

2022

### **Exceptional Human Experiences Among Pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago: A Study of Self-Reported Experiences and Transformative Aftereffects**

Miran Lavric

Snezana Brumec

Andrej Naterer

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.ciis.edu/advance-archive>



Part of the [Alternative and Complementary Medicine Commons](#), [Human Factors Psychology Commons](#), [Multicultural Psychology Commons](#), [Other Psychiatry and Psychology Commons](#), [Other Psychology Commons](#), [Philosophy of Mind Commons](#), [Philosophy of Science Commons](#), [Psychological Phenomena and Processes Commons](#), [Religion Commons](#), [Somatic Psychology Commons](#), [Theory and Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Transpersonal Psychology Commons](#)

---

# Exceptional Human Experiences Among Pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago: A Study of Self-Reported Experiences and Transformative Aftereffects

*Miran Lavrič*

University of Maribor  
Maribor, Slovenia

*Snežana Brumec*

University of Maribor  
Maribor, Slovenia

*Andrej Naterer*

University of Maribor  
Maribor, Slovenia

The Camino de Santiago pilgrimage is an extraordinary endeavour that tends to trigger exceptional human experiences. Following our previous investigation of this topic, we conducted an online survey of 501 pilgrims in order to assess the frequency of different exceptional experiences (EEs) on the pilgrimage and their transformative aftereffects (TAs) in everyday life afterwards. More than 70% of the respondents reported improvement in terms of self-confidence, personal relationships and letting go of emotional “baggage”. The results show strong correlations between the observed EEs and the (consequent) TAs. We contend that walking the Camino de Santiago often produces exceptional experiences that lead to positive long-term psychosocial effects.

**Keywords:** *exceptional human experiences, pilgrimage, Camino de Santiago, transformative aftereffects*

From the 1990s, there has been a change in the theory and the method of pilgrimage research. Late modernity has brought a tendency to challenge existing theories and introduced a greater integration of various research approaches and concepts. Many studies (Collins-Kreiner, 2010; Digance, 2003; Timothy & Olsen, 2006) show that academic study of pilgrimage is interdisciplinary. In addition, as Collins-Kreiner (2010) pointed out, in the new approach to pilgrimage research, increasing attention is paid to individual experiences and the tendency to emphasize the subjective over the objective. The new paradigm has brought to the fore the pilgrim and her subjective experience, thereby focusing on the importance of what pilgrims say about their experiences. Another relatively new pattern in research, according to Collins-Kreiner, is the focus on the aftereffects of pilgrimage on the lives of participants after their return home.

In this study, we apply this new approach to accounts of the pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago (“the Way of St. James”). This extremely popular pilgrimage route consists of a network of paths leading to the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela,

the legendary site of the remains of Saint James. The most popular route is Camino Frances, an almost 800 km long path running from Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port on the French side of the Pyrenees, that takes about four to five weeks of walking. Since 1987, when the Camino was proclaimed the first European Cultural Itinerary by the Council of Europe and one of UNESCO’s World Heritage Sites, the yearly number of pilgrims has risen from less than 3000 to over 347,000 in 2019 (Pilgrim’s Reception Office 2020). Pilgrims who reach the city obtain a Compostela certificate issued by the Chapter of the Metropolitan Church of Santiago. Although most pilgrims were of Spanish nationality (42%), a Compostela was issued to pilgrims from 190 different countries.

Along with the rising number of pilgrims, the interest of the research community in this pilgrimage has increased dramatically over the past several decades. This is evident in a number of studies on different aspects of the pilgrimage (Amaro, et al., 2018; Apostol, 2013; Beek, 2017, 2018; Beek, et al., 2017; Chemin, 2012; Courtney, 2014; Frey, 1998; Gitlitz & Davidson, 2000; Havard, 2017; Herrero, 2008; Nilsson & Tesfahuney, 2016, 2018; Oviedo, et

al., 2016; Lopez, 2013; Lucarno, 2016; Margry, 2008; Nilsson, 2016; Roszak & Huzarek, 2022; Schnell & Pali, 2013; Slavin, 2003; Smith, 2018; Sousa & Rosa, 2017; Vilaça, 2010; Warkentin, 2018).

### **Existing Studies and Theoretical Background**

Researchers have used different theoretical frameworks and approaches to deal with the experiences and the effects of the pilgrimage on the Way of St. James. Schnell and Pali (2013) found that pilgrims reported experiencing life as significantly more meaningful. Most pilgrims in this study reported strengthening their commitment to self-transcendence and self-actualization. The authors concluded that pilgrimage is a positive experience of having mastered a demanding task, encouraging readiness to meet challenges and actualize one's potential.

Focusing on travel diaries of Italian pilgrims, Lucrezia Lopez (2013) found that pilgrims tend to describe their pilgrimage as a cathartic experience that transformed their lives and priorities.

