

Spiritual Health through Pilgrimage Therapy: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Background and Objectives: Going on a pilgrimage for spiritual and religious purposes is not a new phenomenon and can be considered one of the oldest tourism typologies. This form of travel is related to the task social perception, which is stronger than leisure or pleasure. The purpose of this ethnographic study was to study how spiritual well-being is achieved through pilgrimages trips.

Methods: This qualitative research was carried out using ethnographic methodology. Data collection was conducted using semi-structured interviews with 30 female tourists. Purposive sampling was conducted in pilgrimage sites in Shiraz. Participants were selected according to certain features including pilgrimage experience, gender, and sex. The data were analyzed by thematic analysis.

Results: The results indicated that pilgrimage consisted of seven themes: relationship, spiritual relaxation, self-sacrifice, Loving others, hope and optimism, coping with problems, and excellence. Ultimately, the global theme of the social-spiritual empowerment was developed.

Conclusion: Nowadays, pilgrimage plays a very effective role in the spiritual and social empowerment of people such that they not only manage to reduce stress, but also learn how to deal with different situations, and therefore their spiritual health is maintained.

Keywords: Pilgrimage, Spiritual Health, Religion, Tourism, Ethnography, Therapy.

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Introduction

Pilgrimage tourism refers to the journeys by followers of various religions with the purpose of pilgrimage. Pilgrimage is the desire of believers to visit holy sites (1). Statistics on tourism indicate that in addition to religious tourists, a large number of non-religious tourists are also going on a pilgrimage (2). One of the reasons for increased religious tourism can be related to the therapeutic or recovery dimensions in pilgrimage (3). In the age of stress and pressure, humans seek to relieve stress due to daily challenges or to explore the life in greater depth (4). Meanwhile, spiritual health is significant. As with physical, mental, and social aspects of health, spiritual health leads to improvement of general health and coordinates other aspects of health, and therefore enhances adjustment and psychological functioning (5). Generally, spiritual health is a state beyond religious sentiments, and is often manifested as

a relationship with God. Besides that, religious behaviors and beliefs can have a special effect on the meaning of people's lives. Certain behaviors such as worship, pilgrimage, and trust in God can create inner peace through creating hope and encouraging positive attitudes (5). It seems that religious people experience lower levels of stress because of having meaning in life and hope for God's assistance in critical situations, enjoying social and spiritual protection, and sense of belonging to a superior source in facing events (6). Because tourism is a system of meaning whereby people move from one place to another purposefully and understand a series of experiences and events (7), pilgrimage journeys nowadays can play a very important role in providing spiritual health for people. Many studies in Iran and other countries have investigated the effect of pilgrimage journeys and pilgrimage on psychological health. Some

of these works are comparative studies. Movahedi conducted a comparative study on the effects of pilgrimage journeys to the tombs of the infallible Imams' children and travels on the mental health showed that, both pilgrims and tourists at both departure and return were significantly different in terms of mental health. According to the study of Pahlavani and Golshahi (8), the people who are going to go on a pilgrimage have higher levels of mental health compared to those who are going to travel. Some of these studies were conceptual and nature. Sobhani and Mirdariqandi (9) studied the psychological effects of pilgrimage on mental health and human's life.

The study of Rahmani Vasokalaie study on healthy society in spirituality group, with emphasis on pilgrimage role, reported that one of the basic and important approaches through which human beings can get rid of physical, psychological, and social illnesses, is praying to God.

Warfield et al. studied the therapeutic value of pilgrimage and reported that pilgrimage has socially, psychologically, and spiritually therapeutic values (10). Pargament and Maton (11) observed that conducting religious practices such as pilgrimage led to relief of anxiety and anger. Nice and Wintrap argued that participating in religious ceremonies such as pilgrimage and prayer was associated with decrease in psychiatric disorders (12). Morris (13) reported that the patients' symptoms significantly decreased after they went on a pilgrimage for at least 10 months after returning. Importantly, despite strong spiritual and religious history of Iran, no study, to the best of our knowledge, has yet been conducted on spiritual health and pilgrimage journeys, and as Waterfield argues, despite peerless evidence and documented reports on significant improvement and revolution of the literature on spiritual health, the world has been silent about pilgrimage (10). The aim of this study, therefore, is to investigate how spiritual health can be maintained through pilgrimage therapy and to investigate this useful and attractive approach to health in different aspects of life.

