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A Transitional Space of Welfare:  
Experiencing and Reflecting within the  
Cucine Economiche Popolari

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Student's signature



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# INDEX

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	5
ABSTRACT .....	7
EXTENDED SUMMARY .....	8
INTRODUCTION PECULIARITIES OF THE ECOTONE .....	9
REACHING MY DESTINATION .....	9
THE CUCICNE ECONOMICHE POPOLARI.....	13
METAPHORS FROM BIOLOGY .....	18
OUTLINE OF THE THESIS .....	20
CHAPTER I LIFE HISTORIES OF VOLUNTEERS' POPULATION.....	22
ENTERING THE ECOTONE.....	23
ASIGNING CATEGORIES .....	26
CHARACTERISTICS OF THE POPULATION.....	31
UNEXPECTED EVENTS.....	35
CHAPTER II SOCIAL INTERACTIONS AND COMMUNITY .....	39
ATTRIBUTES OF THE EMPLOYEES .....	40
GUESTS AND THEIR BEHAVIORS.....	46
STRUCTURE OF THE COMMUNITY.....	52
FAIR TRADE-OFFS.....	54
CHAPTER III THE BROADER CONTEXT OF THE ECOSYSTEM.....	58
SOURCES OF MATER AND ENERGY .....	59
PHYLOGENYOF CEP .....	63
PUBLIC DEALINGS .....	67
OVERLAPING MEANINGS .....	71
CHAPTER IV SOCIAL RESTORATION .....	74
GENESIS.....	75
TRANSITIONAL GUESTS.....	79
THE REGULARS .....	82

NEW NATURES.....	84
CONCLUSIONS SYNERGIES OF THE CUCINE ECONOMICHE POPOLARI.....	87
REFERENCES.....	92
WEBLIOGRAPHY.....	95

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 Brochure of the organizations for homeless people in Padua .....	10
Figure 2 Map of the City .....	10
Figure 3 Corso del Popolo Street.....	12
Figure 4 Niccolò Tomasseo Street .....	12
Figure 5 Goffredo Mameli Street .....	12
Figure 6 Reception of the CEP.....	13
Figure 7 Showers .....	14
Figure 8 Soup Kitchen.....	16
Figure 9 Wardrobe for clothing donation .....	16
Figure 10 Doctor's office and pharmacy .....	17
Figure 11 Washroom to prepare before the service.....	32
Figure 12 Classroom of the CEP .....	33
Figure 13 Inventory .....	43
Figure 14 Kitchen .....	45
Figure 15 Waiting room before the cash register. ....	48
Figure 16 Counters. ....	50
Figure 17 Artwork illustrating the transition of the guests while they attend the CEP.....	81
Figure 18 Artwork illustrating the self-perception of the CEP and the guests.....	84

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## ABSTRACT

The transformative trend of relocating responsibilities from state institutions to charity organizations, evident in Global North countries since the end of 1970s, has profoundly influenced the Cucine Economiche Popolari (CEP) in the city of Padua. This study employs an autoethnographic approach, with the researcher immersing herself as a volunteer during the summer of 2023, to investigate the organizational framework employed by the CEP in delivering essential goods and services to the guests. The primary objective of this research was to present a description of the stakeholders involved, examining their interactions both within and outside the CEP facilities. The findings from this experience unveil the underlying motivations that drive individuals to become volunteers and emphasize the consequential role this activity plays in their lives. Some of the social interactions among employees, guests, and other stakeholders reflect imbalanced power relations on one side, while on the other, social support is expressed in various forms, including emotional, informational, or tangible support. In both instances, these interactions revealed the intricate, dynamic, and evolving nature of this space. In recent years, the CEP has grappled with the task of transitioning from an organization managed by the Catholic church to becoming an NGO integrated into the city's welfare system, complete with clearly defined responsibilities. This became particularly evident during the Covid-19 pandemic, wherein the vulnerable population relied on the CEP to receive food, health services, and guidance to navigate the challenges posed by the disease. At present, this transition has introduced organizational structure, efficiency, and accountability; however, it has also led to a distancing effect, impacting those who need assistance the most.

*Key words:* Autoethnography, Inequality, Social Interaction, Transitional Space, Welfare



## EXTENDED SUMMARY

Il trasferimento delle responsabilità dalle istituzioni statali alle organizzazioni di beneficenza è stato un fenomeno diffuso nei paesi del Nord globale dagli anni '70. Negli ultimi anni, queste tendenze globali hanno avuto un impatto significativo sulle Cucine Economiche Popolari (CEP) nella città di Padova. Questa ricerca esplora come le CEP sono organizzate per fornire beni e servizi ai suoi ospiti, adottando una prospettiva da volontaria. Condotta come autoetnografia, questo studio ha coinvolto la ricercatrice nel ruolo di volontaria facendo diverse attività dentro la struttura durante l'estate del 2023. L'obiettivo principale era fornire una descrizione dei partecipanti coinvolti e delle loro interazioni sia all'interno che all'esterno delle strutture osservando e partecipando nelle loro attività quotidiane.

I risultati di questa esperienza testimoniano sulle motivazioni che spingono le persone a diventare volontari e rimanere in questo ruolo per lungo tempo, e sull'importanza di questa attività nelle loro vite soprattutto per i pensionati, che trovano una comunità. Alcune delle interazioni sociali tra dipendenti, ospiti e altri partecipanti riflettono da un lato relazioni di potere sbilanciate, per esempio condividere il cibo, mentre dall'altro si manifesta sostegno sociale in varie forme; tra cui sostegno emotivo quando parlano della loro vita e sono ascoltati; sostegno informativo quando conoscono il funzionamento dei programmi sociali, o sostegno tangibile con le medicine o il vestiario. Entrambe queste interazioni hanno rivelato la natura intricata, dinamica ed evolutiva di questo spazio, che cambiano con le stagioni dell'anno, l'arrivo degli immigrati, la situazione economica e le nuove leggi.

Negli ultimi anni, le CEP hanno affrontato la sfida di passare da un'organizzazione gestita dalla Diocesi di Padova della Chiesa Cattolica a diventare una fondazione integrata nel welfare system della città, con responsabilità degli enti del Terzo Settore. Ciò è diventato particolarmente evidente durante la pandemia da Covid-19, in cui la popolazione vulnerabile ha fatto affidamento sulle CEP per ricevere cibo, servizi sanitari e orientamento per affrontare le sfide poste dalla malattia. Attualmente, questa transizione ha introdotto una struttura organizzata, efficiente e trasparente; tuttavia, ha anche causato un effetto di distanziamento, colpendo coloro che necessitano di assistenza in modo più significativo.

*Parole chiave:* Autoetnografia, Diseguaglianza, Interazione sociale, Spazio di transizione, Welfare.

## INTRODUCTION PECULIARITIES OF THE ECOTONE

*Ecotones are areas of steep transition between ecological communities, ecosystems, and/or ecological regions along an environment or other gradient. Ecotones occur at multiple spatial scales and range from natural boundaries to human-generated ecotones.*

*(Kark, 2017:1)*

*“I rang the doorbell and approached to the window to make myself visible to the volunteers. Despite a woman noticing me, she chose to ignore my presence. I rang the doorbell a second time, and this time a man saw me, but the outcome was the same. Frustrated by the lack of response a guest recognized me and decided to climb to the window, urging. Open the door! The man, bewildered by the situation, finally decided to open it. As I entered the facilities, he was stared at me, as did the other volunteers. They seemed puzzled, probably questioning why a guest was entering through that door. Throughout the entire service, their astonishment grew when they realized I was a volunteer, not a guest. Despite this revelation, none of them approached or spoke to me that day. However, I could sense their curious gazes, trying to comprehend the unexpected scenario.”*

*(Edited fieldwork notes, 2023)*

### REACHING MY DESTINATION

This research delves into the operations of *Cucine Economiche Popolari* (CEP), a soup kitchen for the poor near the train station in Padua. After an extensive search for the appropriate fieldwork setting, I arrived at this organization. I was interested in organizations, and how they translate their vision and mission into daily practices embedded within their culture. My objective was to identify an organization in Padua to conduct my fieldwork. I initiated this process by sending numerous emails, contacted them via LinkedIn, knocking on doors, and making phone calls. However, most of my attempts were rejected; some organizations cited closure during vacations as a reason, while others, were initially interested in the research, lost track of my request amid administrative processes. Language proficiency became a barrier for a few, asserting that “You can’t speak Italian and Veneto dialect fluently”; and the rest rejected my proposition because “My talent was not the right one for them.”

One of my final attempts was to visit *Caritas*<sup>1</sup> in the city. I anticipated that it would be open during the summer; however, upon my visit, I was informed that it too would be closed. Before departing, they provided me with a brochure listing organizations in the city that were likely to be operational during vacations (Figure 1 and 2).



Figure 1 Brochure of the organizations for homeless people in Padua

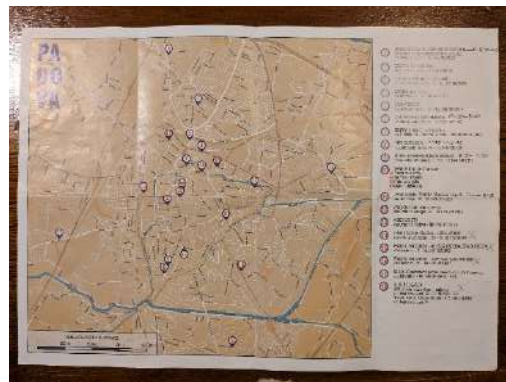


Figure 2 Map of the City

I utilized the brochure as a guide to explore the facilities of several organizations, and the results were consistently similar. Many were closed during summer, while others, though technically open, lacked a staff presence. Some appeared abandoned and insecure from my perspective; what lead me to decide to continue exploring. Upon studying the map, I recognized that one of these organizations was near my apartment. Despite having walked by the location previously without noticing anything noteworthy, I decided to visit it.

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<sup>1</sup> *Caritas* was founded in 1971 after the Second Vatican Council, with the aim of educating the Christian community and benefiting the poor, marginalized, homeless, trafficking victim, and more. Its mission is to offer direct assistance to the poor, as well as pedagogical and pastoral support for the community (Chiesa di Padova, 2023a).

I arrived at the reception of the CEP, where one of the employees received me and instructed “Send an email to this address, explaining what you are looking for and we will contact you.” This felt like a *déjà vu*, considering my prior experiences of sending numerous emails without any response. Nevertheless, I complied the request. Approximately a week later, I received an email from them, inviting me to a meeting at their facilities to assess the compatibility of our ideas for conducting my research there. On the scheduled day and time, I was prepared to explain my research project. Present at the meeting were the Director of the CEP and the employee who had initially received me at the reception and with whom I had maintained contact.

While discussing the aims of my research, my anticipated results, the methodology, and my personal interest, they inquired about my nationality, proficiency in Italian, personal details, and raised queries related to my project. At the end we reached an agreement to conduct my fieldwork there, I only needed to prepare some things to start my work with them. The following week, I reconvened with the same employee. On this occasion, he familiarized me with the goods and services provided by the CEP to the guests; detailed the daily activities within the facilities and other affiliated locations and collaborated with me to plan my schedule for upcoming weeks.

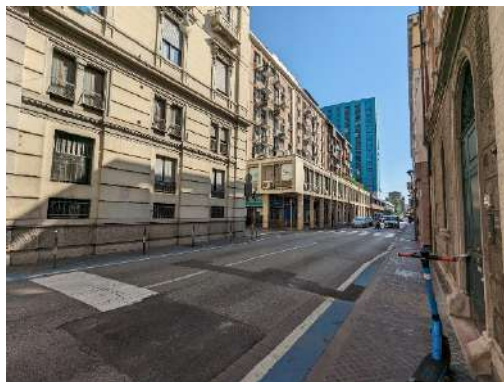
On one side, I experienced both exhaustion and frustration due to the numerous negative responses received through my search. On the other side, there was a sense of satisfaction, after an extended period, an organization finally accepted me for my fieldwork. It presented a paradox that I had visited nearly all of Padua in my quest, only to find my research subject in my own neighborhood, a mere few meters away from my apartment. This part of the city carries a negative reputation, primarily housing a significant immigrant population along with drug dealers, homeless, and at times gangs. According to some testimonials, being in this vicinity poses a risk. However, contrary to these assumptions, I felt more secure in my Italian neighborhood than in *Nezahualcoyotl* or other areas of Mexico City, my city of origin. Undoubtedly, perspectives on safety are subjective.

To arrive at the CEP, I just needed to go downstairs, and found myself on *Corso del Popolo* Street (Figure 3). After a brief walk along the sidewalk, I reached at the intersection with *Niccolò Tomasseo* Street (Figure 4). Continuing my journey, I covered additional distance until I reached my destination. An alternative route involved walking on *Ugo Foscolo* Street, until reaching the intersection with *Goffredo Mameli* Street (Figure 5). Although I could not explain why, this route appeared abandoned to me, so I decided to follow always the same route leading to the reception (Figure 6). Near to the CEP’s facilities, one could observe people begging for

money; stores overseen by the Chinese community; an Eastern European food store; a stationary establishment offering electronic services for immigrants. Additionally, there were groups of men engaging in activities such as smoking cigarettes or marijuana, drinking alcoholic beverages, or involved in heated disputes.



*Figure 3 Corso del Popolo Street*



*Figure 4 Nicolò Tommaso Street*



*Figure 5 Goffredo Mameli Street*



*Figure 6 Reception of the CEP.*

The building and the name of the CEP were not particularly obvious. In my previous walks, I never notice anything distinctive, there was only a long queue that led me to imagine some sort of office. It came as a surprise to discover that this was more than just a queue or an ordinary place. The people waiting in line were the guests, and occasionally, others utilized this entrance, such as volunteers or the postman. However, I never imagine that this would mark the boundary of an ecosystem completely hidden from me until then.

#### THE CUCICNE ECONOMICHE POPOLARI

The CEP started its role hosting victims of the flood, workers, university students, immigrants, addicts, and lonely elderly people. Irrespective of the reasons that lead them there, the CEP functions as a “social emergency room”, offering a welcoming space without reservation. It actively engages with the problems and concerns of its guests, gradually guiding them towards restoring faith in themselves. The CEP provides essential goods and services to facilitate their reintegration into the community (Facco and Zandonà, 2022).

A typical day begins at the reception, where the guests are required to present their ID or provide the last four digits of their registration to the designated person in charge typically an employee and occasionally a volunteer. If a guest lacks a record, it becomes necessary to conduct an interview with another employee. While at the reception, the guest’s attendance is recorded with the OSPOweb<sup>2</sup> software. Subsequently, the guest is prompted to specify the service he or she intends to utilize. These services may include using the bathroom, shaving, charging the

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<sup>2</sup> The OSPOweb is a software belonging to *Caritas Italiana*, with the objective of maintaining in an effective way the data of people in difficulties. It collects data related with poverty, which can be utilized by another stakeholder (Chiesa di Padova, 2023b)

battery of the cellphone, taking a shower, utilizing the laundry facilities, or scheduling appointments for clothing donation or with medical consultations.

For bathroom use and beard shaving, guests can proceed without registration, as these are the only services exempt from software registration. However, for all other services, guest must wait until the designated person in charge completes the registration process. Charging batteries requires the person in charge to write on masking tape his or her name, and later paste in the cellphone. To access to shower facilities, guests are required to pay 60 cents. Approximately 25 showers are scheduled from 8:00 to 10: 00, each guest has 20 minutes. The employee provides towels, soap, and shampoo for use during the shower. Five minutes before the scheduled time concludes, the employee discreetly prompts the guest to finish (Figure 7). Since a significant number of guests are male, the shower service is exclusively done for male employees, ensuring privacy and security. Once a guest finishes, the employee must sanitize the shower, allow a moment for it to dry, and then permit the next guest to use the facility.



*Figure 7 Showers*

For laundry service, guests remit a payment of 50 cents, leave their clothes in a bag with their name, and retrieve them the following day at 15:00. Regarding clothing donations, guests are issued a ticket indicating their name, appointment time, and date for collection. Medical appointments are exclusively coordinated through the medical staff. Guests ascend to the designated area, converse with the nurse, and she schedules and manages the appointment logistics. These services are available from 8:00 to 11:00, Monday through Friday. At 11:00, employees initiate the process of escorting guests outside the facilities to facilitate space cleaning and organization in preparation for the soup kitchen service.

At 11:30, the registration procedure is repeated, after guests proceed to the cash register. If they possess the *buono*<sup>3</sup>, they are exempt from any charges, on the contrary, without it, they are required to pay 50 cents for a starter and salad, 1.5 euros for a main course, and 2 euros for the full menu (which includes water, bread, and dessert in all orders). Subsequently, guests present their ticket at the counter, where a volunteer serves their order on a tray. The guests select their preferences from options such as pasta, rice, or soup, along with choices of chicken, fish, pork, beef, or cheese. On some occasions, guest also could choose their dessert, which may be a cake, fruit, or milk.

With the meal in hand, the guest walked a few steps down the aisle until reaching the door of the soup kitchen. At this juncture, another volunteer offered additional items such as salt, vinegar, napkins, or bread. Once the selection was made, the guest proceeded to the table. While guests are eating, if they needed more water or desired more bread, they simply raised their hand, and the volunteer promptly provide the requested items. Upon completing the meal, guest carried their trays to a designated trolley. Later, a volunteer cleaned and disinfected the table and chair, preparing the space for another guest to use.

When all the guests had received their meals, volunteers joined them at the tables to eat together. Following this, employees commenced a thorough cleaning of both the soup kitchen and the kitchen. Once the cleaning process was completed, the facilities closed at approximately at 15:00. Only one cook and one employee remained for the dinner service (Figure 8). At around 17:30, volunteers for dinner arrived, ringing the doorbell at the secondary entrances. Following their arrival, preparations were made, and at 18:00, the dinner procedure was initiated, that is exactly as the lunch one. All the services concluded at 19:00, and the facilities closed around 20:00. On Saturdays, available services include access to the bathroom, lunch, and registration for *Pranzo di solidarietà* or Sunday lunch<sup>4</sup>. The remaining services are exclusively available from Monday to Friday. On these weekdays, the CEP operates from 9:00 when the employees arrive until 14:00 when all facilities are closed. On Sundays, the facilities remain closed.

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<sup>3</sup> Following registration at the CEP, Italian citizens are directed to *Caritas*, while foreigners are directed to *Pane dei Poveri*. These organizations conduct in-depth interview with the guests to determine their eligibility for the *buono*. If guests can demonstrate a lack of income, disabilities, or other determining factors, they are entitled to receive a full meal either lunch or dinner without any payment. This entitlement has an expiration date, and guest must renew it to avoid being required to pay for their meals. This approach serves as a strategy to “mobilize” guests outside the facilities, by not providing everything exclusively through the CEP (Edited fieldwork notes, 2023).

<sup>4</sup> During Sundays, the CEP is closed, and guests are directed to one of the churches of Padua affiliated with the *Pranzo di solidarietà* network. To receive these meals, guests must register through the OSPOweb software and obtain a ticket containing their information, which will be presented at the church (Edited fieldwork notes, 2023).





*Figure 8 Soup Kitchen*

The additional services include *Fermo Posta*, operational from Monday to Friday between 8:00 and 14:00. During this time, guests without a residence utilize the CEP's location as an official address for receiving letters, residence permits or health insurance cards. This arrangement is facilitated through a formal agreement between the CEP and local authorities. Clothing donations (Figure 9) are also facilitated during the same weekdays, specially from 9:00 to 11:00. In this scenario, guests arrive at the specified date and time indicated on their ticket, proceeding downstairs. A volunteer then facilitates the provision of various items, including underwear, t-shirts, jeans, shoes, backpacks, bed sheets, towels, coats, hats, and bags. The selection and sizing process typically takes between 20 to 30 minutes. After completing the collection, guests have the option to schedule a new appointment for the following month.



*Figure 9 Wardrobe for clothing donation*

On Thursday morning, the CEP designated space within the facilities for the *Avvocato di Strada*. This service operated on a walk-in basis, eliminating the need for guests to schedule

appointment; they simply arrived and waited for their turn to be attended to. The medical service (Figure 10) functioned from Monday to Friday, running from 9:00 to 11:00. Guests with scheduled appointments adhered to the specified date and time. In case of emergencies, guests could promptly seek medical attention. Both services, however, were beyond the scope of my observations, respecting the privacy of the guests. These brief descriptions stem from observations at the reception, as well as narratives from guests, volunteers, and employees.



*Figure 10 Doctor's office and pharmacy*

All the information in this research was gathered through an autoethnography fieldwork, in which I serve as the primary unit of analysis, and my voice constituted the primary narrative. In this time, I assumed a dual role as both the author and the researcher of the thesis (Cooper and Lilyea, 2022). I performed participant observation as a volunteer every day during two months from half of July to the middle of September, during October of 2023 I was there just on Friday noon to contribute with the lunch service.