More recently, Lavrič and Brumec (2020) conducted a short online survey and argued that a strong increase of self-actualization as measured by the Kaufman Characteristics of Self-actualization Scale (CSAS) (2018) was the central psychological aftereffect of walking the Camino. Lobato and Sainz (2020) focused on pilgrims' identity and concluded that once participants are imbued with the pilgrim identity, they tend to remain so after the pilgrimage, even if they do not engage regularly in contact with other pilgrims. Feliu-Soler et al. (2021) explored the effects of pilgrimage on mindfulness on a large sample of pilgrims. Their results showed increased mindfulness skills after the experience, suggesting that it could be a way to foster mindfulness cognitive skills. Brumec (2021) focused on changes in values after a pilgrimage. On the basis of Schwartz's values questionnaire, she found that the value shift reflected pro-social tendencies and implied highly internalised pro-social values. Pilgrims reported a substantial increase in the values of universalism and benevolence and a decrease in the importance of values that emphasize the pursuit of self-interest, success and dominance over others. In a separate study, Brumec (2022)

compared life changes after the Camino pilgrimage with life changes after unitive/mystical experiences, combat near-death experiences, and hypnotically-induced death experiences. She found striking similarities among the results of four different studies. In all four, the most substantial changes involved an increase in appreciation for life; a heightened quest for meaning and sense of purpose; more concern for others; greater self-acceptance; a deeper sense of spirituality; and a decrease in concern with worldly achievement.

More recently, Brumec, Lavrič and Naterer (2022) suggested that the paradigm of Exceptional Human Experiences (EHEs) could be appropriate for dealing with the experiences of pilgrimages and their aftereffects. EHEs are understood to be combinations of exceptional (out-of-the-ordinary) experiences (EEs) during a pilgrimage and their transformative aftereffects (TAs). Based on qualitative and quantitative content analyses of 32 pilgrim travelogues, we constructed an empirically grounded typology of EEs and TAs, as well as combinations (EHEs). We concluded that future research on the psychological aspects of pilgrimages can benefit from applying an EHE framework.

The term Exceptional Human Experiences (EHEs) was coined by Rhea White (1993) to describe spontaneously emerging unusual experiences, which researchers and practitioners deal with in different disciplines separately, and to conceptualize them as religious (James, 2008), mystical (Stace, 1961), anomalous (Cardeña et al., 2017), peak experiences (Maslow, 1994) and awakening experiences (Taylor & Egeto-Szabo, 2017).

White listed 10 basic characteristics of EHEs:

- (1) All of these experiences are spontaneous in virtually every life situation, but there are certain triggers that are often described by the experiencers, including "exposure to scenes of natural beauty, visiting sacred places, such as shrines and cathedrals.... They are also associated with intense involvement in meaningful long-term repetitive activities such as running or walking." (White, 1994, p. 194).
- (2) EHEs involve transcendence, which means awareness of rising above, of surpassing, and exceeding. Therefore, one has no sense of

separation with the surroundings outside the person.

- (3) During the EHE there is no sense of separation within the person.
- (4) EHEs provide a new experience of self, of who we are.
- (5) These are experiences of connection (to different parts of self, to other individuals and forms of life, to the planet, to the universe, and to the sacred).
- (6) During the EHE, one directly experiences a reality that is generally considered to be impossible. It is a kind of instantaneous knowing that whatever is happening is real.
- (7) EHEs are invitations to participate in the process of growth that requires one's cooperation. They are part of an ongoing process that can enrich human life and increase understanding of the nature of existence.
- (8) Each experience is potentially life-changing in its significance. They can foster beneficial and transformative changes in the experiencer.
- (9) EHEs can serve as links to a world of meaning and connection.
- (10) Their disclosure can benefit the experiencer's mental health and well-being. Therefore, the sharing and communicating of EHEs leads to the realization of the experiencer's highest human potential and the transformation of her life.

It is important to note that White distinguished exceptional experiences (EEs) and EHEs. In EEs she included processes and events that, according to Western theories of reality, seem anomalous or questionable. The adjective "human" was added to show that they can reveal these experiences and contribute to a greater expression of real human potential. A colleague of Rhea White, Susanne Brown, claimed that she focused on the potential of EEs that could "be experienced and subsequently integrated into new personal and world view contexts" (Brown, 2000, p. 69). Brown argued that at the moment that potential is potentiated, transmuted, and humanized, EE becomes EHE.

We argue that EHEs are exceptional experiences that become transformative. It is the transformative aftereffects (TAs) that make the EHE perspective useful in research on pilgrimage.

### **The Present Study**

We applied the theory of EHEs to accounts from pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago (Brumec et al., 2022).

Our goal was to quantify the typology of EEs and TAs derived by Brumec et al. (2022) gleaned from reports from pilgrims on the Camino. This typology was based on 32 pilgrims' travelogues.

Our second goal was to examine correlations between individual types from the two basic categories. We hypothesized that each type of EE is statistically significantly ( $p < 0.01$ ) and at least moderately ( $r > 0.300$ ) correlated to one or more types of TAs. Confirming this hypothesis would lend credence to the thesis that all our observed EEs can be considered part of EHEs, since they are all related to some TAs.

Our third goal was to identify and quantify pairs of EEs and TAs that are at least moderately ( $r > 0.300$ ) correlated and thus fit the category of EHEs. We offer interpretations of the theoretically most interesting combinations of EEs and TAs.

### **Methods**

We conducted an online survey of pilgrims who walked the Camino de Santiago one or more times. The survey was based on a typology of EEs and TAs developed in a study of 32 pilgrims' travelogues by Brumec et al. (2022).

### **Participants**

We targeted pilgrims who walked at least 300 km or rode a bicycle at least 600 km of the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage route from any country in the world but who could speak English, the language of the research study.

### **Recruitment**

Participants were recruited through a link with the online questionnaire placed on four Camino de Santiago groups extant on Facebook that serve English-speaking pilgrims: American Pilgrims on the Camino (over 26,000 members); Australian Pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago and Beyond (over 4,300 members); Camino de Santiago All Routes (over 55,700 members); and Camino de Santiago (over 30,300 members). Data were collected from April to July 2020.