Methods

Research methodology is the most important issue in a study (12). This study was conducted using qualitative and ethnographic approach. There are several types of ethnography but realistic ethnography and critical ethnography are the most common types. With regards to the purpose of this study, we selected realistic ethnography (14,15). Data were analyzed by thematic analysis.

In the current study, with regards to the research purpose, the participants were selected from the tourists who attended the holy shrines of Ahmad ibn Mousa (PBUH), Sayyed Alaeddin Hossein (PBUH), and Ali ibn Hamzeh (PBUH), visited by the most number of tourists per year according to the statistics, at the time of interview, fulfilled the inclusion criteria, and volunteered to participate in the study according to age, gender, and history of pilgrimage. Because women most frequently participate in pilgrimage and religious events according to available evidence and also represent one of the bases of society, we decided to enroll women only. The women who had history of pilgrimage and were willing and able to explain their feelings were selected as samples. Meanwhile, we did our best to select the samples aged 18-57 years (young, middle-aged, and elderly) to obtain a comprehensive range of views. To gather data, in-depth interview and participatory observation were used.

Participatory observation is one of the most common methods to gather qualitative data and also one of the most difficult methods that require the researcher to be involved in the culture, the context, or the environment where he/she is going to conduct study. For this purpose, the researcher frequently visited the studied holy shrines for one year to investigate the context and culture of the studied field. The interviews were started by the general question: Why do you go on a pilgrimage? What role does pilgrimage play in your life? Followed by exploratory questions to draw more in-depth information. The interviews were recorded with the participants' permission, transcribed, and then thematically analyzed. The interviews were conducted

between late January, 2017 and late April, 2017. The researcher, a Ph.D. student of sociology who had already conducted qualitative studies and acquired necessary skills regarding qualitative studies, was present in the studied holy shrines in all steps of the study and conducted all interviews in person while observing the etiquettes of the pilgrimage sites and wearing the clothes appropriate for such places.

To increase the accuracy and robustness of the data, validity, reliability, confirmability, and generalizability were observed (16). To assure the reliability of the data, the researcher allocated an adequate amount of time to gather the data and tried to remain involved via going through the data repeatedly. To further assure the content validity of the drawn data, a number of the interview transcripts were encoded and returned to the participants to ensure member check. The reliability of the data was investigated by the colleagues' and the research team's checking. To achieve this purpose, the interviews were replayed and then listened and compared with the transcripts by the members of the research team who did not contribute to gathering the data and necessary revisions were done.

For confirmation, the researchers did their best not to include their assumptions in the process of data collection and analysis. The generalizability of the data was investigated by five women who did not contribute to the study so that the appropriateness of the data could be assured. The interviews lasted for 50-90 minutes. Sampling continued till data saturation was achieved.

As the data were being collected, they were also analyzed. First, each transcript was read several times and then the primary codes drawn. For this purpose, first, the main words and phrases of the participants were determined and then primary codes were reviewed in the form of analytical codes, and after necessary corrections, the basic themes, organic themes, and global themes were drawn. In conducting thematic analysis, a set of concepts and fundamental semantic patterns were drawn through categorizing and thematizing the data and finally the global

theme of social-spiritual empowerment was drawn.

To observe research ethics, before conducting interviews, the researcher's role and research subject and purposes were explained to the participants and after they provided informed consent, the interviews were recorded. At any time during the interview, if the participant was reluctant to be recorded, the interview would be stopped and continued with note taking.

