



Adventure and Spiritual Restoration: Older Adult Motivations for Undertaking a Pilgrimage on El Camino de Santiago

Holly Nelson-Becker, Joseph G. Pickard & Florian Sichling

To cite this article: Holly Nelson-Becker, Joseph G. Pickard & Florian Sichling (2023): Adventure and Spiritual Restoration: Older Adult Motivations for Undertaking a Pilgrimage on El Camino de Santiago, Journal of Gerontological Social Work, DOI: [10.1080/01634372.2023.2181906](https://doi.org/10.1080/01634372.2023.2181906)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01634372.2023.2181906>



© 2023 The Author(s). Published with license by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC.



Published online: 21 Feb 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)






View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Adventure and Spiritual Restoration: Older Adult Motivations for Undertaking a Pilgrimage on El Camino de Santiago

Holly Nelson-Becker ^{a,b}, Joseph G. Pickard ^c, and Florian Sichling ^c

^aDivision of Social Work, Dept. of Health Sciences, Brunel University London, London, UK; ^bSchool of Social Work, Loyola University Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, USA; ^cSchool of Social Work, University of Missouri-St Louis, St. Louis, Missouri, USA

ABSTRACT

A pilgrimage is an intentional journey that can increase well-being. Historically completed for religious purposes, aims in contemporary times may include religious, spiritual, or humanistic benefits and appreciation of culture and geography. This quantitative and qualitative survey research explored motivations of a sample of 111 people age 65 and over from a larger study who completed the Camino de Santiago de Compostela in Spain. Consistent with life course and developmental theories, some respondents walked at life decision points. Sixty percent of the analysed sample were from Canada, Mexico and the US. Nearly 42% were non-religious while 57% were Christian. Five key themes emerged: challenge and adventure, spirituality and intrinsic motivation, cultural or historical interest, recognition of life experiences and gratitude, and relationships. The Santiago pilgrimage counters a narrative of aging as diminishment through positioning identity, ego integrity, friendships and family, spirituality, and positive physical challenge at the center of aging.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 6 December 2022
Revised 13 February 2023
Accepted 14 February 2023

KEYWORDS

Aging; spirituality; resilience; pilgrimage; Camino; transformation

Pilgrimages developed out of a desire for deeper connection to, exploration of, and even devotion to, religious ideas (Amaro, Antunes, & Henriques 2018; Hall et al., 2018). The modern distinctions between motivations for religious and secular pilgrimages are not necessarily clearcut, since they carry overlapping meanings ranging from curiosity to a sense of deep purpose (Collins-Kreiner, 2016; Nelson-Becker, (2018).). Further, the landscapes of pilgrimage continue to merge the intersections of people and place; many pilgrimages sites are associated with a religious saint who left a mark there, or people who have died there, or an event that transpired there, as well as the people who continue to visit (Badone & Roseman, 2004; Di Giovine & Choe, 2019). Older adults increasingly make room for this path to well-being, but it has been little explored.

CONTACT Holly Nelson-Becker  hnelson-becker@brunel.ac.uk  Division of Social Work, Dept. of Health Sciences, Brunel University London, London, UK

© 2023 The Author(s). Published with license by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

The concept of place and its meaning is closely connected to the purpose of the journey. The reasons for a choice of site to which one might journey may include a nexus point of place and purpose or one of the two separate features of person and place. The pilgrimage site and the tourist/visitor are involved in a mutual interrogation of layered meanings sweetened, or occasionally marred, by time (e.g. when a pilgrimage site is damaged). The ways in which individuals interact with the destination site is explained by a spectrum of responses not all of which are positive, including those who experience awe, sense of the sacred, disappointment, or annoyance (Smith, 2018).

There are three, interconnected, key parts of a pilgrimage experience: the motivation or desire to undertake the experience (motivation), the experience of the travel (the journey), and the end or outcome (destination) (Liutikas, 2017; Lois-González & Santos, 2015). We would suggest that the most important consequence extends beyond the immediate outcome of arriving at the destination, and results, often through reflection, in a changed life. Priorities may be revisited, new practices and relationships may be sought or integrated into daily life, career paths may be modified, disturbed, or harmonized with values – in short, any number of new directions begun. Even returning to objective reality of one's life will carry new possibilities. The larger outcome may not be connected to the motivation for the journey, since the element of surprise and novel unexpected events may alter one's course. Yet the motivation that leads to creating the space to follow a pilgrimage path and spend the resources necessary, as well as the inspiration and preparation, may each affect the result. The opportunity to strengthen identity, search for authentic experience, and satisfy existential or spiritual purpose increase the appeal of a pilgrimage (Liutikas, 2017; Nilsson & Tesfahuney, 2016).

