

Collective Labyrinth Walking Leads to Connections and Insights for Contemplative Activism in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic and Other Social Concerns

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Background

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and other societal concerns, contemplative practices such as labyrinth walking have become important for addressing the increases in stress, anxiety, depression, and trauma around the world (Bao et al., 2020). In this paper, we share an overview of findings from the Big Connection research project which took place at a unique point in history and culminated in a model for cultivating contemplative activism through labyrinth walking.

According to The Center for Contemplative Mind and Society (n.d.), contemplative practices are “practical, radical and transformative...[and cultivate] capacities for deep concentration and quieting the mind in the midst of the action and distraction that fills everyday life”. These practices may serve to increase empathy, improve communication skills, strengthen focus, enhance creativity and cultivate a more compassionate approach to life among practitioners. There are many types of contemplative practices, from a variety of spiritual and cultural traditions, some of which are depicted in the [Tree of Contemplative practices](#). Among the most well-known contemplative practices in the United States are centering prayer, labyrinth walking, mindful meditation, tai chi, and yoga.

The current research project focused on a specific form of contemplative practice—labyrinth walking—which is an integrative contemplative practice that engages the body, mind, and spirit. Labyrinths can be described as a singular meandering unicursal path leading to a center and then out again. Unlike a maze, there are no blocks on the path of the labyrinth. Walkers can restfully walk the labyrinth knowing that the path is open.

Throughout time and history, labyrinths have been used by many cultures. The oldest known labyrinths have existed for over 4,000 years. The ancient practice of walking labyrinths as a contemplative practice was brought back into modern consciousness, in part, through the pioneering work of the Rev. Dr. Lauren Artress (1996, 2006, and 2020).





Modern uses for labyrinths are many. For example, labyrinths have been used as a means of assisting persons with a variety of health and mental health-related concerns tap into a sense of calm (Abdallah-Baran, 2003; Heard et al., 2015; Lizier et al., 2018). Labyrinths have also been used for enhancing wellness and spirituality as well as to cultivate reconciliation and healing in communities.

Labyrinths can be found in a variety of settings such as churches and other religious institutions, schools, universities, hospitals, nursing homes, parks, spiritual retreat centers, private residences, and even prisons (Abdallah-Baran, 2003; Heard et al., 2015; Lizier et al., 2018). For example, the labyrinth at the American Psychological Association (APA) headquarters in Washington, DC was built and is utilized to encourage self-care among employees and the surrounding community.

The Current Study

In the May of 2021, as the COVID-19 pandemic persisted, a global labyrinth walk was held on World Labyrinth Day 2021. The Legacy Labyrinth Project (LLP) partnered with researchers from Baylor University to undertake the Big Connection research project.

The purpose of the Big Connection research project was to understand what emerges when people collectively walk labyrinths around the world at the same time with heart-centered intention. This study was, in part, a community-based intervention, and in part, exploratory research on collective labyrinth walking.

The LLP sponsored the project and organized recruitment efforts. Several other labyrinth organizations including The Labyrinth Society, Veriditas, and the Australian Labyrinth Network contributed to recruitment. Baylor researchers conducted a related anonymous survey.

Participants were instructed to complete a heart-brain coherence meditation before participating in a collective labyrinth walk on World Labyrinth Day (see Bintz Meuch, 2020 for video). This meditation was developed to increase heart-brain coherence which per recent research, can serve to cultivate in a sense of calm and receptivity (McCraty & Zaya, 2014).

Additionally, participants were instructed to walk with a shared intention (Brett, 2019; McTaggart, 2018) related to gaining insights into how to bring positivity into the world at a unique time in history (see Katzenmeyer, 2020 for video). Combining these particular elements with collective labyrinth walking had not been previously researched before this study.

The questions underpinning the study were: What happens when individuals and groups walk labyrinths at the same time in different locations, in brain-heart coherence, with a specific intention for social change (within the context of a global pandemic and in an era of social unrest)? How can walking labyrinths with heart-centered intention contribute to the greater good?



Methods

Design

A mixed methods design was used for this exploratory descriptive study. A convenience sampling strategy was employed to recruit adults from those who were participating in a World Labyrinth Day 2021 event.

