

THE FLOOD: UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCE OF VOLUNTEERS AND THEIR TERRITORIAL IDENTITY

Maria Giulia Panetta & Eugenia Magnani

Institute of Constructivist Psychology, Pauda, Italy.

Abstract: This study explores the meanings attributed to the experience of the flood of May 16-17, 2023, which devastated the inland region of Romagna, Italy, as recounted by Romagnolo volunteers. The investigation, conducted using the focus group method, involved participants who had direct experience in rescue operations and explored how volunteers construed their intervention in relation to the territorial context. The analysis focused on the personal constructs through which the volunteers interpreted their experience and how territorial identity may have shaped it. This study contributes to understanding the processes of meaning-making in crisis situations and the role of interpersonal relationships during catastrophic events.

Keywords: Flood, Weather alert, Territorial identity, Focus group, Volunteers.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In May 2023, Emilia-Romagna, a region in northeastern Italy, experienced an extreme weather event that brought six months' worth of rainfall in just 20 days. The resulting floods and landslides caused 17 fatalities, displaced around 36,600 people (Copernicus Emergency Management Service, 2023), forced the closure of more than 600 roads, and inflicted extensive damage on railway lines, buildings, and farmland. Riverbanks were overtopped and sewage systems were overwhelmed, intensifying the impact on infrastructure and communities.

On May 15, a weather alert was issued warning of severe flooding. Water levels were expected to rise, reaching floodplains and riverbanks across the central-eastern part of the region. In the Romagna area and along the tributaries of the Reno River, flood peaks were forecast to approach the tops of the embankments and rival some of the highest levels ever recorded.

This study began with the firsthand personal experience of one of the authors, Eugenia Magnani, who was born and lives in Romagna.

«My entire family tree is rooted in Romagna. This is where I have always lived, where I have experienced the places and the people I love as well as those I sometimes struggle to tolerate. Yet I have always found it difficult to perceive myself as truly Romagnola. What stood out to me were the differences from other citizens rather than a sense of collective identity. The flood, however, became an occasion to rediscover part of my identity. If I were to superordinate this kind of experience, I would narrate it as an experience of holding on: choosing what to preserve and what to throw away, when to uphold and when to give up. It's about how you can stand firm when there is sludge you can't simply wash away».

On the other side, the other author (Maria Giulia Panetta), who did not experience the flood of May 16–17 directly, is deeply interested with the issues of place-based identity.

«I am Tuscan - and frankly, proud to be. I have been living in Veneto for about 20 years, but a significant part of my identity remains deeply Tuscan. It's an essential part of who I am. My family, however, is not Tuscan. My mother is from Apulia, my father from Calabria - both strongly connected to their regions of origin. Thanks to them, I'm familiar with the dialects, the attitudes towards the world and the others, the climate, and the warmth of those places. And a part of who I am today is rooted in those lands. I've always been drawn to questions of identity linked to place: a land, a region, a language, or a dialect and so on. It's with this lens that I approached this topic, which brings together reflections on identity with urgent contemporary challenges - such as the climate emergency and the natural disasters we can no longer afford to ignore».

2. THEORETHICAL FRAMEWORK

Place identity serves as a core conceptual framework for the development of various psychological theories on human-environment relations. The construct was first introduced by Proshansky (1978), who defined it as “those dimensions of self that define the individual's personal identity in relation to the physical environment by means of a complex pattern of conscious and unconscious ideas, feelings, values, goals, preferences, skills, and behavioral tendencies relevant to a specific environment” (Proshansky, 1978, p. 155).

Although Proshansky's work is the most frequently cited, further elaborations and definitions have been proposed.

The literature presents territory as a complex, multifaceted construct that includes multiple elements. For example, in the definition provided by Paasi (2009), territory can be conceptualized through four experiential dimensions that shape

the development of attachments. It is a social dimension, as it is collectively inhabited; a political dimension, as groups struggle to preserve or expand their space; a cultural dimension, as it embodies shared memories; and a cognitive dimension, through which it subjectifies cultural, political, and social boundaries. In this sense, territory becomes central to both public and private identity projects. Emotion, therefore, emerges as a constitutive dimension of territory, amplifying and deepening the meanings associated with identity.

