

2021

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Recommended Citation

Walter, Ofra (2021) "Walking on the Camino Paths: A Spiritual and Biopsychosocial Journey," *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*: Vol. 9: Iss. 6, Article 5.

doi:<https://doi.org/10.21427/x5xz-h817>

Available at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ijrtp/vol9/iss6/5>

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Walking on the Camino Paths: A Spiritual and Biopsychosocial Journey

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The Camino de Santiago is an ancient network of pilgrimage routes that lead to Santiago de Compostela in Spain. This qualitative study was conducted to explore contemporary pilgrims' experiences on the route. I walked the route for 14 days, interviewing other pilgrims about their reasons for taking the journey and their experiences while on it. The methodology thus involved gaining wisdom on two levels: the researcher's level and the participants' level. Nineteen people from various counties and of different ages consented to an interview. The participants expressed an interesting mix of biopsychosocial experiences. They mentioned self contemplation and spiritual experiences. The physicality and historical significance of their journey seemed to affect their decision making and their ability to cope. The analysis revealed three inter-related themes: social wellbeing, contemplation through the body, and spiritual wellbeing. Most were walking a historically religious path for secular reasons, but all sensed a connection between body and soul, spirituality and nature, fostered by the rhythms of the physical journey.

Key Words: contemplation through the body; biopsychosocial; spiritual wellbeing, spiritual journey

Introduction

Our modern world is full of stressors – more today than ever before, with people constantly connected to others through technology. The need to turn things off is becoming increasingly important, with many people turning to nature to find relief. An interesting solution to this contemporary dilemma is an age-old practice: a pilgrimage. For example, every year, thousands of people choose to walk the Camino de Santiago, an ancient network of pilgrimage routes leading to Santiago de Compostela in Spain.

Today's pilgrims have personal reasons rather than religious reasons to walk on the Camino. Some are simply seeking new experiences and new people; others may want to contemplate nature (Fernandes, Pimenta, Gonçalves, & Rachão, 2012; Lois-Gonzalez, 2013). On a more spiritual level, they may want an opportunity to turn inward to gain a better awareness of the self (Berger & McLeod, 2006). The Camino is also appreciated for its historical, religious, and cultural aspects (Murray, 2014). In fact, over the last few decades, the Camino has become a plural space where Christians, Jews, Muslims, and atheists coincide and where multiculturalism and diverse beliefs meet and overlap (Girish & Lee, 2020).

Work in anthropology, geography, sociology, and theology has discussed the nature of pilgrimages, but the field of psychology remains mostly silent on the topic. A pilgrimage is understood to be beneficial to the biological, psychological, social, and spiritual wellbeing of participants, but the reasons for taking the journey in the first place are less researched. This is surprising, as a spiritual journey, such as a pilgrimage, attracts people looking for ways to reconnect to themselves, to find quiet, to be in nature, and to connect to the inner self and the soul (Schroeder, 2010). Individuals often find spirituality without seeking overtly spiritual or religious places. Encounters with either God (Slater, 2004) or a new side of themselves (Sharpley & Jepson, 2011) can be found in a calming environment with room for thought and without daily stress. People looking for experiences of renewal grounded in a time-space set apart may turn to a pilgrimage; a common condition for renewal is a separation from the ordinary enacted through spatial separation (Little, 2012). Ultimately, the experience of the natural environment is multifaceted, affecting various psychological functions, such as perception, cognition, memory, emotion, and imagination (Rennyson, 2018). Accordingly, individual experiences vary significantly.

Although all pilgrims on the Camino follow the same paths, for example, and despite the set of common physical challenges, each person experiences events in a specific way, based largely on his or her reasons for taking the pilgrimage.