The history and nature of the Camino

El Camino de Santiago is an ancient pilgrimage route in Northern Spain. It includes various routes, each ending in the town of Santiago de Compostela, field of stars, at the Archcathedral Basilica in Galicia. El Camino is one of the major Christian pilgrimages. Beginning in the 1980s, El Camino saw an increase in pilgrims traveling its many paths to Santiago (Oviedo et al., 2014). For example, in 2006, 125,758 pilgrims were received at the Pilgrim's Welcome Office, and in 2018, 327,378 pilgrims were received, which are likely conservative estimates as not all pilgrims report to the Pilgrim's Welcome Office upon arrival (Oficina de Acogida al Peregrino, 2019).

While a pilgrim could be any person who travels with the goal of arriving at a place of personal import and is doing so intentionally, with purpose, to experience a sort of transformation, or to be authentic in some way (Greenia, 2018), for this paper, the term pilgrim refers to those who undertook a journey to a sacred place (Amaro et al., 2018). The purpose of this study is to describe

and interpret older people's (age 65 and older) self-reported reasons for having completed a pilgrimage on El Camino de Santiago.

Theoretical influences for pilgrimage

Life course theory provides a complimentary background layer with its interest in social roles, timing of lives, and confluences of culture and history (Bengston & Allen, 1993). In contemporary times active parenting of dependents is mostly completed at older ages. For some, there is opportunity to pursue goals which were either deferred from earlier years or which have arisen at this life stage. Sociohistorical and geographic location may be additional factors in the decision and timing of walking the Camino. It is accessible in a country not plagued by modern warfare, and is culturally and geographically interesting.

Aging affords choice points to older people as well as some conditions or situations that may be thrust upon them, such as personal illness or disability and loss or death of significant others. The constellation of life events under which they live is uniquely their own (Erikson & Erikson, 1997). In the second half of life, and especially at age 65 or older, people may seek to resolve and understand their own life experiences with an ultimate goal of meaning making and integration of their life story. If these challenges are successfully mastered, then wisdom may be the outcome. Walking the Camino is one way to recalibrate for the remaining years ahead and attempt to make sense of times past.

These later years can allow new paths for self-actualization, as people endeavor to meet complex needs for meaning and purpose and self-transcendence, moving beyond past limitations (Maslow, 1968). The way of the pilgrimage, no matter how long or short, has traditionally been noted for the physical hardship it may bestow on those who take up the challenge. It is difficult to foresee and prepare for the physical endurance required when it is lengthy or demands crossing steep elevations. Additionally, those who sleep in the open plan of the albergue, a refugio, or shelter, may find sleep disturbed despite all the benefits of forming ad hoc communities. However, in that process – and consistent with whatever goal with which one begins – finishing marks achievement. From the process of taking the first step, the way unfolds and brings with it new meanings as the adventurer progresses. One re-visions oneself in the eyes of others, both giving and receiving simultaneously, transparently, and wholly with other pilgrims.

Traveling the Camino may bring about a shift to gerotranscendence (Tornstam, 2005). In this view, some aging individuals restructure their lives with a more integrated sense of past, present, and future as well as death with life, and achieve a lessened sense of ego. Individuals form a cosmic view of the micro- and macro-worlds and their connected nature. The self is transformed

through a type of awakening where one glimpses how he/she might live differently (Thomas, 1997). This individual moves into a process of destabilization of his former ordinary living toward stabilization into an illumined state and ultimately transformed consciousness (Thomas, 1997; Tornstam, 2005). This transformed individual becomes an asset to his/her wider community. Participation in the Camino may help individuals connect with a more generative and cosmic focus out of a previous materialistic/individual one. All that is ahead is the day and faith in the walk to satisfy the unknown or invisible longing of the heart. Expectations for the Camino experience serve as motivator and the experience itself is the outcome.

Prior studies

Several recent studies have addressed the question of motivation for a pilgrimage, but few have considered experiences of older people. The Camino is considered one of the first modern Western sites to be reclaimed from medieval pilgrimages and thus can serve as an exemplar for the resurgence in popularity of the pilgrimage trend. There are a mix of reasons for pilgrims to undertake the journey and some of these reasons are especially important for the tourist industry (Amaro et al., 2018). Because traveling for religious reasons is required to receive the pilgrim's certificate, or *Compostela*, which is a notable remembrance of the walk, it is likely that reasons given by the Pilgrim's Welcome Office in Santiago do not fully capture all motivations (Amaro et al., 2018). Further it is acknowledged that the route itself is more important than the cathedral destination, since one must have the passport stamps along the way to receive the certificate. Attending a religious service at the Santiago cathedral is not enough, nor even required, to merit this credential. Amaro et al. (2018) looked only at empirical studies of those who undertook a journey to a pilgrimage site, not visiting the site itself, an important distinction. They reviewed other studies of Santiago pilgrim motivations. In their online survey of 1,140 individuals of whom 30% were Portuguese (45 nations were represented), 25 items were categorized into 8 dimensions. In order of endorsement, these were spiritual aspects, new experiences, cultural reasons, sports and nature, meeting new people, escape from routine, religious motivations, and fulfilling promises.

