

## More seats at “The Philosopher’s Table”

The reinvigoration of a multicultural community association in southern Italy during and post-pandemic

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**ABSTRACT:** How voluntary associations promote social interaction across difference and contribute to building diverse communities are questions of relevance in Italy and beyond. To be successful, associations must earn and maintain reputations as groups worth joining. To do so can be challenging, given that they bring together people with different life experiences and languages. To thrive, groups must remain flexible and adaptive. This article addresses an under-considered type of voluntary association that contributes to building relationships and shared sense of community across cultural boundaries: the multicultural social club. The report is based upon early findings from an on-going ethnographic study in Puglia concerning the aspirations, activities, and life-cycles of multicultural clubs. It describes how members of one organization – The Philosopher’s Table – launched themselves on a path of reflection and reinvigoration during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their objectives were to discover ways better to serve existing members, assist the community, and increase membership. Among the club’s noteworthy characteristics is that it includes locally-born Italians and expatriates in nearly equal number. Expatriates rarely receive attention in discussions of diverse communities in Italy. Findings from this project help address that knowledge gap, contribute to current interest in conviviality in multicultural settings, and extend understandings of the dynamics and life-cycles of social leisure groups that are diverse by design.

**KEYWORDS:** MULTICULTURAL COMMUNITIES; SOCIAL LEISURE GROUPS; INTEGRATION; EXPATRIATES; COVID-19 PANDEMIC; ITALY

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### *Introduction*

A growing body of theory and research has called attention to diverseness in the forms, functions, and practices of third sector or voluntary associations (Harris 1998). Academicians and field practitioners continue to make useful contributions regarding the similarities, differences, challenges, and accomplishments of voluntary groups, from the most bureaucratic and formal to the smallest and least structured. Regarding those similarities, Harris points out that even the most informal groups “generally have a name, a governing body of some kind, articulated goals or purposes, and people who are members” (Harris 1998: 145). Two other frequently noted essential characteristics are that members pursue non-economic goals and membership is self-selected (Bromley, Meyer in Sundblom *et al.* 2020: 10). It is fair to assume that a primary motivation for joining is that the goals and purposes of the association are believed to be in line with the potential member’s interests. Still and regardless of the commitment level to the group’s stated purpose, members expect to obtain some type of personal benefit from being part of the group. Successful associations can create a balance between member-benefit and goal realization. If the group leaders do not foster conditions for this balance to occur, members may simply choose to vote with their feet.<sup>1</sup> To realize their promise and maintain reputations as groups worth joining, clubs must meet members’ needs and expectations over time. Doing so can be especially challenging in groups launched specifically to bring diverse peoples together for social purposes, for example, multicultural clubs. Furthermore, the pool of potential members of these groups may change as incomer demographics shift and the interests of prospective members transform. For multicultural clubs to thrive, their leaders must be able to recalibrate. Not all clubs meet their goals in the same way and not all survive. Precisely how multicultural clubs fashion bridges across difference is of interest to many anthropologists, sociologists, as well as scholars and practitioners in other fields. Learning about their operations and life cycle is useful, in particular, to those whose practice or research interests include convivial experiences in settings characterized by cultural and linguistic diversity. To that end, this note presents preliminary findings regarding a small multicultural club (fewer than a hun-

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1. There are, of course, other reasons that informal groups may disband. That is why group leaders must be attentive to the possibility that the informal structure, self-selection in membership, developed personal relationships, and perhaps varied goals of participants may themselves eventually lead to the group’s dissolution. In this regard, see Sundblom *et al.* 2020: 12.

dred active members) called “The Philosopher’s Table.”<sup>2</sup> The club is based in a mid-sized city in Puglia’s southern reaches, the cultural and geographic zone called Salento. The present discussion is based on on-going research on multicultural clubs in Puglia, Italy. One project goal is to understand better the aspirations, activities, and life cycle of these groups. Another is to determine whether, what, and how these clubs contribute to communities and community-building. Long-term findings will lend insight regarding how these globally mushrooming organizations function as settings for convivial interactions and relationship-building across cultures and languages.