Elizabeth J. Tisdell (2013:300), a researcher into the connections of spirituality and cultural identity, says she had interviewed others on the pilgrimage experience before walking the nearly 500 miles of the Camino herself. The pilgrimage offered her an opportunity, she says, 'to critically reflect on my assumptions as ... a transformative learning advocate.' To this, she adds: 'I revisited and embodied some elements of my Irish-American Roman Catholic background.' By walking the Camino, she reconnected with a 'sense of a spirituality related to the land and to nature, that is so often lost in our computerized lives'. And she concludes:

We can do an academic study of wisdom, but real wisdom comes only from walking the journey of life and attending mindfully to the rhythms of nature, oneself, and others (Tisdell, 2013:300).

Otherwise stated, the event itself and the experience of it are both personal.

This article builds on this understanding and explores why people choose to take a modern day pilgrimage on the Camino de Santiago and how they perceive the walking experience. It listens to the narratives of pilgrims from various countries and asks what role the pilgrimage plays in their personal experiences of transformation. As the narratives reveal, the Camino offers a range of potential experiences which accommodate a plethora of expectations (Luik, 2012). A commonality is that many pilgrims focus on ideas of transformation and personal growth and link these to the physical challenges of the route. Through their pilgrimage, they develop individual meanings and frameworks to turn events and information into meaningful experiences that form coherent lifeworlds (Thorburn & Marshall, 2014).

Psychological Factors Involved in Walking the Camino

Walking is known to have many psychological benefits, including enhanced affective and cognitive functioning. More specifically, Bratman *et al.* (2015) and Thorburn and Marshall (2014) say affective benefits of walking include decreased anxiety, rumination, and negative

affect, and preservation of positive affect; other affective dimensions of environmental experiences more generally include emotion and mood (Schroeder, 2010). Meanwhile, cognitive benefits include increased working memory performance. A recent study found that walkers reported an enhanced positive motivational experience; achieving their goals, experiencing the scenery, enjoying the views and the natural environment, while interacting with other walkers, guides, and local people positively influenced the subjective outdoor leisure experience (Houge Mackenzie & Kerr, 2017). Outdoor activities in general are argued to invite participants to develop inner 'awareness, for empowerment and commitment' (Prince, 2017). Walking may lead to renewal or restoration, sometimes reviving and enlivening, sometimes calming and diffusing, as in the case of psychophysiological stress recovery; this, in turn, can result in

positive shifts in mood, decline in arousal, improved performance on tasks that require directed attention which enhance positive psychological effect (Hartig, 2003:103; see also Maddrell & Della, 2013).

As Tisdell notes,

Human beings were not meant to sit in front of a computer screen; they are meant to move! ... Moving/walking has a miraculous power to help heal the body and the spirit too, particularly when it is approached as a form of meditation on the present moment in every step (2013:297).

Put in other terms, the physical activity of walking allows reflection on the more-than-rational – for example, the 'shifting mood, tenor, colour or intensity of places and situations' (Wylie, 2005:236), in the company of others, without drifting into a form of 'tourism' and without losing the balance between subjectivity and objectivity. As Ingold and Vergunst (2008:2) say, walking 'is itself a way of thinking and of feeling.' Studies have reported that experiences of self-transformation, self-exploration and self-realisation can occur while participating in both adventurous activities and very mundane experiences (Brown, 2013; Kim & Jamal, 2007).

A pilgrimage is traditionally a religious practice, but as the above suggests, walking the Camino path can yield important psychological benefits beyond religious ones (Santos, 2002). Some define a pilgrimage as a journey beyond the self (Lopez *et al.*, 2017). It has also been defined as a reflective experience integrated into wellness

(Kurrat, 2019). A common goal is to achieve a sense of spirituality, distinct from traditional religious practices (Amaro *et al.*, 2018; Lopez *et al.*, 2017). As noted in the introduction, today's pilgrims may be atheists or agnostics, and they are likely to profess a variety of religious faiths (Christians, Muslims, Jews etc.) (Lois, 2013; Slavin, 2003). They may have chosen the Camino because of its religious history, but they do so to achieve individual spirituality (Moscarelli *et al.*, 2020; Nyaupane *et al.*, 2015). This is a free and creative experience, not a traditional pilgrimage (Amaro, Antunes & Henriques, 2018; Fernandes *et al.*, 2012). Aspects such as cultural interest (Bideci & Albayrak, 2016) and using landscapes to escape from the pressures of daily life (Lois-González & Santos, 2015) have also been mentioned as reasons for a pilgrimage, as has the desire for relaxation, self-reflection, contact with nature, and social interaction (Özdemir & Çelebi 2018).