One of the characteristics of autoethnography is the use of personal experience to examine and/or critique cultural experiences. The relationship of their experiences and stories, are clearly expressed through the text, to illustrate the more general phenomena, and promoting the discussion around the topic. This also embrace vulnerability with purpose, when the researcher opened his or herself for criticism, when they make personal experiences available for consideration. The researcher creates a reciprocal relationship with the audience, based on the assumption that vulnerability will engage with them as well as the fact that they are not considered just a passive receiver of information (Jones, Adams, and Elis, 2013).

The primary constrain was to write fieldwork notes, take photographs, audio, or videos. This restriction was rooted in considerations of guest privacy, logistical concerns that I could disrupt

services, and the need for personal protection, as the organization could not ensure the security of my electronic devices. This risky space complicates the access and movement inside the facilities, in the sense that I need to be precautions with myself, what I witnessed and had a considerable expertise to manage sensitive information and being aware of other agendas of the stakeholders (Koonings, Kruijt, and Rodgers, 2019). In addition to this situation, I considered the idea of doing some deep interviews and having a coffee with the volunteers, employees, and guest outside the facilities to collect more data, but some issues related to my security emerged. As I mentioned above I lived on the next street to the CEP, and almost every day I saw one or more of the guests doing their daily activities, the first weeks I saw some of them outside and when they recognized me said “Hi!”, others started to yelled at me blaming for some of their problems; another guest follow me to the door of my building, and near to the reception of the CEP some guests stop me and started to request my phone number, social media accounts, or accept dating with them, in order to be romantically involved.

In consideration of both physical and psychological well-being, I consciously choose to minimize contact with volunteers, guests, and employees outside the facilities to mitigate potential misunderstandings or future conflicts. If by chance, I encountered them outside, I would offer a simple greeting or a friendly gesture, often accompanied by a smile. I soon realized that guests preferred not to be readily recognized (Glasser, 1988), and as a such, I respected their desire for privacy, maintaining a discrete approach with a gesture or smile. At times, they chose to ignore my presence, and I made efforts to be as unobtrusive as possible to respect their decisions. We established a sort of boundary, refraining from engaging in deep conversations outside the facilities. Meanwhile, within the confines of the facilities, we freely exchanged information about our personal lives. Both parties respected the unique space where we connected, engaging in discussions on topics such as economy, politics, religion, society, family, and life stories. However, beyond the facilities, our interactions were limited to simple greetings.

## METAPHORS FROM BIOLOGY

At this point the reader must be wondering Why I started the introduction with the ecotone’s definition? And the answer is that is part of myself and additionally it will be the analytical tool to understand the space of the CEP. As a part of my own story, I considered myself as an interdisciplinary person, I studied Biology for my bachelor’s degree, and while I was working, I discovered that I need knowledge from other disciplines to be able to understand our reality. This mindset inspired me to choose this master’s degree as well as to perform my research

project in Anthropology. As a result of this learning process, I will be using some concepts from Biology to illustrate specific parts of the data gathered, with the aim of understanding the CEP as a transitional space of welfare primarily for the guests.

Even for Ecology is hard to “establish” the boundaries of ecosystems, we can describe the abiotic factors (water, sun, rocks), the organisms (bacteria, fungi, plants, animals), and the interactions among them; and as a result, we will obtain a “particular space” where they could exist and then later do some generalizations (Begon, Townsend and Harper, 2006). Besides all these hypotheses there is always something difficult to classify or analyze and the ecotones are this, is hard to determine which kind of ecosystem are, they overlap attributes from the ecosystems surrounding them, they possess emergent characteristics, and they are also transitional spaces for some species. In resume, the ecotones have a complex nature that is hard to describe and the word transitional is useful for understanding the way in which all these attributes shape it (Kark, 2017:1).

This word was in my mind and help me to describe the nature of the CEP, this space has been changing during its 180 years of history, as well as the services provided, or the type of guests helped. At the beginning this space has almost no demands to the guest, this has no “eligibility requirements”, records or make no demands (Glasser 1988:97), it started as secular organization, later it became part of the *Diocesi di Padova* to be managed by the *Suore*, and currently is an NGO that plays an important role as a part of the welfare system of the City of Padua (Roverato, 2009; Jori, 2022a). This description was drawn through my personal experience performing an autoethnography as a volunteer, as well as the contribution of the guests, volunteers, employees and the research through their website, social media, books, and articles related to them (Telepace, 2023).

An ecotone brings together different ecosystems, in this case the CEP is the space were multiple realities and meanings overlap with a huge impact in the lives of the guest, but also the volunteers that are part of it. As the CEP describes itself as a citizenship laboratory (Vecchiato, 2022); every day get into actions religious beliefs, state institutions, private stakeholders, volunteers, guests from all around the world, that add a beautiful diversity as well as a complexity that is unique, but that also offers the possibility to understand in a better way what is happening in the surrounding context.

## OUTLINE OF THE THESIS

The research in the *Cucine Economiche Popolari* sought to answer the questions of how is organized the NGO *Fondazione Nervo Passini* to provide goods and services to its guests from a volunteers' perspective. The research was undertaken with the belief that the space has a transitional nature, such as the ecotones, that overlaps characteristics of different ecosystems and promote the emergence of new attributes; the patterns of behavior in the CEP will be considered as a culture.

In Chapter I the process of autoethnography will be described to illustrate the way in which I became the research tool, to be part of a specie of the ecotone well consolidated after the Covid 19 pandemics. The main behaviors of the volunteers as well as the interactions among them will help me to classify them into different populations in which it will be possible to understand the meanings of this role for some of them.

The daily interactions among different species such as volunteers, guests, and employees will be the core of Chapter II. Here some behaviors will be documented to focus on power dynamics and the way in which each stakeholder arrives to the CEP to perform their role in search for human contact to longer term relationships.

As it is well known any ecosystem is isolated and the CEP is not the exception. For the Chapter III the dynamics with the broader context will be described with the aim of understanding the direct and indirect consequences for the guests and how in some cases instead of reducing the differences between them and the rest of society, it triggers the antipathy and dependence from other stakeholders.

As the CEP describes itself as a “drop in the ocean” to fight against the poverty, suffering, violence, and injustice for some people, in Chapter IV the organization will be conceptualize as the currently role that it performs as key element of the welfare system of the City of Padua. The way in which it tries to restore the life of the guests to bring them back to the society, will be illustrated.

In the Conclusions, I retrace in the previous chapters to reach the concept of ecotone and how all the elements create the atmosphere for this dualism in one side a space for everyone with no requirements, and in the other, the collection of data, the bureaucratic procedures, and control exercised characteristic of state institutions. Nevertheless, the impacts at well-being level for individuals and the community are remarkable, which raise the possibility to continue studying what happens in this transitional space.

The title of each chapter follows an inductive approach starting with individual level, passing for populations, communities until it reaches the scale of ecosystem. To illustrate this step by step, after the title a biological concept is presented to continue this narration related with the ecotone metaphor. Below these concepts an ethnographic vignette describing my experience is presented, with the aim to create meaning among the researcher, the field, and the audience with evocative little stories. These stories could be defined as “a vivid portrayal of the conduct of an event of everyday life, in which the sights and sounds of what was being said and done are described in the natural sequence of their occurrence in real time” based on a more elaborated and polished version of my fieldwork notes (Schöneich, 2023).

As a matter of privacy all the names of used through the text are pseudonyms to protect the identity of the informant, in other cases when the information was incomplete some elements coming from a different informant with relative the same characteristics were used to complete the description and offered to the reader a more accurate description.

## CHAPTER I LIFE HISTORIES OF VOLUNTEERS' POPULATION

*A female North Pacific Giant Octopus (Enteroctopus dofleini) lives three to four years; it lays thousands of eggs in a single bout and then dies. By contrast a mature Coast Redwood Tree (Sequoia sempervirens) lives for many hundreds of years and produces millions of seeds each year. As these two examples illustrates, organisms differ dramatically in how they develop, the time they take to grow, when they become mature, how many offspring of a particular size they produce, and how long they live. Together, the age, size, or stage specific patterns of development, growth maturation, reproduction, survival, and lifespan define an organism's life cycle, it's life history.*

*(Fabian and Flatt, 2012:1)*

*Population: a group of interbreeding organisms of the same species occupying a specified space during a specified time. Every wildlife population may be described by the following parameters: birth rate, death rate, density, age structure and sex ratio.*

*(Leopold, 2019:5)*

*After the service, I shared lunch with a female volunteer. Curious about her motivations for volunteering, I inquired, "What led you to become a volunteer?" She responded, "To be honest, I found myself with ample free time after retirement and decided that I wanted to allocate it meaningfully." I asked, "Why did you opt for the CEP over other organizations?"*

*She deliberated, stating, "I'm not entirely certain, but I believe it stemmed from a recommendation by a friend who had prior involvement here. She shared her positive experiences, which intrigued me. Initially, I decided to explore the environment, and as I became acclimated, I found satisfaction in my tasks, leading me to commit to the organization." Continuing the dialogue, I inquired, "How do you find the overall environment?" She affirmed, "I appreciate contributing to the well-being of our guests, and being part of a larger collective endeavor adds another layer of fulfillment for me.*

*(Edited fieldwork notes, 2023)*

Upon my arrival in the summer of 2023, I joined the CEP organization, encountering a diverse mix of individuals, ranging from those with years of experience to fellow newcomers like me. This narrative delves into my training process, detailing the nuances of my coexistence with the

volunteers. I find resonance in employing metaphors from Biology, to discern the nuances of our ecotone. Departing from the conventional characterization of volunteers as mere stakeholders, I prefer to delineate them as a distinct "species," a categorization that can be further dissected into discrete "populations" and individual entities. This taxonomic approach aligns with the findings of Glasser (1988:42), in which is impossible to interact with the entire culture through in-depth individual records, in this context is possible to have access to a population of the species.

Throughout this period, I observed and classified the categories assigned to me by my peers. Simultaneously, I provide an analysis of their perceptions, drawing connections to my own positionality<sup>5</sup> in the research. Furthermore, I reflect on how my prior experiences have shaped the lens through which I perceive the intricate dynamics within the CEP facilities. Autoethnography, as a methodological approach, positions me as the primary research instrument, because my mind, body, instincts, intuitions, interests, emotions, and values collectively form the lens through which the narrative unfolds a concept elucidated by Adams and Hermann (2023). This introspective lens becomes the conduit through which the cultural experiences of volunteers within the organizational ecotone are elucidated (Prasad, 2019).

While the compilation of exhaustive life histories for each volunteer, guest, or employee proved unattainable, I successfully amassed biographical sketches. These profiles serve as resources in addressing pivotal inquiries: What are the gatekeepers essential for integration into the population? What expertise equips me to navigate the challenges inherent in volunteering? Which behavioral patterns align with the organizational culture, and conversely, which deviate from the established norms?

## ENTERING THE ECOTONE

Upon receiving the much-anticipated acceptance email, I promptly scheduled an initial meeting, the purpose of which was twofold: to formalize my commitment through the signing of the volunteer agreement and to seek clarification on lingering queries about the organization. As I stepped into the facilities, a warm reception awaited me, guiding me to the designated meeting room adorned with the organization's mission statement and vision displayed on its walls.

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<sup>5</sup> The fact that a researcher's social, cultural and subject positions (and other psychological processes) affect: the questions they ask; how they frame them; the theories that they draw to; how they read intertextual and experiential reading; their relations with those they research in the fieldwork and through interviews; interpretations they place on empirical evidence; access to data, action and the likelihood that they will be listened to and heard (Gregory et al, 2010: 556)



Seated around a round table, a collection of documents lay before me, and an employee, presented the volunteer agreement. As I perused the document, the first query surfaced when I encountered the field prompting me to disclose the name of my church. Initially assuming this to be a criterion exclusive to Catholic affiliations, I sought clarification. The employee clarified that this field was entirely optional. I inscribed the name of a church I occasionally attended throughout the year. It was during this exchange that the employee illuminated the inclusive nature of the organization, emphasizing that volunteers span a spectrum of religious affiliations—atheists, agnostics, and those who identify as Catholic but not practicing. The clarification underscored that religious orientation held no bearing on one's eligibility as a volunteer. I proceeded to affix my signature, marking the symbolic transition into the realm of volunteerism. The employee, with a succinct yet profound declaration, affirmed, "That's all; now you are a volunteer."

Subsequently, we embarked on an exploration of the organization's website, during which he delineated the intricacies of various activities while I recorded notes and posed additional inquiries for clarification. It became evident that, within this environment, the act of taking notes or capturing photographs in the presence of guests was deemed both invasive and disrespectful. In a more discreet manner, he underscored the potential risks associated with having my cellphone in proximity to the facilities, cautioning that some guests might attempt to abscond with it. Moreover, he emphasized the perception of being "distracted" when visibly engaging with the cellphone while involved in projects. Acknowledging the validity of these concerns, I willingly committed to refraining from any actions that might compromise the privacy of the guests. Aligning with this commitment, I conveyed a personal belief that constant attention to a cellphone could hinder my ability to fully engage with and comprehend the ongoing activities, emphasizing the importance of remaining present and attentive during my volunteer responsibilities.

A structured schedule for my initial two weeks of activities was planned to delineate the scope of a volunteer's role. Proposing a cautious start with activities of lesser intrusion, I aimed to minimize any potential disruption to guests and fellow volunteers. In response, a thoughtful recommendation emerged: commencing with the lunch service, thus ensuring a seamless integration into the volunteer population. The rationale behind this approach was to gradually acclimate to the organization's dynamics, providing the opportunity to transition to different services or contribute wherever assistance was most needed as my familiarity and experience grew. I exited the facilities just before the commencement of the lunch service, recognizing the imperative for all staff to be present in the soup kitchen to effectively manage the service.

On my inaugural day as a volunteer, assigned to contribute during the lunch service, I proactively established a mental framework, akin to a protocol, to navigate inquiries from other volunteers, employees, or guests—addressing the fundamental question of "Who I am" as proposed by Glasser (1988). Anticipating common queries about my name, age, place of residence, purpose at the organization, nationality, and Italian language skills. As time unfolded, my experience deepened, prompting a reciprocal exchange where I, too, initiated inquiries to glean insights into the life histories of those around me.

Throughout my volunteer experience, I endeavored to engage with as many fellow volunteers as possible. I initiated conversations exploring various aspects, such as their professional backgrounds, motivations behind choosing to volunteer with the CEP, the significance of this activity in their lives, any supplementary pursuits beyond volunteering, the duration of their service, and a concise overview of their overall volunteer experience. The only method available for collecting this valuable information was through direct inquiry, actively participating in conversations, committing details to memory, and subsequently, upon concluding each service, returning to my apartment to document every recollection. The forthcoming profile unfolds as a descriptive account of the life history of a volunteer who devoted her time to elucidate the meaning the CEP held in her life:

#### Vittoria

She is a volunteer in her late sixties, resides in one of the southern neighborhoods of Padua. According to the weather or her mood she takes the bus, rides her bike, or drives her car to attend the CEP once a week. After her retirement, she sought a meaningful activity to use her free time. Before arriving to the CEP, she tried to be a volunteer in other organizations, but there she needed to put into practice her expertise as a secretary. Contrary, she wants to “use her hands”. Encouraged by a friend who shared her positive experiences as a CEP volunteer, she decided to explore this organization for herself. During an initial trial period, she found the experience gratifying and chose to commit a permanent volunteer. As her engagement with the CEP deepened, so did her interest, prompting her to become more involved in various activities. Currently she is one of the backup volunteers, she stands ready to be called upon by the organization in case of emergencies or to contribute to new activities and services. This dedicated involvement underscores her commitment to utilizing her time and skills effectively in support of the CEP’s mission (Edited fieldwork notes, 2023).

Although my own circumstances diverged from this volunteer profile, I adhered to the same protocols. My advantage compared to them lay in having daily access to a spectrum of activities, allowing me to draw comparisons across various time spans. Further differentiating my experience, my proximity to the facilities facilitated my immersion in the organizational culture, and I had the privilege of posing numerous inquiries to those around me. Yet, my journey was not without its challenges, particularly concerning language. While I possess a basic understanding of Italian, the rapid pace of conversation or the inclusion of the Veneto dialect occasionally posed difficulties. I found myself frequently requesting repetitions or transitions to Italian for clarity. Paradoxically, my multilingual proficiency became an asset, enabling communication with guests fluent in English or Spanish. Moreover, it served as a valuable tool for personal translation when encountering instances where others assumed I did not comprehend.

Upon signing the agreement to become a volunteer, the expectation of receiving some form of training to navigate the intricacies within the organization lingered in my mind. The assurance provided was succinct: "You will learn in practice." While I appreciate the emphasis on practical experience, my prior professional expertise had instilled a sense of caution. In my previous role, where I coordinated volunteers, we dedicated several weeks to thoroughly prepare them for the challenges posed by the complex reality of conservation and poverty. This preparation was crucial in the context of the Rainforest, where the juxtaposition of exuberant beauty and challenges, ranging from heat and humidity to insects, flora, and fauna, required a nuanced understanding. Moreover, the local population faced multifaceted challenges, and conservation wasn't always their primary concern.

Sharing a mindset of learning by doing with the CEP, I recognized the efficacy of this approach on a typical day. However, my apprehension grew considering the potential challenges of this strategy when everyone is busy or when confronted with unusual circumstances. The CEP relies on the collective knowledge of other volunteers to impart essential skills, presuming that serving a meal and attending to guests is inherently straightforward and can be easily mastered by anyone. This approach, while pragmatic, raises questions about its efficacy in situations that deviate from the norm or when the demands on volunteers' time are exceptionally high.

## ASIGNING CATEGORIES

The autoethnographic process has allowed me to discern the social categories imposed upon me by those in my immediate environment, categories that would have been otherwise elusive.

Language emerged as a prominent factor through which volunteers, employees, and guests actively shaped my identity and influenced the dynamics of my social interactions. Given the inherent limitations, it is impractical for any researcher to establish rapport with every member of the community. Consequently, my most profound connections evolved with specific subsets, notably retired White women who volunteered, English-speaking employees, and male guests hailing from North African countries.

It is crucial to acknowledge that these groups may have been more represented than others in my interactions. Concurrently, instances of discomfort arose in relationships where insulting comments, rude attitudes, or aggressive behaviors were expressed. In response, I consciously chose to maintain a certain distance and directed my efforts toward collaborating with those with whom I felt equipped to manage such challenging situations. This deliberate approach allowed me to navigate the diverse social ecosystem within the organization while prioritizing connections that aligned with a more positive and constructive engagement.

Adhering to the framework outlined by Loden and Rosener in 1990 (Scottish Government, 2022), the initial social category to be considered was my physical appearance. As interactions unfolded and information exchange became reciprocal, a more nuanced exploration of elements contributing to social categorization emerged. In delineating my sex, a biological attribute and gender as socially ascribed meanings to biological differences contingent on temporal and spatial contexts (Gregory et al., 2010:679), I identify as feminine. Arriving at the facilities after a shower, devoid of makeup, clad in comfortable attire and shoes, and sporting a ponytail, I deliberately selected this appearance, mirroring the style I had embraced in my previous professional role. Upon my arrival, the staff promptly addressed my attire, stating, "Those clothes are not OK; you need something that covers your neck. It's not a problem for us; the concern arises due to Muslim men," citing the u-shape neckline of my shirt. Together, we went to the wardrobe to procure attire deemed "appropriate for the service." Subsequently, when in view of fellow volunteers and guests, my altered appearance inadvertently conveyed a perception of relative youthfulness, casting me among individuals in their twenties rather than my thirties. This inadvertent camouflage within the group of teenagers participating in the

*Percorsi per le Competenze Transversali e per l'Orientamento* (PCTO)<sup>6</sup> led another guest to assume I was a novice<sup>7</sup>.

Further shaping the initial impressions, the absence of any observable physical disability or mental illness solidified the collective perception of my health. Some guests articulated sentiments such as, "You're so lucky to be fine," referencing both my health and the fact that I retained all my teeth. These interactions underscored the immediate categorization of me as a healthy individual, inadvertently drawing attention to the contrasting health circumstances of some of the guests.

In navigating the socially constructed categories shaped by race<sup>8</sup>, identifying myself becomes a complex matter. I prefer to be perceived as *mestiza*<sup>9</sup>, attempting to reconcile my multi-ethnic background. Some guests perceived me as whiter than themselves, assuming a correlation between my skin tone and perceived opportunities, stating, "You're White and strong, so I guess that won't be so difficult for you to find a job or be accepted by Italians." Regarding ethnicity<sup>10</sup>, I willingly embrace the term, Latina. However, confusion surfaced among volunteers and employees regarding my origins, leading to questions such as, "Are you ashamed of your origins? Why didn't you answer when I spoke to you in Arabic?" These instances highlighted the ambiguity surrounding my country of origin, with some assuming I hailed from the Middle East or North Africa.