Result

In this study, 30 female tourists aged 18-57 years participated. The education levels of the women ranged from high school completion to Ph.D. The data showed that pilgrimage concept consisted of seven organic themes and social-spiritual empowerment was drawn as the global theme. Table 1 shows the scheme of general theme (social-spiritual empowerment), organizing themes (relationship, spiritual relaxation, pass from self, loving others, hope and optimism, coping with problems, and excellence), basic themes, subthemes, and their examples.

Social-spiritual empowerment: According to the results and the multistage and thematic analysis conducted after multiple and repeated encoding of the data, the main and pivotal theme of the participants' conception of pilgrimage was "social-spiritual empowerment". Accordingly, pilgrimage is analyzed and interpreted as a phenomenon that leads to social-spiritual empowerment in the tourists. Relationship, spiritual relaxation, disorientation, hope and optimism, coping with problems, and excellence were the organic themes drawn from the data. The results of the current study showed that from the participants' perspectives, pilgrimage is not just a worship but a practice that, within the framework of the relationships that they establish, and the cognition that they gain about themselves and others, actually brings about a kind of hope that ultimately makes them resistant against challenges and leads to their spiritual excellence. This leads ultimately to social-spiritual empowerment.

Relationship: The drawn themes that were related to relationship, from the participants'

perspectives, were verbal communication, emotional communication, and relationship with a superior power. The relationship that people establish is material and with people that are accessible on the one hand, and superficial and with an infinite power on the other hand.

Relationship with a superior power: The communications in holy sites are partly derived from relationship with Almighty God and partly derived from relationship with the infallibles as mediators of divine grace. The point that should be taken into consideration is the belief in being invited and embraced by the host. The participants acknowledged that such belief sped up establishing relationship

Maryam, 22 years: Here, a special relationship is formed because you've been invited, when you're invited somewhere, [it] means that the host has missed you, you like [someone] to take your hand, you see yourself in front of a greatness.

Verbal communication: The space of pilgrimage sites provides opportunity for mutual interactions and sharing of experiences for pilgrims; and people are often willing to make the most of such situation. In fact, people in such places experience rich and special interactions.

Mitra, 30 years: In the shrine, I talk with [the people] surrounding, sometimes they begin to talk, in some way I try to use their experiences to find out what prayers they recite.

Emotional communication: In pilgrimage sites, people are influenced by the collective spirit and the characteristics of the space, and they are vigorously seeking to establish communication. The feelings and mood that are created for people in these places are very effective in how they communicate. Besides that, such feelings and mood lead to emotional evacuation in pilgrims, as if such a place is a source of security and tranquility.

Roghaieh, 38 years: When I go on pilgrimage, spontaneously I tear, I miss, when my tears are flowing, my mood changes, and my relationship is established.

Spiritual relaxation: As a secure resort, pilgrimage site plays a very important role in relaxing tourists. Most participants have

acknowledged that different factors are placed in the environment together to provide them with peace of mind, and what is very important is the energy that was received from the environment. The themes are clarified using the participants' statements below.

Soothing environment: From the participants' perspectives, pilgrimage sites are the place of the passing of the divine angels on the one hand, and are fragrant due to the aroma of the infallible who are alive and present there on the other hand. Therefore, people who attend such places experience special feelings and mood that are unique and are derived from the energy brought about in the environment. The energy received from such places play key role in relaxing pilgrims and freeing them from feelings of loneliness and discomfort.

Fatemeh, 45 years: When I come to the shrine, I feel sorrow leaves my being, I love the environment here, everyone gets accustomed to somewhere, I get accustomed to here and get calm, here is full of positive energy, part of energy is [derived] from the Imam's child, part of the energy is [derived] from the believers whose light of worship reaches the rest as well, part [of the energy] is also [derived] from the space and the architecture and the green color.

Emotional evacuation: The participants sought out a place for relieving discomfort and daily stress and a listening ear for expressing pain. Pilgrimage sites play an optimal role in achieving this purpose because of offering a space of privacy for people.

Mahsa, 50 years: The best place for relaxing is pilgrimage sites, when I come I seclude myself, empty myself, tell every sadness and sorrow to the Gentleman [the Imam's child], sometimes one tolerates such amount of pressure that you have to empty yourself.