In ancient times veneration, the possibility of healing, and expression of redemption from sin were reasons for pilgrimage travel (Chemin, 2011), but with the Reformation, numbers dwindled from the 16th century until a resurgence in the 1950s. Today pilgrimage provides an opportunity for recreation and travel for religious, spiritual, and personal reasons. The two different types are not always antagonistic. Heritage tourism finds pilgrims joining with the religious history of the place, even if momentarily, suggesting that neither purpose may be exclusive. For example, in another quantitative

study, 85 primarily German Santiago pilgrims were contacted through internet platforms (Schnell & Pali, 2013). Ages ranged to 70 with a median of 32 and SD of 13. Findings indicated that 66% chose to travel the Camino due to a crisis or need for clarification in their life, 57% for spiritual or religious reasons, and 44% for athletic reasons.

Whether pilgrimage tourism constitutes a resurgence of interest in spirituality and religion is unclear (Nilsson & Tesfahuney, 2016; Oviedo et al., 2014). Some pilgrims travel toward the center of their society fully as spiritual pilgrims, especially in countries where political and religious centers meld, other pilgrim-tourists travel to places excentric to their normal journeys while retaining spiritual purpose, yet others who travel to distant cultures are more likely to do so because of motivations as a traveler-tourist (Cohen, 1992). In this schema, the pilgrim was viewed as more likely to journey to a sociocultural center and the tourist away from it to the periphery.

Another way of categorizing motivations for a pilgrimage are internal lures for travel and external appeals due to factors intrinsic to the place such as might be found at memorials or birthplaces of influential figures. In a study of nonreligious reasons for a pilgrimage to a monastery over the previous two years (Drule et al., 2012), 87% of 1,648 respondents had multiple reasons, but 60% expressed, at least in part, religious motivations. The desire to be a better person was listed as a non-religious motivation. In another study of non-religious pilgrim motivations in a sample of 190 bus travelers visiting a war memorial in Gallipoli, paying respects had positive effects on shared values, emotions, and satisfaction with the experience (Hall et al., 2018). Like other tourist sites, pilgrimages are versatile enough to accommodate a range of purposes (Lopez et al., 2017). In reality, pilgrims travel together regardless of their motivations (Oviedo et al., 2014), and separate motivations may be entangled.

Methods

Data and sample

Data for this study were gathered using an online survey of people who completed El Camino de Santiago. With various pilgrims' feedback and study authorization #2036282

from the University of Missouri-St. Louis IRB, we disseminated the survey via multiple Facebook groups, through networks of friends and other researchers, and in various pilgrimage interest group newsletters. This approach resembles a snowball sampling strategy with multiple starting points, in order to avoid sampling from the same network (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). The survey was completed online using the Qualtrics platform. The questionnaire was in English with the option to use the Qualtrics

Table 1. Description of Sample ($N = 111$).

Variable	Operationalization	Mean (SD)	Frequency
Age	Continuous in years, range 65–82	68.8 (3.8)	
Gender	Dichotomous: 1=male 2=female		1 = 49.5% 2 = 50.5%
Marital status	Categorical: 1=single 2=divorced, or separated 3=married 4=widowed		1 = 9.9% 2 = 18.9% 3 = 62.2% 4 = 9%
Country of Origin	Categorical: 1=US and Mexico 2=Canada 3=Other UK 4=Other European 5=Australia/New Zealand 6=Other		1 = 49.5% 2 = 9.0% 3 = 15.3% 4 = 6.3% 5 = 14.4% 6 = 5.4%
Highest Education Level	Categorical: 1=Less than HS 2=HS Degree 3=Some College 4=Bachelor's Degree 5=Graduate/Professional Degree (e.g. JD, MD)		1 = 0.9% 2 = 3.6% 3 = 12.6% 4 = 31.5% 5 = 51.3%
Income	Income category, range 1–13	7.8 (3.5)	
Number of Caminos Completed	Range = 1–6	2.3 (1.8)	
How Religious Are You	Range 1–4: 1=Not Religious at All – 4=Very Religious	2.3 (1.0)	
How Spiritual Are You Religion	Range 1–4: 1=Not Spiritual at All – 4=Very Spiritual Categorical: 0=No Religion 1=Christian, not Catholic 2=Christian, Catholic 4=Other	3.2 (7.)	1 = 41.4% 2 = 30.6% 3 = 26.2% 4 = 1.8%

translation feature. We donated \$1 to American Pilgrims on the Camino for each completed survey up to 250. Though anticipated to be a smaller, uniquely American survey, our dissemination strategy resulted in 461 participants (ages 20–82) from 32 countries. The findings reported in this paper are based on a subset that resulted in 121 respondents ages 65 and over during the five months from November 2017 to April 2018; 111 pilgrims responded to the qualitative portion of the survey. Demographic data from the sample are shown in Table 1.