Interestingly, my sexual orientation remained unexplored, leading to an immediate classification as heterosexual. Additionally, the absence of a wedding ring led to the

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<sup>6</sup> During the summer of 2021 it was established the possibility to more than 70 young people from High School to offer their talent in the CEP. One stage was related to reflection about topics related with social justice, citizenship, and immigration, the second was the service itself in the counter or as a kind of waiter or busser in the soup kitchen; the last stage was a debriefing about the experience (Jori and Vecchiato, 2022).

<sup>7</sup> Since 1883 the Bishop of Padua assigned the management of the CEP to the *Suore Elisabettine*, that is why the hypothesis of being a novice was possible (FNP, 2022).

<sup>8</sup> Refers to physical differences that groups and cultures consider socially significant. For example, people might identify their race as Aboriginal, African American, or Black, European American, or White, or Native American, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (APA, 2022).

<sup>9</sup> Genetic mix among indigenous, Europeans, and Africans produced in Mexico since the XVI century. It creates a population with different physical characteristics. The social perception of these anthropological profiles had created stereotypes, as a support of national identity (Serrano-Sánchez, 2004).

<sup>10</sup> Ethnicity refers to shared cultural characteristics such as languages, ancestry, practices, and beliefs (APA, 2022). As a counter argument it is argued, repeatedly that a pan-ethnic group called *Latinoamericanos* to advance nation-building projects founded upon the myth of *mestizaje* ("racial mix"). Suggesting that the future of the region depends upon accepting *mestizaje* in a positive sense, as integration and creation. The notion of *mestizo* "extended ethnic group" perpetuates the exclusion of indigenous and African-descendants' peoples (Gregory et al, 2010: 413).

presumption of my single status. These instances underscored the intricate web of assumptions and categorizations that unfolded within the diverse and dynamic context of my volunteer experience.

The second circle, tethered to Social/Cultural aspects, materialized during our service-based conversations. My accent while speaking Italian unveiled my Spanish proficiency, and as I further disclosed my language abilities, including English and a bit of French, the contours of my linguistic identity became clearer. Providing insights into my academic pursuits, I elucidated my role as a student engaged in thesis research, leading them to speculate about potential means of financial support, such as a scholarship, facilitating my studies in Padua. I added that I sustained myself by working on weekends, acknowledging the constraints of a modest income.

When the conversation pivoted to my country of origin, Mexico, their associations immediately gravitated towards tourist hubs like Cancun and our vibrant handcrafts. A pointed observation about the colors and embroidery on my purse led to a recognition of its distinctiveness, attributed to Global South countries, particularly Mexico. This interaction also cast me as a friendly and communicative individual, because as one female volunteer said, “People from tropical countries are warmer than us, because you have more sun.” The general assumption that all Latin America is Catholic, emerged, shedding light on the implicit connection between geographical origin and religious beliefs. Additionally, within the confines of the facilities, I discerned various religious symbols, contributing to a nuanced understanding of the religious space within the organization.

The exploration of the third circle, delineating my role within the organization, proved intriguing. To some, I wasn't merely a volunteer; I was perceived as a student engaged in research, a role reminiscent of my prior experiences. Simultaneously, a different perspective emerged, casting me as spy—someone potentially scrutinizing the organization and its members due to my involvement in various activities throughout the week. A prospective future employee identity also surfaced. While the majority acknowledged me as a volunteer, a few instances presented mild inconveniences, such as individuals stating, "I will stay here until I can speak with an employee to solve the situation, not with you-volunteer-!" These nuanced perceptions underscore the multifaceted nature of my role within the organization.

Engaging in a similar demographic analysis of the volunteer population, the gender distribution revealed 55.55% women and 44.45% men, with an average age of 57 years (FNP, 2022). Notably, none exhibited signs of physical disability. The matter of race and ethnicity presented

a nuanced challenge, as while I perceived them as White, their self-perceptions leaned toward identification as "I am purely Veneto or Italian." When discussing individuals from Africa, volunteers commonly used the term People of color. Remarkably, sexual orientation remained unexpressed by the volunteers, and the presence or absence of a wedding ring offered insights into their civil status.

In conversing with the volunteers, I discerned that the predominant language spoken was Italian, with only a limited proficiency in English and French among a few. Notably, when I engaged with guests in English or Spanish, I observed occasional manifestations of what seemed like jealous behavior from the volunteers.

Regarding education, the demographic breakdown revealed that 50.4% held a bachelor's degree, 16.3% possessed a *licenza media*, and 33.3% held a diploma (FNP, 2022). While inquiries into income or financial status remained unexplored, respondents, when prompted to define their socio-economic standing, consistently employed terms such as normal or middle class. Many identified as retirees, and when probed about their past professions, responses were often succinct, stating, "I did some job."

Curiously, discussions about religious beliefs were conspicuously absent. However, when I publicly disclosed my Catholic affiliation and elucidated the syncretic rites practiced in Mexico, the revelation sparked surprise, underscoring the unfamiliarity with such confessions. Consequently, explanations provided by the *Suore* regarding religious concepts resonated with me due to my familiarity with this type of language.

Geographically, the volunteers predominantly resided in various neighborhoods within the city of Padua, with the remainder situated in municipalities in the province. Their daily commutes to the facilities involved walking, taking the bus, cycling, or driving a car or motorcycle. Notably, none of the individuals I conversed with resided in the immediate neighborhood of the CEP, "Fortunately" as one of the volunteers mentioned once.

Within the volunteer population, an implicit hierarchy manifested based on years of experience and the level of proactive engagement. This structure became particularly evident in situations where neither employees nor the *Suore* were present, necessitating the group to seek guidance from more experienced volunteers. While this internal hierarchy was perceptible among volunteers, it remained inconspicuous to the guests.

Over the course of a couple of months, I successfully cultivated effective communication with the guests. They became familiar with me, engaging in conversations, sharing jokes, and, at

times, expressing candid observations like, "Well, it seems that you were reduced in rank, isn't it? That's why you're here in the soup kitchen instead of behind the counter." This rapport-building process allowed for a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics within the volunteer-guest interactions.

Conversations with employees varied based on individual personalities and affinities. Some volunteers engaged easily with talkative individuals, fostering a sense of camaraderie. In contrast, interactions with more reserved employees maintained a formal or professional tone. This adaptability in communication style underscored the diverse personalities present within the organizational culture.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF THE POPULATION

Through daily interactions, the volunteers shared their experiences, ideas, assumptions, and motivations associated with the CEP. In reciprocation, I offered a candid exchange by revealing personal details. The shared data revealed a recurring pattern: many volunteers dedicated their services once a week, with the time commitment contingent on the specific activity. Typically spanning two to three hours on a designated day, volunteers liaised with the employee responsible for schedules to convey their weekly availability. Subsequently, a daily schedule was formulated, and in the event of an emergency, communication occurred via a WhatsApp group.

A distinct subset of volunteers falls under the backup category of those who contribute to a bank of time. In this framework, volunteers make themselves available for service, and if there is a shortage of volunteers for a particular activity, employees can summon them to act as substitutes. This system ensures the flexibility required to address contingencies and maintain the operational continuity of the CEP.

The degree of volunteer involvement with the organization varies significantly based on individual life histories. For instance, some volunteers view their role as a mere distraction from daily life, perceiving it as an everyday activity without particular significance. Their presence is primarily motivated by a desire to spend time or engage in something different from their routine. This group often includes volunteers who choose the CEP due to its proximity to their home or workplace, viewing it as a convenient location for service.

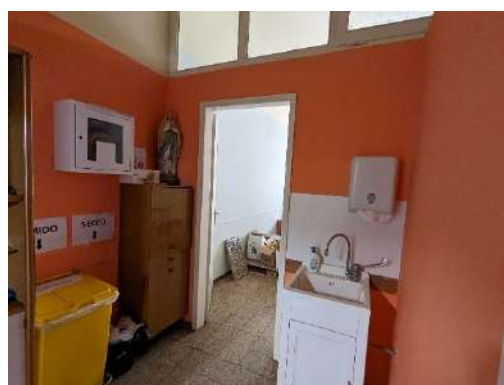
Conversely, anecdotes and past experiences shared by fellow volunteers have revealed to some that the CEP offers a meaningful space for hands-on and tangible contributions, a space where



they can engage in manual work rather than intellectual tasks. Individuals in this category allocate a modest portion of their schedule for these tasks. Notably, their engagement appears somewhat perfunctory, as observed by frequent glances at their cellphones or the clock. Moreover, their interest in the personal lives of their peers is minimal. Despite attempts to initiate more substantive discussions about their experiences, motivations, and various topics, these volunteers tend to swiftly close off the conversation. Recognizing this limited interaction, I eventually ceased my efforts to avoid causing discomfort or overstaying my welcome.

A distinct group of volunteers exhibits a strong affinity for interpersonal connections and personal preferences, which serve as primary motivations for their involvement with the CEP. Members of this population typically join the organization at the behest of a friend, relative, or neighbor, fostering a sense of camaraderie within the group. This camaraderie extends beyond the service hours, as these volunteers often engage in post-service activities such as sharing a coffee or participating in other leisurely pursuits together.

Within the organizational setting, their interactions primarily revolve around discussions about their weeks and personal lives, occurring during the service or mealtime. Notably, their focus tends to be directed more toward interacting with fellow volunteers than engaging with the guests. These conversations persist beyond the service area, permeating spaces like the washroom (Figure 11), classroom (Figure 12), hallways, or facility exits. When questioned about the significance of these interactions, volunteers in this category found it challenging to articulate, expressing it more as a corporeal sensation rather than a describable phenomenon.



*Figure 11 Washroom to prepare before the service.*



*Figure 12 Classroom of the CEP*

In terms of involvement in other CEP activities outside the facilities, these volunteers occasionally make themselves available to participate but seldom contribute to the planning, execution, and evaluation of these activities.

For some individuals, the CEP serves as a venue to attain specific benefits. In essence, volunteering provides them access to the kitchen environment, allowing them to apply their culinary expertise. As one volunteer expressed, "I've always enjoyed the kitchen and cooking, so I sought a place where I could contribute while simultaneously putting my culinary interests into practice." Conversely, for others, the soup kitchen represents a repository of cherished memories. One volunteer harkened back to their high school days when he participated in the PCTO in a kitchen. Returning to the CEP, he found satisfaction in relishing the familiar space.

Another population viewed the soup kitchen as a space to leverage their managerial skills in organizing people. One volunteer drew parallels between her professional background, which involved managing people and organizing tasks, and the operational dynamics of the kitchen. She saw the kitchen as a space to apply her expertise and provide efficient service.

The challenges encountered within the facility were particularly appreciated by these volunteers. The unpredictable nature of operations, the rapid pace of change, and the inherent difficulty in planning were sources of satisfaction. The dynamic and ever-changing nature of the transitional space not only presented learning opportunities but also fostered a sense of companionship among the volunteers. For this population of volunteers, the terms family and life choice carry profound significance, as the CEP and its activities have left a profound impact on their lives. Demonstrating an unwavering commitment, they allocate a substantial portion of their time to CEP activities and actively participate in the design, implementation, and evaluation processes. Notably, the most proactive and engaged volunteers form a private group dedicated to planning various initiatives.

Throughout their service, these volunteers consistently strive to engage in conversations with the guests. One volunteer acknowledged the superficial nature of these chats, recognizing the limitations imposed by the narrow range of topics permissible, such as weather or the quality of the meal. However, she emphasized the significance of providing companionship to the guests, stating, "In some cases, we are the only ones who speak with them."

Beyond the service hours, these dedicated volunteers make deliberate efforts to learn the names and stories of the guests. Weekly updates on the guests' lives are shared among the group, demonstrating a genuine interest in their well-being. The volunteers extend their commitment beyond the facility's walls by offering companionship to the guests in various settings outside the CEP.

Reflecting on their roles, one volunteer noted the increased closeness achieved while working as a waiter or busser. He expressed a sense of fulfillment in serving the guests. Unlike the kitchen setting where certain requests may be challenging to fulfill, serving at the soup kitchen allows him to provide water, bread, engage in conversation, and create a more intimate connection with the guests. The volunteers actively seek to enhance the guest experience, whether by sharing a meal, updating each other on their lives, or extending gestures of kindness, such as offering coffee during the weekend. These seemingly small details are considered essential, contributing to the overall sense of human connection and attention provided to the guests.

The CEP serves as a space where the mantra "Missionary life is a life choice, we always have someone to help" as the Director said, translates into tangible actions, allowing individuals to embody the spirit of aiding others through the provision of basic services. For many, this engagement extends beyond mere assistance and becomes transformative, prompting a reconsideration of their own lifestyle choices. One volunteer shared a personal shift, expressing, "I was highly productive and earned a substantial income to afford material possessions that conferred status. However, at some point, I realized that something had to change. Now, I prefer earning less and having more free time to engage in activities like volunteering and building connections with people."

These dedicated volunteers approach their responsibilities with unwavering commitment, consistently striving for excellence in their roles. Actively seeking ways to enhance the service, they engage in collaborative discussions to generate suggestions, ideas, and innovative solutions. Additionally, their efforts extend to fundraising initiatives, challenging assumptions held about the CEP and its guests.

In reflective conversations, volunteers explore the lives of the guests, considering whether they feel heard and pondering the activities that occupy their remaining hours of the day. The discussions delve into broader societal issues, addressing the impacts of poverty, immigration policies, and mental health challenges that not only affect the guests but also reverberate throughout the entire city.

The initiation into their realm commenced with the training process, a journey that presented varying degrees of ease on different days. As previously noted, the extensive diversity among volunteers manifests in a distinctive array of personal styles. There exists no standardized template for the CEP or an explicit manual to adhere to. This diversity, however, proved advantageous during my training, as each mentor<sup>11</sup>, drawing from their individual experiences, served as a unique guide. They keenly observed my actions, offered valuable suggestions, and intervened, when necessary, particularly in instances of potential risk. My heartfelt gratitude extends to them for their unwavering patience, as it was their conscious decision to collaborate with me.

In these initial encounters, I conscientiously implemented my established protocol for engaging with mentors. This involved initiating conversations to foster mutual understanding, sharing personal information, and establishing a rapport. The interactions were so naturally infused with a sense of camaraderie that, at times, I found myself momentarily "forgetting" the research aspect.

## UNEXPECTED EVENTS

One of my preconceived assumptions concerning the volunteers pertained to their religious motivations. I anticipated that at least one of them would express volunteering for religious reasons, given the organization's inherent connection to religion. The roots of the organization trace back to a significant event on the 17th of September 1882, when an extraordinary flood of the *Bacchiglione* River wreaked havoc in parts of Padua, leading to an increased population of the impoverished. In response to this crisis, Stefania Ezterodt Omboni, a Protestant, founded the first CEP near the church of Saint Daniele, dedicated to distributing meals to the homeless and flood victims (Roverato, 2009).

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<sup>11</sup> I decided to use the term mentor, because one of the employees raised the question about "Who would like to teach this girl/woman how to...? And the volunteer answered Me! During that time, he or she was teaching you how to perform the activities. There is not a formal name, but for me is not a problem to recognize them as my mentors and me as an apprentice (Edited fieldwork notes, 2023).

The next year, Stefania initiated a unique collaboration by seeking the oversight of the Catholic bishop of Padua, marking an unusual dialogue between Protestants and Catholics during that era. The bishop subsequently entrusted the management of the soup kitchen to the *Suore Elisabettine Terziarie*, who have diligently overseen its daily operations for the impoverished families of Padua, a responsibility they continue to uphold to this day (Facco and Zandonà, 2022; Telepace, 2023).

Despite its religious history and ties with the Diocese of Padua, including the bishop, the *Suore*, and the president of the Foundation<sup>12</sup>, who is the priest of the Church of *La Pace*, neither the volunteers nor the employees openly discuss their religious beliefs. It is conceivable that this could be deemed as taken for granted due to the organization's secular<sup>13</sup> stance for legal and civil procedures, while maintaining a Catholic soul. I infer that they exhibit this behavior for two primary reasons. Firstly, they may aim to create a comfortable atmosphere for the guests, who are predominantly Muslims, or adhere to other branches of Christianity. Secondly, the organization strives to project a secular image, seeking universal acceptance. Therefore, in this context, expressing personal beliefs or inquiring about others' beliefs may be deemed inappropriate.

During my observations, none of the volunteers with whom I spoke joined the CEP due to religious beliefs. Instead, retirement emerged as the pivotal moment that prompted them to become volunteers. With more leisure time on their hands, they sought alternative ways to spend their days. While there are numerous volunteering opportunities in Padua, word of mouth remains a potent means of connecting with people. Many volunteers learned about the CEP through a friend, relative, or acquaintance and followed a similar procedure to mine sending an email, attending a meeting to sign the agreement, and then receiving initial instructions before embarking on their service. Whether driven by personal factors like family, friendship, expertise, boredom, or curiosity, these individuals, upon joining the CEP, invariably discovered something beyond their initial motivations.

All these individuals, akin to organisms of the same species in our metaphor, arrive either alone or in pairs. After the initiation of the first service, they gradually become part of their own population, whether during Monday lunch, Wednesday evening, or the distinctive Saturday

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<sup>12</sup> The President of the Foundation is assigned by the Bishop of Padua and is also the President of the Administrative Council (Edited fieldwork notes, 2023).

<sup>13</sup> Ideology in which religion and supernatural beliefs are not central to understanding the world, both religious beliefs and religious institutions should not interfere with the public affairs of a society and are segregated from matters of governance (Gregory et al 2010:671).

lunch. Within each population, there exist additional divisions, such as those in the soup kitchen, at the counter, or others assisting the employees at the reception. I had the opportunity to briefly engage with all these populations. Some were welcoming and open to conversation, while others rejected my presence. In a particular group, criticism was directed at every action I took. Certain individuals shared their vulnerabilities with me, such as the loneliness stemming from the absence of relatives, the melancholy associated with forced retirement, or the sense of purposelessness in their lives. In this context, the CEP provides a space for individuals to live, interact, and discover a renewed sense of purpose.

In addition to religious beliefs, which I anticipated might align with the vision and mission of the Foundation and the CEP, it became evident that even the volunteers struggled to comprehend the nuances and functioning of the organization. No one explicitly communicated to me that the CEP was associated with social justice, sustainability, or active citizenship; these topics were rarely broached. It's possible that my own biases influenced my expectations. In my prior role at an environmental NGO, where I managed volunteers and participated in a youth network for a year, discussions often revolved around ideals of a sustainable world and a shared love for nature. Many sought a place where these values could be realized or at least put into practice. However, considering my position of authority within the organization, it's conceivable that individuals may have conveyed these sentiments to align with the organizational ethos. Now, being on equal footing with other volunteers, they appeared more candid about their motivations, which often proved to be deeply personal.

The revelation of a group of volunteers engaging in reverse research regarding my interactions within the CEP was a startling discovery. Positioned in proximity, they attentively observed my conversations, body language, movements, and the tone of my thesis and personal narrative. One volunteer expressed his intrigue, stating, "I saw you in multiple places here in CEP, and also you chat with the guests; that's really interesting—please tell me more." I had not anticipated such scrutiny and was unaware of the level of attention they dedicated to my presence. Additionally, they disclosed that they had conducted experiments, with one volunteer confessing, "I can understand everything you said because I speak Spanish; I just did not tell you and pretended I could not understand what you were saying." Furthermore, when I initiated questions following my established protocol, they adeptly anticipated my approach and proposed a shift in the process: "To make this interview more interesting, I'll ask you one question, and then you ask me one. In this way, it's not boring for any of us."

After recovering from the initial shock, I recognized that such dynamics are a natural part of every social interaction. This adjustment was challenging for me as my academic background

involved studying organisms (fungi, plants, or animals) that would never pose questions to me. In my previous work, the populations I dealt with were in vulnerable positions concerning income and education compared to me. I held power due to my academic degree, having been raised in the capital, my *mestiza* appearance, and even my height. These attributes meant that almost no one had confronted me face to face in the past.

However, this time was different. I found myself in a disadvantaged position where I was the only one of a different race/ethnicity. My income was lower compared to all the volunteers, and my nationality didn't carry the same weight as Italian. My academic degree had a different perceived value due to my country of origin. Being an immigrant who had "just arrived in Padua a couple of years ago," I faced challenges as my presence was considered less important against an entire lifetime of living in the area. Additionally, my struggle with speaking Italian or Veneto dialect fluently further limited my ability to express ideas. These conditions working against me were undeniably challenging, prompting me to be creative and seek peaceful alternatives to navigate problematic situations."

Nevertheless, despite these characteristics complicating my integration into the volunteer population, they became an advantage in interacting with the guests. Moreover, if I may express my perspective, my relationship with the employees was characterized by calmness and patience. This mutual process of defining my identity, as well as my role in defining the identity of the volunteers, transformed me every day, prompting changes in my nature on multiple occasions. Depending on the situation, I played the roles of a kind individual, a good listener, a respondent challenging incorrect assumptions about my culture, and, on some occasions, someone who felt irritated. I assumed the roles of a student, a novice, an employee, an immigrant, a caregiver, an alien, and a volunteer. All these identities coexisted within me, and the experiences enabled me to articulate and comprehend them.