Mental need: From the participants' perspectives, religious places compensate for mental and psychological emptiness. In the situations where people find no treatment for their feelings of perplexity and loneliness, pilgrimage plays a therapeutic role in meeting mental and psychological needs.

Molud, 38 years: Whenever I get caught up, I feel I lack something in my being, I go on

pilgrimage, as If I've developed some vacuum that is filled with nothing.

Self – sacrifice: In pilgrimage places, the individual is separated from one's own privacy and empathizes with others in a collective environment. What is important here is the formation of a network of sympathetic and sympathetic individuals.

Table 1: Global theme: Social-spiritual empowerment

Organic Theme	Basic Theme	Some examples
Relationship	Relationship with a superior power Verbal communication Emotional communication	Talking, using experiences, tearing
Spiritual relaxation	Soothing environment Emotional evacuation Mental need	Positive energy, vacuum, need, space
Self-sacrifice	Support Sympathy	Attention, guidance
Loving others	Helping others Sharing pilgrimage with others	Material help, spiritual help, calling, texting, praying
Hope and optimism	Trust Expectation	Thanksgiving, submission, spiritual step, intercession, martyrdom
Coping with difficulties	Tolerating hardships Patience	Tolerance, patterning, internalization of traits
Excellence	Promoting faith Strengthening the relationship with God Self-control	Mediation, reminder, forgiveness, Compensation for the past

Support: In pilgrimage places, one is separated from one's own privacy and communicates with others in a communal environment. What matters in such places is the formation of a network of sympathetic individuals.

Sympathy: From the participants' perspectives, pilgrimage is not only an individual and personal phenomenon but also a social one that takes on a special form in common with and the presence of others. What offers spirit to pilgrims is the feelings of sympathy with and companionship of others and attempts they made to help others.

Mahin, 48 years: I usually pay attention to [people] surrounding [me], when they begin to talk and tell their sorrows [to me], I pay attention, I put myself in their shoes, If I have a similar experience, I'll tell them.

Loving others: According to religious teachings, in pilgrimage journeys, people often make effort to surpass each other in doing good deeds and practice as much sacrifice and forgiveness as they can, because they believe any good deed is not only effective in practicing a better pilgrimage and becoming closer to God Almighty, but also has otherworldly reward. In some cases, pilgrims make attempt to share the reward of pilgrimage with the people who are absent in the journey.

Helping others: Helping others from the beginning of the pilgrimage journey is conducted in different ways. The participants acknowledged that assistance is sometimes materially and sometimes spiritually. What matters is the feelings of freedom and comfort developed in them through helping others in pilgrimage journeys.

Khadijeh, 34 years: Often in pilgrimage journey or in shrine, I do anything that I can for others. Sometimes if they need, I help as much as I can, sometimes I help disabled people to go on pilgrimage, I take their hands, I move their wheelchairs.

Sharing pilgrimage with others: In pilgrimage journeys and holy sites, pilgrims experience a feeling that is so influential on their mental health they tend to share it with others. Sharing such experiences is conducted through a variety of ways. In some cases, the pilgrims believe that they can transfer the received energy to others and in some others, they use communication media such as telephone, cell phone, and social networks to achieve this purpose.

Zohreh, 28 years: When pilgrimaging, many people come to my mind, always I pray for both those who have asked me to pray for them and have bid farewell to them and others, but [to] those that come to my mind I call and take the phone toward the Gentleman (Imam's child) and say [to them to talk to him] or I send message to them.

Hope and optimism: Tourists launch pilgrimage journeys with many ambitions and wishes and embrace the challenges and hardships of journey. They have been assured that what is realized is due to the goodness of God Almighty and is certainly based on his

wisdom and pleasure but what facilitates suffering and tiredness due to journey for them is expecting an infanticide from the infallibles in order to provide the light of guidance in the hereafter.

Trust: The participants acknowledged that they felt secure as they were going on a pilgrimage and were sure that what is good for them would happen to them. Their belief background in this field brings a special peace for them.

