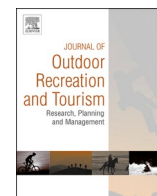


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Research Article

Walking with purpose – Eight solo women's pilgrimage hiking and wellbeing experiences on the via Francigena

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ABSTRACT

Background: There is little research on women who undertake solo pilgrimage walking.

Purpose: This study examined the experiences of women who undertake solo pilgrimage walking, and to consider its impact on their wellbeing.

Methodology/approach: Interviews were conducted with eight solo female walkers who had walked between 200 and 1662 km on the via Francigena pilgrimage route. Interpretative phenomenological analysis was used to explore the data and draw tentative conclusions.

Findings/conclusions: The study finds that the walkers were seeking solitude, seeking adventure, seeking connection to others, and seeking connection to themselves. The study concludes that solo pilgrimage walking improved participants' sense of wellbeing by building identity and resilience, and that the search for community was an important part of solo pilgrimage walking experience.

Implications: The study highlights that and that solo pilgrimage walking can be seen as a source of wellbeing as it appears to be a means to release tension, process grief and engage in physical movement that creates a meditative and reflective state.

1. Introduction

This study explores the experiences of solo female pilgrims rather than those journeying in groups. It highlights the distinct challenges, motivations, and benefits that emerge from solitary pilgrimage experiences through exploration of the experiences of eight female solo walkers on the via Francigena.

The via Francigena (known as 'the way of the Franks') is an historic 1180-mile pilgrimage from Canterbury in England to Rome in Italy. The route is quieter than the Camino de Santiago and does not have the same camaraderie. Travelling through Switzerland and alongside the shore of Lake Geneva, the eighth leg of the Via Francigena includes hiking through Alpine terrain. Surprisingly, there has been little research into solo women walking the via Francigena, and none that considers the connection to wellbeing. Therefore, this study explores women's reasons for embarking on such a journey and how they feel that their experiences impact on their wellbeing.

This study was inspired by the first author's walking of many of the long-distance Caminos^{*} including the via Francigena. These experiences

mean that she had similar experiences to the solo women walkers on the via Francigena who participated in this study. This shared historicity allowed insight into their experiences and informed the analysis of the ways that solo walking impacted their wellbeing. Thus, this research explores how solo journeys intertwine, how each participant's narratives contribute to a shared understanding of the challenges, revelations, and personal growth that comes from solo walking on this ancient route.

Modern Pilgrimage involves travelling ancient pilgrimage routes. This is usually done on foot over a number of days. Crust et al. (2011) suggest that a pilgrimage involves a long-distance walk, typically defined as walks of 30 km⁺ or more, or those lasting several days. Indeed, most walkers do not complete the entire pilgrimage route but choose to complete sections that appeal to them for historical or aesthetic reasons. Duda (2016) states, over the last 20 years there has been a sharp increase in pilgrimage walks across the main routes, such as the way of St James Camino de Santiago, Spain (the largest pilgrim network across Europe), a surge in walkers on the via Francigena (Canterbury to Rome), and an increase in walkers on the traditional routes to Jerusalem. This may reflect a rise in the number of people seeking time away from their

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'normal lives' and wanting opportunities to reflect. As such, pilgrimage walking can be seen as a response to living in a fast-paced society and driven by a desire for an immersive and meaningful experience. Amongst all the pilgrimages, the Camino de Santiago is the most popular, attracting thousands of pilgrims every year. These include organised groups as well as small groups and solo walkers. Here, the walkers are supported by a network of accommodation and transport facilities. By contrast, walkers on the other pilgrimages are less well supported, requiring walkers to be more independent and resilient. Thus, pilgrimage walking can be seen as a growing phenomenon, but the experiences of walkers may differ widely according to the pilgrimage route that they choose.

In terms of route management, the via Francigena is generally well marked and maintained, but there is limited infrastructure for walkers. In some places there are hotels and pensions, and a number of religious houses offer accommodation and food to pilgrims. Although there are cafés and food outlets, these are often far apart in the remoter sections. However, there is limited access to information on the route, with a lack of knowledgeable local guides at churches and heritage sites to provide informative talks. Thus, pilgrimage walking on the via Francigena requires prior planning and self-reliance.

Although there is a reasonable literature on solo women travelling, there is limited research on solo women walking, none that considers women walking the less popular pilgrimages, and none that considers the impact on wellbeing of walking a route such as the via Francigena. The literature is explored below, but the lack of literature means that this is a primary study, using extended interviews to explore eight solo women walkers' reasons for walking a pilgrimage route, their experiences during the walk, and their understanding of the relationships between solo walking and their own wellbeing. As such it seeks to describe the participants' reasons and experiences and to understand the links to wellbeing through interpretative analysis.

Within this we use the definitional framework of wellbeing established by McNaught (2011) and La Placa, McNaught and Knight (2013). However, it is worth considering this framework in context, as wellbeing is a somewhat loose term that requires explanation. La Placa, et al (2013) states the definition of wellbeing has links to positive psychology. Haybron (2008) notes that the concept of wellbeing has long been explored in philosophical, sociological, and psychological literature, and is often linked to questions of how one ought to live and how to achieve happiness. Traditionally rooted in ethics, the concept of wellbeing later gained sociological attention, particularly through the lens of subjective wellbeing. This considers how individuals interpret their wellness within broader social contexts (Veenhoven, 2008). Over time, the conceptualisation of wellbeing has expanded to include emotional and psychological aspects. This has meant that influences such as socio-economic conditions and resilience are now seen as important elements of wellbeing.