To conclude this chapter, I would like to articulate that the challenges and gratifications encountered during my participant observation and integration into the volunteer population have played a crucial role in shaping aspects of my identity and fostering a reflective process previously unexplored. This introspection has allowed me to recognize the continuous evolution and transformation of both me and the CEP space. The intricacies of these dynamics are challenging to study comprehensively, often leading us to oversimplify the complexities of reality. The life stories shared by volunteers revealed tipping points that resonated deeply with my own experiences while also prompting critical reflections, essential for delineating the boundaries of this ecotone element.

## CHAPTER II SOCIAL INTERACTIONS AND COMMUNITY

*The activity of any organism changes the environment in which it lives. It may alter conditions, or it may add or subtract resources from the environment that might have been available to other organisms. In addition, organisms interact when individuals enter the lives of others. The variety of these interactions between individuals of different species could be distinguished into five main categories: competition, predation, parasitism, mutualism, and detrivory... These communities of organisms have the properties that are the sum of the properties of the individual denizens plus their interactions. The interaction is what make the community more than the sum of its parts, so ecologist may use their knowledge of interactions between organism to explain the behavior and structure of a whole community.*

*(Begon, Townsend and Harper, 2006:223,467)*

*At the service counter, a guest approached, attentively perusing the menu options before deciding to combine the soup with the pasta. As the volunteer swiftly took the order, an immediate expression of disdain crossed her face. Subsequently, the volunteer, still chuckling, made their way to the stove and shared a lighthearted comment with fellow volunteers, "These people don't seem to know how to eat—mixing soup and pasta?" The jest rippled through the group, laughter becoming a shared response, and their facial expressions collectively conveyed an exaggerated sense of disgust toward this unconventional request. One volunteer chimed in, "Yeah, you never know what kind of creation they'll come up with." Undeterred, the volunteer turned back to the task at hand, took the plated concoction, and, breaking the momentary silence, inquired, "Would you like to add cheese?" The guest responded affirmatively. While the volunteers attempted to carry on with an air of nonchalance, both the guest and I discerned the subtle undercurrent of disapproval in their behavior.*

*(Edited fieldwork notes, 2023)*

I willingly accept the challenge of characterizing volunteers, guests, employees, and myself as distinct species to construct a cohesive narrative about the unfolding events. Employing the ecotone as an analytical tool, each species, exemplified by volunteers, can be further dissected into populations, as expounded in the preceding chapter. When these populations engage with other species, such as guests or employees, the resultant dynamics can be aptly termed as communities.



Acknowledging the constraints imposed by factors such as gender, language, organizational status, budget, and time, I recognize that my portrayal of this reality is necessarily limited to a select subset of interactions within the confines of the CEP facilities. Despite these limitations, noteworthy behaviors have been discerned, prompting profound reflections for both myself and, ideally, the audience. The inquiry into latent meanings concealed within certain behaviors arises: What nuances are veiled in these actions? Which interactions are accessible to scrutiny, and which remain elusive? Furthermore, a consideration of whether an overarching structure or pattern exists, yet remains undocumented, adds depth to the analysis.

#### ATTRIBUTES OF THE EMPLOYEES

At a certain juncture, I entertained the notion that I could assume the role of an employee, immersing myself in their professional realm by engaging in a comprehensive array of activities. I found myself present daily at various intervals, possessing the privilege to inquire freely, and being formally introduced to guests as the prospective addition to the employee population. As time elapsed, however, I discerned that my status was more akin to that of a seasoned volunteer; a realization that provided a degree of solace as it narrowed my identities to two: volunteer and researcher. Yet, it concurrently brought to light the limitation that I would not be able to encapsulate and elucidate the nuances of other experiential realities within the organizational framework.

In a succinct overview, it is discerned that 36% of the employees are female, while 64% are male. Educational qualifications exhibit a distribution with 64% holding a bachelor's degree, 28% possessing a *licenza media*, and 8% attaining a diploma. Their income spans from 1,512.66 to 1,834.03 euros, demonstrating minimal disparity (FNP, 2022). From my vantage point, the workforce appears uniformly White, with no reported disabilities, undisclosed details regarding sexual orientation or religious beliefs, and marital status deducible through the presence of wedding rings. The majority uphold professional decorum, divulging minimal personal information beyond the facility context, underscoring the establishment of professional boundaries. Following several weeks of observation, a noteworthy revelation emerged: prolonged interactions with a male employee elicited guest speculation, insinuating a romantic association, and diverting attention from the primary research focus.

The ensuing portrayals delineate the characteristics of the employees, with a deliberate emphasis on distinguishing between the male and female perspectives. My empirical observations revealed marked disparities in interactions between the two genders. During

training sessions with male employees, exchanges pertaining to personal events were comparatively succinct. In contrast, interactions with female counterparts were more extensive, yielding richer contextual details. It is noteworthy to mention that, to circumvent potential misunderstandings, additional details were conscientiously reconstructed by me. The ensuing depiction encapsulates the aggregate of data assimilated throughout the course of my fieldwork.

Tiziano

He is an employee of CEP, has boasts over 15 years of experience and knows some of the regular guest and their stories. Every day, he drives his car from a small municipality in the province of Padua, he arrives at the CEP at 7:30 for the morning turn, concluding his duties and departing the facilities at 15:00. His daily routine begins around 7:45 he drinks his first cup of coffee, planning his day's task, which may encompass responsibilities in the reception, the registration office, the showers, or the inventory management. By approximately 10:45, he has a coffee break, fortifying himself for the later part of the day, during which he may find himself at the reception, conducting interviews with new guest, or managing the cash register. At 12:30, he appears at the kitchen and serves his meal to consume in the classroom. Subsequently, at 13:30 he descends to the soup kitchen, cleaning the tables and chairs. While engaged in these tasks, he often shares moments of camaraderie with guests and volunteers. His expertise positions him as the go-to figure for managing challenging scenarios (Edited fieldwork notes, 2023).

Many of my inquiries revolved around their narratives, detailing their paths to the CEP, years of professional experience, specific behaviors, and recommendations for navigating organizational challenges. During the initial three weeks, both parties engaged in dynamic conversations. However, as my expertise grew, finding opportune moments for extended dialogues became more challenging. While I harbored the aspiration to interview all participants comprehensively, practical constraints surfaced. The dialogue between men and women proved to be imbued with societal biases, wherein assumptions of romantic or sexual interests often overshadowed the pursuit of professional discourse. Further complicating matters were time and budget constraints, necessitating my departure from the city by mid-September. Understanding the logistical intricacies associated with profound interviews — requiring the investment of participants' valuable time and financial resources — prompted a realistic acknowledgment that such endeavors were beyond my means. Additionally, I remained cognizant of the boundaries established for interactions with volunteers, employees, and guests.

In the interest of safety, any contact beyond the confines of the facilities was conscientiously avoided.

Within the confines of the CEP, specific roles are demarcated by gender, with male employees undertaking responsibilities at the reception, shower, and cash register, while their female counterparts are engaged in activities associated with the kitchen. Notably, I observed a closer affinity with the female employee population, stemming from the exchange of intimate information and the seclusion from guests' view, fostering an environment conducive to open dialogue and reflection. It is noteworthy that the male employees are primarily tasked with guest interactions, whereas women involved in guest engagement include the Director and the Administrative Manager.

The nature of relationships with guests can be characterized as customized, varying from warmth and empathy to strictness or a more distant and colder demeanor. Moreover, a subset of interactions involves humor, banter, and joyful exchanges. My hypothesis suggests that, contingent on their individual personalities, male employees harbor preferences among guests, evident in the nuanced transformation of interactions through elements like smiling or seeking personal details. This observation has led me to surmise that certain male employees cultivate social relationships with specific guests.

Regrettably, I found myself unable to witness any interaction exceedingly more than 30 seconds in the inventory (Figure 13) among male employees. While subtle exchanges occurred, they were limited to brief messages. My access was restricted from attending pivotal moments such as the coffee break, lunchtime gatherings in the classroom, or the concluding daily meeting. Although I managed to glean some insights individually, I was precluded from observing the intricate dynamics of their organizational processes, decision-making, conflict resolution, and the unveiling of hierarchies among them. This concealed reality serves to underscore the boundaries of my role, elucidating that my position within was that of a volunteer, contrary to my initial perception as an employee at certain junctures.



*Figure 13 Inventory*

In general, volunteers tend to engage more frequently with male employees rather than their female counterparts. To initiate contact, one must invest a substantial amount of time within the facilities and strategically position oneself near the kitchen sink to facilitate conversation. During my initial interactions with the female cooks, they expressed surprise at my interest, emphasizing its significance with comments such as, "Please, don't forget to talk about us in your thesis; we are also important!" Subsequently, it became more accessible for me to convey my emotions and experiences, as we shared a common understanding of the challenges associated with the seemingly endless responsibilities of self-care and caregiving (having previously worked as a caregiver for an elderly woman).

At certain junctures, the simultaneous demands of studying, conducting research, working, and managing expenses became overwhelming. Through candid discussions about our respective frustrations and challenges, a shared recognition emerged, highlighting the commonality in our experiences, and underscoring the significance of establishing meaningful connections in our daily lives. The sentiment was succinctly captured in one cook's reflection, "It doesn't matter if you earn money; if you are not capable of establishing contact with people, it is genuinely sad." Acknowledging this resonance, I found myself compelled to advocate for populations with whom I identified closely, such as the cooks and certain guests, recognizing a sense of proximity between their experiences and my own.

The subsequent profile provides insight into the experiences of the cooks within the organization, shedding light on their perception of their roles, as well as their perspectives on values, respect, and recognition in relation to other stakeholders.

## Adelina

Is a cooker in her late fifties, arrives punctually at 9:30 each day, driving her car from a small municipality in the province of Padua: She prepares herself, then attends the initial meeting around the ingredients available to create the menu. After that she starts to cut the vegetables, preparing the meat, and managing the dessert. While she finds satisfaction in her culinary talent, a prevailing sense of impotence persists, stemming from the constraints imposed by limited ingredients and specific dietary needs of the guests. Despite being entrusted with the critical responsibility of feeding the guests, she occasionally grapples with the perception of undervaluation. Infrequent commendations and a marginal role in decision-making processes contribute to this sentiment, as her responsibilities, crucial as they are, do not necessarily confer authority. At 11:30, the service begins, demanding her close attention to pasta and rice, overseeing the timely extraction of food from the oven, guiding volunteers, addressing inquiries, and ensuring equitable portioning to last through the service. Later. When the service is over, she cleans the kitchen, contributing to tidying activities, and updating the afternoon cook. She is exhausted and aware that upon returning home, a new set of responsibilities awaits. On occasion, she finds herself daydreaming about the potential ease of an alternative life path or her hypothetical future vacations in a Global South country. In her mind with an increase in leisure time, financial flexibility, and diminished responsibilities this could be possible (Edited fieldwork notes, 2023).

The dynamics of female employees remained largely inconspicuous, shaped in part by the prevailing notion among guests that "women gossip in the kitchen" (Figure 14). Paradoxically, this stereotype worked to my advantage, affording me, as a woman, the tacit permission to engage in conversations with them without arousing suspicion. This designated space proved invaluable for sharing narratives despite our diverse backgrounds and generational disparities. A shared understanding emerged, acknowledging the common burdens of caregiving and domestic responsibilities that curtail our leisure time, impeding engagement in sports, cultural pursuits, and charitable activities (EIGE, 2023).



*Figure 14 Kitchen*

Establishing trust, I divulged my experience as a caregiver, an admission that seemed to dismantle potential barriers arising from disparities in education and employment. The responses echoed sentiments of exhaustion, as exemplified by statements such as, "I'm tired; besides work, I need to take care of my family and other responsibilities. I swear it's overwhelming" or "Evenings are tougher because I have two jobs. After attending to household chores, I come to work here in the heat. It's exhausting. In the mornings, I'm fresher and can tackle everything with more energy, later resting at home." Within this group, a sense of camaraderie flourished as we collectively navigated domestic tasks and confronted the challenges posed by the guests. While the female employees were shielded, to some extent, from certain issues related to guest interactions, it inadvertently perpetuated the stereotype that "women cook and serve the guests," a notion I personally experienced and observed during my time as a waitress and busgirl.

The cooks find themselves confined to either the kitchen or the inventory, a circumstance that facilitated my close observation of their interactions. Within their domain, a complex hierarchy unfolds, encompassing the kitchen boss, the cook, and the kitchen helper (Barcelona Culinary Hub, 2023). The distribution of roles among these positions is subject to rotation based on factors such as mealtimes, the availability of volunteers, and the day's personnel requirements. While I did not have the opportunity to attend their meetings, the cooks generously elucidated the morning sessions with the kitchen boss, involving decisions on the menu, the intricacies of the cooking process—encompassing cleaning, cutting, and preparation—and the subsequent cleaning routines for both the kitchen and other designated areas.

They function as a cohesive team throughout the day, particularly during critical periods marked by surges in guest attendance or a dearth of volunteers. Notably, my observations revealed limited direct interactions between the cooks and the guests. Instances were confined to a guest

expressing appreciation with comments like, "Send my greetings to the Chef; the food was tasty," or when guests approached to request take-out bread. Evidently, it is not within their designated responsibilities, yet the enduring assumption that women are associated with both cooking and serving appears to persist.

Another distinct group within the employee population consists of the *Suore*, who have overseen the organization since 1893 (FNP, 2022). Among them, one assumes the role of the Foundation's Director, another serves as the Administrative Manager, while others are responsible for the kitchen's started and reception. My interaction with the Director was primarily at the initiation of the research, during which she attended to the presentation of my project, granted authorization for my presence, and initially observed and supervised my activities. However, over the ensuing weeks, her direct involvement gradually waned, aligning with the level of interaction afforded to other volunteers. The Administrative Manager's interaction with me was limited, with her intervening on a single occasion to address a guest's persistent inquiries about my civil status. Despite this, I did not engage in substantive conversations with her throughout the entire duration of my time there. The *Suor* overseeing the kitchen started shared sporadic moments with me while I manned the kitchen counter, delving into discussions on Mexican saints, post-WWII life, and intriguing facets of culinary traditions. As for the newest *Suor*, our interactions were limited to a brief introduction, as she arrived during a period when I was not in attendance. Subsequently, during Friday lunches, circumstances did not permit shared moments within the facility.

The interactions I have outlined do not pertain to the *Suore*, as their presence inside the facilities was infrequent, and I lacked access to their prayer sessions, attendance at mass, or their interactions on the second floor. It is evident that they constitute a distinct community unto themselves, affiliated with the *Suore Terziare Francescane Elisabettine di Padova*<sup>14</sup>. Prior to residing at the CEP, they led their religious lives elsewhere, relocating to the current premises, a pattern consistent with the preceding years (Sguotti, 2022).

## GUESTS AND THEIR BEHAVIORS

Concerning the guests, they astutely noted aspects where my attempt to camouflage and blend in was futile. The most conspicuous observation revolved around my health; their remarks included, "You have all your teeth, can afford your glasses, and generally look healthy." While

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<sup>14</sup> Is a religious congregation that was founded by Elisabetta Vendramini in 1828 (Suore Francescane Elisabettine, 2023).

I could establish connections based on shared elements like race/ethnicity, language, and narratives from Global South countries, significant disparities persisted. I possessed stable housing, financial means, and access to a university education, setting me apart from their circumstances. In discussions of religious beliefs, they openly shared their perspectives, and my responses aligned with their expectations. Navigating the question of civil status proved particularly challenging. Some guests attempted to initiate romantic connections, assuming my single status due to the absence of a wedding ring. Seeking guidance, I turned to the employees for advice on managing this delicate situation. Striving to balance friendliness and kindness in establishing connections, I concurrently endeavored to safeguard myself from unwarranted advances.

The guest population at the CEP exhibits notable diversity, as evidenced by the 2022 statistics, which accounted for 3034 individuals, comprising 79% men and 21% women. Predominant nationalities include Morocco, Nigeria, Italy, Romania, Tunisia, and Pakistan, with the predominant religions being Islam. Socioeconomic distribution reveals that approximately 68.1% are unemployed, 17.2% possess some form of employment, and 14.7% fall into the 'other' category. Regarding housing, only 38% have secured a place to live, while the majority, 62%, grapple with homelessness. In terms of immigration status, 40% hold a residence permit, 16.1% do not possess one, 10.8% are in the process of obtaining one, and 32.8% have not completed the application process. A temporal classification indicates that 50.6% are new guests, 37.9% fall into the 'other' category, and 11.5% are regulars (FNP, 2022).

On the rare occasions when I could engage in conversations with the guests and establish a sense of security, I seized the opportunity to construct a biographical sketch. Generally, our interactions unfolded unexpectedly, manifesting as brief encounters in the reception area, the waiting room (Figure 15), the Sunday ticket office, while serving trays at the counter, or at the entrance of the facilities.





*Figure 15 Waiting room before the cash register.*

Although our exchanges were fleeting, the consistency of my daily presence enabled me to amass data gradually, facilitating the subsequent development of individual profiles.

### Ali

He is a man in his late forties, immigrated to Italy from a North African country, proficient in French, Italian, and Arabic. Upon arrival, he sought employment, yet faced the rejection of employers. The inability to feed his family, resulted in the dissolution of his marriage. This event led him down to alcoholism, subsequently, he found himself in the streets. Upon discovering the CEP, he hopes that it would serve as a catalyst to recover his life. However, after a year, he made the decision to assume the role as a regular guest, acknowledging the damaged caused by his addiction. The CEP has since become an integral space for his daily routine. Each morning, he arrives to take a shower, attends weekly medical appointments, and carefully selects his table and chair during lunch. He invites friends to join him, fostering conversations that often spill out onto the facility's entrance. Every Thursday, he proactively collects the Sunday lunch ticket and secures one of his closest friends. He remains open and receptive to interactions, readily sharing his personal stories with anyone who seeks to engage with him (Edited fieldwork notes, 2023).

Much like the challenges in deciphering all interactions within an ecosystem, a similar complexity is evident in the ecotone of the CEP. While a prevailing notion portrays the guests with the stigma of "Poor of them, it's not their fault," simultaneous mechanisms of domination<sup>15</sup> manifest, particularly directed towards women. Noteworthy patterns emerged, particularly

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<sup>15</sup> The physical or cultural assertion of power, over an individual, social group or territory. The term refers to the practice and manifestation of power relationships especially in the construction of territory and spaces as a means of control (Gregory et al, 2010: 172)

concerning the Italian population, marked by a robust presence and a culturally influenced closer rapport with employees and volunteers. Insults targeting Chinese, North African, or Black individuals became distressingly commonplace. Upon discovering my Latina background, guests displayed a peculiar hypocrisy, feigning admiration with comments like "Oh, Mexico, what a beautiful country!" Yet, this facade crumbled as expressions of disdain emerged, perpetuating stereotypes that Latin individuals are "incapable" of mastering Italian, implying our perceived irrelevance in the CEP because "Almost nothing happened in my country."

Nonetheless, the most prominent challenge I faced revolved around gender issues. It is not to diminish the significance of concerns related to my ethnicity, religion, or status, as delineated by The Scottish Government (2022), but rather to underscore the heightened complexity associated with being a woman. While I may not have gathered a comprehensive array of evidence from fellow female volunteers, it is evident that inappropriate behaviors from guests are distressingly frequent. Virtually every week, I found myself subjected to some form of gender violence. Applying the IPN's proposed scale of violence (2023), ranging from 1) "Hurting jokes" to 30) "Femicide," my experiences oscillated around 10) "Insulting and intimidation." Notably, I both experienced and witnessed attempts at number 14) "Groping." The daily occurrence of lewd language from guests vividly exemplifies this pervasive form of violence.

"You should wear a mini skirt and work in the street as a wh\*#e, instead of being a volunteer" ... "Would you like to come with me for lunch on Sunday? I can give you what you need" ... "Give me your number or your Instagram account, I want to follow you" ... "Are you married? ...What would you like to do this afternoon with me?" ...

In a distinct category, guests wielded their perceived power to treat me as a servant, positioning me in the role of a waitress or busgirl within the soup kitchen, imposing an expectation that my primary duty was to cater to their needs. This translated into a continuous stream of insults and demands for efficient, flawlessly executed service. Failure to meet their expectations resulted in expressions of anger, devaluation of my work, and, at times, the egregious act of throwing trays and dishes. Astonishingly, they seemed willing to forgive my perceived incompetence if I allowed them to encroach upon my personal space.

Their intolerance during the learning process manifested in comments like, "You don't know how to do that right? Why are you so slow? It's not that difficult; anyone can manage the system. I'm acting like this because I'm hungry and need to eat now." Some were more direct, asserting,

"Women don't know how to do the work." When discussing these challenging experiences with other women, a common thread emerged—similar encounters. Yet, despite the shared resonance, none deemed it as significant, with responses like, "I felt the same as you while I was at the counter, but I assumed none of the men would pay attention. I felt better when you talked about it.

