apply valid, feasible, verifiable, and truthful methods that respond to social needs, thus integrating into global science. Therefore, RECs direct their efforts toward discerning the value and validity of research, protecting the rights, dignity, and well-being of potential study participants, their communities with knowledge and traditions, and the surrounding environment. To these ends, these organizations promote good practices throughout the entire research process, including the truthful publication of results, which will be decisive and, therefore, must be strongly supported by relevant information [6-9], dialogical, deliberative, and plural capacity.

Although the assessment, the issuance of opinions, and the monitoring of research conducted by RECs to establish agreements within the scope of procedural, social, and legal scientific reflection and analysis in an interdisciplinary, plural, and secular manner must consider the axiological diversity and the complex networks present in the societies where research is developed, as is the case in Latin America, whose democracy in crisis faces various levels of corruption in multiple areas, including scientific fraud [10,11].

In this context, RECs must work simultaneously to build incorruptible, truthful, independent, responsible, and upright spaces of citizenship, in addition to strengthening solid relationships, reinforcing research that represents the interests of the studied groups or communities and respect for their beliefs, knowledge, social and cultural dynamics, as well as considering ecosystems for the survival of species and respecting the vital niche, to guarantee a dignified life for future generations [12-14].

However, the desires of contemporary society seem to promote the "blinding" of nature and the purposes for which these collegiate bodies were conceived. Ethical review by RECs has erroneously become a process of "difficult" and unnecessary procedures that consume research time and, consequently, researcher time, leading to conflicts in the issuance of consensual opinions [15].

From being considered, in their conception, as a collective for analysis and reflection, these groups were transformed into a body to "review" projects, as part of an institutional strategy to manage resources [16-18]. Such a dynamics led to the discourse about the urgent need to "parameterize the standards" for evaluation to streamline the task, whose objective would be to achieve

fulfillment of a simple "administrative" procedure, unknown to some and an obstacle to research development or funding for others. Therefore, in some cases, the establishment of certain "standards" for the constitution of RECs was applied for the "convenience" of some managers, when presided over by academic-administrative authorities, who would try to "avoid" decisions that were not relevant to their interests or to associated organizations or institutions [19,20].

The objective is to build a social space where people act in a plural and transdisciplinary manner, with prudence, consciousness, knowledge, and adequate temporal and physical space, with people capable of deliberating transparently and transformatively, who promote the development of sensitive, humanitarian, and excellent science, achieving consensus through shared dialogue. This implies examining, analyzing, reflecting, debating, discussing, and making decisions in a process of interdisciplinary practice that should achieve a transdisciplinary construction with new conceptual categories, through dialogue that promotes the understanding of diverse views and interpretations to advance toward agreements or consensus. In other words, promoting the inclusion of technical, transcendent, and intranscendent, physical, mental, spiritual, and imaginary concepts, giving relevance to each voice that is part of the committee and that resonates from the feeling of its represented parties.

Considering that each REC is different, addressing diverse research themes in multiple contexts, it is worth mentioning the tendency in the debate between the application of legal positivism or predominant technical reason according to the argumentative weight of some of the members, because this can generate forms of reductionism and divert deliberation [21-23]. For this, it is presumed that whoever argues more or has experience is right, disregarding or excluding feelings and perspectives that can be decisive for the protection of one's own life, culture, or the raison d'être of those participating in research.

The observations raise certain gaps in the RECs regarding information and application in their constitution and functioning. For example, the selection of members with dialogical capacity, who respond in a plural and transdisciplinary way to the situated reasoning of the research, as well as transparency in its management and methodology of ethical analysis or evaluation, are aspects that, in some Latin American countries, continue to operate mainly by administrative inertia or good intentions, rather than through regulations, systematization with methods, and plural and participatory deliberation that enable consensus building.

The objective of this work is to phenomenologically understand the current challenges faced by RECs when attempting to implement an ethics based on plurality, transdisciplinarity, and consensus, focusing on the experiences and obstacles of their members in establishing a contemporary and contextual utopian ideal of social regulation, given the demand or performance expected by these committees, with the practical realities and limitations when analyzing and reviewing protocols or situations of any kind in research.