## Measures

The main part of the questionnaire was based on an inductively derived typology of EEs and TAs (Brumec et al., 2022). The nine types of EEs and eight types of TAs, with reference quotation from travelogues, are presented in Tables 1 and 2. Respondents were asked to consider whether they experienced any of the described nine types of EEs during the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage, and whether they experienced any of the eight types of TAs after they came home (for descriptions of survey questions see Tables 1 and 2). They ranked their levels of agreement on a 3-point Likert scale (1 = No; 2 = Maybe; 3 = Yes). In the second part of the survey, respondents answered five demographic questions and stated how many times they had walked the Camino de Santiago.

## Procedure

Volunteers who clicked on the link were taken to the internet-based questionnaire developed using 1KA, an online survey software tool. The online survey was chosen because of its low cost and ability to reach pilgrims from all over the world.

## Treatment of Data

Descriptive statistics for the sample demographics were calculated, as well as for the prevalence of the different types of EEs and their TAs. Pearson's correlation coefficient assessed the relationship between EEs and TAs to determine whether these experiences could be considered EHEs, and further calculations were performed to see which EEs and TAs were most strongly correlated.

## Results

Five hundred and one people responded to the on-line solicitation. Fifty-five percent of the respondents were pilgrims who had travelled the Camino de Santiago once, 21% twice, and 24% more than twice. Respondents' mean age was 57.5 years (SD = 11.5), the youngest being 20 years old and the oldest 80. The sample was 41% male and 59% female. The respondents were highly educated, since more than 79% had at least a bachelor's degree.

The mean of the importance of God in the participant's life was 6.1 (1-10; SD = 2.6). Thirty-five percent followed the Catholic religion, 33% other

and 32% do not follow any religion. Twenty-one percent of participants never go to church, mass, or worship; 29% only rarely; 27% once a week; 18% several times per year and 6% once a month.

As Table 3 reveals, the respondents quite frequently experienced all nine types of EEs during the pilgrimage, and all eight types of TAs after the pilgrimage. With respect to EEs, the *Here-and-now experience* was the most common type. It was fully confirmed (answer "YES") by almost 80% of the respondents.

The other two most prevalent types of EEs were the *Experience of deep calm and reconciliation* (77%) and the *Experience of trust* (74%). The rarest type was the *Experience of dream vision*, reported by only 15% of the respondents.

In terms of the prevalence of the eight types of TAs after the pilgrimage, the most common was the *Boost of self-confidence* (73%), followed by *Stronger interpersonal relationships* (71%) and *Letting go* (71%). The rarest type of TAs was *Strengthened intuition*, which was still reported by 43% of respondents after the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage and a similar number confirmed having a religious experience during the pilgrimage.

Table 3 lends support to the claim that pilgrimage at the Camino de Santiago sparks positive psychological changes in the lives of pilgrims after their return to everyday life. Less than 8% of pilgrims reported no improvement in personal relationships, and less than 10% reported no boost in self-confidence. More than 9 out of 10 pilgrims reported at least some improvement in terms of self-confidence, personal relationships and letting go of redundant elements in their lives.

We calculated the Pearson's correlation coefficients between EEs and TAs (Table 4). All EEs were statistically significantly and positively associated with all TAs. Each type of EE proved to be at least moderately ( $r > 0.300$ ; see Cohen, 1988) correlated to one or more types of TAs (see the underscored coefficients in each row within Table 4). All observed EEs can thus be considered as part of EHEs.

We aimed to quantify the pairs of EEs and TAs that were moderately ( $r > 0.300$ ) correlated and thus best fit the category of EHEs. This

Exceptional Experiences	Description of EEs in the questionnaire	Reference quotations from travelogues
<p><b>1. Here-and-now experience</b> is an experience of “just being,” without the presence of thoughts and their control over an individual.</p>	<p>Here-and-now experience (experience of just being, without time or space component)</p>	<p>“I sat there for a long time, just being. It was God’s time now, kairos time, outside of chronological time when extraordinary things happen. This experience of living in God’s love freely given was deeply consoling and satisfying. I had a strong sense of that ‘giftedness,’ grace, or blessing as I had not earned or deserved this in any way. I felt the whole journey on the Camino had been a preparation for this moment, a stripping down of the ego and self-centeredness, and a being open to providence and what the moment brought.” (McManus, 2014, ch. 16, para. 26)</p>
<p><b>2. Experience of deep calm and reconciliation</b> is an experience of inner peace that usually manifests itself after a process of self-exploration and self-confrontation when walking in nature and silence.</p>	<p>Reconciliation (feeling of inner peace)</p>	<p>I sensed myself vibrating in the air, feeling a peacefulness as great as any I had ever experienced.” (MacLaine, p. 212)</p>
<p><b>3. Experience of trust</b> is a feeling of trust usually based on events that occur during the pilgrimage. you get what you need. It is usually understood in terms of trust in God, Path, or Life.</p>	<p>Experience of “getting what you need” (a discovery that all your needs are being met at the time they are needed)</p>	<p>“Undeniably the Spirit was speaking to me directly. The message was to stop trying to go it alone with your own striving and solo efforts; lay back and trust God, trust the Universe and road to deliver to you what you need.” (McManus, 2014, ch. 16, para. 28)</p>
<p><b>4. Experience of interconnectedness</b> is the strong perception of an individual that he or she is deeply integrated into a larger whole, usually described as the entire universe. This feeling tends to be accompanied by the perception of a universal unifying force or energy, which triggers feelings of joy and happiness.</p>	<p>Interconnectedness (feeling as integrated part of Universe, interconnected with energy and power of life)</p>	<p>“There was a real connection – with others, oneself and the world. There was something real and embodied about Camino life, as close and personal as breathing, but at the same time transcendent and sacred.” (McManus, ch. 3, para. 18)</p>
<p><b>5. Experience of meaningful coincidence</b> is a coincidental encounter of a pilgrim with people or events that mirror his/her inner psychological states and/or life situations. The meaningful coincidence tends to show a way to resolve problems related to such psychological states and/or life situations.</p>	<p>Meaningful coincidence (coincidental encounter mirroring inner happenings)</p>	<p>“For a moment, our conversation was already at the borders of bizarre, whereby I attributed bizarritty [sic] to the feeling that we are one person [...] so similar were our habits, thoughts, even experiences on the way. As if my mirror was without corrections and changes. Clean mirror. We have found that our experiences at a specific city, Albergue, the people we met and even the feelings we had of a particular day, were incredibly similar.” (pp. 136–137)</p>
<p><b>6. Cathartic experience</b> is an experience of emotional release, often accompanied by tears with no immediate cause.</p>	<p>Cathartic experience (feeling of emotional release, known as the purging of the spirit and body, mostly accompanied by tears of unknown cause)</p>	<p>“It’s the middle of mass, just when communion rite begins. We enter the almost full church when the large choir, accompanied by the enchanting sound of the organ, sings ‘my’ song—Nearer, my God, to Thee. Wet and freezing, I sit in the pew closest to the exit and my body is overwhelmed with bliss. I cannot stop the tears which drench my cheeks. God, what sign are you sending me? You want to tell me that you give me your blessing. Thank you for your gift.” (Kapetanović, 2017, p. 212)</p>