Procedure

All participants walked a labyrinth at 1 pm their local time on World Labyrinth Day 2021. They were encouraged to do a heart-brain coherence meditation before their walk and to set a shared intention for their walk. After walking, they received a link to an optional anonymous online survey that took 15-20 minutes to complete.

Measures

The measures included in the online survey were: 1) categorical questions about participants' labyrinth walks on WLD 2021; 2) a short demographic questionnaire; 3) three open-ended narrative questions, and; 4) three standardized self-report measures. The qualitative open-ended, questions were placed first in the survey to reduce bias.

The Pandemic Emotional Impact Scale (PEIS) is a 16-item questionnaire (Ballou et. al, 2020) that was used to assess the impact of the COVID-19 participants. The Labyrinth Walking Connections Scale (McGee & Katzenmeyer, 2020) was used to understand the connections and interconnections that human beings may experience when walking a labyrinth. The Sacred Moments Questionnaire (Pargament et al., 2014) was used to assess for characteristics of sacred versus important moments.

Data Analysis

To gain a deeper understanding of the open-ended questions, an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach was undertaken (Alase, 2017; Smith, et al. 2009). NVivo software (QSR International Pty Ltd. 2022) was also utilized to facilitate the coding process. IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 28) software was used to analyze the quantitative data including descriptive statistics.

Findings

Demographics of Study Participants

The 461 participants in this study ranged in age from 23 to 83 (mean = 63 years old). Most self-identified as Caucasian or White (86.6%) and female (87.3%) with a high level of education. Participants came from 5 continents, 19 countries, and 45 USA states. Diverse religions, spiritualities, and life philosophies were represented by participants.

Description of Labyrinth Walks

What types of labyrinths were walked? Most participants reported walking full-sized labyrinths (77.5%), handheld, or "finger labyrinths" (16.5%) while a small number used a labyrinth application or a picture/handout of a labyrinth.

With whom did participants walk? Most participants reported being alone during their labyrinth walk (43.8%). However, about one-third of the participants walked with a group of people they knew. Other participants walked with unfamiliar persons or strangers (10.4%).

Where did participants walk? Most participants walked labyrinths outside (69.3%) and the remaining walked inside (30.7%). Private residences (36.3%) and places of worship (33.8%) were the most often reported settings for walks. Parks, community centers, schools or universities, hospitals/clinics, and other settings were other responses.

Were there any differences in the frequency of labyrinth walking pre- and post-pandemic among participants? Before the pandemic, 91.5% of participants reported walking a labyrinth at least once per year. During the year 2020, 75% of participants reported walking a labyrinth at least once per year. In sum, in-person labyrinth walking among those in this sample decreased during the first year of the pandemic. Virtual or online walks increased in frequency from pre-pandemic levels which speaks to the resilience of the labyrinth community in creating this option.

Impacts of the Pandemic on Participants

Most participants endorsed experiencing pragmatic and/or emotional concerns, to some degree, on the PEIS (Ballou, et al., 2020). Pragmatic concerns included worries over finances, obtaining necessities, personal health and safety, health and safety of friends and family members, feeling less productive, concerns about a potential societal breakdown, and/or a darker or scarier future. Emotional concerns included trouble concentrating, boredom, sleep difficulties, a sense of loneliness or isolation, feeling down or depressed, and frustration about changes to daily activities.

Collective Labyrinth Walking as a Sacred Experience

Most participants experienced their walk on World Labyrinth Day to be a sacred moment or experience. Sacred moments take place as people perceive something larger than themselves (Magyar-Russell, et al., 2020; Pargament, et al., 2014). The sacred, in this context, is considered to be psychospiritual rather than theological and has to do with aspects of life considered by a person as having Divine significance (Pargament, 2007).

Research by Pargament and colleagues (2014) identified the following qualities as those that distinguish sacred experiences from important experiences: 1) transcendence; 2) ultimacy; 3) boundlessness; 4) interconnectedness; and 5) spiritual emotions. These qualities were experienced by most of the participants in this study ranging from a mild to a very strong degree.

Collective Labyrinth Walking and Perceived Connections

One outcome of this study was that most participants perceived experiencing multiple forms of connections while walking labyrinths together with a shared intention. These connections were: 1) labyrinth connections; 2) intrapersonal connections; 3) interpersonal connections; 4) transpersonal connections; or 5) nature/earth-based connections.