### *Multicultural clubs and social connectedness*

Multicultural clubs can help establish social connectedness across cultural difference and create paths for communities to move forward in new ways. Generally informal and less structured than some other groups, multicultural clubs can offer relaxed opportunities for sociality that may facilitate the successful integration of incomers, for example, immigrants. Members of multicultural clubs in Puglia generally include native Italians and international expatriates. Expatriates are often overlooked in studies of community-building. That they receive short shrift is due perhaps to a tendency to consider them as transient professionals who do not consider themselves part of local communities. Findings from Puglia suggest, to the contrary, that many expatriates relocate for reasons besides temporary employment relocation. Most of the expatriates whom the authors have met in the course of this project, including mostly British, Australians, Northern Europeans, and Americans, have no plans to return permanently to their countries of origin. These incomers are a mixed group in terms of their social class status, country of origin, race or ethnicity. The group includes some retirees but also an increasing number of people seeking new work opportunities. They are artists, plumbers, teachers, beauticians, farmers, and more. The majority are white, however there are also Black British and Black Americans among them. Some self-identify as immigrants, but most embrace the term expatriate.

A handful of expatriates have lived in Salento for decades. The zone has lately acquired a reputation as an affordable, attractive part of Italy in which to live a “slow” life, however. A steady stream of expatriates is now purchasing

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2. In keeping with ethical standards in ethnographic writing and practice, the authors have created a pseudonym for the organization under discussion and have not identified the precise location of the city within the Salento where it is based.

property or assuming long-term leases and pursuing residency or citizenship. Nearly all profess a desire to be part of the local community and contribute to its common good. Some describe participation in multicultural clubs as steps toward that goal. As Neal *et al.* have written regarding social leisure groups in multicultural settings, these sites allow for “elective coming together of ethnically diverse others” to do “leisure things” (Neal *et al.* 2019: 69). It is important to recognize that doing leisure things in multicultural clubs can contribute to developing a sense of belonging to place, especially for incomers. Plunkett *et al.* have noted that

[...] places are more than geographic locations, with social interactions and meaning being an integral part in creating places and place meanings [...]. Community implies sharing, and we propose that place attachment finds much of its grounding within communities because of this. In other words, shared experiences and shared meaning of those experiences leads to bonding or attachment with the place in which these experiences occurred (Plunkett *et al.* 2018: 473-474).

To that point, as well, we suggest that multicultural clubs such as The Philosopher’s Table, which existed for many years prior to the current influx of expatriates in Salento, function as convivial spaces to generate interpersonal relationships and sense of belonging to a community.

Much literature on voluntary groups emphasizes large, function-created associations that are geared toward achieving instrumental goals and clearly stated outcomes and supported by paid staff (Smith 1997 in Sundblom *et al.* 2020: 10). Less attention has been directed on the expressive dimensions of membership and the establishment of social relationships as an end in itself as is often the case in smaller groups. More studies are called for regarding expressive, small group organizations, where nurturing social or affective bonds between members are regarded as key activities and essential to the success of the association over time (2020: 13). Here we follow Harris’s call for closer attention to issues of member benefit (Harris 1998: 144). We extend Harris’s interest in member-benefit by proposing that small expressive-oriented multicultural clubs such as The Philosopher’s Table contribute to building community across cultural and linguistic difference in part because cultivating social relationships with people different from oneself is considered a key benefit of membership. Interest in how clubs such as this one contribute to building community in multicultural urban environments is also of relevance to theories of conviviality. Sociologists Amanda Wise and Greg Noble have suggested, for example, that the study of convivial practices offers produc-

tive possibilities for scholars who “grapple with the challenges of intercultural relations in an increasingly globalised world, and the challenges [they pose] for local relations of living together” (Wise, Noble 2016: 423). The authors emphasize the need for new *ethnographic* studies [emphasis in original] that spotlight conviviality’s “performative aspects” and give attention to the situated nature of convivial practices, in time and space, as a means better to understand the different ways that people “inhabit diversity” (2016: 424-427). To that point as well, Alina Rzepnikowski suggests that the convivial turn in urban studies reflects both contemporary concerns about “human modes of togetherness” and scholarly attempts to counterbalance prevailing discourses surrounding immigration and diversity as social problems (Rzepnikowski 2020: 1). She cites friendship, compassion, and sharing as important but understudied facets of the “affective side of social relations” that are part of convivial living in multicultural settings (2020: 19). In the next sections we provide more detail about convivial practices in The Philosopher’s Table, its organizational structure, the findings from a survey relevant to understanding the member-benefits of participation in this multicultural club, and steps that club officers and advisors have taken to increase the club’s visibility and relevance to the community in the post-pandemic period.