Method

A study was conducted with the members of the RECs [24] aiming to explore their lived experiences. Through a phenomenological analysis, guiding categories related to plurality, transdisciplinarity, and consensus were investigated, in addition to the application of inclusive practices, member selection, challenges, and experiences in their functions within the RECs.

The study questionnaire was developed based on a theoretical review of deliberative ethics, epistemological pluralism, and ethical governance of RECs, grounded in phenomenological analysis. This instrument was validated by an opinion from three bioethics specialists with experience in REC, with the following criteria: clarity of questions, thematic relevance, coherence with objectives, content sufficiency, and phenomenological adequacy. The suggestions resulting from the specialists' review improved the writing and provided greater understanding and analytical depth to the instrument.

Thus, the questionnaire contains open-ended questions and a guidance sheet for its nine items: 3 with questions about general data and 6 with blank spaces to express opinions on the key categories for analysis based on the following aspects: a) plurality (valuation of diversity, inclusive and exclusive practices, perceived challenges and benefits); b) transdisciplinarity (facilitators and barriers to multidisciplinary participation and its contribution); c) consensus (decision-making methods, practices for achieving consensus, experience of dissent and conflict management); d) utopia *vs.* reality (contrasts between ideals and actual practices, experiences of frustration and achievements when trying to overcome these challenges). This questionnaire structure facilitates the in-dept exploration of subjective perceptions, to achieve discursive flexibility and thematic coherence.

The sample was composed of active members of RECs from Latin American countries: Bolivia, Peru, Colombia, Mexico, and Chile, affiliated with an academic institution and who voluntarily participated as selection groups. The 12 members were selected on demand, reaching the information saturation criterion [25] obtained through interviews, validated by the criterion of three specialists in bioethics and life sciences, selected according to their years of experience in bioethics, an H-index of at least 7, in addition to having belonged to a REC in the last three years.

The inclusion criteria were: more than three years in the respective REC and absence of conflicts of interest in the research. Members with specific training in ethics or bioethics and individuals with less than three years of experience, or who have left an ethics committee for institutional and/or personal reasons, were excluded.

The interview results were analyzed with ATLAS.ti software, version 24, in which the guiding categories were obtained inductively, and thus, the words most used by REC members in relation to the study theme were selected, as well as the word cloud, which denotes regularly notable terms in the respondents' discourse, such as decisions, consensus, REC formation, diversity, among others.

Next, codes were assigned to each document, which were organized into folders with guiding categories. Bsed on the information, an interpretative triangulation analysis of pre-established and emergent categories was performed using again ATLAS.ti software, version 24, with deductive assignment of categories for 12 studies with selected members, resulting in 304 citations and 85 sensitizing codes. Intercategorical relationships were carried out with these data, resulting in 31 emergent categories (consensus=7; plurality=4; reality=13; transdisciplinarity=4; utopia=3), and, from them, 5 semantic networks were established to obtain responses for the inducing categories [26].

Thus, fundamental elements were found, selected as the most important in each of them, according to the value of rooting and the substantiation of the contents. With the citations that showed greater rooting (frequency and density of connections), co-occurrence and document-code analysis was performed, which enabled prioritizing the emerging categories that respond to qualitative empirical research. In the investigation, the theoretical assumptions will be conceived as preliminary concepts, which are reformulated through the analysis of the relationship of contents in qualitative evaluation, integrating the abstract meanings of the participants in their actions or realities with the categorical emergence [25].

Ethical considerations

This study was approved by the Ibero-American Ethics and Bioethics Committee. The participants responded to the survey completely voluntarily and freely, with prior informed consent, and could withdraw from responding without any present or future consequences. Before and after the study, participants could have doubts clarified, as well as request more detailed information about the research or any topic related to the study, at any time, by communicating directly with the main researcher.

The study information is private and confidential. The interviews were anonymized and the results were treated with codes in a dissociated manner.