Qualitative analysis

The survey included 10 open-ended questions that explored themes such as motivations to do a pilgrimage, expectations, experiences and challenges during the pilgrimage, as well as what participants gained from their experience. The analysis for this paper focused on the responses to the question exploring the motivation of the respondents to undertake a pilgrimage and the related question about the presence and nature of any spiritual intention.

Reflexive thematic analysis was completed using Braun and Clarke's (2019) deepened discussion of their method. More than data domains, this approach consists of thoughtful engagement with the data that results in interpretative stories of shared meaning that acknowledge researcher assumptions, skill, and the data. Initial coding remained very close to the data, consisting primarily of paraphrasing responses, and became more conceptual, reflecting our growing understanding of the data.

For example, our initial codes included a code for spirituality that denoted responses describing a religious motivation for undertaking a pilgrimage. But as our analysis continued, a broader theme emerged that also included notions of self-discovery, self-reflection, and a search for a deeper understanding of human nature. We merged the code for spirituality into a broader code we designated as "Spirituality and Intrinsic Motivation" that reflected a wider range of respondent experiences.

Regular data meetings between the PI and the Research Assistant were used to discuss emerging themes and patterns as well as larger conceptual codes. In order to ensure authenticity of our findings and guard against analytic bias, early results were shared with several survey participants with an opportunity to provide feedback and comments. Respondents often provided more than one reason for undertaking this particular pilgrimage, and the same person could be found in more than one category. All the 65 and over individuals who responded are represented in at least one theme; there were 10 non-responses for this question, so they were dropped, for an analysis of 111.

Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore the reasons that older people gave for undertaking a pilgrimage on El Camino de Santiago. Using thematic analysis, we identified five major themes in responses and each participant often identified more than one rationale: 1. challenge and adventure (64 respondents); 2. spirituality and intrinsic motivation (60 respondents); 3. cultural or historical interest (41 respondents); 4. recognition of life experiences and gratitude (34 respondents); and 5. relationships (24 respondents). Within each of these themes were enfolded multiple perspectives. Seventy-seven of the 111 qualitative respondents responded to an ensuing question that they walked with a spiritual intention; thirty-five individuals left this blank or responded negatively, though some responses belied this. One reported he was a Catholic priest walking with no spiritual intention (#87, US, male, age 69). Another related, "No, but I hoped for and indeed experienced a spiritual dimension" (#50, South Africa, male, age 65). Spiritual intention responses sometimes elaborated earlier responses. "I usually carry stones representing the intentions of others: those in need, a death and funeral or a wedding

I would miss, in solidarity with someone's illness or loss of a loved one" (#34, US, male, age 67).

Challenge and adventure (64)

The excitement associated with a new challenge and adventure enticed many people to the Camino and were endorsed by 64 study participants, topping other categories. Of these, four people reported starting the journey simply because of broad curiosity, without much explanation. Adventure was defined as an opportunity to encounter new experience. The following participants expressed a motivation similar to other respondents. "Because I wanted to challenge myself, [have] an adventure" (#17, US, female, age 69). [I wanted a] "general challenge for myself, to understand myself, and life more" (#29, Australia, female, age 70). "I wanted to prove to myself that I could undertake a major physical/mental challenge at my age," related (#74, UK, male, age 67). "I wanted to prove that I could walk a long way and I wondered about whether my lapsed Catholicism would change," suggested a 66-year-old Australian male (#92).

Ideas of mental and physical challenge, personal challenge, or surviving outside one's zone of familiarity were prevalent. "Suffering depression and remembered about the Camino, so I thought I would go," wrote a 68-year-old Australian male (#40), as a possible remedy to his mood. "The reasons varied with each pilgrimage, but largely they were about the emotional and spiritual growth that comes from adventurous travel" (#66, Australia, male, age 65). A 66-year-old New Zealander female (#121) explained, "To take myself out of my comfort zone to see if I could complete the Camino physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. It was tough but I did it!" The participant below expressed several motivating factors, centering mainly around place and the opportunity for an active work leave.

I had always wanted to go, having read much about Camino Frances, and an opportunity came to allow me time off work. I fancied the 'freedom,' exercise, and self-input to complete it. I love hiking and exploring. I love nature. I love Spain and did not know that area and wanted to know it. (#106, UK, female, age 69)

Spirituality and intrinsic motivation (60)

Feeling a call to the Camino and/or a spiritual purpose were expressed by 60 participants.

Walking as inner calling

Spirituality or an intrinsic motivation encapsulated a key area. This was unsurprising given the historical connection of this walk to Catholic history.