### *The Philosopher’s Table: an overview*

Founded in 1991, The Philosopher’s Table is Salento’s most enduring multicultural social leisure group. It comprises Italians (primarily Salentines) and foreigners including non-native English speakers from widely ranging walks of life. Most members are college-graduates or hold post-graduate degrees. It was established by an energetic team of about one half-dozen expatriates and Italians led by a relocated Australian. Most original members were Commonwealth citizens who taught in Salento, and their Italian counterparts from local high schools and universities. The name was inspired by the explorations of an eighteenth-century Irish scholar who was among the first Northern Europeans to make a lengthy visit. He published glowing accounts of the Salentine sub-peninsula’s natural beauty, the artistic and intellectual achievements of the people there, and the hospitality he was offered. Given the club’s interests, it is unsurprising that, from the time it was launched, English has been the Philosopher’s Table’s official language. It is worth pointing out in this regard that some incomers’ ability to participate in local community life can be hampered initially by lack of competency in the Italian language. For many expatriates in

Salento, who are generally either native English speakers or highly competent in English, the ability to express oneself well in Italian is an aspirational goal. In turn, the relatively limited number of Italian residents who comfortably communicate in English have few in-person routine opportunities to exercise their English language skills. Multicultural clubs like The Philosopher's Table thus hold appeal for segments of both incomer and local populations.

Philosopher's Table's meetings are generally organized around a presentation, often taking the form of an autobiographical talk, the occasional English language film, or a guided visit to an interesting site in Salento. Monthly meetings begin before the dinner hour in space offered by educational institutions or churches. Group dinners, which almost unfailingly take place after, are opportunities for members to get to know one another better. Afternoon teas and socials hosted in the past are remembered fondly by long-term members for that reason as well. The club is led by a president (chosen by consensus) who is assisted by a small team of volunteer officers and invited advisors that includes expatriates and Italians (fewer than a half dozen total). Its website includes synopses of many past presentations and activities, historical notes on the organization, book and film reviews, and a photograph gallery. Modest annual dues cover the cost of mementos for guest speakers or miscellaneous expenses including a much anticipated annual holiday party where members and guests sing carols and celebrate the season with sparkling prosecco wine accompanied by candied cakes.

In early 2020, at the outbreak of the Covid-19 Pandemic and in accordance with public health protocols, the in-person activities of The Philosopher's Table and other social leisure organizations came to an abrupt halt. Restrictions varied over the months that followed but continued for about two years. During much of that time, public buildings and private establishments where groups would normally meet were closed or allowed to open only for extremely limited hours. Public health rules dictated how many unrelated individuals could gather in private homes, take walks outside their immediate neighborhoods, or were allowed to drive outside the city limits.

These restrictions required The Philosopher's Table's leadership team to explore different short-term arrangements. They also provided time to consider longer-term plans for the club. Monthly meetings were moved to an online platform. Not surprisingly, members were appreciative that the meetings continued in any form, but all lamented the loss of the level of social contact provided by the in-person format. Again, not surprisingly, enthusiasm



for zoom meetings diminished over time. The number of regular attendees declined and no new members joined. By mid-2021, hardly more than a dozen people continued to pay dues, although that should not be assumed to mean that non-dues payers no longer considered themselves members. The situation became critical for this membership- and participant-centered organization, which had been largely dependent on its supporters to provide off-balance sheet resources for the group’s use (such as meeting facilities) and to make presentations or invite new members.