Results

The respondents were members of RECs, men and women aged between 30 and 63 years, from Bolivia (25%), Colombia (25%), Peru (16.6%), Mexico (16.6%), and Chile (16.6%). In total, 75% of

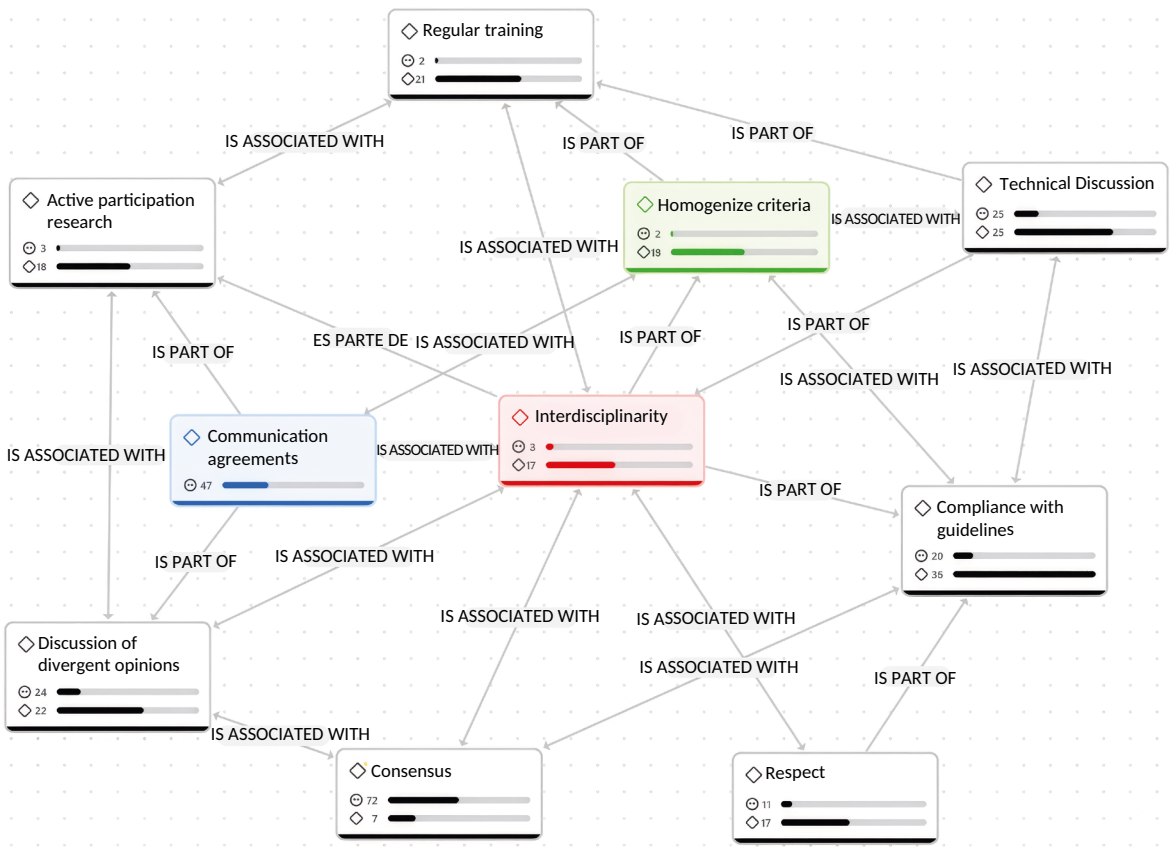
the sample belonged to the same institution and only 25% were from outside the institution linked to the REC. The participants mentioned that the members were selected by trusted manager referrals (25%), political appointments (18%), by friendship, selection based on requirements (24.5%), public examination (6%), invitation to external members (13%), and volunteering (12.5%). A total of 75% of respondents indicated that they did not have a community representative.

The analysis resulted in three semantic networks: transdisciplinarity; reality at work; and emerging categories (consensus; plurality; reality; transdisciplinarity; utopia). According to the results on interdisciplinarity, the semantic core was related to "communication agreements" as articulators of technical consensus, with key relationships referring to communication, technical discussion, training, and adherence to guidelines.

The semantic tension, in turn, referred to integration *vs.* homogenization. A critical discovery was that interdisciplinarity, while seeking plurality, is a practice that can tend towards institutional norms, which limits the concept-definition process.