This tends to begin as an intuitive affinity for exploring, developing, or understanding something, the reasons for which lie just beyond consciousness. It was an inner experience participants found difficult to explain yet knew mattered.

I wanted to feel a spiritual experience of some sort, though I had no idea what that might look like. I felt a strong ‘call,’ even a Divine ‘threat,’ a voice in my head saying that if I didn’t walk the Camino that year (after wanting to walk for ten years) that ‘my life would be forfeit.’ That finally motivated me to move forward and devise a plan of action. (#20, US, female, age 66)

Eleven people in this sample describe their motivation as a “need” to do it, “a call,” an “inner compulsion,” “a strong pull,” or being “inspired” to go that was influenced by reading books about Spain, the latter a response from #49, a 68-year-old Canadian male. “I felt compelled to go, as soon as I could. Then, having experienced it, had a strong desire to go again (different routes),” mused a 77-year-old Englishwoman. “

I felt an inexplicable inner compulsion to walk the Camino. It was like an inner calling, much as one experiences a vocational call. That was true for my first Camino. For my second Camino, it was a deliberate choice, wanting to re-experience the joys of the first one and wanting to reconnect with friends from my first Camino who walked with me on my second one, recounted a 75-year-old female. (#5)

A 74-year-old Australian female reflected, “An inexplicable calling. Strange, because I am not a physically active or particularly fit person, but I knew I had to do it” (58). The word “calling” suggests particular vocational or avocational functions and also carries an overtone of an inner inclination for which the origin may be mysterious or not known to the person experiencing it. It further suggests that divine influence may play a role. In his book, *The Call to Social Work*, for example, LeCroy (2012) categorizes interviews with social workers as addressing themes of personal mission, ethics and justice, meaning, compassion, healing and building community. All of these themes would similarly find place for most who walked the Camino in our study.

Spiritual purpose

Some participants disclosed specific contexts affecting their purpose in doing the walk and how they chose to walk it.

I did [have a specific purpose] on my second Camino. The son of my dearest friend had been diagnosed with stage 4 adrenal carcinoma and given a month to a year to live. I walked praying and hoping that the spiritual power of pilgrims praying on the Camino for centuries might be tapped. (#5, US, female, age 75)

Others revealed a practical theology that may have involved stepping back to take a wider view of the world and their place in it: “I want to understand life more, to simplify life, to sort out what’s important, to find ways to be content

with this life, to be more philosophical about hardship, to not ‘sweat the small stuff’” (#29, Australian female, age 70). “I was invited to go with a friend; I wanted a time to discern prayerfully the next step in life for me,” suggested a respondent who included companionship in his aim (#78, US, male, age 66).

Another spiritual motivation commonly expressed was worship and “regaining a sense of wonder I previously had” (#51, US, female, age 65). “I wanted to spend some time being quiet before the Lord and worship Him with my husband. We walked together, prayed together. At home I attend a Pentecostal Church, and he was a Catholic” (#53, South Africa, female, age 67). This account included hope and a plan for spiritual reconnection with a partner.

Others included mention of how they walked. “I felt that, being solitary and silent much of the time, it was a great help to communicate with God and to be open to Him” (#93, UK, female, age 77). “It was a kind of meditation, walking alone, as a change between my working life and my pension life” (#84, Netherlands, male, age 67). Creating a space would facilitate holy hearing and open one to the voice of the numinous. “I wanted to walk like Jesus walked. . .without the distractions of everyday life and to be a blessing to others. I wanted to take this time to listen to God” (#111, US, male, age 68). “I was open to the experience/mystical part the Camino has to offer” (#43, US, female, age 65). Prayer was also a key accompaniment. “Praying for people, learning to be in the moment, learning how to live one step at a time” (#105, US, male, age 67). Finally, with a scope beyond personal needs, “I walked as a prayer for peace and resolution in the world” (#13, Ireland, female, age 72).

Responses also suggested how physical immersion in new environments facilitated connection to God and to spiritual questions. “I believe I found my spiritual intention in the joy of walking in the Spanish countryside. I also found my angels in the hospitaleros and my companions on the Way” (#107, Canada, male, age 67). The following brief responses share an aspect of this sense of the outdoors as path to appreciation, awe, and a close connection with the sacred. “To be outside all day in God’s creation” (#112, US, female, age 67). “To see God in the ordinary and in nature” (#28, Australia, female, age 65). “I visited many churches along the Camino and prayed for the wisdom to understand God’s plan for my life” (#38, US, male, age 67). The following participant summed up major themes of spirituality that included seeking personal insight, a connection with God validated across generations, and openness to change:

I wanted to discern God’s will and purpose for the next season of life; I knew from friends that this could be spiritually transformative, and I wanted to participate in something that has been a God-connecting experience for pilgrims for centuries. (#78, US, male, age 66)

Cultural, geographic, or historical interest (41)

A total of 41 respondents indicated that one of their reasons for completing this journey was place-based due to an interest in Spain. Several people were influenced by the depiction of El Camino in the film, *The Way*. “I had read about the Way after seeing the movie and I was amazed that anyone would do this walk more than once. I wanted to know why” (#43, US, male, age 68). Another commented: “I saw *The Way*. Since I have lost a child this movie affected me deeply. I resolved to go at the first opportunity as the spiritual aspect of the Camino really called to me” (#64, US, female, age 66).