As interest in people-place relations has grown, a lot of confusion has arisen in attempts to define both “regional identity” and “place identity” (Lewicka, 2011). Numerous articles titled either “regional identity” or “place identity” can be found in the academic literature. Some adopt a clear disciplinary orientation - for instance, studies on *regional identity* are typically rooted in geography, while those on *place identity* are more common in environmental psychology. Nevertheless, a certain degree of conceptual ambiguity persists, as overlapping and mixed interpretations of *place identity* appear in both strands of the literature.

The decision to adopt the concept of *territorial identity* arises from the need to highlight a specificity that would not be adequately captured by either the notion of *place identity* or *regional identity*. First, Romagna does not coincide with the administrative boundaries of the Emilia-Romagna Region. Rather, it is an area with its own history, traditions, and cultural distinctiveness, whose boundaries do not align with institutional ones. Referring to *regional identity* would therefore imply a geographic-administrative frame of reference that fails to reflect the symbolic and historical reality of Romagna. By contrast, the concept of *territorial identity* allows us to emphasize the dynamic relationship between communities, belonging, and territory, encompassing both material and immaterial elements that contribute to cohesion, as Capello (2009) suggests.

Secondly, compared to *place identity*, the choice of *territorial identity* allows us to highlight not only the affective and symbolic dimension of the relationship with a space but also the ways in

which material features and physical configurations of the territory - such as the plains, hills, the Apennines, or proximity to the sea - contribute to processes of identity construction. Whereas *place identity* is predominantly used with reference to specific locations (a city, a neighborhood, or a confined environment), the term *territory* evokes a broader and more layered connection, encompassing environmental, geographic, economic, and cultural elements that collectively shape a sense of belonging and identity narratives (Bucher & Nováková, 2015). Within the framework of Personal Construct Psychology (Kelly, 1955/1991), identity can be conceived as the outcome of a continuous process of construing, through which the individual organizes personal experience by means of a system of constructs. From this perspective, place is not a neutral backdrop but a dimension that falls within the range of convenience of many constructs, providing elements through which the self is construed. The meanings attributed to spaces, landscapes, and social contexts provide dimensions along which individuals elaborate similarities and differences, continuity and change, thereby sustaining identity over time. According to the Commonality Corollary (ibidem, p. 63), individuals who share similar ways of construing a given place may experience a sense of belonging, while the Sociality Corollary (ibidem, p. 66) highlights how people are able to anticipate one another's behavior by construing the meanings that others attribute to shared environments. Moreover, the Modulation Corollary ((ibidem, p. 54) reminds us that the relevance of place in identity construction is neither universal nor fixed, but varies according to the permeability of the constructs each person employs. In this sense, place becomes both a resource and a constraint: it anchors the self within a network of cultural narratives and practices, while also enabling possibilities for change whenever alternative constructions emerge.

What happens when territorial identity encounters a catastrophic climatic event?

Environmental phenomena such as erosion, flooding, or ice melt can threaten the continuity of place-based identity, generating experiences of loss and dislocation. At the same time, however, affective and symbolic ties to the territory may serve as powerful resources for resilience: "Place attachments may motivate individuals and communities to engage in collective action and adaptive strategies to safeguard valued places" (Fresque-Baxter, 2012, p. 258). In this sense, place-based identity not only reflects a sense of belonging but also acts as a catalyst for proactive behaviors in response to climate change.

This perspective aligns with Kelly's (1955/1991) constructivist framework. As Kelly asserts, "a person's processes are psychologically channelized by the ways in which he anticipates events" (ibidem, p. 32). Changes to place thus become anticipatory challenges that may stimulate processes of construct restructuring, opening up new possibilities for identity construction.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In this study, we aimed to explore three main issues that we can summarize as follows:

1. Weather Alerts: Has the experience of weather alerts changed, and if so, how? We wanted to understand whether and how the perceptions of weather alerts have changed after the events of May 2023.
2. Exploring the constructions of the flood. We looked at how people constructed meaning around the flood. What narratives emerged, the emotions involved, and the meanings attributed to such an intense and disruptive event.
3. The role of territorial identity: In what ways and how did territorial identity shape the experience of Romagna volunteers? We asked whether, and in what ways, territorial identity played a role in shaping the experience of Romagna volunteers. We asked how being "from here" influenced their

response, their involvement, and their understanding of what happened.