**Table 1A: Types of Exceptional Experiences occurring during Camino de Santiago.**

<b>Exceptional Experiences</b> (continued from Table 1A)	<b>Description of EEs in the questionnaire</b>	<b>Reference quotations from travelogues</b>
7. <b>Experience of insight</b> is an instant awareness of the essence of an important issue, which is achieved without conscious thinking.	Insight (clear knowledge, indirectly acquired or spontaneously perceived without conscious thinking)	"I sat there for a long time, just being. It was God's time now, kairos time, outside of chronological time when extraordinary things happen. This experience of living in God's love freely given was deeply consoling and satisfying. I had a strong sense of that 'giftedness,' grace, or blessing as I had not earned or deserved this in any way. I felt the whole journey on the Camino had been a preparation for this moment, a stripping down of the ego and self-centeredness, and a being open to providence and what the moment brought." (McManus, 2014, ch. 16, para. 26)
8. <b>Religious experience</b> is an experience of direct connection to God or some other transcendent or supernatural entity. This experience tends to be associated with feelings of grace and bliss, feelings of gratitude, as well as feelings of happiness, joy, and pleasure.	Religious experience (uncommonly tight and direct connection with God or other religious subjects)	I sensed myself vibrating in the air, feeling a peacefulness as great as any I had ever experienced." (MacLaine, p. 212).
9. <b>Experience of a dream vision</b> is the perception of spatially or temporally distant things, people, or events without the intervention of the common human sensory organs.	Dream vision (an inner experience of what is supposed to happen in the past or will occur in the future)	"In my dream vision, I became confused about time. I was existing at the end of the twentieth century, yet having an experience in the eighth century, in the time of Charlemagne, while this John the Scot dream I was dreaming seemed itself to be going backward and forward in time." (MacLaine, 2000, p. 86)

**Table 1B: Types of Exceptional Experiences occurring during Camino de Santiago (continued)**

<b>Transformative Aftereffects</b>	<b>Description of TAs in the questionnaire</b>	<b>Reference quotations from travelogues</b>
1. <b>Boost of self-confidence.</b> During the pilgrimage on the Camino, some pilgrims realize that the opinions of others are not as important as they previously thought. Consequently, their self-confidence rises.	Boost of self-confidence (doesn't matter what others think, increased self-confidence)	"I sat there for a long time, just being. It was God's time now, kairos time, outside of chronological time when extraordinary things happen. This experience of living in God's love freely given was deeply consoling and satisfying. I had a strong sense of that 'giftedness,' grace, or blessing as I had not earned or deserved this in any way. I felt the whole journey on the Camino had been a preparation for this moment, a stripping down of the ego and self-centeredness, and a being open to providence and what the moment brought." (McManus, 2014, ch. 16, para. 26)
2. <b>Letting go.</b> The core idea within this type is that one needs very little for happiness and that, therefore, one should let go of all the redundant material and emotional "baggage" that one carries through life. After returning home, many pilgrims start to eliminate excessive objects, emotions, and relationships from their lives.	Letting go (eliminating excessive objects, emotions and relationships)	"For several months after my return, I tried to apply my reflections on my fears to the whole of my life. I calmly examined what I carried on my back. I cast off many things, many projects, many constraints. I tried to lighten my load to make it easier to bear the mochila of existence." (Rufin, ch. 32 para. 18).