The semantic network of interdisciplinarity shows that communication agreements are factors for homogenizing criteria; this depends on technical discussion, regular training, and consensus, as well as respect for and compliance with evaluation guidelines (Fig. 1). Interdisciplinary practice, consequently without a dialogical ethics, is at risk of becoming merely functional and not reflective.

Figure 1. Semantic network interdisciplinarity in research ethics committees



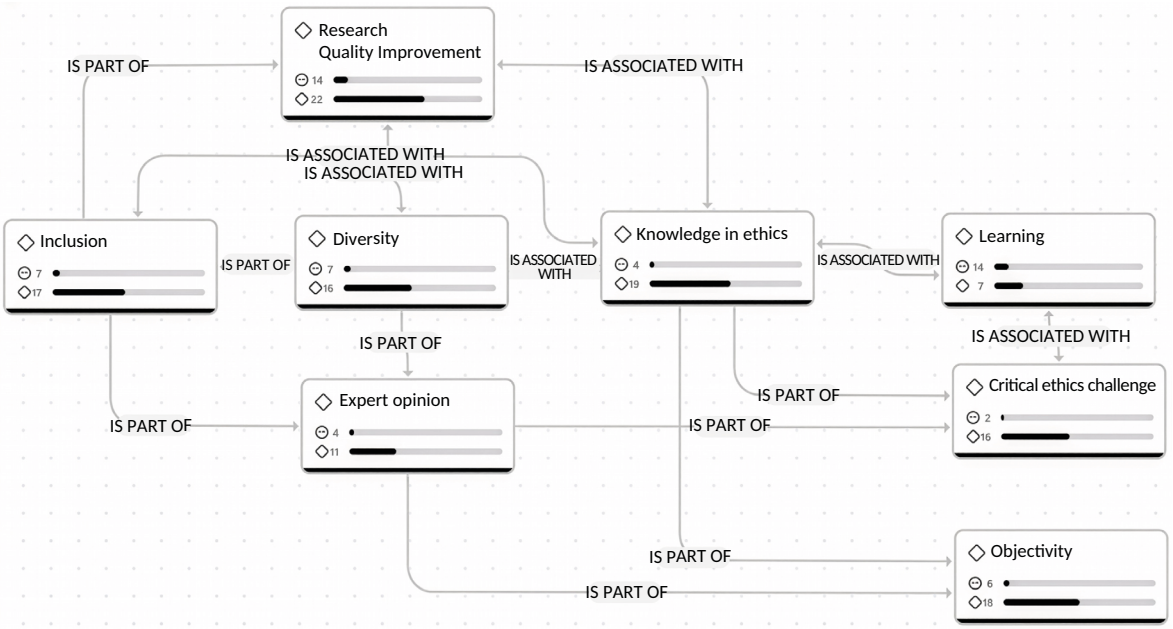
These findings show that, despite efforts to integrate the knowledge of each committee member, interdisciplinary practice turns into a simple mechanism for interventions during a session, rather than the construction of new conceptual categories—as it should be.

Transdisciplinarity

In turn, the transdisciplinarity network (Figure 2) demonstrates the improvement in research quality, as inclusion, diversity, ethical knowledge, and peer learning are important elements that provide objectivity in review and assessment results, and may represent a challenge for critical ethics.

The semantic core of this network is related to inclusion and diversity, increasing ethical judgment; and the process facilitators are peer learning, critical knowledge, and epistemic diversity. The implicit barriers encountered were institutional resistance and disciplinary dominance, mainly in the health sector. The most notable emerging category refers to transdisciplinarity or the difference in the sum of knowledge, so that critical judgment transformation must be promoted, that is, it will be necessary a "critical ethics" that questions epistemic hegemony and enables transformative dialogue.

Figure 2. Semantic network transdisciplinarity in research ethics committees



In conjunction, these findings show that transdisciplinarity is an ideal for transforming ethical opinions. However, institutional and hierarchical structural limitations restrict its full implementation in the RECs, resulting in the evident dominance of disciplines primarily from the health area.