4. METHOD

This study was conducted using a focus group. The group discussion, which lasted nearly two hours, provided a space for shared reflection on identity, belonging, and lived experience. At the beginning of the session, participants completed a short questionnaire designed to collect basic demographic information and to contextualize individual experiences within the group dynamic.

4.1 Participants

The study involved 8 participants who identified as Romagnoli and had direct experience as volunteers during the May 2023 flood. Participants were recruited through local informal networks and personal contacts in the Romagna area among individuals who had participated in volunteer activities during the flood.

4.2 Questions

The questions were developed around the key issues we wanted to explore. For each question, we propose here a brief commentary to explain the reasons behind the choice of every question.

1. What did a weather alert mean to you before May 16, 2023? What did the weather alert mean to you during the days of the flood? What does a weather alert mean to you now?

This first question, composed of three sub-questions, was designed to explore whether, and in what way, perception of weather alerts changed before, during, and after May 16-17, 2023. It is important to note that we deliberately chose not to use the word flood (e.g., before the flood, during the flood, etc.) because we were uncertain - as the following question would clarify - whether participants used the term flood to refer specifically to the days of intense and continuous rainfall, to its consequences, to the period that followed, or to all of these aspects combined.

2. How would you describe the experience of the flood? (The mud)

The aim of this question was to elicit participants' personal constructions and meanings regarding their firsthand experiences. While addressing the second question, it became clear that the element of mud represented a central experience in the participants' narratives. Although it was not part of the original question framework, we decided to explore this aspect further, so we decided to include it and to ask the participants to narrate their own experience with mud.

3. How did living in this area influence the decision to volunteer during the flood?

The third question was designed to explore whether, and to what extent, participants believed that residing in the areas affected by the flood had played a role in their decision to volunteer. This question allowed us to explore the possible connection between territorial belonging and volunteering, confirming the relevance of examining this relationship within the present study.

4. What does it mean for you to be Romagnoli?

The fourth question aims to investigate Romagnoli identity by directly asking participants to elicit its defining characteristics.

5. How would you describe the experience of being a Romagnolo volunteer during the flood?

6. How would you describe the non-Romagnolo volunteers?

7. How do you think the non-Romagnolo volunteers would describe the Romagnolo volunteers?

8. How do you think a non-Romagnolo volunteer would describe themselves?

The final four questions were designed in the spirit of Henry Procter's Perceiver Element Grid (1996), making it possible to elicit the personal constructs through which Romagnoli volunteers define themselves and differentiate themselves from other volunteers who do not share the same territorial belonging.

5. FINDINGS

We will now present what we consider the main processes that emerged from participants' narratives, while remaining aligned with the initial areas of interest that guided our investigation.

5.1 Weather Alert: From Abstract Warning to Experiential Construing

With regard to the weather alert, we identified what appeared to be three distinct phases in the construing process related to the meteorological warning, which seem to correspond to the three key moments: before, during, and after May 16-17, 2023.

5.1.1 Phase 1: Loosening and constriction

The first phase is characterized by both loosening and constriction.

At the outset, the idea of a *weather alert* is loosely held and operates as a peripheral warning. It reflects an abstract anticipation rather than a concrete, relevant danger. As such, its predictive value is low, leading over time to widespread invalidation, failing to anticipate the events accurately.

Giovanni: «Honestly, before that day - I mean, around that time - I didn't really take the weather alert seriously. I was constantly getting them - wind alerts, cloud alerts, alerts for everything - so it all felt kind of blown out of proportion, and I barely paid any attention to it».

As environmental ambiguity increases and social communication multiplies (especially media-based alerts), anxiety rises. This fosters constriction, as individuals narrow their field of anticipations in an attempt to preserve internal coherence.

A dichotomous construct *inside (home) = safety* vs. *outside = threat* becomes elaborative, providing a way to regain a sense of control.

Giorgio: «If someone had said to me, "There's a weather alert, you should leave the house,"

I would've just replied, "Nah, I'm good staying home"».

The construct is often maintained through hostility, with individuals resisting revision even when confronted with conflicting evidence. Hostility can be seen as a viable alternative to threat, which would arise if the danger were perceived as close and real, implying an imminent comprehensive change in one's core structures. In some participants' accounts, this seemed to emerge in the tendency to dismiss weather alerts as exaggerated or unreliable even when environmental signals were becoming increasingly alarming.