**Table 2A: Types of Transformative Aftereffects after walking Camino de Santiago**

Transformative Aftereffects (continued from Table 2A)	Description of TAs in the questionnaire	Reference quotations from travelogues
<b>3. Stronger interpersonal relationships.</b> After the Camino experience, pilgrims are more appreciative of true friendship, interpersonal help, and they are more broadminded.	Stronger interpersonal relationships (greater appreciation of true friendship and interpersonal help)	"The Camino has made one thing very clear to me: I want my life to demonstrate love, sacrifice for others, compassion, and the value placed in relationships." (Gray & Skeesuck, 2017, p. 217)
<b>4. Spirituality, wisdom, and detachment.</b> After returning to the everyday world, many pilgrims report living more spiritual lives; they tend to think more about human wisdom and faith and tend to become more humble and less attached to things, people, or relationships.	Spirituality, wisdom, and detachment (living more spiritual lives; thinking more about human wisdom and faith, becoming more humble and less attached)	"I know that all the spiritual wisdom I have won so far cannot help me if I cannot live it in practice. I think that the essence of all life wisdom lies in living them. The theory is always very beautiful and you can quickly conquer it, but making use of it in everyday life, that is art." (Jernejčič, 2014, p. 85).
<b>5. Unity and love.</b> When they return home, pilgrims tend to put more emphasis on love, unity with nature, and following their hearts.	Unity and love (tending to put more emphasis on love, unity with nature, and following their hearts)	"Although my daily rhythm has caught me once again in its net, it often helps me when I re-experience the infinite freedom and the magical power of the human body and spirit and their connection with nature and other people." (Djura Jelenko & Jelenko, 2010, p. 140)
<b>6. Apostolic mission.</b> This aftereffect involves the pilgrim's sense of responsibility to share his or her insights from the Camino with other people and invite them to gain their own pilgrimage experience.	Apostolic mission (feeling a sense of responsibility to share insights from the Camino with other people and inviting them to gain their own pilgrimage experience).	"Apostles are all of us because each of us in a way announces our truth to people around us. Nowadays we do not call ourselves apostles, but we had different names on the way through history. We are all the same Self, we are all One, we are all connected, so we are all connected with some fragment of ourselves with the vibrations of Jesus and his apostles." (Vranjek, 2015, p. 189)
<b>7. Vulnerability.</b> Within this type, a pilgrim typically connects personal growth with recognizing his/her vulnerability. The core idea is that by only admitting and revealing pain one can realize that he/she is not alone in suffering. This recognition fills the pilgrim's life with hope.	Vulnerability (admitting and revealing pain)	"When we invite others into our world, when we surround ourselves with a community of trusted individuals, we are able to share. [...] And we begin to realize we're not alone in our suffering, and we're not alone in life. Our stories begin to take on a different shape; they're filled with hope. Soon, the beauty of our relationships outweighs the darkness of our pasts." (Gray & Skeesuck, 2017, p. 144)
<b>8. Strengthened intuition.</b> Intuition becomes a much more important factor in one's decision-making process.	Strengthened intuition (intuition becomes a much more important factor of decision-making process)	"I am not complicated anymore and I am not losing myself in the games of the thoughts of the restricted mind. With confidence, I follow intuition, and thoughts serve only as a channel for messages of the soul." (Artnik Knibbe, 2016, p. 212)

**Table 2B: Types of Transformative Aftereffects after walking Camino de Santiago (continued)**

was achieved by computing the percentages of respondents answering "YES" to both items in each pair. Table 5 presents these percentages together with the respective correlation coefficients, which sort individual pairs by the strength of correlation coefficients.

The most internally consistent EHE ( $r = 0.417$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) is *the experience of deep calm and reconciliation* with the aftereffect of *unity and love*. Fifty-five percent of respondents reported fully

experiencing both, making this one of the most common. The pilgrims who experienced deep calm during the weeks of their Camino walk were more likely to put more emphasis on love, unity with nature, and following their hearts after they returned to everyday life.

The aftereffect of *unity and love* was strongly associated ( $r = 0.389$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) with the *experience of insight* during the pilgrimage. Although this combination is not among the most frequent (37%),

it is not hard to imagine that having experience(s) of instant awareness of the essence of things can lead to more emphasis on unity and love.

The most frequent (58%), as well as internally consistent ( $r = 0.387$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) combination was that of *experience of deep calm and reconciliation* with the aftereffect of *spirituality, wisdom and detachment*. Again, it is quite convincing that experience(s) of deep calm leads to increased levels of spirituality and detachment.

Table 5 supports the claim that EHEs are meaningful in terms of logical connection between EEs and TAs. This is most apparent in the case of TA of *strengthened intuition*, which is strongly correlated to having an *experience of insight* ( $r = 0.355$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and the *experience of a dream vision* ( $r = 0.314$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

### Discussion and Conclusion

The results of our survey support the claim of positive psychological and social effects from walking the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage. This claim has been tested by several different studies and in different ways (Brumec, 2021, 2022; Brumec et al., 2022; Brumec & Aracki Rosenfeld, 2021; Feliu-Soler, et al., 2021; Lavrič & Brumec, 2020; Lobato & Sainz, 2020; Lopez, 2013; Schnell & Pali, 2013; ). In this study, such effects are presented within the framework of exceptional human experiences.