Participants expressed cultural curiosity, awareness of history, or interest in the geography of the place. “I loved the history of Spain and its people” (#29, Australian, female, age 70). One 82-year-old English male noted his interest in language and lifelong learning, “To improve my ability to communicate in Spanish” (#88). A 70-year-old female from the United Kingdom simply wrote, “To enjoy the beauty” (#30). [My reasons were] “. . . historical and cultural. [I wanted to] experience what it would have meant in the past to go from home to a special place . . . to go on a pilgrimage in a time . . . when most of the people never left their living area” (#109, Netherlands, male, age 73).

Curiosity was awakened or re-awakened. “When I first heard about the Camino vis research I was doing on Galicia, I knew immediately I had to walk. Two months or so later I was in Le Puy-en-Velay, walking” (#23, US, male, age 65). “My first Camino (4 months) was a fulfillment of an old existing curiosity to do a pilgrimage like my ancestor” (#54, Netherlands, male, age 74). The following respondent demonstrated intellectual and cultural curiosity. “As a non-practicing Roman Catholic, the ambivalence of the Gospel messages, the history of Spain and the impact of the Camino, particularly since its re-invention” (#113, UK, male, age 71).

Recognition of life experiences & gratitude (34)

Thirty-four people were drawn to this pilgrimage in recognition of a life transition. Time and aging, retirement, health, transition, celebration, and gratitude were all subthemes in this group. Looking back from then age 68, one participant wrote that she walked for her 50th birthday celebration and that she had needed “a break after intense PhD work” (#4). Respondents spoke about this time as a break or a bridge to retirement. “As a recent retiree, I decided to do the Camino to give thanks for a good life and to mark the change brought about and the new opportunities that might arise in my new life” (#41, female, age 65). “My first pilgrimage (of 6) was in response to being newly retired. I wanted a healthy lifestyle option” (#64, Canada, male, age 67). “I had driven the Camino ten years before walking it. I decided to walk it on the occasion of my retirement from the US Navy as a bridge to civilian life”

(#58, 69-year-old male). These reflections offered a sample of different life situations.

Aging itself and uncertainty were reasons specified for the walk. “Because I could, and maybe in the future I wouldn’t have either the time or the physical ability” (#24, US, female, age 73). “I felt that at the age of 70 years, having thought about it for decades, it was now or never. So, I did it, alone” (#21, age 78, female). A 65-year-old female hiker recalled, “I read an article 27 years ago about the Camino and told myself someday I would walk it” (#21, US). In contrast, for others the opportunity had recently made itself known and they made space for a spontaneous decision. “This time, I was at a change of life. . . I was hearing the footsteps of advancing age. We made the pilgrimage on two weeks’ notice” (#99, US, male, age 68, 2nd of 2 Caminos).

Gratitude was also identified separately. Walking was a way of giving back through the pilgrimage. Some participants reflected they needed to close a reciprocal circle. They had been given something, and, in return, something was owed. Sometimes the implication included offering thanks to a Higher Power or Sacred Source, and sometimes the need to give thanks was not to a specific entity. “To give thanks for a fortunate life” (#103, male, age 67). “For gratitude, I don’t know to whom or what, but I was grateful for not having breast cancer after a bump was found,” reflected #31, a 69-year-old Canadian female. “Celebrating 60. Grateful. Direction for what’s next,” punctuated #23, a 65-year-old female, in staccato phrasing.

Relationships (24)

An aspect about relationships was noted as a reason to begin the journey by 24 respondents. In some cases, key relationships were stagnating, if not falling apart, “A break from over 20 yrs of parenting and a moribund marriage” (#25, Australian, female, age 66). This was a chance to strengthen them or make a good relationship even better: “To support my wife, whose idea it was” (#27, US, male, age 71). “I walked to get closer to God . . . I also walked to connect with my twenty-three-year-old daughter on the Camino Frances and later with my wife on the Camino Portugese” (#83, Canada, male, age 67).