It is considered normal for guests to exhibit aggressive behavior, such as hitting the counter (Figure 16), yelling, intimidation, or even making explicit threats toward female volunteers during service. On a singular occasion, a fellow female volunteer offered a piece of advice, suggesting, "Well, I guess the best way is to make a joke or use your sense of humor. In that way, they don't get angry, and you can handle the situation." While I concur with the sentiments of Facco and Zandonà (2022) regarding "rules of civic coexistence" and the notion that marginalized situations do not justify unlawful acts, I believe a more profound exploration of civic responsibility is warranted from both perspectives.



*Figure 16 Counters.*

Each time men made jokes about my appearance, commenting on aspects such as my beauty, hair, eyes, color, smile, weight, and even my perceived skills as a good wife, it became apparent to me that these instances delineated the boundaries of respect and coexistence among us. The situation was particularly vexing when I was introduced as an object, with comments from a volunteer like, "Look at her, what do you think? Is she beautiful or not? Have you seen how hard she works while cleaning the tables? Seems like a nice woman. Let me introduce you to the woman of your life." In those moments, managing the situation became challenging. Initially, I considered the possibility of misunderstanding, but over time, I discerned that this was a recurrent pattern. Furthermore, I was not the sole recipient of such comments; most

compliments directed at women revolved around their appearance rather than other elements of their identities.

One of the most noteworthy interactions among the guests occurred when they provided each other with social support, characterized as "a group with buffering effects of physical, mental, and environmental stresses." This support can be categorized into three main types: emotional support, which encompasses aspects of intimacy, attachment, reassurance, and the ability to confide in and rely on others; tangible support, involving direct aid or services such as loans, gifts of money or goods, and providing services like taking care of those in need or performing a chore for them; and informational support, which entails offering information and advice to assist individuals in solving problems (Glasser, 1988: 101-3).

I presumed that emotional support played a significant role in the lives of the guests. However, a substantial portion of their communication occurred in their mother tongue, rendering me unable to comprehend the content of their conversations or the emotions they shared. Notably, when overseeing the distribution of Sunday tickets, I had the opportunity to engage in more profound conversations with the guests and gain insights into their mutual support networks, particularly in terms of informational and tangible assistance. Initially, the regular guests, who frequented the facilities daily, were well-versed in the churches offering Sunday lunch and willingly shared this crucial information within their network. Subsequently, between Thursday and Saturday, two scenarios unfolded: guests either arrived solely to collect their Sunday ticket before departing, or some individuals extended tangible support to their friends, partners, or relatives by collecting tickets on their behalf.

It was truly remarkable to observe, as it challenged the common assumption that guests exhibit a different behavior compared to mainstream society. Their actions, as shared with me, were remarkably logical. Drawing parallels from my own experiences, I've visited hospitals for medical appointments, banks, or universities to assist a family member, a practice that, it seems, resonates universally. The guests articulated their actions in a similar light. Some mentioned health concerns preventing fellow guests from personally obtaining their tickets, while others shared more emotional reasons, such as avoiding a place that evoked unpleasant memories. In some instances, positive developments, like guests being currently employed, explained their absence during ticket collection days. These instances revealed a nuanced spectrum of motivations, even from those in ostensibly improved circumstances, extending to selflessness, like sharing codes to ensure additional food for their peers.

## STRUCTURE OF THE COMMUNITY

In this concise depiction, I aim to delve into the essence of the CEP: the meal. Since its establishment in 1882, the primary objective of the CEP has been to provide sustenance to those in need, and over the years, the operational dynamics have undergone significant transformations. This essential service requires the coordinated efforts of five employees and approximately ten volunteers. The responsibilities of the employees encompass overseeing the reception, managing the cash register, and coordinating activities in the kitchen. Simultaneously, volunteers play pivotal roles at the counter and in the soup kitchen, assuming positions as waiters or bussers. In the final moments leading up to the commencement of service, designated employees assign roles and extend well-wishes to all, echoing the sentiment of "Good service!"

One of the most significant experiences I observed pertained to the changing of the menu. This seemingly inconspicuous action unveiled numerous underlying behaviors. As I reviewed the menu, comments surfaced regarding "the superiority of Italian food, you know, with all our culture and ingredients I am completely sure that there is nothing better in the world." These remarks were intended to "educate me" about local varieties that may not be easily translatable, and in those instances, I concurred with the sentiments. However, on several occasions, other volunteers consistently expressed an overarching belief that "Italy is the center of everything." Interestingly, when the cook added a touch of chili to accommodate the tastes of the guests within the tomato sauce or introduced another culinary "innovation," gestures of disgust were notably present.

At a certain juncture, I found myself uneasy in that scenario and utilized my expertise in Ethnobotany<sup>16</sup> to elucidate that some of the ingredients perceived as 100% Italian originated from various parts of the world. This was an attempt to foster an awareness of the diverse origins of the food. However, the response was such that they either chose to ignore what I was conveying or outright rejected my knowledge, asserting, "It's not true, I know that the tomato and polenta are completely Italian." Faced with these reactions, I opted to refrain from further confrontations, though it became a recurring pattern wherein similar attempts with different groups of volunteers yielded consistent results.

The vignette recounted at the outset of this chapter was not an isolated incident; rather, it unfolded repeatedly. Each instance in which a guest requested a specific combination of meals, driven either by hunger or cultural preferences, triggered a cascade of reactions among the

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<sup>16</sup> The study of socio-cultural and traditional use of plants in different ethnic groups (Garg,2018:10)

volunteers. Laughter, gestures of disdain, and whispered conversations ensued, punctuated by comments that revealed a lack of understanding or empathy. Expressions such as "Only they could eat like that, always coming up with something new," or "These people don't know how to eat; why mix the soup and the pasta?" were commonplace. The most distressing episode occurred when this disparaging discourse coincided with an empty counter, inadvertently exposing the guest to the hurtful remarks. In that moment, his visible reaction reflected a sense of humiliation resulting from the volunteers' insensitivity to his food choices.

After careful observation, I discerned that guests resorted to modifying their meal requests not necessarily for novelty or cultural reasons but rather to ensure they received an ample portion. When volunteers reacted with laughter or expressions of disgust, the person in charge of serving portions seemed unsure about the quantity to allocate for each selection. Admittedly, maximizing the food received is a strategy employed not only to stave off hunger but also to secure leftovers for sustenance throughout the day.

Personally, I can relate to this practice, having done so in Mexico City during my student and working years. In a city where waking up early, enduring long hours of public transportation, and affording only one meal a day is a common reality, making the most of that meal becomes imperative. The guests explained to me, "We use the bread to eat everything on the plate." Each time I heard this, I would respond, "We—Mexicans—do the same with tortillas." Recognizing that these culinary habits are rooted in cultural differences, where combining rice and beans for a nourishing meal, adding an egg for protein, or consuming copious tortillas are socially acceptable practices, I realized that what may seem unconventional here in Italy is a customary approach in my cultural context.

Being a waitress or busgirl is a challenging task, and the interactions become complex due to the dynamics involving both guests and volunteers. Volunteers sometimes express racist comments, such as asserting, "You didn't understand what I was trying to say, in Africa, they don't have cars, cellphones, infrastructure, and all that stuff, you catch it." These remarks are offensive and pejorative, and volunteers often leverage their position of authority, emphasizing that "the main rule in the CEP is that you cannot say anything against the volunteers; remember, they are offering their time and service without payment," as explained to me by some employees. I believe that if I were to identify myself as African, I might find it offensive if volunteers discussed me among themselves, referring to me as "A friendly nigga."

Language is a powerful tool that conveys a wealth of information about our thought processes and perceptions of the world. Another significant discourse<sup>17</sup> revolved around "everyday life." While I anticipated that volunteers would be attuned to the challenging conditions faced by the guests in their daily lives, as mentioned in the previous chapter, only a few volunteers seemed connected to this reality. After the service or during conversations within the facility, they posed assumptions and questions that presumed the Italian reality was universal. For instance, remarks like, "Then I guess that all of you ~~Mexicans~~ are capable of speaking English; whoever can do that, and your neighbor is the USA," revealed assumptions about language proficiency. They presumed that the entire country could afford the learning of a new language. Similarly, assumptions about extracurricular activities, vacations, and travel capabilities were made, reflecting a lack of awareness about diverse economic circumstances. When I explained the limited resources and different work conditions in my home country, they sometimes dismissed my experiences, expressing disbelief and suggesting that my country was not as economically challenged as portrayed.

In another notable aspect, volunteers and employees often referred to the guests as "people of color," categorizing them broadly without recognizing individual nationalities. Instead of addressing guests by their specific nationality, they were often simply labeled as Africans, with little regard for the diversity among them. Furthermore, there was a tendency not to remember names, as it was perceived that "All of them are Mohamad." This contradiction emerged when volunteers expressed a desire to get to know the guests better, yet there was a lack of active effort to learn about them individually. The treatment extended to their surnames, where little effort was made to pronounce them correctly, allowing for various interpretations without considering the importance of addressing guests by their names, as advocated by the CEP's values (Jori and Vecchiato, 2022).

#### FAIR TRADE-OFFS<sup>18</sup>

In examining the interactions within the community, the structure appears somewhat dynamic to me, with the power dynamics shifting according to the circumstances, resulting in one group receiving benefits at certain points. Another notable characteristic of this ecotone is its self-regulating capacity. The guests are well-acquainted with each other, recognizing their behaviors

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<sup>17</sup> A specific series of representations and practices through which meanings are produced, identities constructed, social relations established, and political and ethical outcomes made possible (Gregory et al 2010:166).

<sup>18</sup> In evolution, a situation in which undergoing natural selection improving performance in one arena means simultaneously decreasing performance in another arena (Evo 101, 2023b).

both inside and outside the CEP. This familiarity provides them with the ability to implement trade-offs, suggesting ideas to enhance the performance of interactions. However, this may come at the cost of reducing privileges for volunteers or employees.

When volunteers partake in meals with the guests in the soup kitchen, there are instances when the guests may not express enthusiasm about our presence. This could be attributed to either our access to the most delectable meal, or simply because we have the privilege of choosing from the leftovers of the day. Such situations once led to a heated argument among the employees but also served as a crucial moment for self-reflection on our privileges and the dynamics of our interactions with the guests.

"Why are they allowed to take whatever they want from the kitchen when they aren't paying anything?" questioned the guest. The employee responded, "Because they are volunteers," to which the guest retorted, "I know that, but they are in better conditions than us. They can afford to pay for the meal and should have the same starter, main course, and dessert. Why can they create their own meals? I've noticed their portions are larger and they can choose whatever they like. It's not fair!" "Calm down and finish your meal," the employee advised. However, the guest refused, stating, "No, I won't. Why are you silencing me when you know I have a valid point?" The employee answer "Please leave." The guest persisted, "No, I just want them to eat the same way as me. If they are volunteers and truly want to understand, they should do that." (Edited fieldwork notes, 2023).

While I found his arguments well-articulated, I acknowledge the potential influence of my advocacy bias on my writing. The question arises: what constitutes the appropriate payment for our services as volunteers? Is the companionship we provide sufficient, or is our motivation rooted in pure charity? Should we expect to be treated exactly like the guests to deepen our empathy with them? I don't possess a definitive answer, but it seems worthwhile to engage the guests in a dialogue about how they would prefer to acknowledge the volunteers. Perhaps, shifting the language from "Remember that he or she has no obligation to be here, nevertheless is here, Ehhh!" To a more approachable tone like "He or she is here to learn from you; what would you like to teach?" Could be an idea to explore, fostering a more collaborative and enriching citizenship laboratory.

The dynamics among the guests, at times overlooked by the organization, became apparent during a specific incident. While I was in the process of signing a Sunday lunch ticket, an individual entered, clearly unwelcome by the others. In the brief moments he was visible, it was



evident that his presence wasn't appreciated. Subsequently, he proceeded to the bathroom, leaving the floor in a state that required closure for cleaning due to its wet condition. Upon rejoining the queue to collect his meal, further disruptions ensued, causing inconvenience to fellow guests. Following the incident, I engaged in conversations with those who had been bothered by his actions.

“I hate that s\*#t addict! He only arrives dirty and treats all of us in a rude way. Then he started pushing me in the queue, -what the hell! I’m so annoyed that I won’t eat. That man is particularly mean, I hated him. He always looks for ways to bother us or start arguments, causing troubles in the queue, and creating a mess in the bathroom or the shower. It’s awful. My problem is: Why does he still attend the CEP? None of us are happy with his presence, and on multiple occasions, we have requested a punishment for him. We suggest that, at least he must clean up all the chaos he causes during his visits, but no one pays attention to our comments.” (Edited fieldwork notes, 2023).

The actions of this guest serve as a notable illustration of how the community itself proposes mechanisms to regulate disruptive behaviors among its members. As someone who empathizes with their perspective, the challenge arises when a particular individual persistently engages in disruptive or bothersome conduct, potentially undermining the overall sense of camaraderie. In such instances, I believe soliciting direct input from the guests on how to refine and reinforce community guidelines would be a constructive approach. Drawing on their collective experiences, they could provide an intuitive framework for fostering a positive environment. Implementing these insights might not only facilitate the learning process for both regular, transitional, and new guests but also reinforce the understanding that the community is a space where everyone seeks to enjoy their time, and conflicts can be effectively resolved when they arise.

In certain instances, it appears that the need for more regulation coexists with a requirement for less regulation, particularly in the realm of relationships and tangible support. Consider the scenario where an individual, despite facing economic challenges, wishes to extend an invitation or share a meal with a prospective partner. One day, while I was working as a busgirl, I observed a heartwarming date where a man and a woman were enjoying a meal together. The man displayed courteous gestures, requesting additional bread and water, and serving the woman with a sense of chivalry. As their meal progressed, he began preparing a takeaway basket for her. However, an unforeseen obstacle arose when an employee intervened, stating, "Either you eat it or take it with you, but you cannot give it to her." This restriction led to frustration and anger on the part of the man, questioning the rationale behind such a prohibition

and ultimately leaving the premises upset. A similar incident unfolded with another couple attempting to share their meals. Despite efforts to reciprocate the gesture, they too encountered resistance, with multiple employees and even the Director becoming involved in the dispute.

Reflecting on these events, it is evident that there are no explicit guidelines regarding whether guests can share their food, leading to numerous misunderstandings, particularly in the soup kitchen. The protocol surrounding the provision of bread, the allocation of napkins, the sharing of leftovers, and the appropriate manner to make such requests remains ambiguous. The interpretation of these rules appears to be highly subjective among volunteers, adding a layer of complexity to the soup kitchen experience. This diversity in the application of rules is keenly perceived by the guests, who systematically observe and strategize their approach based on individual volunteer tendencies, discerning which items to request and from whom, depending on proximity and familiarity.

To convey the authenticity of what might be encountered, I believe it is crucial to prepare future volunteers or employees for their role within the CEP. Moreover, reconnecting with the guests can provide us with an invaluable wellspring of experiences, aiding in the creation and development of goods and services that cater to their needs. While it might be speculative, I anticipate that the imminent future of the facilities presents a unique opportunity to explore innovative approaches to regulating interactions within the space.

In concluding this chapter, a comprehensive examination of interactions within this specific ecotone reveals a spectrum of behaviors among the community's various species. The observed dynamics range from mutual support and cooperation to conflicts and suggestions, all the way to instances of silence and interactions I may not have been privy to. Acknowledging my own involvement in both positive and negative aspects of these interactions, the challenges faced in such transitional space, the dynamics within this community prove to be simultaneously beautiful, complex, frustrating, and unexpected.

## CHAPTER III THE BROADER CONTEXT OF THE ECOSYSTEM

*Community ecology, then is the study of patterns in the structure and behavior of multispecies assemblages. Ecosystem ecology, on the other hand, is concerned with the structure and behavior of the same systems but with the focus on the flux of energy and matter.*

*(Begon, Townsend and Harper, 2006:467)*

*On that day, I was the person in charge of the reception. A woman, bearing visible signs of abuse, urgently sought access to a shower but lacked the means to pay. I sought guidance from the Director. To my surprise, I was instructed to compel her to make a payment. Consequently, she departed the facilities without receiving the assistance she sought. Shortly thereafter, the postman arrived, presenting a package destined for a guest. Approximately thirty minutes later, a distressed guest approached me, revealing that she had been apprehended by the Carabinieri<sup>19</sup>. Overwhelmed and unsure of the appropriate response, I found myself at a loss. As she began to cry, a fellow employee intervened, guiding her to the waiting room for additional support. During these events, a man inquired about the availability of medicines to address his health concerns. The day proved to be frantic, prompting me to reflect on the myriad skills and expertise required to navigate and effectively assist individuals grappling with diverse challenges.*

*(Edited fieldwork notes, 2023)*

Even when confining my investigation solely to the confines of the CEP facilities, the concept of a rigid boundary proves to be illusory. Like any ecosystem, this transitional space is invariably influenced by weather patterns, the availability of food, and unexpected events. At this juncture, contemplation arises regarding whether inequality stands as an inherent characteristic of this system. One must scrutinize whether it is the system itself, or the actions of individuals within it, that bear responsibility for the disparate allocation of material opportunities, resources, and rewards (Blim, 2021).

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<sup>19</sup> The constitution of the *Carabinieri* dates to the Royal Decree on July 13<sup>th</sup>, 1814, which attributed to the “Royal Carabinieri Corps” the dual function of defense of the State and Protection of public order and safety. Nowadays, have an autonomous range within the Ministry of Defense, at the same rank alongside the Army, the Navy, and the Air Force (Carabinieri, 2023).

## SOURCES OF MATER AND ENERGY

Upon initial observation, I harbored the belief that the CEP conformed to the archetype of a conventional NGO. Unraveling its intrinsic nature proved to be a more intricate endeavor. A CEP staff member emphasized, "In fact, we don't require any form of publicity. Individuals in dire need are already cognizant of our existence through channels such as the Health Service, the *Questura*<sup>20</sup>, or the train station." According to him, the CEP's strategic alliances have conferred upon it a distinctive standing within the city, setting it apart from its counterparts, prompting my curiosity to delve deeper into these affiliations.

The operationalization of donor alliances is executed through the dedicated efforts of volunteers, while the negotiation process is orchestrated by the Director. Daily, volunteers convene at local supermarkets such as Coop or Ali to procure products nearing their expiration date, transporting them to the CEP. Furthermore, the *Banco Alimentare*<sup>21</sup>, contributes to the food supply, encompassing fresh fruits and vegetables donated by local farmers, alongside the output from the vegetable garden's pilot project. This dynamic influx of diverse provisions renders advance planning unfeasible. Until the products are cataloged in the inventory, determining the menu remains contingent on daily deliveries. On one hand, this system boasts the advantageous facet of acquiring donated goods and circumventing expenses. On the other hand, it introduces a daily anxiety phenomenon, as the unpredictable nature of incoming supplies tends to constrain the creativity of the cooks and engender monotony among the guests, who are often confronted with repetitive meal offerings.

Issues may arise in the realm of sustenance, such as when an abundance of food and a wide variety are present, eliciting a collective sense of satisfaction among guests. In such instances, the power dynamic tilts toward the guests, who feel empowered to make choices about their meals and, in cases of excess, often opt to take leftovers home for their families. Conversely, when faced with a dearth of provisions, aggressive and violent behaviors may manifest, presenting a challenging situation for management. In these circumstances, individuals may express frustration, questioning why they are offered what they perceive as a meager amount of meal: "It's not wartime, holysh\*#! Why on earth are you providing us with such a pitiful amount of food? Do you think I can survive on this? You must be joking."

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<sup>20</sup> In each of the provincial capitals there is a *Questura* (Police station), the best known of the territorial offices of the State Police (Polizia di Stato, 2014). Padua as the capital of the province has the *Questura* to 30 minutes by walking from the CEP or by taking the bus.

<sup>21</sup> The foundation has the mission and vision of attenuate the problem of hunger, marginalization, and poverty as well as fight against food waste in collaboration with different institutions (Banco Alimentare, 2023)

Typically, on such challenging days, volunteers and employees adopt a compassionate stance, allowing for a lenient approach to guest behavior with the understanding that hunger may be an underlying factor. The availability of food, in this context, serves as the catalyst for frantic behaviors that can swiftly escalate into aggression or threats.

In general, guests maintain no direct interaction with the clothing donors; individuals simply deliver clothing items to the facilities. Volunteers subsequently assume the responsibility of overseeing the classification and organization of these donations, arranging them by size. Periodically, the CEP employs social media platforms, such as Facebook, to appeal for specific clothing donations, including but not limited to hoodies, short sleeves, backpacks, or shoes. While some of these requests yield positive responses, others remain unmet. Guests could schedule monthly appointments to receive a comprehensive clothing allocation, spanning from entirely new undergarments to clothing, shoes, and various accessories (such as umbrellas, sheets, purses, and backpacks). A noteworthy constraint is the prohibition against trying on these items for hygiene reasons; thus, selection primarily hinges on size compatibility. Interestingly, when I conveyed the intent to scrutinize clothing donations to the volunteers, their initial response was one of skepticism: "How's it even possible to study clothing donations? Makes no sense."

