

# The Joy and Pain of Walking the Camino de Santiago Pilgrimage Route: Is It Good for Health?

C. Yvette Wharton, Physical Activity and Health Lecturer, Division of Sport and Exercise Sciences, Abertay University

Email: y.wharton@abertay.ac.uk

## Introduction and Methods

In surveys of physical activity regular walking for leisure is the most frequently cited mode of activity. As part of regular physical activity, walking has the potential to benefit physical, mental and spiritual health. Although leisure walking has many benefits long distance multi day walking can have both positive and negative outcomes. Repeated days of walking and carrying packs can be both physically and emotionally challenging.



## Methods

This research examines the experiences from a psycho/social and spiritual perspective of five women aged 37-64 years; ( $\bar{x}$  52) who walked for five days along the 121 km route of the English way of Camino de Santiago, Northern Spain. To give a level of immediacy 'walking interviews' were used during the journey (Middleton 2009). These explored the perception of the physical experience of actually walking, how they felt about the walk and their ongoing motivation. The researcher also took on the role of a participant observer with the purpose of obtaining additional insights.



## Findings

Contrasting emotions were experienced. Joy and happiness were expressed when participants spoke about the natural scenery, and social support and camaraderie of the group.

*"Seeing that sunrise coming up. But to be able to share it with someone else was great."*

Alongside this were negative aspects of pain and discomfort, with these stemming from the following:

- Blisters
- Sunburn
- Tiredness (lack of sleep from using shared dormitories)
- Arthritic Pain
- Chaffing
- Back/shoulder pain (carrying backpack).

*"The most awful was the chaffing on the first day ..., oh, that was really sore. I can't even explain how sore that was. And on the third day when the blisters started."*



Religious and spiritual aspects were spoken about after finishing the walk when an appreciation of their accomplishment was recognised. This was most notable when attending the pilgrims mass in the cathedral.

*"I got quite emotional at the mass. I felt quite emotional there and the whole concept of it."*

## Discussion and Conclusion



All participants experienced pain or physical discomfort. The pain; although unwelcome was part of the whole experience and a risk associated with long distance pilgrimage (Kyung-Mi and JuSung, 2015; 347). Walking with others in the natural environment provided distraction from the pain. This social aspects were an important component of diversion and motivation for continuing. These underpinned the effort required to accomplish the pilgrimage but also opened each individual to the benefits of a shared empathetic experience. Walking in natural settings revitalise; enhance mood and encourage social interaction (Johansson et al. 2011). Despite the pain participants experienced strong social bonds and positive experiences. All attended the pilgrim mass in Santiago Cathedral finding this occasion moving and for some this functioned as a valve that released emotions and confirmed them in their own and shared accomplishment of having walked the Camino pilgrimage.

## Conclusion

Pain and discomfort created psychological and emotional responses that had to be balanced alongside the desire to continue the pilgrimage. Requiring this to be negotiated to maintain motivation and enthusiasm. The religious aspects of the pilgrimage added meaning to the walk. Pilgrimage walking can elicit both positive and negative experiences and release strong emotional responses.

## References

- Kyung-Mi, I., JuSung, J., 2015. The Meaning of Learning on the Camino de Santiago Pilgrimage. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, 2, 331-51.
- Johansson, M., and Hartig, T., 2011. Psychological Benefits of Walking: Moderation by Company and Outdoor Environment. *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-being*, 3(3); 261-280
- Middleton, J. 2009. 'Stepping in time': Walking, Time and Space in the City. *Environment and Planning A*, 41, 1943-1961.