A'zam, 51 years: I'm confident in them that they'll make me calm, if my wish is realized, I'll be grateful and if not, I'll thank them again because I'm sure it'll affect elsewhere.

Expectation: Tourists expect the outcomes of pilgrimage to affect not only their worldly life but also their otherworldly life. Such expectation causes the pilgrims to practice the rites of pilgrimage in the best possible manner.

Marzieh, 40 years: God willing, on the first night in my grave, they'll come to visit me, they'll be my paracletes, and any step that I've taken to pilgrimage testifies that I've taken spiritual steps.

Coping with difficulties: Because of life stress and tiredness, pilgrims seek out somewhere to achieve peace. Visiting pilgrimage sites and studying the infallible biographies teach them how to cope with difficulties on the one hand and internalize certain characteristics for being empowered on the other hand.

Tolerating hardships: Tolerating any stress and hardship in daily life requires faith and trust that promise the pilgrims that light will ultimately come out. Because of containing certain teachings, pilgrimage promises the pilgrims that it will not only boost their ability and empowerment but also will provide spiritual protection that allows them to get rid of the problems.

Mahvash, 28 years: I often endure the hardships, in the hope that they themselves will help [me], I read their biographies, I see [that] they've also tolerated many difficulties, I say [O] the Gentleman (Imam's child), I've endured much, so satisfy my wish to return with filled hands, as if in some way they help my endurance increase.

Patience: Pilgrimage is a school offering different teachings from its beginning to its end including special traits that attract much attention in life. People maintain their spiritual health in different conditions through acquiring or reinforcing such traits in various situations. The participants acknowledged that they acquire certain traits such as patience, resistance, tolerance, happiness, and forgiveness in pilgrimage.

Zeinab, 55 years: Generally, in pilgrimage, as if they offer much patience, many difficulties happened for this journey, first of all I got sick, but as if these difficulties make man resistant, generally they teach lesson to man and the effect of this patience remains in life.

Excellence: In pilgrimage sites, pilgrims seek out perfection via establishing spiritual communication with God Almighty. The more entrenched the relationship with God Almighty is, the greater peace and pleasure they acquire; and the pilgrims know that this relationship will be stable if they take certain steps in their lives and work to compensate for the shortcomings of the past.

Promoting faith: The participants stated that from the beginning, they started this journey with the aim of bringing about some change and revolution in all dimensions of their life. Pilgrimage provides certain conditions for them to achieve flourishing and excellence.

Sara, 41 years: I expect [them] to give me strong faith, my heart is broken [when I see] why my faith has not become strong, I spent much time, tolerated the journey hardship, [and therefore] shouldn't return empty-handed, some change should occur in me.

Strengthening the relationship with God: Pilgrimage offers certain conditions to people to revisit their relationship with God and take steps to strengthen it. The participants acknowledged that what matters is the presence of a great mediator, who facilitates communication because of the honor he has in front of God.

Afsaneh, 25 years: Whenever I feel that my relationship with God has been dimmed or that I've made a mistake, I go on a pilgrimage and ask the Imam's child to mediate to reconnect my wire [to God]. Generally pilgrimage causes

me to review my works and make some change and always remember to not only let my communication with God to disconnect but also to strengthen it day by day through reciting a series of prayers and secluding [myself].

Self-control: In pilgrimage and holy sites, people consider themselves committed to perform special rites and practices, but they do know that performing such practices is only a constituent of the pilgrimage and what matters is how to keep the outcomes of pilgrimage and the deeds that they should do after the pilgrimage. A part of the pilgrimage is actually dedicated to reflecting on this issue.

Hosna, 37 years: After pilgrimage, I promised myself not to sin, compensate for my previous deeds, if someone is upset by me, I always seek for [God's] pardon and ask for [God's] forgiveness.