I would never have envisioned that clothing donations could introduce both discomfort and financial gains for the guests. This realization crystallized one day when a man approached me at the reception, requesting a "change" for his shoes due to their inadequate size. Unfortunately, that day lacked additional footwear, and even if more were available, the established protocol disallowed exchanges. Guests are compelled to navigate solutions, whether enduring physical discomfort (by using ill-fitting clothes and shoes), expending personal funds on replacements, negotiating swaps with acquaintances, seeking alternative venues for acquiring new items, or engaging in an unofficial market.

It is a recognized fact among volunteers and staff that some guests engage in reselling donated clothing, turning the acquired items into a source of income. This revenue is not solely earmarked for clothing but also extends to cover various expenses. From my perspective, if the CEP grants them the autonomy to make choices, guests exercise this privilege in ways that best suit their needs. I perceive one of the emergent attributes as the entrepreneurial spirit of the guests. They acquire the skills of selection, accumulation, and strategic visits to locations offering donations, subsequently engaging in exchanges with peers or selling items to amass funds for acquiring the necessary items.

In response to this circumstance, the introduction of a laundry service appeared to be a promising opportunity to assist guests in navigating their clothing challenges. Regrettably, I was unable to witness the service, precluding a comprehensive description of its various stages—whether clothes were washed collectively or separately, the process of folding, and details regarding collection and schedules. An optimistic aspect emerged as approximately 10 individuals per day sought this service and demonstrated a willingness to pay for it. Notably, I observed the transition from a free service to a paid one, implemented on August 1st. On that day, concerns arose among reception staff regarding potential negative reactions to the newly imposed 50 cents fee. Contrary to expectations, the ensuing hours proved to be notably calm compared to other instances when guests, frustrated, had exhibited more aggressive behaviors. One guest commented, "Yeah, sometimes we're upset, but right now I'm in a good mood, so we can chat a little bit. Upon explanation by staff that the charge was necessary to cover expenses related to energy, water, soap, and fabric softener, guests expressed momentary dissatisfaction. However, the overall response indicated an acceptance of the change, recognizing the cost as reasonable. Importantly, this service provided guests with the opportunity to preserve their clothing items, mitigating the need to discard them due to cleanliness issues.

Another form of in-kind donation pertains to medicines and occurs annually in February when the CEP receives contributions from pharmaceutical companies. Typically, these items do not necessitate a prescription, enabling pharmacist volunteers to facilitate their distribution. This facet of the observation fell outside my research due to respect the privacy of the guests. A comparable situation unfolded when the CEP collaborated with *Avvocato di Strada*<sup>22</sup> to provide legal assistance to guests.

Every Thursday, between 9:00 and 11:00, legal advisors from *Avvocato di Strada* visited the facilities to offer their expertise without the need for appointments or charges. Although forbidden from delving into the operational mechanics of this service to preserve privacy, I gleaned insights into the critical need for legal assistance. While no lawyers were visibly present during my tenure, I learned of the guests' motivations in seeking legal aid. Guests approached the reception to seek information about schedules or inquire about assistance with their legal concerns. Predominantly, these concerns revolved around immigration issues, encompassing challenges like expired resident permits, asylum applications, and occasionally, matters related

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<sup>22</sup> Is an Organization of Volunteers, that offers consultancy and legal assistance to homeless people, or economically marginalized without cost (Avvocato di Strada, 2023).

to legal offenses. The demand for this service persists throughout the year, with a notable upsurge in desperation during the summer months when lawyers are on vacation.

Upon their arrival, some guests exhibited a sense of desperation, seeking assistance to navigate and resolve their issues. During these encounters, I found myself grappling with a profound sense of helplessness. My limitations in rendering aid stemmed from two principal factors: a fundamental unfamiliarity with the intricacies of Italian bureaucracy and institutional workings, and a lack of expertise in legal matters. Law has never been a forte of mine, and my historical challenges with this subject matter have rendered it decidedly outside the purview of my academic disciplines. The complexity of legal language further compounds the difficulty, as it is not inherently user-friendly, making comprehension an intricate task. This challenge is amplified for individuals like me, hailing from foreign countries, where the nuances of Italian law prove particularly elusive.

In 2021, the CEP entered into agreements with companies to facilitate the development of employees' soft skills through the *Volontariato d'Impresa* project (Facco and Zandonà, 2022). This initiative commenced in the final weeks of September. Unfortunately, I was unable to attend during that period as I was residing in a different city. However, a stroke of luck allowed me to participate during the Fridays of October when I was engaged in lunch service, affording me the opportunity to engage in conversations with the employees during that time. These employees found great satisfaction in assuming the role of students, rather than overseeing their daily tasks. They relished the chance to attend lectures, pose questions, benefit from mentoring, and feel liberated to make jokes or mistakes. Every instance in which I served as a mentor proved to be a positive experience. It's worth noting that, in this case, I did not partake in the lecture or the subsequent debriefing sessions.

When presented with the opportunity, I autonomously decided to assist a woman who had felt threatened by one of the guests, experiencing a moment of fear. I approached her and reassured, "He is high, and lacks awareness of his surroundings. While he may verbally berate, he is unlikely to take any physical action." My intention was to instill a sense of calmness in her, emphasizing that these minor confrontations are often inconspicuous and, ultimately, inconsequential. The volunteer experience takes a frustrating turn when the kitchen becomes overcrowded, resulting in the potential for inadvertent collisions and making it nearly impossible to efficiently manage guest orders. In these instances, we find ourselves at a standstill with little to occupy our time. This circumstance prompts me to ponder whether the duration of such experiences is sufficient to catalyze a transformative shift in one's perspective on life, problem-solving approaches, or team interactions.

Throughout my involvement in my bachelor's thesis and previous professional roles, I have been engaged in the training processes of individuals. One critical lesson learned is the counterproductivity of presenting the experience as merely easy or exclusively characterized by joy and satisfaction for being there. It is imperative to acknowledge and discuss a spectrum of emotions encompassing frustration, anger, sadness, fear, guilt, and regret, recognizing that the learning process is inherently challenging. Initial difficulties and inevitable mistakes are inherent components until proficiency is attained through practice.

In one instance, I observed an employee within a company grappling with such emotions, leading to a reluctance to perform a particular service. Although I was not privy to the specifics of her emotional state, I empathized with her predicament. On a personal note, there have been occasions when I experienced discomfort, having been subjected to undue pressure by a volunteer, prompting a desire to disengage entirely from my responsibilities and, perhaps, seek solace in solitude. This observation underscores the importance of integrating emotional awareness into training programs, emphasizing the acceptance of diverse emotions, and underscoring the inherent challenges within the working ecosystem.

#### PHYLOGENY OF CEP<sup>23</sup>

Utilizing the genealogical tree metaphor, the CEP shares a common ancestor with *Caritas*, *Pane dei Poveri*, and Local Churches, namely the *Diocesi di Padova*. Currently, these organizations maintain close interaction and exhibit certain interdependence that eludes detailed elucidation. My initial introduction to the CEP unfolded through recommendations from both *Caritas* and *Pane dei Poveri*. Upon visiting *Pane dei Poveri*, a modest establishment near the Basilica of Saint Antony, I conveyed the objectives of my research. The response was amicable but accompanied by a practical constraint: the closure during August. Moreover, they suggested exploring *Caritas*, a more comprehensive organization better suited for the scope of my thesis.

Upon arriving at *Caritas*, as I waited in the reception area, guests of the CEP (unbeknownst to me at the time) approached, inquiring, "Are you here for the *buono*?" Clarifying my purpose, I responded, "No, I am here as *Pane dei Poveri* directed me to this organization for my research." Subsequently, a woman emerged from the offices and outlined the conditions for collaboration, which entailed a year-long commitment to fieldwork and an acknowledgment of their closure during vacations. While providing a brochure, she suggested exploring other organizations

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<sup>23</sup> Or Genetic Three, which is a hypothesis about the relations among the organism, illustrating that all the life is connected (Evo 101, 2023).



within it, advising, "You could attempt to visit all the organizations listed and ascertain which one will be open during the summer and permit you to conduct your research. This is the maximum assistance I can offer."

I am currently pondering why, despite their longstanding collaboration, there exists information that remains unknown between *Caritas* and *Pane dei Poveri*. Both organizations utilize the OSPOweb software to analyze data registered by the CEP, allowing them to decide whether the guest will be required to pay for the meal. Through the shared experiences of the guests, I have come to realize that accessing information from both organizations is not as straightforward as one might assume, particularly for individuals without a map or those who are hesitant to seek guidance from others. Following the registration process, guests must navigate finding these places and undergo additional bureaucratic procedures.

This challenge is notably exacerbated during the summer months, as guests express frustration with both organizations due to their closure for vacation. Only those who update their *buono* a month in advance can potentially circumvent payment. In numerous instances, employees caution guests about the impending expiration date, yet only a handful pay heed. Consequently, when the due date arrives, conflicts escalate, leading to raised voices or even physical altercations at the counter as guests confront the necessity of payment.

This situation prompts me to contemplate the underlying sources of their frustration. Could it be rooted in the profound poverty that prevents them from affording the payment? Perhaps it stems from forgetfulness regarding the bureaucratic process, or a reluctance to undergo a new interview due to changes in their circumstances. Alternatively, their discontent may be linked to negative past experiences with these organizations. Despite these potential causes, I refrained from probing further, deeming it inappropriate. Some volunteers emphasized this sentiment, advising, "Never ask guests about their job, residence, or daily activities; it is considered impolite and disrespectful. Familiarize yourself with permissible conversation topics."

While this advice holds validity, it also introduces a paradox. How are we to foster a profound interaction and comprehend the needs of the guests without delving into aspects of their lives? This apparent contradiction prompts ongoing contemplation about how the CEP can effectively manage these delicate situations in the future. A brief dialogue performed by employees and well-loved volunteers with new, transitional, and regular guests could be a tool to understand the level of interaction that they want to have with the community, to avoid painful events or misunderstanding. An alternative could be asked this in the first interview with the employee, discreetly included as a casual part of the questionnaire.

Another entity affiliated with the CEP is the network of Local Churches. In the 1990s, *Suor Lia* initiated collaboration, urging other churches within the Diocese of Padua to join hands with the CEP. This collaborative effort was born out of the necessity to address the closure of CEP facilities on Sundays, leaving guests without a place to eat. Over time, additional churches became involved in this initiative, and presently, approximately 40 churches contribute to providing Sunday lunch for the guests (Sguotti, 2022). Each participating church manages its own registration process, estimating the number of guests anticipated on Sundays. Subsequently, the CEP compiles a weekly schedule, indicating which churches will be offering food that week. Guests arrive and communicate their preferred church to the designated person in charge, who registers them in OSPOweb and generates a ticket bearing the guest's name.

Each church exerts a significant influence on the guests, beginning with considerations of distance. Guests meticulously calculate the time, effort, and financial investment required to reach a particular church. Beyond mere proximity, the quality of interaction upon arrival becomes a decisive factor. Guests candidly shared their diverse experiences, revealing that in certain churches, they felt judged with disdainful glances, while in others, they were swiftly served lunch with minimal engagement, essentially being "kicked out." Some lamented the lack of willingness for meaningful interaction, expressing sentiments such as, "None of them offered me a place to sit. That's why I dislike summer; the volunteers just want to provide food and swiftly retreat to enjoy their Sunday. I preferred winter when volunteers have nowhere to rush to and are warmer with us due to weather conditions." The complexity extends to Italians as well, who must carefully navigate their past lives to avoid potential complications. One guest emphasized this concern, stating, "I do not want to go to that church that used to be in my neighborhood. I wish to avoid encountering my family or others who might recognize me."

Furthermore, for some, the Sunday lunch represents more than just a meal; it embodies a positive connotation associated with the notion of having a family and enjoying a normal life. One guest expressed this sentiment by stating, "I've been good all these years; that's why now I have my house and pension to survive. Occasionally, when I can't cover my expenses, I need to attend the Sunday lunch." This uplifting perspective was notably evident at the Church of *Santa Sofia*, where every second Sunday of the month, they extend their hospitality to everyone, including myself, without requiring a ticket. Here, tables are set, and guests are seated in a restaurant-like setting. Volunteers graciously offer a complete dining experience, encompassing starters, main dishes, desserts, coffee, and even wine. This initiative has fostered a unique sense of community, prompting some individuals, now ex-guests, to travel from different municipalities to partake in this familial gathering. As one guest noted, "Eating alone is

something awful when you have the opportunity to see your friends." The family overseeing the service takes immense pride in being regarded as the "favorite Church of Padua" and cherishes the close interaction they share with the guests.

A distant relative of the CEP is the Scouts<sup>24</sup>. They receive an invitation to the facilities during Easter and summer vacations. This collaboration serves the dual purpose of advancing their objective of training young people and addressing tasks impractical during other months, including comprehensive room cleaning, warehouse inventory management, and maintenance of *Chiesa della Pace*. Given the scale of these tasks and the need for effective organization, the Scouts, with their structured approach, prove invaluable. They advised me to immerse myself in their activities not only to learn but also to contribute to motivating them, particularly if there were any signs of lethargy in executing tasks. For me, this proposition presented a contradiction. In Mexico, Scouts are predominantly associated with the elite, as only those with the financial means to cover fees, equipment, and travel expenses can participate. However, in the context of the CEP, the Scouts encompass a more inclusive demographic. When questioned by employees and volunteers about my childhood extracurricular activities, particularly whether I engaged in sports, arts, or was a Girl Scout, my response seemed to shock them. The notion that these activities might be inaccessible due to financial constraints was a shortcut to their minds, challenging their assumption that everyone has equal access to such opportunities.

During their Easter or summer vacations, the Scouts strategically plan extended journeys to various regions of Italy or even to other European countries. They seek hospitality while offering their services to the community, with the CEP reciprocating by providing amenities such as lunch. This immersive experience typically spans around three weeks. Operating under a nominal enrollment fee and mandatory insurance payment, the boys and girls convene weekly to strategize community engagement activities. A monthly Night Out serves as a practical application of their acquired skills, fostering active involvement in community welfare. The Scouts maintain a network with other Scouts and collaborate with diverse organizations, including Protestant and secular entities. During our discussions, they patiently clarified distinctions from the scouting system in Mexico, emphasizing, "I understand your point; in your country, you also have to pay fees, but here everything is free." Notably, all the Scouts were of European descent, and their equipment, while impressive, raised questions about affordability.

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<sup>24</sup> *L'Associazione Guide e Scouts Cattolici Italiani* (AGESCI) Italian Catholic Guide and Scout Association which has around 184,000 members and is an educational youth association that use the spare time and extra-curricular activities of young people to train them according to the principles and method of scouting, adapting to boys and girls in today's Italian social reality (FIS, 2023).

As they deliberated on their organizational strategies, they highlighted issues with another organization, stating, "They claim to help the community, but in reality, they lack true involvement, and that is their flaw." This prompted me to consider whether, like in some contexts, they too engage in territorial<sup>25</sup> disputes for control within their community.

When I sought the opinions of employees and volunteers regarding the Scouts, the general sentiment was one of satisfaction, describing them as hardworking, organized, and genuinely friendly. However, exceptions were noted, as in some instances, their involvement presented more problems than solutions concerning expertise and logistics. In such cases, employees found themselves having to extensively explain tasks or even undertake additional work. The connection with the Scouts was perceived positively by some, especially those with relatives affiliated with the organization. In my observations, one connection remained neutral, with complaints about limited assistance, while the other was decidedly positive, characterized by enthusiasm and timely task completion, requiring minimal time and energy investment from the employees.

It's noteworthy to mention that, in comparison to the youth involved in the PCTO, the CEP's engagement with the Scouts included a religious discourse before delving into the activities. These activities comprised reading passages from the Bible and participating in an interactive exercise centered around "removing prejudices to understand the reality of these people and experiencing their everyday lives." This involved walking on various surfaces with shoes (symbolizing prejudices) and without them (representing an open mind), prompting reflection on the importance of openness to perceive subtle differences.

## PUBLIC DEALINGS<sup>26</sup>

The CEP inherently operates with a minimal need for widespread recognition, operating on the assumption that it is already well-known throughout the city. However, this assumption is only partially accurate, as awareness is limited to a specific segment of society. The organization maintains robust connections with the Public Education System, aligning its efforts with a pedagogical spirit aimed at educating the community on active citizenship. Notably, education

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<sup>25</sup> Coming from territory a unit of contiguous space that is used, organized, managed by a social group, individual person, or institution to restrict, and control access to people and places (Gregory et al. 2010:746).

<sup>26</sup> In this research the public stakeholder is the State that could be defined as "A centralized set of institutions facilitating coercive power and governing capabilities over a defined territory. No one definition of the state is adequate given the way that states have varied in their form and function over time and space" (Gregory et al. 2010: 722)

has evolved into a primary focus in recent years, as highlighted by Vecchiato (2022). In 2019, the CEP established a significant partnership with the University of Padua to facilitate internships. The year 2020 saw the inception of a collaborative project with the Department of *Filosofia, Sociologia, Pedagogia e Psicologia Applicata* (FISPPA) titled "*Emanazione di linee guida e protocollo di sicurezza e sofferenza urbana: le Cucine economiche popolari di Padova come luogo di accoglienza e incontro per una nuova cittadinanza inclusiva*" These strategic alliances, including my research project's acceptance, owe much to these collaborations, solidifying the importance of such partnerships for the organization.

I had the chance to encounter another student at the University of Padua on only one occasion. In her case, she was primarily involved behind the scenes, meaning that she wasn't directly engaged in the services, unlike myself. Unfortunately, I didn't have the opportunity to engage in conversation with her. Throughout my months of fieldwork, encountering other students was a rarity, given that this period typically coincided with most students being on vacation. What fascinated me most was the experience of reliving my teenage years, as I participated in the PCTO during the summer. The initial meeting set the tone, where we all gathered to comprehend the vision, mission, and rules. Phrases like "All of us are poor in one sense or another; it doesn't matter the external appearance; you're a person that deserves attention" expressed by an employee resonated with both the teenagers and me. We were all in a similar situation, navigating the unknown without a clear idea of what we were supposed to find. I relished being part of the debriefing meeting, offering a chance for reflection on the experiences of the day.

The PCTO elicits varied responses from my perspective. Some teenagers express gratitude for the opportunity to attend, learn, and witness a different reality. On the other hand, there are those who are present out of obligation, and collaborating with them as volunteers can prove challenging. The program encompasses diverse populations, occasionally presenting manageable situations, while at other times, "Teenagers are complicated for us, we already have our volunteers," as shared by those involved. They candidly conveyed the complexity of being part of the program during the summer, expressing a desire to be elsewhere for vacation. Some participants admitted to feeling confused about what to expect or encounter within this unfamiliar setting. As previously mentioned, the behaviors of the guests, at times, deviate from our expectations, leaving us in a state of vulnerability.

In 2019, the CEP entered into an agreement with the Tribunal of Padua, designating it as a venue for community-oriented activities such as *lavori di pubblica utilità*<sup>27</sup> and *attività inerenti all'istituto della messa alla prova*<sup>28</sup>. Subsequently, in 2021, a collaborative agreement was forged with the *Servizio di Integrazione Lavorativa (SIL)*<sup>29</sup> Azienda Unità Locale Socio-Sanitaria 6 EUGANEA<sup>30</sup>, facilitating social inclusion internships (Facco and Zandonà, 2022). Despite these activities taking place behind the scenes, specifically in the kitchen area, and my daily observation of them, my interaction remained limited. Although they were there honing their skills and adhering to regulations, they seemed somewhat detached from the volunteers. There was no shared lunch or dinner, and during the initial stages of the service, while waiting for the first plates to arrive, interactions were more prevalent with the cooks than with the volunteers. The rationale behind this disconnect remains unclear. When questioned about their presence, responses were often speculative, with answers like "Perhaps he is shy and avoids conversations" or "He consistently appears upset, making me hesitant to approach him." My attempt to initiate a conversation was met with annoyance, prompting me to refrain from further inquiries. On a separate occasion, when assisting one of them with an apron, I speculated that he might be one of the disabled individuals, adding an additional layer of complexity to establishing effective communication.

The CEP has established an agreement with the AULSS6 EUGANEA concerning health-related matters. Under this arrangement, doctors (who serve as volunteers at the CEP) can issue medical prescriptions. Subsequently, guests visit the offices where they receive authorization to purchase prescribed medications from pharmacies. This process is facilitated by the possession of the *Straniero Temporalmente Presente (STP)*<sup>31</sup> ID. Furthermore, the CEP maintains a close

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<sup>27</sup> The Public Utility Jobs consist in the provision of an unpaid activity for the benefit of the community to be carried out in the State, regions, provinces, municipalities or in social assistance or social assistance organizations or voluntary in favor of people affected by HIV, disabled people, sick people, elderly people, minors, ex-prisoners or non-EU citizens; in the Civil Protection Sector; in the Sector of Protection of Public and Environmental Heritage; and in other activities according to the expertise of the convicted person (Ministero della Giustizia, 2023a).