5.1.2 Phase 2: Broadening of the Perceptual Field and Direct Encounter

When direct experience occurs (e.g., rising floodwaters), an abrupt dilation of the perceptual field follows. The previous anticipatory system collapses under the weight of invalidation, producing a "constructive void" filled with anxiety. This void becomes fertile ground for elaboration through experience as first-hand encounters.

In this phase, home emerges as a symbolic "island of meaning" - a last stronghold of familiar constructs. People resist leaving not because they underestimate danger, but because their system lacks alternative constructions of comparable validation. Anticipation narrows to what is immediate, familiar, and identity-linked.

Tiziano: «A friend of mine from Forlì, living around Villa Franca, told me that when the mayor's message came through - literally saying, "Emergency message, leave everything and get out" - she kept saying, "I just don't know what to do"».

The experience is construed first-hand, with few elements available to anticipate it through similarities with past events. As a result, replications are constructed from a direct encounter with the implications of the event, consistent with Kelly's Construction Corollary

(1955/1991, p. 35), according to which people anticipate events by construing their replications.

Giovanni: «The environmental signal is spot-on, I mean, it's actually real. The media, on the other hand, is always tangled up with all sorts of other things».

5.1.3 Phase 3: Reconstructing the "Weather Alert"

Through repeated direct encounters with danger, participants' construing of *weather alerts* becomes more permeable, admitting new elements: flood, landslide, destruction, displacement. This permeability enables more refined anticipations and behavioral preparedness.

The flood event re-signifies the alert system: shifting it from useless to meaningful, from abstract to tangible normality. The media's prescriptive role fails, as people were only able to make sense of the information through direct involvement in the events, which allowed them to experientially construe replications.

Giovanni: «For me now, a weather alert just means getting ready».

Giorgio: «...And if I'd seen it that way, if they'd said, "Look, you really need to get out," maybe this time I would've».

Tiziano: «...One of the new normal things is having Venetian-style flood barriers. [...]

The other thing is just putting stuff up high in the house. Even if you mostly live on the ground floor, at least if you put things up higher, hopefully not everything gets ruined. Some people keep their basements mostly empty, and stuff like that...».

5.2 The Flood: Invalidation and Re-Elaboration of Core Constructs

The second key topic we explored concerns how participants construed the flood itself.

This part of the analysis focuses on the ways in which the flood was interpreted, lived through, and remembered by those directly involved.

5.2.1 Construing the Flood: Destruction, Deturpation, Identity

The flood is construed not only in terms of its effects (destruction, desolation) but also in relation to its causes (human neglect, environmental exploitation). Construing the flood as nature's reclamation of space enables a reorganization of core constructs related to agency, responsibility, and belonging.

Tiziano: «In a way, it's like nature is taking back the places we've lived in for ages - maybe even a little too much, and maybe some places we really shouldn't have».

A structural coupling (Maturana & Varela, 1984/1987, p. 80) between the system "nature" and the cultural identity of *Romagnolo people* emerges. This coupling generates guilt transitions, especially among those who identify with the Romagnolo construct as caretakers of the land. The guilt seemed to arise when participants construed themselves as belonging to a community responsible for caring for the land while simultaneously perceiving that environmental degradation or human negligence might have contributed to the disaster. Agency is restored through acts of responsibility, such as volunteering.

5.2.2 Cultural Belonging and Superordinate Constructs

The flood challenges - and thus reveals - pre-verbal, superordinate constructs such as cultural belonging. Constructs like *Romagnolo* operate implicitly, organizing identity through long-term replications rather than propositional articulation. When environmental conditions shift drastically, these constructs become field-relevant.

Michele: «Honestly, I've never felt this close to my city. I mean, I never really had any connection with Cesena... it was basically nonexistent. I couldn't wait to leave to study somewhere else. I went, I came back, I left again, and after just a short while, I was already fed up. Then I came back a couple of years

later, and this happened... I've never felt anything like it before».

Acting (e.g., volunteering) becomes a form of elaboration through which core constructs are validated and re-integrated.

For some participants, the choice to act is preceded by a dissonance between anticipated and actual identity roles, creating spaces for guilt, reflection, and the formation of new role.

Aldo: «I wasn't personally affected at home, and no one really close to me was touched by the flood either. After a while, I started wondering... why did I even go? I've never really had a strong sense of community. And so, I don't know... I kind of felt a bit guilty, you know? Like... you did something good, but why did you do it? I felt a bit like... maybe I did it just... just so I wouldn't be outdone by others. But something strange happened inside me... because I didn't really feel it that close to me, even though it was all around, because it hadn't actually touched me. And I had this really weird feeling... a feeling that still feels really strange to me even now».