McNaught (2011) suggests that understanding wellbeing requires an interdisciplinary approach tailored to specific populations and contexts. In this seminal work, he developed a definitional framework of wellbeing in which wellbeing is perceived as a macro concept concerned with the objective and subjective assessment of wellbeing as a desirable human state. La Placa, McNaught and Knight (2013) provided more detail on this framework. They identify four domains: individual wellbeing; family wellbeing; community wellbeing, and societal wellbeing. Thus, although individual wellbeing remains part of the model, it portrays wellbeing as intrinsically related to participation in social groups. This framework provides a structure for the consideration of wellbeing that is at odds with the individual conceptualisation of wellbeing that is predominant within positive psychology.

2. Conceptualising solo women's pilgrimages

There is currently no literature that specifically explores solo women's pilgrimage hiking experiences. Consequently, the theoretical

basis for this study draws on literature about women's solo travel, literature on long-distance hiking, and on a very small literature on women's experiences of long-distance hiking.

2.1. The experiences and wellbeing benefits of women's solo travel

Mau et al. (2021) suggest that there is growing evidence to show that women's solo travel is the fastest growing segment of the travel industry across the world. Their research examines the relationship between the internal and external values, travel motivation and behaviour intention. They find that the number of women embracing the autonomy of travelling independently is growing, as they search for freedom, independence and empowerment, and that female solo travellers tend to choose 'off the beaten' track destinations. In a study of Portuguese solo women travellers, Breda et al. (2020) finds that the main motivations for women to travel alone are a need to find themselves, not having a travel companion, desiring the freedom of choice, a desire for experience and adventure, and a need to escape from daily routine.

There is a long history of writings about solo women travelling. Much of the early literature in this area is autoethnographic and sits within traditions of travel writing and post-colonial exploration, including authors such as Gertrude Bell or Freya Stark, to later generations such as Rebecca West, Christina Dodwell, Dervla Murphy and Noo Saro Wiwa. Particularly in older texts, the narratives often include experiences that demonstrate bravery and fortitude, aligned with noble aims such as scientific research, often aiming to extend the boundaries of female activity. The academic study of solo women travellers gained momentum in the early 2000s as research by Erica Wilson and colleagues explored women's individual travel. Wilson and Little (2005) used constraints theory and described women's solo travel as constrained by sociocultural, personal, practical, and spatial factors. In interviews with 80 solo women travellers, they identified precedent constraints that included social expectations of them as women, concerns about leaving roles and responsibilities and concern about other people's perceptions. They also noted that internal doubts and fears acted as personal constraints, whilst there were practical constraints of time and money, and a spatial constraint in the limited choice of destinations for single female travellers. In the following year, Wilson and Harris (2006) brought together two qualitative studies and identified independent female travel as a search for self and identity; self-empowerment; and connectedness with others/'global citizenship'. They find,

that travel was remembered more as an inner journey of personal growth and self-development ... Travelling alone was also beneficial because it provided freedom from having to deal with the demands of everyday life and relationships. Being away from their normal environments and demands made on them as partners, mothers, daughters, colleagues etc, allowed them time and space to focus on themselves or reassess their life perspectives, to ponder their pasts, presents and what their futures could hold. (p169)

As such the literature of this period, places women's solo travel as a constrained choice, that develops wellbeing and resilience. More recently, Pereira and Silva (2018) developed a model of women's motivations for independent travel and tourism experiences. Here, the main motivations are related to the desire to learn, self-development, challenge themselves, find a sense of identity and autonomy, meet new people and experience new life and adventure moments. Whilst this updates the evidence base, their conclusions largely support the conclusion that women's solo travel is often motivated by a search for self and identity.

2.2. The experiences and wellbeing benefits of long-distance hiking

The literature on long-distance solo walking is somewhat limited. Den Breejen (2007) explored the experiences of long-distance walkers in Scotland using quantitative questionnaires distributed to walkers over a

ten-day period and analysing 15 follow up diary-based questionnaires. Her study of nine women and six men uses *enjoyment* as the primary measure of the long-distance walking experience and finds that 'walkers generally experience the end of their walk as a climatic high' (p.1426). They suggest that 'the strong relationship that walkers forge with their surroundings and the expected sense of achievement' (p.1426) appear to create an upward trend in *enjoyment* over the walk. Similarly, in a phenomenological study, [Crust et al. \(2011\)](#) explored the experiences four men and two women and found that long-distance walking had a cumulative effect with positive feelings increasing throughout the duration of the walk. They state,

All participants reported a subjective sense of well-being at the conclusion of the walk that included an overall feel-good factor, psychological well-being (clear relaxed mind, positive attitude, mentally refreshed), physical well-being (increased feelings of fitness) and social well-being (new and enhanced personal relationships). (p.257)