Work reality

This aspect shows that intersubjective lived experience, with different formations within the REC transforms knowledge in terms of ethics and research. Despite that, some researchers try to impose their personal interests by presenting arbitrary stances that are sometimes endorsed by institutional authorities, nullifying the value of the RECs' opinions, especially in cases of rejections. Furthermore, it exposes the existence of research protocols with scarce information, leading to late reports. This is compounded by the low interest in being part of the REC, mainly due to the voluntary nature, generally unpaid or unrecognized, or the impossibility of accessing these spaces due to being by nomination of managers or of a political nature, and finally, due to the excessive time dedicated to this activity (Figure 3).

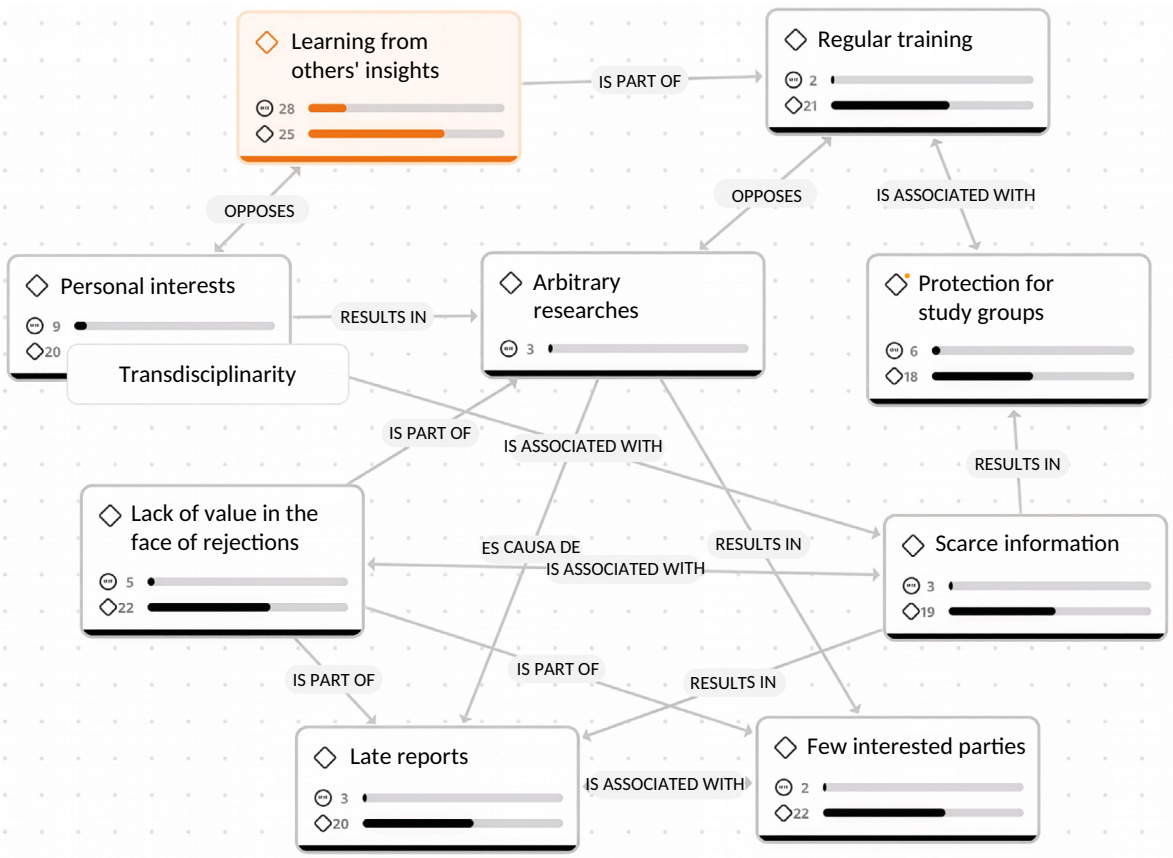
The semantic core of this network is related to the conflict of personal interests and implicit institutional validation, and the contrast between utopia and reality establishes that the ideal formation of people and RECs has a clear

relationship with practical impositions at the time of issuing results. The factors of dissent related to the precariousness of the function, bureaucracy, and lack of social representation are pointed out as issues to be urgently addressed, as well as the tendency towards the medicalization of the RECs' function. This network shows a tendency of deliberative tension of these groups and the structural conditions that devalue them.