<sup>28</sup> Is an innovative form of judicial probation for adults, at the request of the accused and the suspect, in the suspension of criminal proceedings for crimes of minor social concern (Ministero della Giustizia, 2023b).

<sup>29</sup> Is a System of Services for the employment of people with disabilities established at the Local Health Authority to plan and implement the work and social integration of people with disabilities. The aim is to improve the person's life quality and rebuild their identity through work, keeping the person in their life context for as long as possible (Regione del Veneto, 2012).

<sup>30</sup> The official name is. *Regione del Veneto Azienda ULSS6 EUGANEA*, which mean *Local Unit Socio Sanitary*

<sup>31</sup> This is realized for 6 months to foreign citizens with an irregular immigration status in Italy. If the foreign citizen does not have enough money, he or she will pay only a part of the ticket, if is totally without money (the situation of poverty) can be exempted from paying the fee by signing the "*dichiarazione di indigenza*" (ML, 2021).

collaboration with the public hospitals in the city, providing medical attention. I observed instances where guests arrived in dire conditions, and employees either directed them to the Emergency Room or assisted in their recovery within the CEP facilities.

The interaction with the *Forze dell'Ordine*<sup>32</sup> according to some experiences shared by the volunteers and guests in the past they were present near to the entrance of the CEP but this was described as invasive, hostile, and maybe exaggerated, in fact I do not know if they made an agreement with the CEP in the sense that is allowed to smoke marijuana or drunk alcohol in the surrounding area, and only if there is a problem the employees will call them to solve the situation.

Living in the same neighborhood allowed me to regularly observe the *Carabinieri*, *Polizia Locale*<sup>33</sup>, and *Polizia di Stato*<sup>34</sup> mobilizing in the area. It was a common sight to witness patrols on Corso del Popolo or behind my building. Routine encounters involved having a dog sniff for drugs and requesting identification to verify immigration status. This situation was undoubtedly uncomfortable, and I acknowledge the potential bias associated with my appearance. While I understand the necessity of maintaining order, it raises questions about the extent of these interactions and whether they may be perceived as excessive by immigrant residents experiencing them frequently.

On the only occasions when I observed the employees of the CEP requesting the presence of law enforcement, it was when a guest initiated a form of strike by positioning himself in front of the counter, insisting on remaining there until “an authority could solve his problem.” While I cannot recall whether I made a mistake, possibly providing him with the wrong meal, what struck me as noteworthy was that no one doubted me. The employees immediately addressed the situation and called for the presence of law enforcement to handle the matter.

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<sup>32</sup> In Italy, the law enforcement agencies are *Polizia di Stato*, the *Carabinieri* and the *Guardia di Finanza* (Rai Scuola, 2023).

<sup>33</sup> The *Vigile* (Local Policeman), who until 1970 were mainly involved in traffic and issuing massive fines, now has been replaced by a professionally updated figure, capable of intervening independently in all sectors and jointly with the other Police Forces to guarantee the need for safety (Polizia Locale di Padova, 2023).

<sup>34</sup> The present organization of Public Security in Italy was introduced by Law N. 121 of 1981. The National Authority for Public Security is the Minister of the Interior, responsible for public order and security, and the coordination of police forces. (Polizia di Stato, 2021).

“Well, it’s your fault because you should not have taken the tray and should have requested that the volunteer change it before you left. Now, because you brought it with you and touched it, there is nothing we can do.” He replied, “I will remain here until you change my meal”. Later, the kitchen was closed and all of us were cleaning. I asked one of the employees “What are you going to do?” The employee replied, “No worries. I already called a police officer who is our friend, and he will fix it to avoid the situation escalating.” (Edited fieldwork notes, 2023).

I observed the unfolding of a situation where a guest at the CEP engaged in what seemed to be a form of protest, although I couldn't hear the conversation. The presence of the police and CEP employees indicated that the guest was facing opposition from almost every aspect of the system. This experience left me frustrated and confused, as I couldn't discern whether the guest's frustration was directed at me or the overall system. Unfortunately, I was unable to learn the resolution of the issue that day. The following day, the guest engaged in another form of protest, causing me to question the authenticity of the situation. Regardless, it is evident that the CEP maintains a favorable relationship with law enforcement, leveraging their support to assist individuals in need of food, clothing, and other services. However, the mention of law enforcement is not always received positively by guests, as evidenced by instances where guests chose to leave upon hearing about police involvement. In conclusion, navigating such interactions proves to be complex for guests, requiring them to develop coping mechanisms.

The *Fermo Posta* service is an outcome of a strategic alliance with local authorities, granting the CEP the role of the guests' address for matters concerning health, immigration, or as a point of reference. On a particular day, I observed a poignant moment when a guest expressed, "Thanks to the Lord, I finally obtained my residence permit. Thanks to everyone for helping me." This individual now had the chance to rectify their immigration status and, perhaps, explore employment opportunities in the future. It was a revelation for me regarding the significance of having a designated address, especially for receiving letters.

## OVERLAPING MEANINGS

In this stage of my research, I found myself consistently pondering the diverse species, populations, and communities, examining their broader connections with institutions such as the Catholic Church, *Caritas*, the Police, the National Health System, businesses, and NGOs. These elements, collectively increasing as never imagined, contribute to the dynamics of the ecotone. These characteristics, uniquely defined by space and time scales, are specific to



ecotones. They may limit the range of distribution, exhibit sensitivity to environmental changes, act as a buffer zone between adjacent communities, serve as a semipermeable barrier for flows of energy, nutrients, and propagules, or function as a landscape boundary that potentially confers stability (Delcourt and Delcourt, 1992). By delicately applying these biological concepts to the social context, we discern that the CEP encompasses multiple elements that overlap and connect to a wider network.

Throughout this chapter, the boundaries of the CEP have been illustrated as challenging to establish. However, it is true that all stakeholders are aware of them in one way or another. They can modify their behavior when they need the facilities or offer the help needed to reach them. The space is ingrained in people's minds, with private businesses recognizing that they can train their staff there, and local producers bringing surplus production. State institutions understand that some of their responsibilities could be performed more efficiently, and religious works materialize in this specific part.

Without a doubt, the space is responsive to changes in both the city context and the global, as well as at the individual level. Weather conditions or conflicts in the streets can prompt changes in the behavior of the guests. If there is insufficient food to feed the guests or a shortage of donated items, employees may become anxious about the day's dynamics and the energy required to explain and address conflicts. This space is sensitive to various phenomena, including the need for a community with which to interact and socialize, or the opportunity to offer a service and spend time with people who, under different circumstances, would be difficult to engage with.

This space facilitates a continuous influx of donations, projects, programs, and policies to the guests. It serves as an example of how macro-scale events are translated into a common language, managing aspects such as money, resources, and legal considerations to provide goods and services that may seem easy on the surface but involve multiple processes and negotiations behind the scenes. Ultimately, stability is achieved when the space becomes a refuge for the everyday difficulties faced by the guests outside, or when it fosters a sense of community and purpose for the volunteers. It serves as a space where conflicts are resolved, and where each stakeholder in the welfare system collaborates to offer better services and improve the overall quality of life for the people within.

Power relationships, interactions, changes, scales, and different times are the elements that define the dynamics of the ecotone. It is true that this space is constructed every day and, in some cases, achieves its goal of reducing inequalities and differences, but in others, it

exacerbates them. When we expand the scale and observe the broader network, the system becomes more chaotic. This unique human creation invites people to participate in a mutually constructed space where they can support, help, and redistribute their thoughts, ideas, and behaviors into actions.

## CHAPTER IV SOCIAL RESTORATION

*Ecological restoration is an intentional activity that initiates or accelerates the recovery of an ecosystem with respect to its health, integrity, and sustainability. Frequently, the ecosystem that requires restoration has been degraded, damaged, transformed, or entirely destroyed as the direct or indirect result of human activities. ... Restoration attempts to return an ecosystem to its historic trajectory.*

*(Allison, 2012:5)*

*“Do you know where my mother is? Inquired one of the guests. I promptly replied, “Wait a minute; I will go and search for her.” Upon my return, however, I delivered regrettable news -I could not locate her. I suggested, “If you wish, you can wait here for her”. He graciously accepted, “Of course, I will do that.” After a brief interval, I inquired about the purpose of his visit. He responded, “I have a job know, and I wanted to come earlier to say hi, but I couldn’t until now that I’m on vacation.” Expressing delight, I remarked “Wonderful, I am glad to hear that.” As time passed, he began to grow bored and announced, “I will go and come back another day. Please if you see her let her know that I was here.” Just as he was about to depart, his mother appeared, and they exchanged a warm embrace. Subsequently, they move a few meters away from the crowd to update each other on their lives.”*

*(Edited fieldwork notes, 2023)*

After spending some time within the CEP, it became that this space serves not only as provider of goods and services, but also as a source of social support for both guests and volunteers. This realization prompted a connection to another biological concept, that of restoration. The reader may understandably ponder why this connection is drawn. The reason lies in the recognition that our lives adhere to an expected trajectory, extended beyond individual or familiar realms to encompass the societal and even state levels. This trajectory implies the societal norms of establishing a family, securing employment, paying taxes, and fulfilling various expectations. However, what transpires when this trajectory is subjected to degradation, damage, or even complete destruction? The essential inquiry emerges: Are individuals capable of reclaiming the historical trajectory through intentional activities, or must a new path be forged?

This concept closely aligns with the perspective presented by the CEP regarding the notion of rebirth amidst adversity (Vecchiato, 2022). As expounded in Chapter III, in pursuit of this objective, the CEP does not operate in isolation; rather, it is an integral component of a broader network, intricately linked with the welfare system of Italy and the municipality of Padua. Despite its self-designation as not a state institution, the CEP effectively assumes roles akin to those through the provision of goods, services, and space. This prompts an exploration into the true significance of this contribution within the vast ecosystem of guests' experiences. What nuances define the historical trajectory of the CEP, transforming into a transitional space? Furthermore, an examination of the diverse guests and the significance this space holds for them is imperative to unravel the multifaceted layers of meaning inherent in the CEP's existence.

## GENESIS

The trajectory of Padua underwent a profound transformation in 1842 with the advent of the railway connecting Padua to Margera, followed by the introduction of gas-powered street lighting in 1847. These events can be considered as pivotal markers of the industrialization, the ascension of capitalism, urbanization, and the ensuing population surge, accompanied by the inherent challenges. These years serve as a crucible for tracing the origins of extensive societal, economic, and political shifts, laying the foundation for the Western welfare state. The latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the reshaping of nation-states, notably in 1861 with inception of the seafarers' scheme, a pioneering system encompassing provisions for old age, invalidity, and survivors' pensions, making the nascent stages of the Italian welfare system (Kuhnle and Sander, 2010). The arrival of Italian troops in Padua in 1866, incorporating the Veneto Region into the Italian Kingdom, ushered in a new epoch characterized by secularization, peace, and the propagation of civil rights, coupled with transformative reforms to the public administration. Presently, Padua boasts a distinctive identity, amalgamating agricultural and industrial pursuits, with the intellectual currents emanating from the University (Roverato, 2009, Castles et al, 2010).

In 1870, a wave of entrepreneurial ventures emerged as multiple small businesses were established, accompanied by the initiation of new ateliers aimed at refining the learning processes of workers, thereby elevating the overall quality of manufacturing. This era witnessed a substantial surge in the construction sector, necessitating the development of ports, industrial channels, aqueducts, buildings, railways, and the steel industry, alongside a growing demand for financial services. However, amid this development, urbanization posed challenges, notably the mismanagement of fresh and sewage water leading to recurring epidemics of typhoid fever

and cases of cholera. Recognizing the pressing need for public health measures, the municipality, in 1875, undertook the construction of a new aqueduct to mitigate the diseases and sustain the ongoing modernization efforts. Concurrently, the Catholic Church maintained a pervasive influence in the city during this period, with the bishop's opinion holding considerable weight in the decision-making process, as documented by Roverato (2009), and Jori (2022).

On September 17th, 1882, the city of Padua experienced a devastating flood that prompted an influx of multiple immigrants. It was during this challenging time that Elena Camporetti, a friend of Stefania Etzerodot Omboni, proposed the establishment of a soup kitchen. Collaborating with a group of female friends, they established a facility in the Church of Saint Daniel, operating from October to March and providing meals for approximately 500 people each day. In May of 1883, Stefania sought funding and discovered that the Bishop Giuseppe Callegari of Padua shared with her altruistic ideals of aiding the poor. Bishop Callegari not only provided financial support but also offered new locations and entrusted the management responsibilities to the *Suore Elisabettine*. The administration, overseen by both clergy and secular individuals, secured founding from local churches, the municipality, banks offering financial services, and concerned citizens. In 1886, a new facility opened on *Vandelli* Street; and in 1895, the CEP earned the prestigious gold medal at the *Mostra Campionata di Padova*. Stefania continued to be an integral part of the council until 1898 (Jori, 2022).

In the year 1900, the central operations of the CEP underwent relocation to *Paolo Sarpi* Street, facilitating a move to a larger building with the explicit purpose of accommodating a greater number of guests. By 1914, another relocation transpired, this time to *Niccolò Tommaseo* Street, strategically positioned adjacent to the train station. Noteworthy is the commitment of the *Suore* who commuted to the facilities daily until 1929 when they permanently reside there, ensuring the provision of services throughout the entire year, a departure from the previous seasonal assistance limited to winter months (Jori, 2022).

As previously noted, Italy adhered to a Liberal regime from the period of national unification until 1922. During those years, the primary objective of the welfare system was to extend relief to the most impoverished citizens, shielding from specified risks such as illness, maternity, or unemployment. This form of welfare system was particularly geared towards the working class and interconnected with their social rights. Subsequently of this period, the Fascist regime took hold (1922-1943), introducing a comparative limited expansion of the social security framework in its political agenda, aligning Italy with other European nations (Kuhnle and Sander, 2010; Jessoula and Alti, 2023).

In 1946, in the aftermath of the WWII, the CEP, bolstered by alliances with the local authorities, undertook the reconstruction of its facilities. A noteworthy addition during this post-war period was the establishment of a soup kitchen designated for university students, providing dinners as a part of the organization's ongoing efforts. (Jori, 2022). At that time, the predominant structure of the Italian welfare system was overseen by the public institution *Istituto Nazionale della Previdenza Sociale (INPS)*<sup>35</sup>. This institution was organized into multiple funds addressing diverse risks such as old age, survivors, disability, unemployment, family, and illness, each tailored to different professional categories. The Italian welfare system operated on the premise that universal coverage could be achieved through a work-based social insurance schemes, contingent upon robust economic growth and full (male) employment for effective social protection (Jessoula and Alti, 2023). During the 1950s and the 1960s, within the context of this development model, workers no longer found it necessary to frequent the soup kitchen. Instead, they were provided meals in the dining room of the companies where they were employee. This period, often referred to as the golden age of economic and welfare development (1945-74), marked a pinnacle in societal progress (Castles et al, 2010).

In the 1970s, the combination of robust job protection and limited investment in the Active Labor Market Policies contributed to the formation of a rigid labor market, characterized by a profound gap between the employed and the unemployed (Jessoula and Alti, 2023). It was during this period that the perception of the CEP underwent a significantly transformation, evolving into a refuge not only for the poor, but also for a diverse range of people including the bums, elderly, foreign immigrants, refugees, evictees, minors, workers on redundancy funds, prostitutes, homosexuals, and transgender individuals. Towards the end of the decade, in 1978, the enactment of the Law of Basaglia mandated the closure of the Psychiatric Hospital of Padua. Consequently, mentally ill who roamed the city found solace and support within the facilities of the CEP (Jori, 2022; Sguotti, 2022). While the first oil shock in 1973-74 had limited impact, the second shock in 1979 triggered a four-year period of recession, marked by high inflation rates and increased unemployment, further exacerbating social inequalities (Jessoula and Alti, 2023).

During the 1980s, several factors elucidated the marginal role of social assistance in Italy, as well as in Greece, Spain, and Portugal. These factors include the predominant role of the family, the prevalence of an irregular economy, and limited administrative capacities. The family's central role assigns women as caregivers and men as breadwinners, constricting benefits, and

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<sup>35</sup> The National Institute for Social Insurance.

services within the family circle. The irregular economy, characterized by a substantial number of jobs for marginal workers and low wages; further complicates the social assistance system. Additionally, the low administrative capacities impede innovation and reform, reflecting a legacy of authoritarianism (Ferrera, 2010). Amidst this backdrop, various services were initiated during the 1980s, including shower, the donation of blankets and clothes, a listening center, the presence of social services from AULSS, medical attention, and the *Fermo Posta* service. In 1982, *Suor Lia* Giancesello became involved in these efforts, assuming the role of Director by 1985. Under her leadership, more stringent rules were implemented to regulate the behavior of guests. Daily management under her direction emphasized elements such as encounters, dialogue, friendship, attentive listening, health, and hygiene (Jori, 2022; Sguotti, 2022; CEP, 2023).

In the 1990s, the Italian welfare system underwent significant recalibration, aligning itself with the standards of other European countries. This period witnessed a pivotal reform of the pension system in 1992, the signing of various social pacts, and enhancements to family benefits. A comprehensive overhaul of social services and assistance was enacted, culminating in reforms that extended until 2000 (Ferrera, 2010). For the CEP, after the establishment of a minimum structure, the volunteers were welcoming to the facilities at the beginning of 1990's and became part of the organization, in this decade the beginning of the arriving of the first immigrants starts. The CEP faced its first problems with the neighborhood, Italians have conflict with the foreigners. In 1991 the renew of the facilities to provide new services help to host more guest, also in this period *Suor Lia* promotes the involvement of the local churches to host the guests for Sunday Lunch. The increase of the number of the guest promotes new set of reforms to provide more structure to the organization as well as to face the problems originated with the longer queue outside the facilities and the conflicts (Jori, 2022; Sguotti, 2022, CEP, 2023).

In the 2000s, the CEP experienced an average attendance of approximately 400-500 guest per lunch and around 100 for dinner, encompassing individuals not only from Italian but also from diverse nations such as Morocco, Tunisia, Albania, and Nigeria. This period was characterized by a confluence of economic challenges, including recession, declining competitiveness, and issues linked to the pension system, shaping the dynamic of the decade. Concurrently, there was a notable shift of power from the central government to the regions (Ferrera, 2010; Jessoula and Alti, 2023). The financial crisis of 2008 further intensified the presence of a new demographic labeled as the new poor. This group emerged due to job losses and family-related issues. Notably, this new segment of the impoverished population exhibited a more dignified

profile than their predecessors, and their needs prompted a demand for an improvement in the quality of services offered by organizations such as the CEP (Jori, 2022; Sguotti, 2022).

Until 2017, *Suor Lia* play a pivotal role as part of the leadership of the CEP. On June 18<sup>th</sup>, 2017, the establishment of the *Fondazione Nervo Pasini* (FNP) was formalized through a bishop's decree, conferring upon its autonomy and legal personality (FNP, 2023). In 2018, owing to age and health considerations, *Suor Lia* concluded her tenure, passing the baton to *Suor Albina* as Director and *Suor Federica* as Administrative Manager. Concurrently, the FNP received civil recognition. In 2019, the management of the CEP underwent an official transition from the *Diocesi di Padova* to the FNP. The year 2020 witnessed the onset of the Covid-19 pandemics, significantly impacting the lives of the guests and resulting in a 50% reduction in attendance due to concerns about the risk of infection (FNP, 2020; Sguotti, 2022).

#### TRANSITIONAL GUESTS

I would like to incorporate one of my central concepts transitional, as defined by Merriam-Webster (2023): “involving, providing, or consisting of a passage, movement, or change from one state, condition, subject, place.” This concept aptly characterizes the experience of guests entering and exiting the CEP within an undefined time scale. Some may stay in the facilities for a brief period, ranging from days to weeks or even months, only to depart permanently. Others follow a cyclic pattern, temporally residing, then leaving the city, and returning after a period. Some utilize specific services like the bathroom, partake in the Sunday lunch service, and engage in local church services. During my time there, I observe these cases, recognizing that there are likely behaviors within this category that remained unobservable. It's conceivable that additional instances fitting the description exist but eluded direct observation.

Initially, the first population of guests engaged in the registration process primarily driven by hunger. Upon completing the formalities, they promptly proceeded to the soup kitchen to secure a meal, without financial obligation for the day. If they did not return the following day, the employees would approach them requesting payment for the meal or encouraging them to participate in the *buono* system. At this juncture, guest held the agency to decide their course of action -either seek assistance from fellow guests through a loan or opt for the *buono*. This served as a secondary screening process but also presented an opportunity for guest to explore alternatives in the city because “There's always a place to go here in Padua; is almost impossible that you died of hungry” Consequently, guest could explore options in churches, organizations, or restaurants, satisfying their hunger without becoming overly entangled with CEP.