Building on recent work by Brumec et al. (2022) we measured the prevalence of different types of EEs and TAs during and after the Camino, and found the most frequent TAs were related to improvement in general psychosocial functioning of

Exceptional Experiences During the Pilgrimage			
	% YES	% MAYBE	% NO
Here-and-now experience	79.3	11.6	9.1
Experience of deep calm and reconciliation	76.9	16.0	7.1
Experience of trust	74.0	18.7	7.3
Experience of interconnectedness	63.8	23.6	12.5
Experience of meaningful coincidence	57.2	22.6	20.2
Cathartic experience	53.6	17.5	28.9
Experience of insight	48.3	3.6	18.1
Religious experience	43.1	23.8	33.1
Experience of a dream vision	15.4	14.8	69.9
Transformative Aftereffects from Walking Camino de Santiago			
	% YES	% MAYBE	% NO
Boost of self-confidence	73.4	17.0	9.5
Stronger interpersonal relationships	71.1	21.3	7.7
Letting go	70.9	20.2	8.9
Spirituality, wisdom, and detachment	68.6	21.5	9.9
Unity and love	64.8	23.4	11.8
Apostolic mission	52.3	24.4	23.2
Vulnerability	47.9	26.6	25.6
Strengthened intuition	43.0	32.6	24.4

Table 3: The Frequency of Individual Types of Exceptional Experiences and Individual Types of Transformative Aftereffects

individuals, including a boost in self-confidence improved interpersonal relationships, and letting go of material and emotional “baggage” in life (71%).

The more mystical or unusual experiences (dream vision, insight, religious experience) and aftereffects (strengthened intuition) were less common, but far from being very rare. Given the mystical nature of such experiences, we find their occurrence quite frequent. For example, only 24% of respondents categorically denied the TA of strengthened intuition. A mystical or “anomalous” event was the rarest type of EE in the study by Brumec et al. (2022). More mystical and unusual EEs (dream vision, insight, religious experience) were substantially less common than the more generally acknowledged experiences and psychological states

(just being in the moment, deep calm, the felling of a general trust in life).

All EEs were statistically significantly and positively associated with all TAs, and each type of EE proved to be at least moderately ( $r > 0.300$ ) correlated to one or more types of TAs. These results support the thesis that EEs at the pilgrimage are a causal factor of TAs after the pilgrimage. We consider this finding supportive of the validity of the EHE approach to the study of pilgrimage. This idea is further supported by examples of most strongly correlated pairs of EEs and TAs. As we have shown, these pairs make a lot of sense from the perspective of logical judgement, which can be considered evidence of their face validity.

We conclude that pilgrims at the Camino de Santiago often report experiencing exceptional

	Unity and love	Stronger interpersonal relationship	Spirituality, wisdom, and detachment	Apostolic mission	Letting go	Vulnerability	Strengthened intuition	Boost of self-confidence
Experience of interconnectedness	<u>0.337**</u>	0.237**	<u>0.302**</u>	0.188**	0.239**	0.239**	0.283**	0.203**
Experience of deep calm and reconciliation	<u>0.417**</u>	0.298**	<u>0.387**</u>	0.268**	0.282**	0.170**	0.187**	0.185**
Cathartic experience	<u>0.347**</u>	0.193**	<u>0.319**</u>	0.242**	0.239**	<u>0.360**</u>	0.244**	0.128**
Here-and-now experience	<u>0.355**</u>	0.215**	0.215**	0.152**	0.215**	0.274**	0.272**	0.217**
Experience of insight	<u>0.389**</u>	0.288**	0.329**	0.297**	0.250**	0.314**	0.355**	0.180**
Experience of trust	0.281**	0.257**	<u>0.317**</u>	0.268**	0.199**	0.143**	0.253**	0.225**
Religious experience	0.254**	0.154**	<u>0.384**</u>	0.317**	0.145**	0.143**	0.114*	0.099*
Experience of meaningful coincidence	0.266**	0.164**	0.306**	0.270**	0.192**	0.219**	<u>0.335**</u>	0.190**
Experience of a dream vision	0.223**	0.147**	0.242**	0.267**	0.112*	0.210**	<u>0.316**</u>	0.175**
* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)    ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed) Note: Coefficients above 0.300 are underscored.								

**Table 4: Pearson’s Correlations between Types of Exceptional Experiences and Types of Transformative Aftereffects**

psychological processes during the pilgrimage, and that these experiences tend to lead to positive long-term psychosocial effects.

This study does have limitations. (1) The survey was conducted exclusively in an online format so participation was limited to individuals who had access to and were able to navigate the online survey. (2) The survey covered only those pilgrims who were members of one or more of four groups on Facebook. Pilgrims on whom the Camino experience had had a more positive impact may have been more likely to decide to take part in these Facebook groups and to answer the questionnaire. (3) The online format prevented respondents from

being able to get immediate answers to any questions they may have had about the survey procedure. (4) Any retrospective report of subjective experience may be vulnerable to memory decay, distortion, or fabrication. (5) Reliance on retrospective self-reports of EHEs and TAs may limit confidence in the findings. (6) The transferability of our findings is limited given that we relied solely on English-speaking pilgrims. Nevertheless, we see no obvious reason why EHEs should significantly differ between pilgrims from different countries.

To conclude, our study brings empirical support to the claim that the EHE framework is useful in pilgrimage studies. Hopefully, continued

<b>Exceptional Experience</b>	<b>Transformative aftereffect</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Pearson's r</b>
Experience of deep calm and reconciliation	Unity and love	55.3	0.417**
Experience of insight	Unity and love	37.1	0.389**
Experience of deep calm and reconciliation	Spirituality, wisdom, and detachment	57.9	0.387**
Religious experience	Spirituality, wisdom, and detachment	35.7	0.384**
Cathartic experience	Vulnerability	33.1	0.360**
Here-and-now experience	Unity and love	55.9	0.355**
Experience of insight	Strengthened intuition	27.1	0.355**
Cathartic experience	Unity and love	41.1	0.347**
Experience of interconnectedness	Unity and love	46.5	0.337**
Experience of meaningful coincidence	Strengthened intuition	29.5	0.335**
Experience of insight	Spirituality, wisdom, and detachment	37.5	0.329**
Cathartic experience	Spirituality, wisdom, and detachment	41.3	0.319**
Experience of trust	Spirituality, wisdom, and detachment	54.7	0.317**
Religious experience	Apostolic mission	28.1	0.317**
Experience of a dream vision	Strengthened intuition	11.8	0.316**
Experience of insight	Vulnerability	28.3	0.314**
Experience of meaningful coincidence	Spirituality, wisdom, and detachment	43.3	0.306**
Experience of interconnectedness	Spirituality, wisdom, and detachment	47.3	0.302**
* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)    ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)			

Table 5: Most strongly correlated EEs and TAs ( $r > 0.300$ ) among the pilgrims

exploration of pilgrimage experiences and similar phenomena through this lens will further illuminate ways of enhancing the quality of life.