Indeed, they conclude that,

The whole experience prompted many of the participants to reappraise aspects of their lives and to gain a sense of perspective (i.e., generating new meaning). The experience of completing the walk, which was challenging and difficult for all, has since been used as a baseline from which to judge other life challenges. The result is that day-to-day problems were often downgraded in perceived difficulty due to more positive evaluations of individual capabilities to overcome challenges. (p.257)

[Rodrigues et al. \(2010\)](#) analysed questionnaire responses from 200 hikers in Portugal. The study assessed respondents' environmental perceptions, ecological sensitivity and the factors restraining them from hiking. The study found that the main motivations of hikers were linked to the enjoyment of nature: 'to observe and enjoy the beauty of the landscape', 'to breathe pure air' and 'to get to know and interpret nature in an involving way'. They state that,

... motivations reflect the generally associated 'healing' character of a nature experience, especially in the second item, but also the enjoyment of landscape beauty and of nature in an involving way reveal the well-being associated with hiking that may have therapeutic features. (p.337)

A different interpretation is presented by [Redick \(2016\)](#), which explores long-distance walking (both male and female) as a spiritual rambling. They note that the practice of long-distance walking in remote places distances the walker from their everyday world and opens them to new possibilities to scripting their own life-story into a potential narrative. The findings suggest that a central experience of long-distance hiking is that everyone on the trail has the same role, one is engaged in the journey and is open to new interpretations, and that this presents new ways of scripting a life story.

[Stevenson and Farrell \(2018\)](#) conducted 93 walk-along interviews to explore the embodied nature of walking.

... we found that walkers shared common positive feelings – they felt good, relaxed, well, tired, happy and joyful. The rhythm and physical exertion of walking brought their senses into play and enabled them to make connections between body, mind, landscape, self and others. These connections were restorative enabling walkers to develop a sense of perspective which was associated with well-being. (p.444)

This literature base shows that the experience of walking has eudemonic and restorative benefits, as well as developing a subjective sense of wellbeing.

2.3. Women's experiences and wellbeing benefits of long-distance hiking

There are very few studies of women long-distance hikers. Evidence of impacts from long-distance hiking on the Pacific Crest Trail is presented in [Howard and Goldenberg \(2020\)](#). This study identifies nine impacts from the 23 women. In order of frequency they were *Feel*

Empowered (identified by 83 %), *Positive Outlook and Perspective*, *Values and Priorities Shift*, *Social Skills and Behavior*, *Increased Self-Awareness*, *Post-Trail Depression*, and *Improved Overall Health*, *More Relaxed*, and *Caused City Overwhelm*. Participants were also asked how hiking the Pacific Crest Trail had changed their lifestyle. Six themes emerged: *Hiking Addiction/Increased Adventure*, *Minimalism*, *Career Change*, *Moved to a New Area*, *More Eco-Conscious*, and *No Change*. Here, it is clear that the major impacts during the experience were on women's attitudes to themselves and their social behaviours. In addition, the changes to lifestyle suggest that the hike was credited with significant long-term impacts outside of wellbeing, but that might be seen as a response to improved empowerment and, perhaps, increased self-authorship.

In a large-scale study of people who had 'thru hiked' the Appalachian trail, [Whittington et al. \(2024\)](#) identified a number of differences between men and women. They found that women were more worried about potential crime, assault, and harassment from others; women were more worried about managing natural elements; and men were less confident they had knowledge for maintaining health and hygiene. The study also found differences in reported benefits: men increased in appreciation for family relationships, whilst women gained a greater sense of empowerment and opportunities to think about their future. As in [Howard and Goldenberg \(2020\)](#), the key finding for women lies in their empowerment, and their ability to review their values and priorities. Again, these seem likely to derive from improved wellbeing during the hike and be part of improved wellbeing after the hike.

Overall, the literature provides some basis for considering the experiences and wellbeing of solo women's pilgrimage walking and its links to wellbeing.

3. Method

This qualitative research used interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) and collected data through online interviews. [Coolican \(2014, p.261\)](#) definition of IPA is where the method attempts to describe an individual's perspective or an understanding of the world, while recognising the constructive role of the researcher in the interpretation of that individual's experience. This approach was chosen as it developed a narrative response to the participants' answers.

The following were used in this research project; Code of Ethics which demonstrates the procedures undertaken to conduct the research, participation in the study was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained.

3.1. Participants and procedures

Participants were recruited via social media on via Francigena platform and the advert aimed at solo participants who had walked between 200 and 1800 km of the different stages of the walk. To do this, an advert was created outlining the purpose of the research and asking for volunteers from solo female walkers who had walked stages of the via Francigena. Eight female participants responded to the study. Participants ranged from 21 to 75 years old and came from eight different nationalities across 4 continents. Participants ranged from walking 200 to 1662 km of the via Francigena. Five had walked Camino de Santiago and all were regular long-distance walkers. Consent forms were completed by each participant.

3.2. Measures

The interview started with a brief background to each participant asking them which Pilgrimages they had been on previously, their motivations, age, and nationality to develop an understanding of them. One of the interviews was conducted with the participant whilst walking the via Francigena and seven were conducted after they had completed their walk. Each participant was interviewed separately, lasting from 25 to 30 min. The interviews took place on Zoom or WhatsApp and were

recorded using the functionality of that platform. The interviews were based around four main questions.