Thus, longevity notwithstanding, it became apparent to the club’s leadership that focused attention had to be directed at serving members’ interests and recruitment. While continuing to hold zoom meetings, it decided to take forward-looking steps that could bring new energy to the organization. The president and advisory committee resolved to create and distribute a survey – the first in the club’s decades-long history – to gather members’ input. It would solicit information regarding members’ interests, preferences, and their suggestions for how to enhance the club’s community reach. The information would be used to plan for the resumption of in-person activities when conditions permitted. Another novel step on group leaders’ part was to direct the survey not only at members but also at individuals who had attended a Philosopher’s Table event and subsequently not chosen to join. The next section reports on both this project’s general methodology and the specific methodology of survey construction and distribution.

### *Project methods*

This study utilizes primarily qualitative methods, in particular the classic anthropological technique of participant-observation. In keeping with that methodology, the authors became club members in 2016 and have participated in meetings during site visits totaling thirty-six months to date. Over that time, they have attended more than 30 general membership meetings and dinners. Both have been speakers at meetings. One author was invited to join the advisory committee in August 2020 (the height of the pandemic), and served in that capacity for two years. That author participated alongside other advisory committee members in the design, distribution, and analysis of the membership survey. As customary in ethnographic research, informal interviews and conversations in situ with members was the preferred data-gathering methodology. Regarding how anthropologists use conversation as a part of a methodological repertoire, Dressen and Jansen have referred to “the hard work of small talk”

and argued that it is the “hidden core and as well as the engine of fieldwork” (Dressen, Jansen 2013: 239). To that end, the authors have conversed at length about the club with more than 75 individuals, many of them on multiple occasions. Informal interviews are conducive settings for story-telling about the club to occur, which has been demonstrated to be an important research tool in the study of voluntary groups (Chen 2013; Kim 2022). In keeping with ethnographic ethics, the authors referred regularly to their dual roles as club members and as researchers in their conversations with others in the group.

The Philosopher’s Table’s leadership opted to include both forced choice and open-ended questions in their survey. They decided that it would be in keeping with the club’s character to distribute only an English-language version but to note that respondents could answer in Italian if they preferred (ultimately, few did). Four successive survey drafts were created and discussed within the group. Protecting respondents’ anonymity was a major concern for committee members, and the survey was tested twice online within the committee to insure anonymity before its official distribution in April. It was sent out on the club’s email list, which included past and present members, some people who had attended a Philosopher’s Table event in the previous two years but not joined, and elected and appointed local government officials. The survey was also embedded on the club’s homepage and announced in two WhatsApp chat groups and one Facebook group where both expatriate and Italian residents of Salento participated. An email reminder to complete the survey was sent three weeks later, and reminders were also posted on social media.

The survey was composed of 24 questions divided into three sections. The first section focused on how respondents had learned about the club and their level of participation. The second collected mostly open-ended data on what respondents perceived to be the purpose of the club, how they would describe the group in their own words, and their most and least favorite aspects of the club. That section also offered an opportunity to make suggestions about how the group and its activities could become more attractive and visible. Section three captured data on respondents’ first language, sex, age range, and education. Overall, the survey yielded sufficient information to gauge respondents’ views of the club’s value to themselves and the community. It provided a basis for immediate discussions regarding how best to support the group’s continuation and the extent to which the club reflected current members’ aspirations including regarding its role in the community and in contributing to social-connectedness across cultural difference.



### *Membership survey findings*

Responses to survey questions revealed that The Philosopher’s Table was perceived, above all, as a social space in which to meet diverse people, share ideas across cultures, and take advantage of opportunities to learn from a variety of interesting speakers. That last point was buttressed by responses to the question asking respondents to state their preferences regarding future presentation topics. Those who noted a preference called for “variety” of speakers and activities. Thus it was apparent that most members evaluated the club primarily in terms of how it satisfied their expressive needs for sociability and establishing and maintaining relationships in the larger community.