### 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>
- Apostol, M. S. (2013). The pilgrimage at Santiago of Compostela between tradition and modernity—a statistical approach. *Quality Access to Success* 14, 326–329.
- Beek, S. (2018). New pilgrim stories: Narratives, identities, authenticity. *Yearbook for Ritual and Liturgical Studies*, 34, 67–72. <https://doi.org/10.21827/5a2e41ccedc3e>
- Beek, S. (2017). Ritual identity. *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*, 5(2), 26–30. <https://doi.org/10.21427/D77Q6W>
- Beek, S., Post, P., & Kemps-Snijders, M. (2017). Creating a corpus of pilgrim narratives: Experiences and perspectives from the PILNAR Project. In A. Hessen, & Odijk, Jan (Eds.), *CLARIN in the Low Countries* (pp. 371–378). London: Ubiquity Press.
- Brumec, S. (2021). The Camino de Santiago in late modernity: Examining transformative aftereffects of the pilgrimage experience. *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage* 9(6) <https://doi.org/10.21427/ganh-va40>
- Brumec, S. (2022) Life changes after the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage, including a deeper sense of spirituality, *Journal for the Study of Spirituality*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20440243.2022.2042948>
- Brumec, S. & Aracki Rosenfeld, N. (2021) A comparison of Life Changes After the Pilgrimage and Near-Death Experiences. *Bogoslovni vestnik/Theological Quarterly* 81(3), 695-710.
- Brumec, S., Lavrič, M., & Naterer, A. (2022). Exceptional human experiences among pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago: A typology of experiences and transformative aftereffects. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000456>
- Cardena, E., Lynn, S. J., & Krippner, S. (2017). The psychology of anomalous experiences: A rediscovery. *Psychology of Consciousness*, 4(1), 4–22. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cns0000093>
- Chemin, E. (2011). *Pilgrimage in a secular age*. University of Exeter.
- Cohen, J. (1988). *Statistical power analysis for the behavioral sciences* (2nd ed.). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Courtney, M. (2014). Doing, being, belonging and becoming on pilgrimage: A narrative analysis of autobiographical accounts of walking the Camino de Santiago. In L. D. Harman (Ed.), *A sociology of pilgrimage: Embodiment, identity, transformation* (Kindle ed., ch. 5). Ursus Press.
- Digance, J. (2003). Pilgrimage at contested sites. *Annals of Tourism Research* 30(1), 143–159.
- Farias, M., Coleman, T. J., III, Bartlett, J. E., Oviedo, L., Soares, P., Santos, T., & Carmen Bas, M. (2019). Atheists on the Santiago way: Examining motivations to go on pilgrimage. *Sociology of Religion. The Quarterly Review*, 80(1), 28–44. <https://doi.org/10.1093/socrel/sry019>
- Feliu-Soler, A., Pérez-Aranda, A., Luciano, J. V., Demarzo, M., Mariño, M., Soler, J., Van Gordon, W., Garcia-Campayo, J., & Montero-Marín, J. (2021). Psychometric properties of the 15-item Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire in a large sample of Spanish pilgrims. *Mindfulness*, 12, 852–862.
- Frey, N. L. (1998). *Pilgrim stories: On and off the road to Santiago, journeys along an ancient way in modern Spain*. University of California Press. <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520922464>
- Gitlitz, D., & Davidson, L. (2000). *The pilgrimage road to Santiago: The complete cultural handbook*. St. Martin's Griffin.
- Greenia, G. (2014) What is pilgrimage? In L. D. Harman (Ed.), *A sociology of pilgrimage: Embodiment, identity, transformation*. (Kindle ed., ch 1).
- Havard, M. (2017). Grit or grace: Packing for the Camino de Santiago. *International Journal of Religious Tourism And Pilgrimage* 5, 5–9.
- Herrero, N. (2008). Reaching "Land's End": New social practices in the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. *International Journal of Iberian Studies* 21, 131–149.