Foley (2010) expands the notion of renewal by proposing the concept of time-spaces linking gendered, religious, and other norms. Winkelman and Dubisch say the following holds for both religious and secular forms of pilgrimage:

The opportunity to engage in a process of self-reflexivity combined with a connection with kindred spirits, promotes the assertion of true identity, enabling integration of [the] self in the process of connection and renewal (2005, xxi).

Environmental psychologists (e.g., Hartig 2003:103) have demonstrated how the sociophysical and temporal characteristics of the environment are available for renewal and restoration. Thus, walking on the Camino paths offers pilgrims a social, emotional, and physical opportunity, or, in other terms, a biopsychosocial experience. The biopsychosocial model was conceptualised by George Engel in 1977 (Dowling, 2005). The model suggests that to understand a person's medical condition, we must look beyond the biological factors and also consider the relevant psychological and social factors. The word can be broken down as follows: 'bio' stands for physiological pathology; 'psycho' represents thoughts emotions and behaviours such as psychological distress, fear / avoidance beliefs, current coping methods and attribution; 'social' indicates socio-economical, socio-environmental, and cultural factors such as work issues, family circumstances, and benefits / economics. This study takes a biopsychosocial approach to explore contemporary pilgrims' experiences on the

Camino route, their reasons for taking the journey, and their experiences. It is based on the understanding that the practice of walking fosters phenomenological processes of coming-into-being (Solnit, 2001). Notably, it includes the researcher in the methodology, as I walked the paths with my subjects.

Method

In this exploratory qualitative study, I assessed the psychological and social impact of the walking experiences of pilgrims from different countries while they were on the Camino route, specifically along the Way of Saint to James Santiago de Compostela Cathedral. In July 2019, during the 14 days I spent walking on the Camino, I met many pilgrims. I interviewed 19 walkers of different ages and from various countries. When I met them, I asked if they would consent to an interview. The interview was recorded only after the individual agreed to participate and had signed a consent form. Six were from England (age range 20-50 years), six from Italy (age range 30-67 years), one from Bulgaria (aged 21 years), one from Sweden (aged 40 years), one from Israel (aged 54 years), one from Spain (aged 35 years), and three from the USA (age range 40-55 years).

Conducting the interviews while walking and meeting other pilgrims opened up the opportunity to focus on 'doing' as well as 'being'. The methodology of the research was learning through being in nature. In the semi-structured interviews, I asked two questions. First, what made you start your journey on the Camino? Second, can you describe your experience on the Camino? I recorded the conversations. The recordings were transcribed, and the data were analysed using conventional thematic content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), with coding categories directly derived from the textual data of the interviews.

Findings

The interview data shed light on why people had chosen to take this ancient pilgrimage route and what they experienced. Although most mentioned self-contemplation and spiritual experiences, they explained these in different ways. For most, if not all, the physicality and historical significance of their journey affected their decision making and their coping. The analysis revealed three inter-related themes: social wellbeing, contemplation through the body, and spiritual wellbeing.

Social journey – the Camino family

The pilgrimage comprised an invitation to interact and share with others and, by so doing, to increase personal wellbeing. Abbate and Nuovo (2013) find that Camino travellers are highly motivated by 'self and socialization'. Indeed, even though I found the primary context of the Camino pilgrimage was self-exploration, my interviewees often mentioned being exposed to those from different cultures and explained how this opened up their understanding. Unplanned meetings led to the spontaneous creation of a sense of family, as walkers were given opportunities for socialisation with no limitations of space. This, in turn, enhanced their sense of wellbeing and seemed to generate decision making.