Those in position of the *buono* are essentially compelled to attend the CEP facilities for minimum of few weeks. During this period, if they adhere to the attendance, employees capture a photograph, subsequently generating their ID which becomes available for the following week. An interesting trend has emerged where guests often refrain from returning to collect their ID, leaving it as a sort of souvenir for the CEP. When convinced to retrieve their ID, the process streamlines for everyone involved. All the requisite services are meticulously recorded via the software, and gradually, the faces of these individuals become familiar to employees, volunteers, and fellow guests through regular interactions. In my observations, numerous instances of these scenarios unfolded, and during conversations with the guests involved, they expressed their motivations, often centered around urgently seeking employment to cover expenses or recuperating from health issues.

In one way or another, I managed to empathize with their situation. Last year, when I was job hunting, I encountered similar challenges. I faced difficulties due to my limited proficiency in Italian, and my lecture schedule did not align with what my prospective employer required. On multiple occasions, I contemplated returning to my home country. Eventually, I secured a job as a caregiver, allowing me to continue residing in Italy. As previously mentioned, the guest at the CEP were also strategizing to spend a temporary period there before making a move as one of the mention to me “It’s really hard to find a job here, so I decided to come back to my country, is not easy to live from charity, and also my two girls are there, so it will be better for me to take care of them.” It was an experience that nearly mirrored my own.

Another scenario unfolded when guests appeared to be in a hurry, and I refrained from inquiring about the reasons behind their urgency. In my understanding, the CEP ecotone, in this context, served as a place for fattening, indicating that guests utilized the *buono* to access freely meals each day. They strategically gathered necessary items and attended medical appointments to establish a reserve for future use. Subsequently, when conditions became favorable, they made the decision to depart the facilities, often expressing sentiments like “I will abandon the city tonight and need my stuff to do that.” During my interactions with them, I consistently perceived a sense of urgency, as they appeared nervous or anxious. They sought maximum efficiency volunteers and employees, aiming to avoid any perceived waste of time. Remarkably, they adhered to their promises; once they left the space, I never encountered them again. While this does not necessarily imply, they won’t return to the CEP, the likelihood of witnessing their return diminishes for me.

The second population of transitional guests consists of individuals who return to the CEP, undergoing a process of akin to that of the first one. However, their return is recurrent, occurring

numerous times, as they are always welcome. Though I haven't directly interacted with this group, I have gleaned insights from narratives shared by regular guests and employees. The implementation of OSPOweb software could potentially aid in monitoring their movements, tracking whether they re-register in other *Caritas* managed spaces and gauging the intervals between each reentrance. According to accounts from regular guests, these individuals often relocate due to mental health challenges, various additions, or as a means of evading legal repercussions. Despite these circumstances, during their tenure as guests at the CEP, the facility addresses some of their fundamental needs, including food, hygiene, clothing, medical services, and survival essentials for the streets, particularly during summer (tents and blankets provided during the clothing donation service). Subsequently, it becomes challenging to ascertain whether they manage to improve their circumstances and move beyond the degraded state of their lives (Figure 17). What remains true is that, at least while they are at the CEP, they experience acceptance and relief (Glasser 1988) as they navigate their uncertain paths into the future.



*Figure 17 Artwork illustrating the transition of the guests while they attend the CEP.*

The third population of the transitional guest, briefly introduced in Chapter II, manifests their transition as a form of protest. Formerly regular guests, they perceived the changes in the CEP, notably the implementation of the OSPOweb software and the shift in leadership, as altering the fundamental nature of the facility. Initially, the CEP represented one of the few spaces in modern life that did not ask questions, folders and charts were not kept, and without eligibility

requirements a problem-free space (Glasser, 1988:96-7), The transition into a more organized structure was met with disapproval, prompting their diminished presence, limited to Thursdays through Saturdays solely for obtaining the Sunday lunch ticket, after which they close to attend local churches on that day. Conversations during Sunday lunch further elucidated their perspective on the evolving situation:

“My idea is that fewer people are attending the CEP now because they don’t like the new system: bringing your ID, providing your registration number, explaining which service I will use, and so on. I stopped attending the CEP because, one day, I swear to God, I didn’t have money and I request a loan from the cashier. He rejected my request, even though he have known me for years. How is that possible? He told me that the new rules did not allow for that- what the hell. Now, with the new system, it’s impossible. You need to beg for help, and that’s humiliating. That was one of the reasons why I don’t attend the CEP anymore. Now, I just like to come to the Sunday lunch; at least here, I can chat and share food with my friends” (Edited fieldwork notes, 2023).

The change was challenging to confront, especially for those who had the option to leave the facilities. They struggled to reconcile with the realization that possessing an ID or making a payment had become more pivotal than the years of companionship and shared experiences. The question arises: where does the trust find its place in this new system? Despite the difficulties posed by the transformed space, there exists a notable gap in the system that allows to access the facilities, obtain the Sunday lunch ticket, and maintain interactions with their friends.

## THE REGULARS

I had not previously contemplated the prospect of spending one’s entire life within the confines of the CEP until a guest mentioned “I will return my ID, is my last meal at CEP. I’ll move to another city” The volunteer responded to her “Keep it maybe you will need it in the future” She responded “yeah; I’ll be in this situation until death reaches me.” Although an employee had earlier conveyed to me that some guests might remain there indefinitely due to factors such as age, mental illness, disabilities, or prolonged absence from the job market, it wasn’t until I encountered a guest with two decades of attendance and others who vividly recalled *Suor Lia*’s management era that the compelling evidence became indisputable.

These guests are predominantly recognized by the employees and occasionally by a select few volunteers. Their distinctive characteristics include the attire they consistently wear, their

culinary preferences, punctuality, personal stories, health status, interpersonal dynamics with fellow guests or other individuals, thereby establishing enduring relationships with the staff. Some form couples or groups, sharing meals and participating in Sunday lunches together. Frequently, they linger outside the facilities or seek specific assistance from *Suor* Albina or the employees. These guests exhibit heightened awareness of the presence of newcomers, being the first to discern my regular attendance at various times throughout the day and my familiarity with discreet locations or nuanced knowledge about the CEP.

My interaction with them was, on one hand, friendly, as they felt comfortable talking to me and freely asking questions. However, on the other hand, they were hesitant to waste their valuable time conversing with me instead of spending it with their preferred volunteer or employee. They attentively observed if a particular volunteer was at the counter to engage in conversation while receiving their tray; some guests even used this as an opportunity to practice their Spanish with me. Perhaps the most poignant instance of this relationship occurred when a woman, visibly sad, stood in front of the counter where I was serving and expressed, "I miss *Suor* Lia so much." This wasn't the first time a guest had reminisced about her or the period when she was in charge. It seems that they missed more than just her management style; the absence of this relationship appeared challenging for them to navigate.

This population of guests was one of the most affected by the Covid-19 pandemics. Beyond the health issues, the most drastically disruption was the loss of interactions and relationships:

“Reflect for a moment: before the Covid-19, four people could sit at a table, and perhaps more could join them to create a larger one. I could bring my ingredients and engage in longer conversations. Later, I received a basket of food, or I need to wear a face mask and limit communication. What kind of companionship is that? As you can see now, we sit in couples and only remain here for a few minutes. Later, we need to leave because other guests want to eat, or in the end, the employees remove us from our tables. I still remember when it was possible to have more extended conversations and spend more time together.” (Edited fieldwork notes, 2023).

It was a traumatic experience for them, and I presume, likewise for the employees and volunteers. Some recount that period as painful because none of us knew what to do or how to react to this situation. This impact also affected the volunteer population, some of the elderly were forced to retire from service as their families requested to safeguard their health, I am certain that this was unexpected for the organization as well. On the positive side, I would like

to believe that it created the space for new individuals interested in volunteering to come forward.

This space now encompasses almost everything, serving as their own welfare system that fulfills basic needs such as providing showers, clothing, meals, general and specialized medical assistance, and dispensing medicines. Additionally, it offers legal advice, the opportunity to enroll in social programs for job placement or subsidies and serves as their official address. This is the space in which they forge and experience most of their daily interactions and relationships. While I did not personally witness it, I presume that spiritual guidance is also available upon request to the *Suore*, as it is interwoven with the history of the CEP (Figure 18).



Figure 18 Artwork illustrating the self-perception of the CEP and the guests.

## NEW NATURES

Over more than a century of its existence, the CEP has demonstrated remarkable resilience, consistently adapting to both individual and global realities. Its key characteristic lies in its ability to transit time and space. Through my personal engagement, I aimed to contribute to the

comprehension of this organization, and in the end, I was able to witness a crucial aspect of the Italian welfare system. This dynamic significantly impacts the lives of the guests while also providing volunteers with a sense of belonging. The myriad stories of success, failure, change, and challenge serve as a testament to the fact that this space transcends our initial perceptions. It offers a profound glimpse into our modern society, illustrating the intricate network of connections, interactions, and the complex flow of information, responsibilities, resources, and ideas that are challenging to fully grasp.

The narrative presented provides a sample of Italian, Veneto, and Padua's ecosystem, with volunteers and guests generously sharing their life histories. This interaction proved invaluable in reconstructing the historical trajectory of the Italian welfare system, established at the close of the nineteenth century and persisting to the present day. On one side, volunteers, often retirees benefiting from pensions, find purpose and engagement in the organization during their leisure time. Simultaneously, current workers leverage policies regulating working hours, affording them the opportunity to participate in dinner services. Additionally, teenagers enrolled in the Public Education System utilize the CEP as a citizenship laboratory. Donors contribute with food, money, clothes, and other items, exemplifying a generosity borne from a position of abundance. This symbiotic relationship between individuals and the welfare system, facilitated by various organizations, plays a pivotal role in shaping both individual and social ecosystems. These organizations and institutions serve as circuits of power, where normative frameworks are generated and disseminated, knowledge is crafted, and ideas are promulgated (Garsten and Nyqvist, 2013).

On one side, it was a shock for me to observe this alien culture, where things were unimaginable for me — such as the duration of vacations, wage structures, paid job hours, the abundance of spare time, access to goods, the shift from familial to kin relationships to services, and the level of independence that the middle class enjoys, among other aspects. These positive attributes of the Italian welfare system are distinctly evident in this space. The intricate connections with the Catholic Church, local authorities, businesses, and various stakeholders constitute a novel lens through which to comprehend and organize our society.

I could contrast this development with others, where accidents, health issues, family problems, the loss of a job, or other situations bring individuals to a complicated situation, and then I found myself an alien in this culture. Living without a house, lacking the means to feed oneself, being excluded from one's supportive network, and remaining completely alone pose challenges that I had never deeply reflected upon. While poverty and inequalities were not new concepts to me, the experience was quite different from what I had witnessed before. In Mexico City, it

is common to see homeless people, and there are, of course, organizations and institutions that take care of them, but it is challenging to observe them in action. Here, I could see firsthand how life can radically change in an instant, and sometimes, we may not be as resilient as we think when faced with such challenges.

However, I found myself in the position of an alien to both cultures, overlapping with certain elements of my identity such as food, language, religion, colonial past, weather, clothing, habits, studies, jobs, ethnicity, family, and nature. These aspects acted as gatekeepers, determining my access to both cultures. Daily interactions allowed me to break down boundaries and engage in meaningful encounters during my time there. Some days were characterized by a struggle to comprehend anything, while on others, everything seemed to unfold in an instant. The experience was marked by a lack of information alongside overwhelming narratives, a balance between the absence and excess of rules, and moments of difficulty and negativity interwoven with multiple contradictions. This individual experience also connected me to global dynamics in a direct and unavoidable manner, prompting me to visualize the intricate dynamics unfolding around me.

# CONCLUSIONS SYNERGIES OF THE CUCINE ECONOMICHE POPOLARI

*Synergy-here defined broadly as the combined (interdependent) effects produced by two or more parts, elements, or individuals -is a ubiquitous phenomenon in nature and human societies alike...its importance is not widely appreciated because it travels under many different aliases, including emergence, cooperativity, symbiosis, coevolution, symmetry, order, epistasis, mutualism, interdependencies, heterosis, phase transitions, systemic effects, even complexity and “dynamical attractors...the term “synergy” could be utilized as a pan-disciplinary lingua franca for the functional effects produced by cooperative phenomena of various kinds...synergistic effects of various kinds have also played a major causal role in the evolutionary process; in particular, synergistic effects have provided the underlying functional basis for the evolution of complex systems, in nature and human societies alike.*

*(Corning, 1998:133)*

*On that day, I was the person in charge of Sunday lunch ticket and recharging the cellphones. During a lull in activity, a man from a North African country approached me, seeking assistance with the services offered. Shortly thereafter, another man arrived, and as I struggled to transcribe his Italian surname, the North African man stepped in, offering his linguistic expertise in French, Italian, and Arabic. Our initial interaction paved the way for a compelling conversation. He inquired about my country and whether historical issues persisted with Spain, a nation that had conquered us in the past. This question became the catalyst for an enlightening dialogue encompassing topics such as History, Economy, the contemporary Geopolitical landscape, religion, and personal experiences. What struck me most profoundly was the optimistic vision he harbored for the future. He shared, "My son is half European half North African. I am confident that his mindset is unique, and I anticipate that my descendants will be here in Europe, creating positive change..."*

*(Edited fieldwork notes, 2023)*

Throughout this transformative experience, I engaged in profound self-reflection, scrutinizing my assumptions, behaviors, language, and actions. I systematically questioned and compared them against the reality, thereby redefining my perceptual framework and enhancing my comprehensive understanding. Commencing as a research tool seemingly alien to the cultural



of the CEP (Blim, 2019), my assimilation progressed incrementally through daily interactions and keen observation. Consequently, I was able to delineate certain social categories and discern essential behavioral patterns crucial for acceptance. However, the paramount achievement lay in cultivating the trust of those with whom I interacted (Glasser, 1988).

In this reciprocal exchange, both parties, myself, and the others, divulged intimate aspects of our lives—personal data, pivotal life events, fears for the future, current frustrations grappling with reality, expectations of our potential impact, and the gratification derived from engaging in meaningful endeavors. I found myself in a perpetual state of transition during both my fieldwork and the thesis composition phases, seamlessly navigating through roles as a researcher, volunteer, woman, immigrant, Latina, student, Spanish speaker, caregiver, and Catholic. While these multifaceted identities proved advantageous, facilitating interactions with specific populations, they concurrently served as boundaries that confined me to a defined space, limiting my outreach to the broader community.

The interactions occurring within the confines of the CEP facilities were both anticipated and unforeseen. The daily activities proved pivotal in comprehending that the support provided extended beyond tangible elements such as a warm meal, showers, clothing, or medicines, encompassing emotional support exchanged through shared smiles, familiar narratives, and a mutual understanding of both tragedies and joys (Glasser, 1988). These facets, comprising information, structure, behaviors, and language, collectively conveyed that the space was far from neutral. Its nature could be constructed negatively when dynamics reinforcing differences were practiced, or positively when guests received reassurance. Additionally, the community exhibited distinctive and emergent properties, with these diverse interactions potentially serving as catalysts for enhancing the lives of guests, volunteers, and employees alike.

The systemic interconnections within the CEP proved intricate to elucidate, introducing global-scale phenomena into the arena. Noteworthy among these were individuals arriving via the Mediterranean Sea, those crossing the border with Slovenia, and those undergoing changes in immigration status. In the urban context, securing employment emerges as a priority, yet cultural disparities, encompassing language, religion, habits, skills, and behaviors, foster a certain antipathy (Blim, 2019) that impedes successful hiring. Gradually, these differences escalate, placing individuals in precarious situations involving encounters with law enforcement or seeking assistance from the National Health System.

On a familial scale, issues such as abandonment, abuse, or failure contribute to the deterioration of relationships, triggering subsequent behaviors that render the guests in a vulnerable position.

The interconnectedness extends beyond Public Education institutions, the Catholic Church, the Tribunal of Justice, donors, and private businesses, shaping a new dimension to the space through the transit of information, goods, services, and resources.

These succinct descriptions of various elements enable me to delineate two primary ecosystems. The first constitutes a seemingly "problem-free" space wherein anyone admitted receives a nourishing plate of soup comprising oxheads, maize, carrots, turnips, cabbages, onions, peas, and leeks (Glasser, 1988). This space extends beyond mere sustenance, encompassing provisions of clothing, asylum, and acceptance. Notably, it operates without the imposition of records, inquiries, or behavioral expectations. Individuals are not subjected to judgment based on personal problems, physical appearance, disabilities, mental health, or the tragedies in their lives. This environment harks back to a historical context, approximately 140 years ago, when the CEP embodied such qualities as a charity organization, hosting the needy and providing unwavering support. This ethos was grounded in a shared willingness to assist and, significantly, religious beliefs.

The second ecosystem represents a meticulously organized institution that, akin to a census, necessitates the provision of personal details such as your date of birth, nationality, spoken languages, religion, and available skills. Following registration, you are assigned an identification number, a critical component that must be memorized and always carried, serving as your access pass to various services. Subsequently, a comprehensive interview ensues to ascertain your socioeconomic characteristics and determine your eligibility for fee exemptions based on your perceived level of financial need. Much like the procedural protocol observed in institutions such as post offices, health offices, or the *Questura*, individuals are required to queue, patiently awaiting their turn for service access. In the event of an unfortunate circumstance resulting in an untimely arrival, exceptions are not made. Staff members courteously inform you that you have missed your appointment and advise that punctuality is imperative to prevent a recurrence of such incidents in the future.

Currently, the CEP has mixed elements from both ecosystems, rendering challenging to distinctly categorize it as either a charitable organization or a state service provider institution, a distinction that remains elusive (Alexander, *in press*). The organization is overseen by the *Suore*, with well-established roles such as Director, Administrative Manager, and the President of the NGO, who is a priest. The presence of religious elements, including sculptures of the Virgin Mary, Saint Anthony, and crosses dispersed through the facilities, underscores the organization's ties to its charitable roots. The observance of Sundays and another Catholic celebration, such as the *Immacolata Concezione* or *Ferragosto*; is evident, mirroring the

organization's deep religious affiliations. Simultaneously, it adheres to secular dates, commemorating events like *Festa della Repubblica*, or *Festa della Liberazione*. On these occasions, guests participate in church services within the city or the Saint Egidio community, where they receive their meals. This amalgamation of religious and secular practices underscores the intricate nature of the CEP's culture and its multifaceted role within the community.

Daily, the CEP undertakes a crucial activity, namely, the collection of data. This data serves a national purpose, facilitating analyses pertaining to issues of poverty, immigration, and security through the utilization of the OSPOweb software. Collaborative efforts with *Forze dell'Ordine* not only aid in space management but also contribute valuable insights into new immigrant arrivals and dynamic occurrences in the streets, such as conflicts or altercations.

Moreover, the CEP functions as a space conducive to probation and internship opportunities, particularly tailored for individuals with specific requirements. Its strategic alliances with social services, coupled with its connections to the National Health System, underscore its integral role as a component of the broader welfare system. The multifaceted nature of its activities positions the CEP as a pivotal organization with far-reaching implications for both local and national contexts.

Furthermore, the CEP is obligated to adhere to NGO regulations, necessitating an annual disclosure of its financial status, donor information, the extent of beneficiaries impacted by its initiatives, the efficacy of its services, the number of volunteers, and the contentment levels among guests. This information is public and transparent. In addition to regulatory compliance, the CEP is mandated to engage actively in city and municipal events, promoting its activities. Establishing a positive brand image is imperative for garnering support from potential donors and the broader public, thereby solidifying its presence in the local territory.

To sustain its operations, the organization undertakes fundraising campaigns, seeking financial contributions, or collecting donations in kind. The CEP is also committed to maintaining an active online presence through social media platforms, consistently sharing digital content that encapsulates participant experiences. This strategic approach ensures that the community is well-informed about the CEP's endeavors and the primary beneficiaries of its initiatives. In essence, these multifaceted efforts underscore the organization's commitment to transparency, community engagement, and financial sustainability.

While measuring the impact of the synergies cultivated by the CEP proves exceptionally challenging, it transcends results. Presently, there exists some discernible evidence; for

instance, guests who previously encountered hardships and now possess essential identity documents, secure regular employment, attain pensions, or find stable housing serve as positive illustrations. However, the scope of impact extends beyond these data.

The bonds forged among guests, volunteers, and employees are crucial at both individual and community levels. This is evident in instances where individuals return periodically to express greetings or share updates on their lives. The act of sharing a meal with former companions rekindles a sense of family, illustrating the enduring impact of their time at the CEP. The narratives, experiences, and lessons shared by these individuals already wield influence over numerous people, including myself. A more targeted investigation in the future could provide a deeper understanding of the CEP trajectories of those who have been part of this community.

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