1. What inspired you to embark on the via Francigena Pilgrim journey?
2. What are you looking to achieve from this journey?
3. What are you seeking through time to invest in your health & wellbeing/time-out on the route?
4. What type of faith or spiritual (if any) experience are you exploring on this trip?

These open questions allowed participants to talk freely and allowed the researcher to probe their responses. Denscombe (2017, p. 215) suggests that the advantage of open questions is that information gathered is more likely to reflect the richness and complexity of the views held by the participants. The interviews were recorded, together with handwritten notes and anonymised after the transcription.

3.3. Data analysis

Braun and Clarke (2013) argue the transcript is the product of an interaction between the recording and the transcriber. In accordance with this, and with the norms for IPA, the transcripts were read many times and coded into emergent themes. Interpretative notes were then made in the margin with important words/phrases which appeared important linked to health and wellbeing, descriptions of experiences were recorded, lists were made, and emergent themes were developed as memos. The codes were then grouped. After fragmenting the text and analysing experiences further, subordinate themes were then organised into a theoretical structure. Four main themes emerged from the analysis. Consideration was given within each theme, as to how the long-distance pilgrimage walking experience influenced the participants.

3.4. Ethical issues

The project was approved by the University of Worcester code of ethics. All participant data was anonymised to avoid identification of the participants, and because it included discussion of sensitive topics.

4. Results

Four themes emerged from the data analysis. Seeking Solitude and subthemes: alone, silence, simplicity, reflection, Theme 2 – Seeking adventure and subthemes: mindset, new experience, challenge, Theme 3 – Seeking connection with subthemes: culture, community and spiritual and Theme 4 – Seeking connection to oneself with subthemes: embodiment in movement, finding oneself and seeking physical benefits.

4.1. Theme 1 – seeking solitude

The first theme identified was *Seeking solitude*, a central aspect of the via Francigena. The rural remoteness, rich cultural history, and natural landscapes along the route provided participants with the opportunity to step away from the distractions of daily life. Solitude allowed moments to pause and reflect, offering a space where the participants engaged with their emotions whilst contemplating the complexities of life. Within this there were three subthemes: alone, silence, simplicity.

The desire for solitude emerged from six participants' responses, and it took many forms. Solitude is a state of being alone, especially when this is a pleasant or peaceful setting. In some interviews, solitude was presented as a sensory and emotional experience of being alone with one's thoughts in the environment. Here, solitude allowed participants time for introspection facilitating self-knowledge and a deeper experience. They would withdraw from human company, so that they could connect to their inner voice. Thus, they described how, when walking

solo, one is less distracted and the reflective aspect of pilgrimage is enhanced. This is beautifully explained,

I am a student, enjoy solitude, and want to think things out organically, to feel embodiment in nature and to think critically through life in the environment, life can be artificial.

Here, solitude is something to be sought out and valued as a way of life and is closely aligned with nature and the environment. However, it also has a role as a healer.

I had a rough moment in life and needed to rethink, I was seeking a new direction in life, I had no idea what this would be, but needed time to reflect, just to be alone in a religious place, to reflect and reconnect with body.

However, solitude was also linked to loneliness by one participant.

I found Francigena very isolating and only saw three other walkers on route, I had to think of my safety and didn't like the solitude too much.

As mentioned, the theme of solitude was not perceived in the same way by participants. For some it was a state of being - *being alone*. As such solitude was seen as a context or situation where the individual is by themselves, with no others present for a period. This was expressed as key expectation by one participant,

I was in search for self, just being alone and contemplating ... I wanted to walk alone in silence and reflect. I wanted to be completely alone, I was seeking internal rest and to enjoy the landscapes.

This state is distinctly different to loneliness, and is sought and enjoyed,

Being alone doesn't bother me, I can walk alone and speak to others.

This solitary state of being was described by most participants as a positive thing. They felt that they benefited from time alone to think and reflect, and that this contributed to their wellbeing. Although descriptions of solitude varied between participants, most felt that time away from social interactions was important for their wellbeing.

The second subordinate theme was *Silence*. Silence was described as providing peace and tranquillity that allowed space to relax and think clearly. Participants expressed their need for silence, and again it seems to be conceptualised as a context conducive to personal growth and pleasurable introspection. Indeed, it was described as a reason for choosing this route as well as for solo walking.

Francigena looked appealing with its quieter routes, I live in a big city and just want to spend time alone. The nature is lovely, the silence, the rest.

In a similar way to being alone, silence was also described as a context for growth and healing.

I was exploring faith and was looking for answers, the silence, the feelings.

Despite this, silence was a double-edged sword for some participants, with links to both loneliness and contemplation.

I like the silence (but) it can be lonely, I didn't see anybody, and I had blisters and was thinking, will it be painful? I had time to think, getting to the religious sites was important, I can feel things in silence.

This need for silence seemed deeply linked to their rationale for solo pilgrimage walking, and it is clear that silence was seen as a facilitating factor in the exploration of their feelings, and their search for answers. In many interviews, there seems to be an implicit assumption that external silence supports the development of inner calm and peace.

Although less prominent than *Being alone* and *Silence*, one other theme was apparent in the data. This was *Simplicity*. This was presented as an aspirational state, where female solo walkers sought out and appreciated a less complicated life. In some responses this was seen as a pleasure in itself, and in others it was seen as a purposeful rejection of more complicated (and often urban) lifestyles.