One pilgrim explained her decision-making about what to do next in her life was possible because

Camino is a family. There is simplicity, direct connection, strong and immediate connections are formed.

A man travelling with his family said,

We just loved it; we met so many people so many people from all the parts of the world. They have a valid reason to come ... it's uplifting. It's a bubble; yeah, it's a bubble. You can put away all you do in daily life.

Another commented:

I noted that it is a tradition in Camino to sit together with people from different parts of the world to feel together and one, and language is not an obstacle.

My interviewees highlighted the connections between walking through nature and social wellbeing, seeing the Camino paths as a place where they were not hampered by concerns of time and space and, as such, could concentrate on the immediate experience of being with others. Sharing the walking experiences led to introspection, as people achieved a sense of spirituality by sharing. Sharing also led to understanding others from a wider international perspective. According to Brown (2013), and Kim and Jamal (2007), walking on the Camino paths gives pilgrims the opportunity to participate with others in rituals, events, and celebrations and thus gain insights into their own lives and the lives of others.

Contemplation through the body

For the most part, people had chosen to walk the Camino so they could take time to think and to be away from the things in their lives that were causing stress. Their contemplation was linked with the physical challenges; walking more than 20 kilometres a day on sometimes difficult trails triggered an emotional reaction. According to Rennyson (2018), these physical challenges open a way to explore and experience events in a specific way. Indeed, for some pilgrims I talked to, the physical experience triggered memories and contemplation.

One pilgrim told me that on the first day he met Italian pilgrims while having dinner. He said the meal was

flooded with emotions, evoking feelings from past childhood, fears, and anxieties while reflecting on the trekking day.

He shared his experience of physical difficulty, noting one particular place on the path and explaining its link with cognition:

In one of the area paths where the route is flat and deceptive in relation to the distance, it created mental distress that the distance was not over. Coping was extremely challenging.

The difficulties related to walking for a long distance over rough terrain seemed to link body and mind in the moment, allowing pilgrims to reflect on their attitudes to life. One said the following:

I appreciated and recognised the fact that I love what I do. I realise I need to be more attentive to myself, as walking when my legs get tired and ask for rest. I need to understand the meaning of the universe and nature of which I am a part and need to listen to changes and adapt myself.

In a sense, contemplation through the body on the Camino formed a space for decision making and offered a way to cope with stress. Bratman *et al.* (2015) argue that pilgrims complete a series of personal psychological assessments by walking in nature; as a result, their anxiety decreases, and their working memory increases. This, in turn, enables decision making, something echoed by my interviewees. They said the walk helped them to create a space to make decisions, with many expressing the sense of being at a personal or professional crossroads. One commented,

I went out to Camino to find out for myself if this is the track and profession I want, I'm undecided.

A pilgrim from Italy said she moved to England for three years to improve her financial situation and meet new people, but was disappointed when friends in Italy did not keep in touch:

Now I am back home in Italy and before deciding where to go, I decided to walk on a Camino to think and find the way.

Another mentioned decision making and his sense of the pilgrimage as a turning point:

This is the second time I have done the Camino ... [It is] a trip made during a break between stages. Before starting work.

Many used the pilgrimage to deal with varied life stresses. One interviewee told me,

Going on a Camino eight times helps me to return to balance and to be able to cope with life.

Another shared,

I live in Aroma and I have one child. I have a big house. That's a lot of stress Walking the Camino enables me to relax.

Another source of stress was technology; one pilgrim commented,

Trekking on the Camino enables me to be away from technology which causes stress.

To this, he added:

I don't have email on my phone and so to come up here I love the space and this talking to people, meeting people, unexpected people.... I just love the space that I have here and ... this time my phone is off now and it's quiet ... it's a helpful way to help my job to do my job better but I need this space.