5.2.3 *Mud as a Construct Symbol*

In participants' accounts of how they experienced the flood, *mud* repeatedly emerged as a central element. We considered it important to dedicate part of this analysis to it, as mud appeared to function as a construct symbol.

Following Kelly's definition (1991a, p. 96), mud can be seen as a construct formed within the same experiential context as the flood itself, and as such, the flood experience can be effectively represented through this single element.

Mud becomes very quickly a representation of the flood, incorporating multiple layers of meaning: contamination, helplessness, communality, reconstruction.

Giorgio: «It was just... this overwhelming sense of helplessness. Because as soon as you started shoveling, the mud was still soft. You shoveled, and it came right back. You cleared it away, and the whiteness returned. On your

clothes... you cleaned them, and it came back. [...] It really feels like you're trying to move the ocean with a spoon».

Michele: «I didn't really experience a strong sense of disgust or the grossness of the mud - I'm not sure why. In fact, I started noticing that I actually felt somewhat at ease with it, which I've never fully understood. Even now, I don't have that tactile feeling of disgust, and that's what struck me the most. It's rare for me to dream, but during that week, a few times, I dreamed about the space where I was actually sleeping - my home at the time - which was normally furnished but entirely covered in mud. That somehow affected me on an unconscious level».

It is *preverbal* and *sensory*. Participants often described their experience as "*horizontal*," a term they used to indicate a situation in which everyone was perceived as being on the same level, temporarily suspending usual social distinctions. This way of construing allows others to be perceived as "like me", fostering trust within immediate relational dependencies.

Giorgio: «And then you kind of start believing you're everybody's friend and you feel totally fine with that, even though that's not really me at all».

These dependencies are not elective but arise from core needs (e.g., protecting one's home). Commonality around the mud shared experience validates the construct *community* and allows individuals to sustain coherent identity constructions during the crisis.

The way people engage with the mud becomes an *elaborative choice*. Individuals select the pole *lightness* over *seriousness* to avoid threat and fear. This choice is supported by cultural constructs of being Romagnolo, which favor operational irony, practical solidarity, and collective joy even in the face of disaster. *Lightness* does not negate the gravity of events, but becomes a sustainable way to organize action and maintain agency.

Tiziano: «The mud, I think, also added a bit to that playful vibe that was already there. [...] There's this kind of recklessness in being all together, doing something that's actually useful, helping people—'cause people kept thanking us—and then just going for it, that's it. There's also this spirit of, I don't know, maybe a bit of recklessness, but also a kind of joy».

Aldo: «It felt like this huge party, like a massive celebration. But then I started noticing all these piles of stuff—crazy, surreal. It looked like a completely different place from what I remembered. Really strange, yeah».

5.2.4 From Acting Against the Mud to Acting With Others

The initial antagonistic relationship with mud (*"moving the ocean with a spoon"*) ends up in cooperative meaning-making. The sense of helplessness brought about by the experience of mud threatens one's sense of agency. What could have become a role maintained through hostility shifts its range of convenience and becomes *acting with others* rather than *acting against the mud*, moving from material opposition to relational co-construction. The mud becomes not just an enemy but a shared stage for connection and collective action.

5.3 The Romagnolo Identity

We've come this far, and by now much has been said about these people deeply rooted in Romagna.

But who is a Romagnolo, according to the participants?

5.3.1 A Preverbal Superordinate Construct

The identity of *Romagnolo* is formed through *immersion*, that is through *consistent and repeated replications over time*, often preceding an individual's birth through cultural transmission across generations (e.g., language, customs, and shared narratives), reflecting the interplay between personal and socially shared meanings (Miletić, 2016). It operates implicitly, guiding action without reflection or high levels of

cognitive awareness. Under threat it serves as a discriminative construct: *Romagnolo* vs. *non-Romagnolo*.

This construct becomes sufficiently inclusive to organize new roles (e.g., volunteering), allowing the self to elaborate identity and confirm its coherence within cultural frameworks.

Tiziano: «It's really, really automatic, I don't even know how to put it. I struggle to find the right words... Yeah, it's that sense of belonging».