I enjoy the simple things, shelter, community, it's your journey to do what you want. I enjoy the simple life, we are used to all the sophisticated things, you feel you always must work for something, all you need is your health and body.

Indeed, simplicity is seen as easier and, perhaps, less stressful.

I can make changes to life, the process of cutting out shopping, my country is very materialistic, I prefer a simpler life, it's easier to manage.

Throughout the interviews it is evident that the pilgrimage environment provides considerable simplicity – a pathway, rest stops and overnight stays – but it also provides a space for silence and clarity of thought. This lack of complexity perhaps means that the pilgrimage becomes a place of escape from urban life, and a rest for sensory and spiritual overload. As such the participants see it as a reason for seeking solitude.

4.2. Theme 2 – seeking adventure

Seeking Adventure was identified as a theme and was common throughout the interviews. The conceptualisation of adventure varied from one person to another, but all acknowledged that the activity of long-distance walking involved challenge and exploration and most used the word ‘adventure’ to describe times where they had to confront their discomfort or venture into unfamiliar territory. Within the theme of seeking adventure, there were three subordinate themes: *mindset, new experience and challenge*.

Several female solo walkers discussed adventure as a mindset - a set of attitudes or fixed ideas that shaped how they perceived and responded to situations and challenges. In these interviews they discussed how their adventurous mindset influenced their thoughts, behaviours, and reactions. These participants seemed to represent adventure as a mental and physical challenge that required dedication to overcome, but that was also a source of enjoyment and pride. This is nicely encapsulated,

The adventure and experience are important; it is a bit like a treasure hunt, what is around the corner? it is intriguing.

Here, adventure is represented as a children's game, hinting at the fun and excitement that comes from working out solutions or completing the game. By contrast, another participant describes this as a big adventure and seems to hint that the scale of the challenge is a key aspect determinant of adventure.

I love hiking, I do big adventure trips with companies and like to challenge myself. Francigena, this challenge I had to do for myself.

And,

I'm motivated by challenge, the greater the challenge, the more satisfied. To overcome a high climb is satisfying, then seeing a spectacular view.

For this participant, the excitement of being challenged by the route is the adventure. Again, a different perspective is given by another participant for whom the novelty and the location are important.

I had walked Camino Frances, I was convinced I liked long-distance walking, especially new adventures, and experiences in nature.

Thus, the concept of an adventure seems to be differently constructed by the various people, but all locate it as a mindset, a way of seeing the world as challenges to overcome. This is perhaps unsurprising amongst people who have chosen long-distance solo hiking, and such behaviour hints at characters who are challenge oriented. This is reinforced in the other subthemes, *new experience and challenge*. Within this subtheme, new experiences are explicitly linked to adventure, and are characterized by exploration, challenges and stepping into the unknown.

Being in the middle of nowhere and just enjoying life was good, I had one bad experience but was confident in my judgement of avoiding difficult situations.

This quotation touches on the risks of adventure, and the importance of good judgement, this is echoed by another participant,

I found Francigena very isolating and only saw three other walkers on route, I had to think of my safety and didn't enjoy the solitude too much, but I had to step out of my comfort zone.

Thus, for these female solo hikers, the essence of an adventure experience appears to lie in stepping outside one's comfort zone, dealing with the unexpected, whilst embracing the uncertainty. It is seen as an external threat and a responding mindset and seems entangled with a melange of emotions (pride, fear, excitement, wonder). Participants appeared proud of their positive mindsets and describe how their approach to problem solving and challenges demonstrates evidence of their resilience.

4.3. Theme 3 – seeking connection

Seeking connection was identified as a theme in the interviews, with subordinate themes: *culture, community and spiritual*. Participants described a sense of connection to the history of the pilgrimage, the ever-changing community of walkers and to something deeper often (but not always) characterised by faith.

All of the participants went on the pilgrimage alone and enjoyed the experience. For some, the connection to the environment was important, whilst for others the social interaction of meeting other pilgrims along the way was an integral part of pilgrimage that provided a sense of belonging and social connectedness.

The connection with the pilgrimage and the places that they walked through is very tangible in their responses,

I am a small person in a large place, there is a real tangible purpose in the landscape, it is very grounding.

Participants also appear to seek connection to community through walking.

I knew Francigena was a long walk, but I love hiking, and the walk looked interesting, I wanted to be part of the Camino family, I want to find more time for others and listen to their stories.

However, the participants viewed the culture along the via Francigena with a mix of curiosity and respect, encountering hospitality and traditions on their journey. However, those that had previously walked the Camino de Santiago saw this as a less social experience

I wanted to repeat the Santiago experience, but Francigena wasn't as communal.

Although there were mixed opinions on the connections to local culture and community, the participants all appreciated the sense of community amongst fellow pilgrims.

Finally, most participants experienced profound moments of connection to something spiritual,

I found Camino Frances gave me a deeper spiritual experience, the communal aspect for solo travellers was more inclusive.

Most of the pilgrims, including those with less faith, described spiritual experiences, particularly where the stillness and silence of ancient churches heightened their sensory awareness, allowing them to connect deeply on a spiritual level.

I was exploring faith, I am Catholic, not practising, but exploring the church that I visited was a religious experience, I was looking for answers, the silence, the feelings.