Several respondents mentioned the commemoration of loss as their intention in walking. “I have walked the Camino each of the past three years for my nephew who is quadriplegic as a result of a tragic accident in 2014. I have taken the journey he can never take” (#76, US, male, age 76). A woman revealed, “When my daughter’s best friend committed suicide, I wanted to walk in her honor. She was an exceptional young woman, full of life and very spiritual” (#51, US, female, age 65). One woman from the US walked in memory of her recently deceased husband and to consider the future (#104), while another 66-year-old woman walked because her mother died and she continued to grieve the loss (#69). “The call came from somewhere but I had no idea why.

However, I also felt strongly that as I was walking I was honoring the women in my family who had passed on” (#58, Australia, female, age 74). “I walked the Camino in memory of my parents and sought forgiveness for my shortcomings in the relationship with them” (#52, US, male, age 73).

Friendship and the thrill of sharing the experience, learning from strangers, and the opportunity to help others were factors. “After watching ‘The Way’ I was drawn to the close bonds developed between strangers, where everyone helped each other without judgment” (#111, US, male, aged 68). Two participants responded they walked simply because they were invited by friends. Participating in community thus offered purpose. Finally, to build self-confidence and the relationship with self, “to get back my self-reliance after illness” (#16, United Kingdom, male, age 71) was a further relational subtheme.

Discussion

Our data show that older people who undertook the El Camino de Santiago pilgrimage were motivated by varying reasons, and some were difficult to articulate. About 69% of our self-selected sample who responded to the research invitation cited a spiritual rationale, though even more suggested the challenge and adventure of the experience was a primary appeal, in some cases combined with spiritual reasons. In centuries past, all who walked would have been mostly Christian pilgrims. In contemporary times, consistent with a decrease in those who endorse a Christian belief, the term spiritual includes people who may be non-religious, instead experiencing extra-theistic and mystical connections (Wixwat & Saucier, 2021).

Ultimately, older people walk a pilgrimage trail because it is deemed to benefit them and their ongoing well-being. Motivations presented show that a pilgrimage is both aspirational and inspirational. Intentions included improving fitness, connecting to meaning, healing and restoring from heart-break, honoring deceased or disabled loved ones, reciprocal exchanges in a community of strangers, and opportunities for exploration and self-discovery surrounded by beauty. For some, the walk signaled a much-needed break or escape from stressful work or life contexts to which they would not return. Consistent with Tornstam’s (2005) theory, some older people spoke in terms of a transformative shift. Others were deeply affected by the presence and beauty of place but as travel tourists rather than spiritual tourists (Cohen, 1992). The choice to walk and undergoing the walk satisfies higher-order needs for aesthetics, self-transformation, or self-transcendence (Maslow, 1968).

Early older adulthood often serves as a pivot point. The Camino may itself serve as a demarcation between the past and the future, forged in the present. Encountering the walk provides a liminal space (Oviedo et al.,

2014) where change may more easily occur or be noticed than in daily life. To walk at an older age means awareness of an aging body and often the approaching time boundary when such a walk would no longer be possible. Thus, walking the Camino at this life stage whether for spiritual or other reasons offers opportunity for deepening the self and expressing one's values.

Although this study focused on those who walked the pilgrimage path in Spain, a pilgrimage could also include encounters at a local or medium distance such as returning to visit a natal home or a place invested with a story of personal meaning. Local spiritual sites, such as the birthplace of Martin Luther King, Jr., the Stonewall National Monument in New York City, the origin place of Alcoholics Anonymous in Akron, Ohio, a national cathedral or shrine, or place of indigenous meaning or healing all might be sources of renewal and community-building. Social workers and other helpers would do well to encourage older people to consider this option as a form of decreasing loneliness, increasing purpose, and finding meaning in previous experiences and personal narratives.

Limitations

This self-selected, snowball sample was limited to those who were reached by the survey, so we cannot know how all people who walk the Camino might structure their reasons. The sample also had a US bias, though much less than expected as it was initiated by a US-based researcher. If we had set out to interview older people alone, the sample size for this group may have been larger.

Future research

There is a gap in research on the value of pilgrimage for older persons. Although there is literature on motivations for a pilgrimage generally, we know little about how older adults perceive it, why they walk and why they may consider it, but choose not to engage in one themselves. A pre and posttest design would add greater rigor. An area for future work is to compare motivations among younger and older pilgrims which may be done within our data set as well as through the collection of new data.

This online survey offered space for qualitative responses. However, a qualitative study using an interview format with pilgrims selected from a variety of national backgrounds; religious, spiritual and non-spiritual world-views; mixed gender; multi ethnic; and including LGBTQ+ communities might open up narratives to better understand motivations for participation and healing more deeply.

Conclusion

The dominant narrative of old age is one of diminution and loneliness. Consistent with a recent disciplinary goal to reframe the aging experience, the Camino counters that narrative by offering the physical challenge of the walk, a community of chance that can offer deep connection, reconsideration of life goals, and overall well-being. These motivations can serve as a model for future generations, and the Camino offers one valuable pathway to achieve them.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The author(s) reported there is no funding associated with the work featured in this article.