To this point, *native English speakers’* most frequent responses regarding the club’s purpose referred to the organization as a space to meet people/bring people together or to its role of informing people about/promoting English culture.<sup>3</sup> Two respondents specifically described the group’s purpose as bringing together English and Italians/English-speaking Italians. Two mentioned the organization’s role in creating opportunities to speak to or help “the community.” Another noted that there are now many more non-native English speakers in Salento and that [the region] is more cosmopolitan than [it was] 30 or 40 years ago “so the organization should provide more variety.” The most frequent responses by *non-native English speakers* characterized the club as a space to meet people from different national backgrounds/bring people together, a place to share ideas/mutual interests/exchange opinions, a venue to learn about various topics, and as a site to “teach”/ “practice”/ “know more about” English language. Non-native English speakers also mentioned that the club facilitated intercultural and international learning and exchange, multicultural networking, socializing, meeting new people, and having fun.

The motives most frequently mentioned by *native English speakers* for why they participated in the club were that they enjoyed “meeting up” / “keeping up” with people and that the topics on which speakers presented appealed to them. Some wrote that their participation allowed them to “get to meet people I perhaps haven’t seen for a while,” “meet new people,” “get out of the house,” “keep up with acquaintances,” or to “stay close to my roots.” The motives most frequently mentioned by *non-native English speakers* for participation were practicing/improving/speaking English, and the interesting presentations. One wrote that the meetings enabled them “to develop cultural

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3. It is unclear whether by English culture respondents were referring to language or ethnicity.

awareness [...and...] to be attentive about another point of view.” On a similar note, another non-native English speaker wrote that the club helped them to “broaden my knowledge of international cultures.” Other motives included cross-cultural networking, meeting “people that I really appreciate,” “meeting important guests,” and making friends.

Respondents generally expressed satisfaction with monthly meetings, although the majority noted that they would also like to see more other types of activities in the mix. Regarding those activities, suggestions included group visits to important cultural sites and other excursions in Salento and its environs, social get-togethers such as group meals not necessarily linked to a presentation, and more films, a book club, and group games.

Most respondents referred to the need for growing the membership rolls with younger recruits. Several cited as a disadvantage the high number of seniors among current members (nearly three quarters are over age 60), but only half offered suggestions on how to do so. Those who did focused primarily on logistics (convenience of meeting location, days of the weeks and time of day), increasing the number of social meet-up opportunities, and some outreach strategies. Regarding how to increase sociality, respondents called for additional informal gatherings, launching a WhatsApp group, holding poetry readings, hosting informal performances by members (for example, acting out scenes from plays), and creating opportunities to sing in English with Italian translations of the songs on hand. Concerning outreach, respondents encouraged the group leadership to organize a helpline that members could turn to in emergencies, and hosting service-oriented activities. Comments about the group’s website addressed some of these same issues; suggestions for improvement also raised issues of interactivity, including expanding the site’s contents to include more kinds of contributions by more members. Some ideas proposed were an interactive club blog, updated photo galleries that included photographs of new members, and the creation of a new section for the website where members could ask for/give advice or share information.

Strikingly, many survey respondents’ suggestions for the committee referred to the desirability of cultivating greater community involvement. *Native English speakers* emphasized the need to do more for English learners in Salento. One suggestion was to offer prizes for top young English learners and perhaps to involve local businesses or other organizations in the activity. Another was to hold “English in the Piazza Day” featuring storytelling, games, and food. Several respondents encouraged the Committee to increase

advertising to include more outlets read regularly by locally born prospective members, such as Italian-language Facebook sites. Another proposed that honorary membership be extended to city officials because the involvement of city leaders might create new pathways for community involvement.

Responses by *non-native English speakers* emphasized the importance of using social media and advertising in Italian-language print and online outlets including the key local newspapers and magazines. A respondent suggested inviting a local newspaper reporter to cover some especially significant Philosopher’s Table events.

As a result of the survey, the club’s leadership committee learned a great deal about who their members were and their interests, including in how it might expand community reach and contribute to the good of the community. It was clear that both native English-speakers and non-native English speakers felt that nurturing cross-cultural relationships was a strength and draw of membership, and that members’ fluency in English was considered an underutilized asset that could serve the larger community.