However, this was not universal and one participant, despite feeling a connection with landscapes, quieter walking routes and the cultural aspects of the pilgrimage did not feel any spiritual connection. Thus, the interviews show that many of the pilgrims sought and found spiritual meaning on their journey.

In summary the experiences of connection to community, culture and spirituality varied between the participants. Whilst some participants sought a stronger connection to community, they all highlighted positive aspects such as the opportunities for personal reflection, spiritual growth and the connection with other pilgrims.

4.4. Theme 4 – seeking connection to oneself

Finally, *Seeking connection to oneself* emerged as a main theme with participants offering a range of reasons across a variety of situations. The subordinate themes within this overarching theme included: *embodiment in movement, finding self and seeking physical benefits*.

The link between seeking oneself and finding oneself lies in the process of self-discovery and personal growth. Seeking oneself involves actively exploring and understanding one's identity, values, beliefs, and purpose. It is an ongoing journey of introspection and self-examination. Finding oneself, on the other hand, is the outcome of this journey where an individual gains a clearer sense of who they are, their place in the world, and what truly matters to them. In essence, seeking oneself is the journey, and finding oneself is the destination. I have grouped these subthemes together to show the physicality of the pilgrimage and how seeking connection to oneself meant for the participants and how it can lead to personal insights and revelations.

Seeking connection to oneself is clearly a strong motivator for some,

I had a rough moment in life and needed to get in touch with oneself. I hated the work culture and needed time out to think; I was getting physical symptoms like headaches and needed time out.

I was in search of myself, just being alone and contemplating.

These participants described how they were experiencing changes in their life due to health, work or life pressures and how they needed the space on pilgrimage to reconnect, re-establish their identity and or/ come to terms with or adapt to life. In some cases, this was a response to dealing with grief and participants discussed how walking helped process the pain.

I spent 2 months walking alone, 800km, walking helped process the grief, I wanted to look after my health and be mindful of what was going on, walking allowed me to have emotions and zone out.

Embodiment was frequently mentioned in the interviews. The sub-theme *embodiment in movement* explored how using one's body as a tool through walking and movement leads to self-awareness, self-regulation, finding balance and creating self-acceptance

The connection with my body wasn't healthy. I had a serious problem with my legs through a serious illness. The walk cured the pain. Walking 2000km, I became aware of the movement in my body and the connection to nature.

Another participant had experienced a serious illness and explained how the walk had other benefits – namely helping her to develop coping strategies.

I had a serious illness and heard about via Francigena, you really have to stop to listen to your body, now I have my health back I will go on the walk.

Another woman mentions her health issues, but how the walk helped.

I have bad knees, arthritis, people didn't think I could walk the route, but two weeks into the walk, my knees got better, movement is important.

As the solo female pilgrims overcame their problems, what also emerged from the data was that they acquired confidence in their physical abilities, gaining a deeper connection to their bodies through awareness and sensory perception. Thus, the bodily act of walking allowed the participants space to express themselves physically which

enabled healing for body and mind.

5. Discussion

The pilgrims in this study were female solo walkers and chose to walk on the via Francigena because of its remote, rural location without excessive tourism. They were clear in their reasons for seeking solitude. Spending time alone was important to them as this provided space for them to prioritise their own needs and escape the constraints on life. They found that solitude and walking alone helped them to discover their authentic selves and allowed them to resolve their own problems and answer important questions. However, their experiences included many contradictions: they sought out peace and yet described the pilgrimage as challenging and adventurous; they chose to travel alone and yet felt solidarity and companionship with strangers; and they chose the loneliness and hardships of solo travel as a way of improving their wellbeing.

5.1. Solo pilgrimage walking as a peaceful adventure

According to [Malis et al. \(2023\)](#) solitude is important as it facilitates self-knowledge and deeper understanding. Likewise, [Smith \(2018\)](#) draws the connections between the act of walking and peace. She argues that, to have peace, you must begin by walking peacefully. The interviews certainly identify peacefulness, but also a quest for adventure.

[Hinds \(2011\)](#) identifies many beneficial aspects of being alone in the natural environment, suggesting that solitude could be linked to both spirituality and nature. This study supports [Malis et al. \(2023\)](#) and [Hinds \(2011\)](#) research that natural environments can be beneficial in providing psychological restoration from mental exertions bought on by modern living and [Sanders, et al \(2014\)](#) found having moments of solitude, being in nature and having time to reflect were important to long-distant walkers. There is a common thread between [Pereira and Silva \(2018\)](#) and [Malis et al. \(2023\)](#) research on solitude and this study and the importance of solitude and wanting to spend time alone. However, [Brown \(2020\)](#) raises important safety issues for female solo travellers in how they monitor the environment, modify their behaviour and identify potential risks when walking alone.

Adventure was clearly important to the pilgrims. [Zimmermann and Saura \(2017, p. 162\)](#) state that an adventurer is someone who expects the unexpected and is open to new possibilities, and that being immersed in adventure activity can be a moment to be elsewhere, taking time to think about life. This study clearly outlined that all eight participants were seeking adventure. However, there were mixed conceptualisations of adventure, and why it was important. Although all eight mentioned their satisfaction in completing the walk, four seemed driven to test their ability and skills, whilst the other four seemed motivated by the experience and appeared to be seeking enjoyment and a feeling of accomplishment.