Utopically, respondents raised the need for team self-training spaces, training and support for the community, as well as greater inter- and transdisciplinary inclusion, given that most members belong to the same institution and tend towards the medicalization of research spaces, preventing the achievement of a plurality of approaches, resulting in a major absence of ethical considerations in the evaluations of other areas of science.

This semantic network shows that the conditions of the RECs' structures, conflicts of interest, and the minimization of their role create a significant gap between deliberative ideals and actual practices when evaluating research projects.

Figure 3. Semantic network reality in the work of research ethics committees



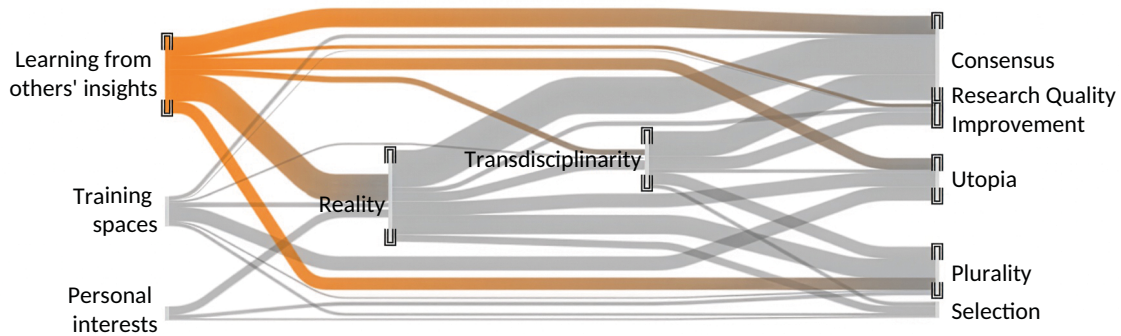
Emerging categories

The analysis of co-occurrences and concurrences of emerging categories necessary to reach consensus in inter- and transdisciplinary groups shows the communication agreements that would be achieved mainly through technical discussion and listening skills of members, who would contribute knowledge based on plurality and respect to achieve transdisciplinary integration. In this sense, ethics and research training spaces become powerful instruments for inter- and multidisciplinary technical improvement, by reaching agreements in reports and generating fewer rejections. The absence of a representative of the community's interests was not categorically observed, but it is evident the elitist tendency in

the selection of members as an inseparable part of the institutionality.

On the other hand, sharing reasonable and well-founded perceptions and experiences promotes consensus; however, it is a reality that must be taken into consideration to achieve true interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity, to make the selection of members transparent and avoid personal interests, in order to increase research quality (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Sankey diagram: consensus



Discussion

The major complexity and diversity of research presented in RECs demand critical reflection between the normative ideal established by the literature and the reality faced by the community, researchers, and these committees. These latter, in addition to facing institutional political pressure and pressure from researchers demanding a quick response, face the disparity in evaluation criteria among members, cultural diversity, the lack of specific training in themes outside their own, the bureaucratization of procedures, the absence of their own methodology, and the consolidation of transparent criteria in the evaluation and issuance of results.

The results of this study, conducted with members of research ethics committees in the Latin American context, showed that the multidisciplinarity, interdisciplinarity, and transdisciplinarity approaches still show very low progress in their intrinsic dynamics. Thus, interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity are considered active categories in dispute that must be understood not only as technical structures but as critical processes of responsible and contextual analysis, where consensus is not automatic but a relational process that requires conditions of real plurality, active listening, and representativeness; for example, through the deliberative methodology, which requires rigor that must prevail in analyses, including all perspectives and biases.

Clearly, the advancement of science shows knowledge situated in explanations and actions of social and natural phenomena. This shows the need for interaction between disciplines, professions, and everyday knowledge, as well as their global transformation into "transdisciplines," new conceptual categories that transcend the limits of specialized knowledge. In this sense, it is observed the need to broaden disciplinary perspectives, seeking to expand understanding resources in order to address current issues in their full complexity.