Ultimately, as my interviewees suggested and as Slavin (2003) notes, walking as a contemplative practice creates possibilities for 'wayfinding, pathclearing, and interbeing'. Otherwise stated, the contemplative inquiry set in motion by the physical environment of the Camino path became a space wherein pilgrims could reflect on and embody what mattered most in their lives as they unfolded in the present moment.

Spiritual wellbeing

Walking on the Camino paths involved a feeling of spiritual wellbeing and openness, closely connected with the physical space. In effect, the physical space and the simplicity of each day's task (completing that day's route) opened a space for spirituality. Lee and Ingold (2000) suggest an explanation for the spirituality elicited by walking. Walkers, they say, can simultaneously look outwards to perceive their surroundings in a detailed way and turn inwards to the realm of thoughts and the self. I found this to be the case on the Camino; one pilgrim said the following to me:

There's not much time to think what you're going to do. You just think about how far you're going to walk each day, its place. Your mind dissolves a lot of space and [you] reflect. In the church I go to back home, it's busy in the church.... I see a lot of people in the church. We catch up with people, so there's no time for yourself. The Camino is special for me. I can do whatever I like [and it's] different for everyone.

Another explained how the achievement of reflection and spirituality was more possible on the Camino route than at home:

I wanted to take time and reflect. I often can take time [but] even if you go to the woods, to the park, it's not the same time. You can be there for a few hours but then you back to life to your life. We're here in the Camino; there is not much thinking about daily life. ... You can reflect on your life, reflect on the moment. When you go to the church back home, it's, of course, quiet in the church, but it's busy. There's a lot of people ... and Sundays, you see a lot of people catch up with people, so it's not like that. In a sense, you don't have time for yourself.

Some clearly linked personal spirituality with the path's religious history:

I chose to trek in the Camino to have inspiration and possibility to reflect on my life in a historical religious pilgrimage.

In a similar vein, one pilgrim said:

We heard about the Camino. We wanted to experience the spiritual, why walking is like a kind of meditation.

A related reason to walk on the Camino was to express gratitude for some major event. A pilgrim said to me:

My son has cancer and has undergone treatments, I promised a force majeure that if my son recovers I will go on a Thanksgiving journey.

Others had chosen to walk on these historical paths to reflect on their losses. One woman said she was widowed at the age of 30:

I have no children, and I am afraid of new relationships. In Camino, I find peaceful peace and the ability to deal with emotions and thoughts.

In tears, another shared the following:

My son died in an accident and left me a grandson.

For these and many others, walking opened a door onto spirituality. A woman said she saw a movie mentioning the Camino and thought one day she would do the route. Two years ago, her husband died of cancer and heart problems, and she decided to make a journey of some kind. Then, she remembered the Camino. For her, this was a spiritual journey connecting her to the memory of her husband. She also mentioned its connection to religion and tradition. Interestingly, none of my interviewees mentioned religious reasons for the pilgrimage, but most commented on a personal spiritual journey and had chosen Camino because of its history as a religious pilgrimage route.

One pilgrim said the experience took him out of depression:

I underwent a significant transformation from a state of loss, thinking about suicide and unwillingness to live, I decided to go to the Camino in despair. During the walk, I aroused a desire to live and a belief in myself, and a belief in the universe.

Another pilgrim shared the following:

[When] we started the Camino [it] was very stressful at home ... and it was hectic I wanted to put everything away.... I want to feel wellbeing in a different atmosphere and be focused only on walking in spirituality because I'm able to connect to myself, not to think about anything, just to be in the simple life, simplicity.

For these walkers, the simplicity of the physical journey fostered insights and helped them move from a place of unhappiness to one of acceptance, even happiness. Walking the Camino offered a calming environment away from home and daily life, it created room for thought and without daily stress. Trekking on the Camino offered an unexpected opportunity for spirituality without seeking spiritual or religious places. Camino walkers find a new side of themselves (Sharpley & Jepson, 2011) and a different way to reflect and solve or cope with problems by enabling them to be in the present in a state of mindfulness.