Thus, an overall pattern emerged from this study. All eight participants were seeking an experience that included peace and adventure and were prepared to venture into the unknown. According to [Mehmetoglu and Engen \(2011\)](#) such experiences are events that engage the individual in a way that is attuned to the individual's need to create their own identity. This was the case here and neatly describes how the participants combined peace and adventure.

This study found that all participants were seeking challenge for different reasons. The challenge was not only in walking the pilgrimage but in understanding themselves and coping with the adversities and setbacks they encountered. Indeed, six participants struggled with physical ailments but showed determination by overcoming these challenges. Although no-one mentioned resilience, they demonstrated coping strategies and traits of resilience. [Steinhardt and Dolbier \(2008\)](#) suggest that there is a mutual connection between coping and resilience and suggest that resilience can be developed through controlled exposure to challenge, and [Bernay \(2019\)](#) states through dealing with

challenges, resilience becomes a trait for coping skills. As [White and White \(2004\)](#) put it travel is a way of challenging and extending oneself physically and intellectually, and are integral to the extended interval of risk, spontaneity and independence offered by long-term journeys.

Thus, solo pilgrimage walking is simultaneously a search for peace and a quest for adventure, and both are means of building identity and resilience.

5.2. Solo pilgrimage walking as a search for community

Each pilgrim left a familiar community to undertake the pilgrimage. They encountered the pilgrimage community and found solidarity in being with others and enjoying simple relationships with other people. This reflects [Murray \(2014\)](#) who describes pilgrims as trying to recapture the simplistic traditions and nostalgia of earlier times. However, [Marsh \(2007\)](#) suggests that the spiritual aspect of adventure includes an enhanced sense of connection resulting in better wellbeing, solitude and reflection which contributed and to spiritual development. [Gatrell \(2013\)](#) suggests that undertaking the pilgrimage restores well-being, since the focus is on the journey and on the self. Thus, the pilgrims in the study show that making oneself walk slower than usual initially focuses on the action of walking but soon leads to an awareness of the surrounding environment.

Seeking connection and the spirituality had different meaning for the participants, some participants have a faith and others not. However, the pilgrims in this study had found some form of spiritual connection. [Brumec \(2022\)](#) claims that both atheist and religious pilgrims are exploring different transcendence on the route. Even if a pilgrim denies the spiritual component to his or her motives, the potential for some spiritual experience is still present. Further, [Jenkins \(2023\)](#) describes how long-distance trekkers on hiking trails often speak about their journeys as spiritual; describing connections with nature, or deep relationships with a community of walkers as transcendent. In addition, pilgrims who walk to established sacred sites bond with other walkers who share identify and beliefs. They may name connections as they walk as spiritual or not, but their stories are often charged with religious and/or spiritual therapeutic understandings.

[Pereira and Silva \(2018\)](#) claim that in the past pilgrimage was closely connected to the Christian tradition, it was a journey to God. By contrast, today pilgrimage is more secular, with many people seeking their own personal way, something between the spiritual/religious need and an urge to visit historic sites. The interviews revealed close connections with [Pereira and Silva \(2018\)](#) as the eight participants were seeking their path whilst walking via Francigena.

[Brumec \(2022\)](#) and [Jenkins \(2023\)](#) have close associations with the participants as their experiences all had a spiritual dimension. Although there were varied views on religion and spirituality, pilgrims each had a unique narrative. All eight had encountered some form of spiritual transcendence, with two explicitly religious, and the other six feeling spiritual in nature or connectedness with others. This resonates with [Pereira and Silva's \(2018\)](#) views on how modern-day pilgrims seek their own journey, whilst expressing dissatisfaction with modern life.

This study shows how the pilgrims sometimes walk alone, then re-group with others. [Noy \(2004\)](#) notes that solo travellers engage in frequent social interaction. [Malis et al. \(2023\)](#) identify the role played by social equality on pilgrimages. The interviews highlight the way common purpose, shared goals and a sense of immediacy creates temporary communities with strong bonds of solidarity. In part this was developed when pilgrims stayed in small hostels where they shared stories and had meaningful conversations with others. describes these as places where pilgrims share their pain and experience in communal spaces, offer advice to each other, but also establish friendship, trust and joy. Thus, the interviews portray a social environment in which the pilgrims engage in a tight-knit community whilst travelling, telling, and listening to others' stories.

Thus, the search for community was an important part of solo

pilgrimage walking. Their journeys were spiritual, but they also formed deep relationships with other pilgrims. As this study has shown there were challenges, but this didn't stop the participants embracing a new culture which contributed to their individual and shared wellbeing.

5.3. Solo pilgrimage walking as a source of wellbeing

In this study, the bodily act of walking and movement allowed the participants time to explore and express themselves. They felt accepted on the via Francigena and this was important for the female solo pilgrims, as it encouraged them to appreciate their bodies and their unique capabilities. Thus, they were able to release emotions and stored tensions in the body leading to improved emotional wellbeing and a greater heightening of their senses. The eight embarked on journeys of self-discovery. As they walked each day, they found a new rhythm and as they stepped out with a sense of purpose and curiosity, and found solace, healing, and restoration.