Discussion

The aim of the current study was to investigate maintenance of spiritual health through pilgrimage therapy using an ethnographic approach and thematic analysis. Findings demonstrated that pilgrimage journeys nowadays play important role in women's life. In this study, the participants stated that in the pilgrimage sites, they sought to establish relationship, and in the contexts of the established relationships, they were provided with peace on the one hand and their interactions were broadened on the other hand.

The established relationships are not merely material and individual but also represent a constituent of relationship, relationship with a superior power, and a metaphysical relationship that is a source of peace per se. Through pilgrimaging, the pilgrims establish closer relationship with God and are provided with feelings of psychological security in religious sites. Pilgrims' feeling close to God leads to greater levels of life satisfaction and happiness in them and determines certain conditions for caring oneself and eliminating deviating factors in one's being (9).

This study showed that some women seek out mental and psychological relaxation in religious sites. This purpose is partly achieved

by the energy received from the environment. In addition to being emitted from the being and presence of the infallible, such energy is also produced by the environment such that a part of palliative role is played by the environment. On the other hand, religious sites are highly effective to satisfy women's mental needs and compensating for their emptiness such that their mental health is maintained through providing context for emotional evacuation. Pilgrimage site is a place for worshipping, disregarding the mortal life and world for a moment, telling their secrets and needs to God, and reaching further intellectual peace, which is consistent with the study of Vasokalaie (17).

The participants stated that pilgrimage is not only a personal action but also an interpersonal action because it causes one to abandon one's privacy and to leave oneself through sympathy and emotional support received from others; and the necessary context is provided to help others both materially and spiritually. Meanwhile, the reward of the pilgrimage is shared by people that have not even attended the pilgrimage site but come to the mind of the pilgrim.

Hope in human leads to his making further effort and efficacy of his activities. Hope causes human to take action. Evidence indicates that any living being continues his daily routines with hope (18). Creating hope for life is one of the outcomes of pilgrimaging holy sites in the pilgrims' behavior. Human becomes hopeful for future life and a beautiful and happy future and gets rid of hopelessness and pessimism. This is a psychological need. Hope leads to making additional effort in individual and social life (9).

Our study indicated that from the beginning of pilgrimage journey, the pilgrims feel confident that whatever happens to them is definitely good for them, but they expect that any step that they take in this world to pilgrimage the Imam's child leads to interceding and forgiving them.

As Warfield et al. argued, the pilgrimage journeys described by the participants had significant effects on their life, relationships, identity, and programs for the future. From the perspectives of mental health services

providers, access to knowledge about previous journeys (or religious journeys) is important (10). Research findings have also confirmed that pilgrimage journeys include special lessons and teachings such that the pilgrims themselves acknowledged that they took the lives of the Imams' children and the infallible as a model and resisted difficulties through acquiring certain traits such as patience. This causes the pilgrims to apply all lessons in life.

Faith in God has many examples such as prayer, fasting, and pilgrimage. Under normal conditions, the pilgrims reach peace and overcome and eliminate their anxiety through communicating with God and the infallible Imams (AS) (9). The women in our study stated that what matters for them is mental and spiritual excellence that is realized by promoting faith and strengthening the relationship with God Almighty as much as possible, and that influences their lives for the long term in case of meditation, pardon, and asking God Almighty for forgiveness. According to William James, faith without doubt is the most effective treatment for anxiety (19). The graves of the Imams (AS) are one of the best places for calculating one's soul and reviewing one's deeds (11).

The themes relationship, spiritual relaxation, disorientation, hope and optimism, coping with problems, and excellence can finally integrate into a central core called social-spiritual empowerment.

Conclusion

Nowadays, with regards to mental, psychological, and physical stress that people tolerate and the tensions in different arenas that they have to cope with, pilgrimage plays a very effective role in the spiritual and social empowerment of people such that they not only manage to reduce stress, but also learn how to deal with different situations, and therefore their spiritual health is maintained, because people during pilgrimage journeys prepare themselves for such situations through modeling and the teachings they receive, and also make the meaning of life and spirituality prominent in their lives through the communication they establish with God and renewing promise. As a result, they

achieve spiritual and social health and also flourish in other dimensions of life.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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