### *Discussion*

Successful voluntary associations established with a specific purpose in mind need to be attentive to both participants’ perceived needs and to the stated goals that brought about the creation of the organization itself. This balancing act is not necessarily simple, nor can it be maintained if group leaders do not recognize the potential need for adjustments throughout the association’s life-cycle. Associations such as The Philosopher’s Table are among those most likely to face challenges in achieving this balance because, even when the stated mission of an organization serves as a fundamental reason for members having joined in the first place, continued member-benefit cannot be assumed. The fact remains that members expect returns that are non-monetary but important for their sustained participation. In the present case, hoped-for returns include establishing social relationships across cultural difference, and a sense of being part of and contributing to a multicultural community.

A member can, of course, quickly remove himself or herself from a club that they feel does not meet one’s needs. In this regard, for example, Sundblom *et al.* emphasize that the social dimension associated with the decision or choice to join a voluntary association is both an important resource and a potential cause for the group’s dissolution (2020: 15). The Philosopher’s Table leadership recognized the potential for the health crisis to affect the group’s

viability as members could not interact in the ways to which they had been accustomed. Club leaders' behavior at least implicitly revealed their belief that the group played a valuable role in promoting multicultural relations in Salento and that it was their responsibility to support that goal during the pandemic and beyond. Hence they took the novel step (for this organization) of creating a survey while they persisted in their quest to schedule monthly presentations and create a virtual space to reinforce social bonds throughout a difficult two-year period. During those dark days, the club was a social lifeline and diversion. On one evening, in fact, participants were offered the opportunity to engage in a pub quiz/trivia contest with teams and break-out rooms on Zoom. To be sure, every interaction, even on Zoom, was appreciated and praised by members.

The Philosopher's Table also took steps to address its continued viability by deploying its first survey, in which members as well as people who had decided not to join the club were encouraged to participate. Seeking the input of others – including non-members – was an affirmation of the notion that The Philosopher's Table is indeed part of a larger multicultural community.

In some ways, the Philosopher's Table has already succeeded. For example, many respondents suggested that hosting more activities was desirable given that knowing more about this area's rich history and culture should be of interest to anyone in the community. Since health restrictions on public gatherings were lifted, the club has organized museum outings, visits to local landmarks and emerging sites of interest, as well as some outdoor activities, and insured that they were publicized even more robustly than previously to the larger public. Each has been well attended by the English-speaking community which, as this note has explained, includes native speakers, Italians, and some other expatriate immigrants. Here we return to Harris's caution, mentioned earlier, regarding how the "need to give high priority to meeting individual members' needs [...] can make it difficult to maintain longer term vision [...] (Harris 1998: 147). The leadership of The Philosopher's Table, however, is playing the long game. Its vision includes expanding community-oriented activities as well as being attentive to "social interactional benefits such as friendship, mutual support, and exchange of news through their participation in meetings and activities" (1998: 148), while at the same time strengthening its role as an English-speaking resource to the community.

In a recent article on a community project that brought local residents and Syrian refugees together in Amsterdam for cultural and language exchanges,

Kim discussed the success of a Community Diner and a Language Café program. Kim stated that the diner and café projects were successful due to open discussions concerning the types of “programs to run and how to run them, what part each participant would play, and what material and other resources they could mobilize. In such discussions, newcomers and non-regular participants were invited to join [regularly participating] [...] local residents” (Kim 2022: 429). This discussion has presented early findings from a project on multicultural clubs in Puglia that also explores – albeit in a markedly different setting – how long-term members, newcomers, and non-regular participants in a multicultural club participated in a survey that brought to the fore and reinforced the importance of the group as a space to initiate and maintain highly valued cross-cultural social relationships and as a vehicle that brings unique value to a diverse community. The survey was designed to be inclusive. It was open to members and others who had participated in a club activity but chosen not to join, and respondents could comment in English or in Italian, notwithstanding that English is the club’s official language. The active steps taken by the Philosopher’s Table to assess where it stands and its own response given that information may be considered by other multicultural leisure associations when they too examine the importance of member-benefit and social integration. As this project unfolds, it will be instructive to compare the experiences of The Philosopher’s Table with similar groups in Italy and elsewhere that adopted different strategies in their quest to “survive the pandemic” and to compare future initiatives with those implemented during those very difficult years.

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No potential conflicts of interest were reported by the authors.

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