[Pereira and Silva \(2018\)](#) suggest that women solo travellers' main reasons of travelling alone is to get out their comfort zone, develop a sense of autonomy and individuality. Their journey translates into searching for something deeper than leisure and relaxation. These women wanted to evaluate their own values, develop their identities, and gain knowledge. [Pereira and Silva \(2018\)](#) argue that pilgrimage travel to historical sacred spaces or other destinations is an inward metaphorical journey such as meditation and self-study. This is explored by [McIntosh et al. \(2020\)](#) who claim that when pilgrims begin to walk, things begin to happen to their perspectives of the world which continue over the course of their journey. They develop a changed sense of time and a new awareness of their bodies. [McIntosh et al. \(2020, pp. 71-72\)](#) also state that pilgrims become attuned to different rhythms as they continue day after day, and mile after mile. This resonates with the accounts of the participants as all eight participants mentioned a new awareness, becoming more attuned and developing an awareness of their bodies through walking in the environment.

[Mau et al. \(2021\)](#) makes a notable aspect of the study with comparisons over the physical body and embodiment, getting in tune and in touch with oneself. [Mau et al. \(2021\)](#) article on therapeutic walking and the reflection process when walking more than 30 km, claims physical movement can be psychologically helpful as it provides new experiences with body and self and discusses liminal phase and a space for transformation. The liminal phase can be seen as a space of uncertainty and ambiguity, characterized by a reflective process of self-questioning and change. Liminality as a theoretical model has been used in [Mau et al. \(2021\)](#) as a model to identify change. [Berney \(2019\)](#) states being present contributes to wellbeing and consists of the physical breath, body sensations, emotions, and feelings.

These findings are also consistent with [Mau et al. \(2021\)](#) as all eight participants found a new connection with their bodies, yet the responses from the participants expand beyond into an understanding that although awareness and transformation is not only felt at a physical level but emotional, mental combined with the balance of solitude and camaraderie.

[Wilson and Harris \(2006\)](#) mention how travel provides an important arena in which individuals can explore, reflect, consider, and analyse. They suggest that it can trigger new perspectives, changes or a renewed appreciation of life, and that time spent alone, meant that women were able to find time and space for reflection and self-development. This aligns with [Seryczyńska and Duda \(2021\)](#) who note that pilgrims set their own priorities and learn the truth about themselves. They realised they lacked time in their everyday life for the kind of reflections they were able to do on the Camino, thus, they could distance themselves from everyday life.

The interviews highlighted several reasons for the participants to be in search of self; including three processing traumas that they had experienced. [White and White \(2004\)](#) found that taking to the road was a way of grieving and distancing themselves from a way of life that had

ended. Buckley (2018) describes the three stages of grief that a woman dealt with following the death of her 22-year-old son and how engaging in nature-based adventure enabled her to deal with her inner healing. Through coming to terms with her grief and reconnecting with nature, she emerged with a new perspective. Buckley's example (2018) shows how the wilderness can be therapeutic, producing healing and psychological benefits. The psychological processing of pain and problems through walking has links to positive psychology (Stanton et al., 2011) but Harper and Dobud (2021) also suggest that gently moving through the forest is meditative; participants are in the here and now, and the stillness and meditation aids mental health and is a pathway to healing.

Thus, solo pilgrimage walking can be seen as a source of wellbeing and appears to be a means for the participants to release tension, process grief and engage in physical movement that creates a meditative and reflective state.

5.4. Limitations and future research

This study has explored the experiences of eight solo female walkers on the via Francigena. It explored the distinct challenges, motivations, and benefits that emerge from solitary pilgrimage experiences and the way that these relate to wellbeing. As such it has interpreted the experiences through shared historicity to make sense of the highly personalised accounts, and to enable the development of conclusions about more generalised experiences of solo pilgrim walking. However, there are a number of factors that limit such generalisability. These include the small sample size, the period of data collection (three years after the covid pandemic), the uniqueness of the via Francigena and the uniqueness and positivity of each of the pilgrims who kindly volunteered their time for this study.

6. Conclusions

Despite the limitations of the study, the evidence seems clear that the women in the study used solo pilgrimage walking as a means of building identity and resilience and that contributed to their wellbeing during and after the experience. They found that activity and culture of solo pilgrimage walking was as a source of wellbeing as it allowed them to release tension, process grief and engage in physical movement that creates a meditative and reflective state. In addition, their interviews showed that the choice to walk alone was in many ways a search for community, and this was an important part of the solo pilgrimage walking experience. As such, the women felt engaged in something bigger than their own journey, but that contributed to their sense of wellbeing.

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CRedit authorship contribution statement

Sarah Grocutt: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft.
Colin Wood: Writing – review & editing, Supervision.

Informed consent

All participants completed written informed consent forms prior to interview.

Ethical approval and informed consent statements

The research was conducted as part of Dissertation for the MA in Outdoor Education. Ethical Approval was received from the University Research Ethics Committee of the University of Worcester.

Significance of the research

This is the first research to explore women's choices to walk alone on a pilgrimage route, their experiences and how this impacted on their wellbeing. It finds that solo pilgrimage walking allowed women to release tension, process grief and engage in physical movement that created a meditative and reflective state.

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Declaration of competing interest

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Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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