It seems that the dialogue between different disciplines, ideally antagonistic, establishes spaces where more complex techniques and knowledge are built in a plural manner, with various manifestations related to multidisciplinarity, which corresponds to the sum of knowledge; to interdisciplinarity, which generates interactions;

and to transdisciplinarity, which crosses or encompasses them all.

Multidisciplinarity can be understood as a juxtaposition of different disciplines, where each contributes its vision and experience in parallel within the axis of its intervention. This multidisciplinarity facilitates the analysis of reality through the integration of different theoretical and methodological perspectives, also recognizing the permanent need to assimilate societal changes and innovations, which represents a central element in the findings of this study, pointed out as a strength of the work in RECs.

Interdisciplinarity arises from the recognition of the strength that multidisciplinarity implies in addressing social and capital phenomena, representing the valuable diversity of disciplines that can be cultivated [27]. Regarding that, several authors agree that interdisciplinarity consists in the complementarity of different fields of knowledge that work together to achieve a detailed, profound, and comprehensive view of a given reality, based on a common objective [27,28].

Bell and collaborators [29] propose that interdisciplinarity can be conceived as the interaction between two or more disciplines that results in intercommunication and reciprocal enrichment, implying a change in attitude towards knowledge that includes not only theoretical knowledge but, in a advantageous manner, heuristic knowledge for understanding phenomena, such as: relating, comparing, discriminating, classifying, synthesizing, and integrating constituent elements and their internal and external relationships. This requires careful exercise to be achieved, which, according to the study's respondents, represents the main gap. Determining the social and scientific value of a research or research area requires multiple approaches that can focus on social responsibility and justice.

Transdisciplinarity establishes the global meeting space for disciplines and knowledge among those who know about science and also about human beings, their lives, conceptions, errors, and beliefs, among those who maintain their level of specificity towards more comprehensive, inclusive, and therefore more plural perspectives, which advance toward new categories. For this reason, transdisciplinarity implies the existence of a cohesion of values and internal coordination to address a problem from different disciplinary perspectives, in which each complements the other and contributes its own perspective, which may even be critical of the other disciplines [28].

In transdisciplinarity, networked work enables approaching reality from a complex perspective [28]. Rigor, openness, and tolerance are its main characteristics. The first concerns the argumentation that includes all available information; while the second involves the acceptance of the unknown, the unexpected, and the unpredictable; and, finally, tolerance is the recognition of the right to ideas and truths different from one's own, from the revelation of facts in the face of conflicting values to determine duties [30].

However, the findings showed that, in some committees, recommendations are based on traditions of "specialists," with scientistic approaches that disregard the human and sensitive consideration of people and social groups. Transdisciplinarity transcends the fragmentation of knowledge and excessive specialization. From this perspective, it is necessary that REC members possess dialogical capacity, a deliberative and understanding attitude, and the indispensable management notion to form multidisciplinary and intersectoral teams that hold knowledge, but not necessarily formal knowledge in science, technology, and innovation in the public and private spheres, with a participatory viewpoint and that can understand the diverse life contexts, their development, and options for fulfillment. However, the great utopia would be for the social role of RECs to develop through interdisciplinary interventions with a transdisciplinary vision and a multidisciplinary orientation, as expressed by the study participants.

Pluralism refers to the recognition of the possibility of different solutions to the same problem or different interpretations of a same reality or concept, a diversification of factors, situations, or developments in the same field. Thus, we speak of "sociological pluralism" when the action of a plurality of social groups, relatively independent of each other, is recognized or admitted.

Final considerations

It is concluded that there is a disconnect between the normative utopia and the practical reality, with institutional tensions in the appropriation of judgments, as well as epistemological tensions in ethical conceptions and decision-making models among members, but mainly political tensions, in which institutions demand the dependence of members and authorities to constitute RECs that respond to the institutions' needs to generate ethical approvals for local research projects. In this sense, the most powerful semantic emergence is the need for a critical and decolonial ethics, capable of including other actors, with diverse knowledge and rational voices of consensus and dissent based on social ethics. The constant self-training of its members and the community will be the basis for achieving fair consensuses with equity.

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