5.3 Volunteering

5.3.1 Role, Agency, and Privilege

We now turn to explore the choice to become a volunteer, which in our analysis relates to role, agency, and privilege.

5.3.2 Re-Validation of Core Constructs

Volunteering is construed as a privilege - not passive (*"being spared"*) but active (*"being able to act"*). In participants' accounts, this shift appeared as a movement from threat toward a renewed sense of action-oriented engagement. In other words, what initially emerged as a potentially threatening experience was reconstructed through volunteering, allowing participants to re-establish coherence and involvement with the situation. This transformation occurs through a *narrative reconstruction* of the *privilege* construct.

Giovanni: «For me, it was really a gut feeling kind of privilege. I mean, I felt honored to do that thing, together with them, with the people we met, just sharing, really. Sharing, like you said before, sharing stories rather than the burden».

Helping others validates both *Romagnolo* and *Volunteer identities*, which often overlap in core dimensions: generativity, pragmatism, operativity. These roles enable individuals to extend their construct systems and to resolve guilt transitions.

Giovanni: «On one hand, there's generosity, on the other, altruism, and also, I guess, the

challenge of, you know, getting through... the challenge of getting past what happened».

When volunteers interpret their actions as a “challenge to overcome,” a transition of hostility may occur: individuals cling to core constructs under duress, even in the absence of accurate anticipations. This can reinforce identity but may simultaneously restrict opportunities for revision. Post-event dialogues provide shared and safe spaces for revision. Constructs tightened for survival become permeable again. Through *communal validation* and *shared elaboration*, individuals can integrate threatening experiences without fragmenting identity, thereby supporting processes of identity integration.

Giovanni: «I think, with that kind of attitude, it's like... being willing to go towards the lion rather than the sheep, you know? So... handling it, not with your head held high or anything, but just the best way you can. And also, when you're working with others, like we know, it really enriches you, helps you understand. I think even just tonight, just having this chat—at least for us, being able to talk about it—I don't know about you, but it doesn't happen that often...».

5.3.3 Mud, Play, and Role-Based Construing

Mud first invalidates (*destroys, erases*), then equalizes (*everyone is dirty*), enabling *horizontal construing*. What we call here “horizontal”, that is an expression used by the participants, translates the Commonality Corollary, being the “psychological processes [...] as similar as their constructions of experience” (Kelly, 1955a).

Tiziano: «It's that emergency situation that really creates this vibe where you just trust each other. You don't care who's next to you or what they're thinking. No one's different. You just... shovel the mud».

Within this shared field, playfulness emerges. The dialect term “*Paciugo*”¹ frames the activity as both mess and communal play, humanizing an experience that might otherwise feel dehumanizing.

In the context of emergency, *volunteer* becomes a superordinate role construct, reducing the salience of personal identity traits. The focus shifts to action and presence. Anticipations take a behavioral form: who shows up, who helps, who stays. This fosters immediate coherence and collective action.

Michele: «In that moment, you were there with me, for others, shovel in hand or holding the water pump. There's this time, this moment, there with me, for others... and you're just exhausted. It's another story, but your emotional world kind of disappears. I'm just trying to put it into words a bit. I mean, your personality as a volunteer - that's how you see yourself, and how you see others too».

Being action-oriented is a defining characteristic of both Romagnoli and volunteers. “*Sbuzzo*” denotes a culturally validated form of spontaneous action and initiative that tends to emerge under conditions of uncertainty. It guides behavior in unpredictable contexts, especially when anticipations are weak. It is validated through repetition and immersion and does not need external instruction.

5.4 Romagnolo Volunteers – Cultural Framing of Action

5.4.1 Romagnolo Volunteers – Cultural Subsumption of Role

The construct *Romagnolo* seems to subsume the role of volunteer, shaping how help is given: through lightness, camaraderie, and operativity. This superordinate cultural construct determines not just what is done, but how. Volunteering is not a separate identity but a cultural enactment.

¹ The term ‘paciugo’ refers to mud and appears in the expression ‘chi burdél de paciug,’ literally translating to ‘the kids of the mud.’ This expression emphasizes the playful and enjoyable aspects of the experience, rather than its potentially burdensome or unpleasant elements.

Michele: «We were talking about the Romagnoli, making a big ruckus, having drinks... so the idea of the Romagnolo volunteer is someone who just makes everything feel lighter. There's no sense of heaviness at all».