- James, W. (2008). *The varieties of religious experience: A study in human nature*. Routledge. (Original work published 1902)
- Kim, B., Sam Kim, S., & King, B. (2016). The sacred and the profane: Identifying pilgrim traveler value orientations using means-end theory. *Tourism Management, 56*, 142–155. doi:10.1016/j.tourman.2016.04.003.
- Kim, H., Yilmaz, S., & Ahn, S. (2019). Motivational landscape and evolving identity of a route-based religious tourism space: A case of Camino de Santiago. *Sustainability 11*(13), 3547. doi:10.3390/su11133547.
- Lavrič, M., & Brumec, S. (2020). Transformative aftereffects of the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage among Slovenian pilgrims. *Social Inequalities and Politics*, 225–231.
- Lluis, O. C. (2016). Rise of pilgrims on the “Camino” to Santiago: Sign of change or religious revival? *Review of Religious Research, 3*, 433–442.
- Lobato, R. M., & Sainz, M. (2020). On the way to fusion through the pilgrims’ route: Factors that maintain identity fusion in collective rituals. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations, 23*(4), 502–518.
- 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.
- Lopez, L. (2013). How long does the pilgrimage tourism experience to Santiago de Compostela last? *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage, 1*(1), 1–11. https://doi.org/10.21427/D7C133
- Lucarno, G. (2016). The Camino de Santiago de Compostela (Spain) and The Via Francigena (Italy): A comparison between two important historic pilgrimage routes in Europe. *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage 4*(7), 48–58. https://doi.org/10.21427/D7Z30X
- Margry, P. J. (2008). *Shrines and pilgrimage in the modern world: New itineraries into the sacred*. Amsterdam University Press. https://doi.org/10.5117/9789089640116
- Margry, P. J. (2015). To be or not to be ... a pilgrim: Spiritual pluralism along the camino finisterre and the urge for the end. In C. Sánchez-Carretero (Ed.), *Heritage, pilgrimage and the Camino to Finisterre* (pp. 175–211). Springer.
- Maslow, A. H. (1994). *Religions, values, and peak-experiences*. Penguin Books. (Original work published 1964)
- Nilsson, M., & Tesfahuney, M. (2016). Performing the "post-secular" in Santiago de Compostela. *Annals of Tourism Research, 57*, 18–30.
- Nilsson, M. & Tesfahuney, M. (2018). The post-secular tourist: Re-thinking pilgrimage tourism. *Tourist Studies 18*(2), 159–176.
- 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
- Olsen, D. H. (2010). Pilgrims, tourist and Max Weber’s “Ideal Types.” *Annals of Tourism Research, 37*(3), 848–851.
- Pilgrim’s Reception Office. (2020, March 3). Informe estadístico Año 2019. https://oficinadelperegrino.com/en/statistics/
- Roszak, P. & Huzarek, T. (2022) The challenging future of pilgrimage after the pandemic: New trends in pilgrimage to Compostela. *Religions, 13*(6), 523. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13060523
- Santos, Xosé M. (2002). Pilgrimage and tourism at Santiago de Compostela. *Tourism Recreation Research, 27*(2). 41–50. doi:10.1080/02508281.2002.11081219.
- 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
- Slavin, S. (2003). Walking as spiritual practice: The pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. *Body & Society 9*(3), 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1177/1357034X030093001
- Smith, A. T. (2018). Walking meditation: Being present and being pilgrim on the Camino de Santiago. *Religions 9*, 1–6.
- Sousa, M., & Rosa, A. (2017). Faith, entertainment, and conflicts on the Camino de Santiago (The Way of St. James): A case study on the mediatization of the pilgrimage experience on Facebook groups. *Essachess 10*, 145–169.
- Stace, W. T. (1961). *Mysticism and philosophy*. Macmillan.

- Taylor, S., & Egeto-Szabo, K. (2017). Exploring awakening experiences: A study of awakening experiences in terms of their triggers, characteristics, duration, and after-effects. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology, 49*(1), 45–65.
- Timothy, D. J., & Olsen, D. H. (Eds.) (2006). *Tourism, religion and spiritual journeys*. Routledge.
- Vilaça, H. (2010). Pilgrims and pilgrimages: Fatima, Santiago de Compostela and Taize. *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society, 23*(2), 137–155.
- Warkentin, B. (2018). Spiritual but not religious: The fine line between the sacred and secular on the Camino de Santiago. *Social Work & Christianity 45*(1), 109–121.
- White, R. A. (1993). A brief overview of exceptional human experiences. *Journal of Religion & Psychical Research, 16*(4), 193–195.
- White, R. A. (1994). Recalling and recording exceptional human experiences. *Journal of Religion & Psychical Research, 17*(4), 193–200.
- Winsberg, M. D. (1994). A walking pilgrimage across Spain to Santiago de Compostela. *Focus, 43*(3), 31–37.

### About the Authors

**Miran Lavric, PhD**, is an associate professor of Sociology at the University of Maribor, Slovenia. He teaches courses on topics such as sociology of religion, psychology of religion, comparative religion, as well as several methodological courses. His research activities are focused on topics related to sociology of religion, youth studies, and studies of public opinion. He has published a number of original scientific articles, books and book chapters on these and related topics.

**Snežana Brumec** is a PhD candidate in the Department of Sociology, Faculty of Arts, University of Maribor, Slovenia. In her PhD thesis she focuses on sociological analysis of social phenomenon tied to pilgrimage at the Camino de Santiago as an expression of spirituality in late modernity.

**Andrej Naterer, PhD**, is an associate professor of Anthropology at the University of Maribor, Slovenia.

He holds courses on qualitative methodology and topics related to anthropology. His research activities are focused on topics related to youth and childhood and he authored an anthropological documentary, published two books and numerous articles and book chapters on these topics. He also managed or worked as a researcher on numerous national and international research projects.

### About the Journal

The *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies* is a Scopus listed peer-reviewed academic journal, and the largest and most accessible scholarly periodical in the transpersonal field. IJTS has been in print since 1981, is published by Floragrades Foundation, sponsored in part by Attention Strategies, and serves as the official publication of the International Transpersonal Association. The journal is available online at [www.transpersonalstudies.org](http://www.transpersonalstudies.org), and in print through [www.lulu.com](http://www.lulu.com) (search for IJTS).