Data Availability Statement

This study used third party data made available under license that the first author does not have permission to share. Requests to access the data should be directed to Dr. Joseph Pickard at pickardj@umsl.edu.

ORCID

Holly Nelson-Becker  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9614-9974>

Joseph G. Pickard  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8907-3067>

Florian Sichling  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0532-291X>

References

- Amaro, S., Antunes, A., & Henriques, C. (2018). A closer look at Santiago de compostela's pilgrims through the lens of motivations. *Tourism Management*, 64, 271–280. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2017.09.007>
- Atkinson, R., & Flint, J. (2001). Accessing hidden and hard-to-reach populations: Snowball research strategies. *Social Research Update*, 33(1), 1–4.
- Badone, E., & Roseman, S. R. (2004). *Intersecting journeys: The anthropology of pilgrimage and tourism*. University of Illinois press.
- Bengston, V. L., & Allen, K. R. (1993). The life course perspective applied to families over time. In P. G. Boss, W. J. Doherty, R. LaRossa, W. R. Schumm, & S. K. Steinmetz (Eds.), *Source book of family theories and methods: A contextual approach* (pp. 469–499). Plenum Press.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 11(4), 589–597. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806>

- Chemin, E. (2011). *Pilgrimage in a secular age: Religious & consumer landscapes of late-Modernity* [Thesis]. University of Exeter.
- Cohen, E. (1992). Pilgrimage centers: Concentric and excentric. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 19(1), 33–50. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-7383\(92\)90105-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-7383(92)90105-X)
- Collins-Kreiner, N. (2016). Dark tourism as/is pilgrimage. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 19(12), 1185–1189. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2015.1078299>
- Di Giovine, M. A., & Choe, J. (2019). Geographies of religion and spirituality: Pilgrimage beyond the ‘officially’ sacred. *Tourism Geographies*, 21(3), 361–383. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2019.1625072>
- Drule, A. M., Chiş, A., Băcilă, M. F., & Ciornea, R. (2012). A new perspective of non-religious motivations of visitors to sacred sites: Evidence from Romania. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 62, 431–435. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2012.09.070>
- Erikson, E. H., & Erikson, J. M. (1997). *The life cycle completed: Extended version*. W. W. Norton.
- Greenia, G. D. (2018). What is pilgrimage? *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*, 6(2), 7–15.
- Hall, J., Basarin, V. J., Lockstone-Binney, L., Yusuf, A., Winter, C., & Valos, M. (2018). Spiritual values and motives of secular pilgrims. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 42(6), 715–723. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijcs.12436>
- LeCroy, C. (2012). *The call to social work*. Sage Press.
- Liutikas, D. (2017). The manifestation of values and identity in travelling: The social engagement of pilgrimage. *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 24, 217–224. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2017.07.014>
- Lois-González, R. C., & Santos, X. M. (2015). Tourists and pilgrims on their way to Santiago. Motives, caminos and final destinations. *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change*, 13(2), 149–164. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14766825.2014.918985>
- Lopez, L., Lois González, R. C., & Fernández, B. M. C. (2017). Spiritual tourism on the way of Saint James: The current situation. *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 24, 225–234. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2017.07.015>
- Maslow, A. H. (1968). *Toward a psychology of being* (2nd ed.). Van Nostrand Reinhold.
- Nelson-Becker, H. (2018). Religion, Spirituality, and Aging: Illuminations for Therapeutic Practice (pp. 454). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE. doi:10.4135/9781506375298.
- Nilsson, M., & Tesfahuney, M. (2016). Performing the “post-secular” in Santiago de Compostela. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 57, 18. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2015.11.001>
- Oficina de Acogida al Peregrino. (2019). *Statistics*. <http://oficinadelperegrino.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/peregrinaciones2018.pdf>
- Oviedo, L., de Courcier, S., & Farias, M. (2014). Rise of pilgrims on the Camino to Santiago: Sign of change or religious revival? *Review of Religious Research*, 56(3), 433–442. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13644-013-0131-4>
- Schnell, T., & Pali, S. (2013). Pilgrimage today: The meaning-making potential of ritual. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 16(9), 887–902. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2013.766449>
- Smith, A. (2018). Walking meditation: Being present and being pilgrim on the Camino de Santiago. *Religions*, 9(3), 82. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel9030082>
- Thomas, L. E. (1997). Late-life effect of early mystical experiences: A cross-cultural comparison. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 11(2), 155–169. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0890-4065\(97\)90019-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0890-4065(97)90019-0)
- Tornstam, L. (2005). *Gerotranscendence: A developmental theory of positive aging*. Springer.
- Wixwat, M., & Saucier, G. (2021). Being spiritual but not religious. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 40, 121–125. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2020.09.003>