The distinctive *lightness* of Romagnolo volunteers can be mistaken for lack of awareness. Instead, it is an elaborative choice that sustains emotional balance, helps to preserve identity coherence under pressure and enables ongoing engagement.

Michele: «No way this sense of lightness should be read as carelessness - no, no. Everyone knows it's probably the only way to keep going, to get this thing done. Somehow, we just have to lighten everything a bit... for me, not being Romagnolo, it would probably throw me off a little at first».

While the constructs of *willingness* and *helpfulness* are common to all volunteers, what distinguishes Romagnoli is their style of construing: "*bolgiosità*"², collective joy, relational fluidity. These constructs are not part of how external volunteers describe themselves. Their dimensions become intensified within the Romagnolo system, reinforcing both cultural distinctiveness and resilience.

5.4.2 Constellatory Identity and Intensity of Expression

The Romagnolo cultural construct system is constellatory and tightly organized, offering few viable alternatives. Volunteers are not constructed as different in kind, but in *intensity and expression*.

Constructs such as *doing*, *belonging*, and *lightness* are elicited more strongly and coherently within Romagnolo identity. This systemic congruence is what outsiders might perceive, recognize and often admire. Outsiders are perceived not as different in kind, but as differing in intensity and congruence.

Tiziano: «In the Romagnolo volunteer, there's the level of 'bolgia,' the level of action, and maybe a bit more of a sense of belonging and awareness that creates a vibe you can really feel. It's not that different - volunteers from other parts of Italy have it too - but maybe a bit less intense. It's really just a matter of degree. But yeah, with us it can get explosive in certain situations; everything kind of ramps up and creates an atmosphere that just takes over, and that's exactly why people love Romagna».

The conviviality, the level of action, and a deep sense of belonging seem to work as superordinate constructs subsumed within the Romagnolo identity, being "a construct which permits its elements to belong to other realms concurrently, but fixes their realm memberships" (Kelly, 1955, p.108). All three of these constructs subsume other elements, which are shown in the Perceiver Element Grid (PEG, Procter, 1996) in Table 1.

Table 1: The PEG (Procter, 1996), built from the narratives of the Romagnolo volunteers

	Romagnolo Volunteer	Non-Romagnolo Volunteer
Romagnolo Volunteer	Hospitable, cheerful, rowdy and chatterbox, playful, chaotic, with inner resourcefulness, generosity, altruism, the kind of people who act first and think later, light-heartedness	People who have become 'Romagnolized'; people with a strong sense of community and altruism toward others going through a similar experience.
Non-Romagnolo Volunteer	Rowdy and chatterbox; playful chaotic; loud and noisy; light-heartedness.	With a spirit of generosity; with willingness to contribute; without the light-heartedness.

² 'Bolgiosità' is a term used by the participants, coined from the Romagnolo dialect, to describe a lively, noisy, and exuberant way of behaving, often playful and chaotic. It's a rowdy conviviality.

5.5 Non-Romagnolo Volunteers

The construct *Romagnolo* is sufficiently superordinate to include, within its poles, the experience of the other (the non-Romagnolo volunteer), as long as it is perceived as compatible through commonality.

Giorgio: «I'd be tempted to answer by saying what I wouldn't describe (as a non-Romagnolo volunteer). I wouldn't include the 'bolgiosa' part. But the generosity, the willingness to help, the drive to get things done - that, yes. The festive side, though... for how I see people here in Romagna, I wouldn't include that as part of describing themselves. I just wouldn't see that part as part of it».

The other is not construed in their alterity but assimilated into the local-self's construct system, following a constellatory and tight logic: *"If they act like us, then they are like us"*. Assimilation occurs without elaborating differences. Entry into the *Romagnolo* cultural construct system requires proximity and active participation.

Giorgio: «I get the feeling that everyone who helped has kind of become *Romagnolo* - they've *Romagnolized*».

External volunteers often display a sense of reverence, positioning themselves as guests. Their integration into the shared role system takes place gradually, through proximity and behavior. In order to maintain coherence and relational validation within a dominant behavioral style and a tight, constellatory structure, non-Romagnolo volunteers are perceived to adopt the constructs available in the field. This process is being described as a form of *"Romagnolization"*, whereby outsiders, within few viable alternatives, align their anticipations and behaviors with the prevailing cultural system.