Conclusion

This article explores why 19 pilgrims chose the Camino path and how they perceived the walking experience. Most people I spoke to explained the long walk as spiritual in one way or another. For example, they talked about reconnecting with themselves and engaging in a transformative journey, away from the stress of everyday life. The physical challenges focused them and attuned them to the experience in a specific way: they took the opportunity to reflect on issues in their lives, resolve problems or rejoice about happy events, and make new decisions. Their narratives showed an interesting mix of physical, spiritual, and social experiences in a landscape full of spiritual history. Egan (2010) argues that people are attracted to historical spiritual journeys as a way to reconnect to themselves, to find quiet, and be in nature (Brown, 2013; Kim & Jamal, 2007). My findings support those of these earlier studies.

Interestingly, despite the Camino's history as a religious pathway, I found little evidence of religious motivations among my interviewees. According to Collins-Kreiner (2010), the paradigm of pilgrimage predicated on religious elements no longer holds. Now, there are two forms of pilgrimage: the religious and the secular. Yet even though my interviewees could be described as walking for mostly secular reasons, their recounted experiences often sounded religious, albeit not in a formal religious context. According to Singh (2005), a pilgrimage can be defined as traveling for communion with a specific, non-substitutable physical site that embodies and makes manifest the religious, cultural, or personal values of the individual. In other words, the traveller believes a certain physical site embodies some powerful, mystical quality (Digance, 2011). By being at the sacred site and touching the sacred, the traveller will

be transformed, cleansed, renewed, or reborn in some important way (Hyde & Harman, 2011). For example, one pilgrim talked about depression and looking for a way out; he said the pilgrimage was transformative in this context.

According to Egan (2011), today's pilgrimages are removed from their medieval religious origins in time, meaning, and practice to appeal to contemporary walkers who are exploring the contours of a more earthly experience. Instead of a specifically religious experience, Im and Jun (2015) argue that pilgrims experience 'mediation and spirituality' in time, space, body, and human relations. Walking connects people to their bodily space and time in a spiritual space. Walking the Camino path has even been described as a ritual of a postponed and open final ending, where the walkers ritually bring their temporary quest to a satisfactory close every day (Schöne & Groschwitz, 2014). In effect, the pilgrims I met walking on the Camino reconnected body and soul in a spiritual and natural world fostered by the slow daily rhythms structuring the physical journey. As a result, in many ways, their journeys can be considered the narrative adjustment of their present social practices.

My interviewees equally emphasised the social aspect of the journey. They pointed to a sharing experience with a diversity of pilgrims from varied religions and cultures who chose to walk on the Camino paths for a variety of reasons. These unplanned meetings created important familial connections where walkers shared a spiritual bond that went beyond their individual differences. As my interviewees suggested, sharing one's experiences with others in this type of situation can lead to reflection on the more-than-rational (Wylie, 2005). My interviewees seemed to use their encounters with others as a springboard into personal reflection, appreciating their fellow pilgrims as members of an *ad hoc* but important family.

As a final note, I should add that my methodological approach incorporated me as the researcher into the method. I was a researcher, looking at the experiences of others and also walking the journey of life and attending mindfully to the rhythms of nature, myself, and others. Unlike Elizabeth J. Tisdell (2013), I am not highlighting my personal journey as a pilgrim on the Camino. I am more concerned with the experiences of my interviewees. However, the importance of my inclusion in the Camino spiritual family cannot be entirely discounted.

Limitations and recommendations for future research

This study was exploratory; I was walking on the Camino and occasionally met other walkers who consented to an interview. These data were collected at a specific time – during my own journey in the Camino. Walking at another time may have exposed me to other walkers with other experiences, which may have affected the study results. Future research should include pilgrims at different times and in different stages of the Camino, to reveal more diverse experiences and to deepen the understanding of the biopsychosocial experiences of making a pilgrimage along the Camino paths. It would also be useful to increase the number of participants to test the results of this study.

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