Sociality, in this context, is construed through anticipations based on commonality. *"If it happened to me, I would need help; therefore, I can help now"*. The other is construed not as fundamentally different, but as *"someone living what I could be living"*. Personal experience

becomes the reference point for construing the other's experience and similarity across past experiences enables role elaboration across identities.

Michele: «It's a matter of human empathy. I was born there, I come from you here, and I know that if it happened to me... it's just human, at zero level».

6. DISCUSSION

The study highlights how the *Romagnolo* volunteer organizes experience through a set of superordinate constructs - conviviality, active engagement, and a deep sense of belonging - that structure anticipatory behavior in situations of potential anxiety. These constructs function as higher-order lenses through which volunteers construe both themselves and others, allowing them to engage in decisive action while sustaining relational trust. Participants described *"sbuzzo"* (a form of wild resourcefulness), and *"bolgiosità"* (a lively and chaotic exuberance) as core elements of their personal construct systems. These elements illustrate how cultural and social meanings become integrated into individual ways of construing the world, the self and the others, thereby shaping how volunteers anticipate and respond to emergent events.

A central finding concerns the relationship between construing and action. Tasks such as shoveling mud or operating pumps were not merely practical activities but also occasions through which participants elaborated and validated their constructions. In these situations, meaning emerged through action itself, as construing unfolded through participants' engagement with the environment. At the same time, these actions appeared to tighten constructs for survival, helping to reduce uncertainty and anxiety. *Lightness* and *playfulness* emerged as deliberate strategies within volunteers' construct systems, sustaining engagement and managing the emotional impact of high-intensity situations. Non-Romagnolo volunteers, while initially experiencing

disorientation, gradually adapted by “Romagnolizing” their own constructs to align with the group’s dominant interpretative frameworks. This illustrates the dynamic process of construct revision and how cultural constructs may shape personal anticipations and meanings.

Finally, the Romagnolo volunteer identity can be imagined as both a *personal* and *interpersonal* construct: it enables individuals to anticipate the behavior of others, to construe collective efforts as meaningful, and to participate in a network of cultural practices that reinforce trust, enjoyment, and purpose.

continuously revised. Conducting interviews at different points in time - ideally beginning shortly after the May 2023 event - would allow us to observe how emerging constructs consolidate, loosen, or change over time, and how new experiences may reshape perceptions of the catastrophe. This temporal perspective would also enable a deeper understanding of how the narrative of the catastrophe evolves both within individuals and across social relationships, contributing to a shared collective narrative.

7. REVISION AND NEW ANTICIPATIONS

The findings are deeply embedded in the Romagnolo cultural context and the specific circumstances of the flood emergency. Our aim was to understand whether and how the territorial dimension contributed to shaping the experience of being a volunteer during a catastrophic event that struck participants’ own homeland. It would be valuable to replicate the study in different regions, such as Tuscany or Veneto, to highlight possible differences and similarities in how territorial identity shapes the construction of the volunteering experience. A comparison between different cultural contexts would help us to understand which elements are common and supportive of volunteering more generally from those that can be more clearly attributed to specific territorial dimensions.

To complement the Perceiver Element Grid constructed in this study, it would also be useful to conduct a focus group with non-Romagnolo volunteers who served during the May 2023 flood, in order to explore how external perspectives contribute to shaping an identity that is already tightly defined.

The events under investigation took place approximately two years ago, meaning that the narratives we collected are already mediated by time and subsequent experiences. From a constructivist perspective, each individual organizes and interprets events through personal construct systems that are dynamic and

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Maria Giulia Panetta is a psychologist and psychotherapist trained at the Institute of Constructivist Psychology (ICP), Padova, Italy. Alongside her clinical practice, she is engaged in supervision, teaching, and psychotherapy training. Her research and professional interests focus on relational processes and the construction of experience, with particular attention to embodiment, group settings—including those in sport—and the epistemological foundations of clinical practice.

Contact: mariagiulia.panetta@gmail.com

Eugenia Magnani is Psychologist and psychotherapist with a constructivist and narrative orientation, and advanced education in Clinical Neurosciences. She works with individuals and groups, with particular attention to meaning-making, relationships, identity development, and socio-emotional wellbeing. Her professional interests include narrative psychotherapy, theatrical role-play, group facilitation, and constructivist epistemology.

Contact: eugeniamagnani.psicologa@gmail.com

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