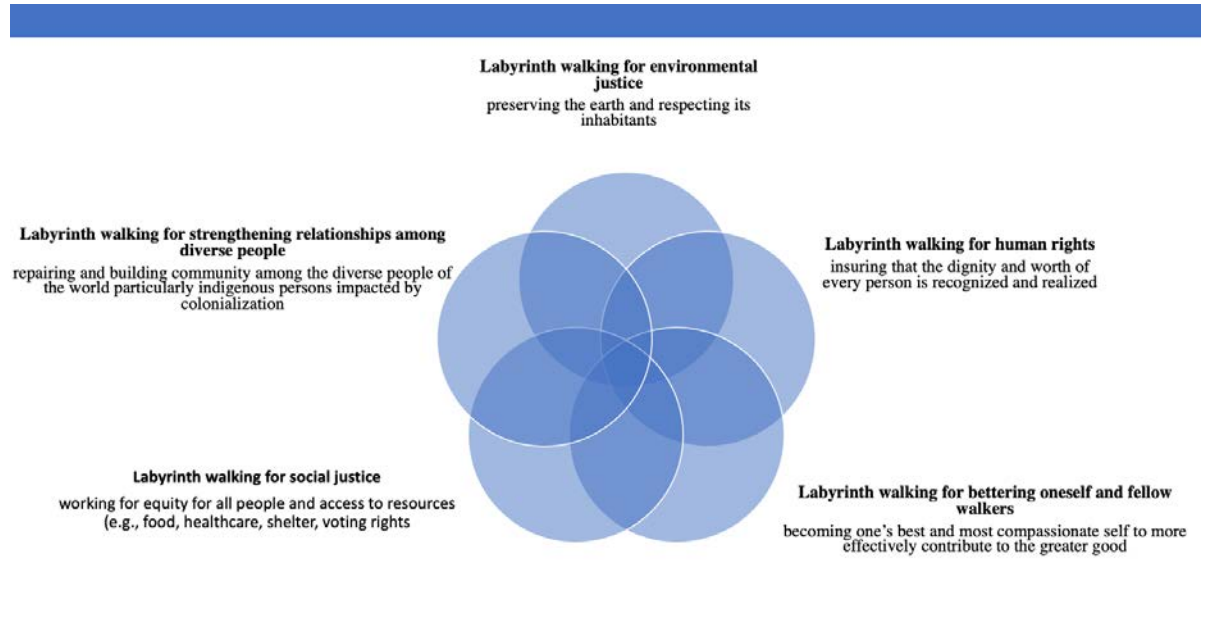




Collective Labyrinth Walking and Insights for Activism

Participants responded to the following question: “How can walking labyrinths together contribute to the greater good which can guide our efforts in the labyrinth community moving forward?” Five subthemes themes emerged from participant narratives in this study around the theme of contemplative or labyrinth activism: 1) human rights, 2) social justice, 3) the need for strengthening relationships among diverse people, 4) environmental justice, and 5) bettering oneself for the greater good.

Labyrinth Activism Themes Emerging from Qualitative Data



¹Pictorial image developed by Jocelyn Shealy McGee, Ph.D.

Implications and Conclusions

This study explored individual experiences of persons who collectively walked labyrinths on World Labyrinth Day 2021 as part of the Big Connection research project. A new model for labyrinth activism, which is a form of contemplative activism, emerged from this study.

Two key pillars of this model are achieving heart-centered focus (e.g. heart-brain coherence) and walking with a shared intention. Participants collectively walking labyrinths across the globe perceived this experience as a sacred moment with multiple layers of connection. Collective labyrinth walking with heart-centered focus and a shared intention cultivated deep insights and inspirations for actions for the greater good in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and other social concerns.

Additional research, particularly longitudinal research, is needed to replicate this model as well as the other findings from this study. Contemplative practices, such as collective labyrinth walking, hold promise for addressing not only individual concerns around emotional health but also for inspiring insights for activism in the context of significant global concerns such as the COVID-19 pandemic and other societal issues.



Labyrinth Activism Model based on Study Findings



¹ Photo Credit: Scott Thurmond Images® Scott.Thurmond.Images@gmail.com

² Location: Boyce Thompson Arboretum, Wallace Desert Garden, Superior, Arizona

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⁴ Pictorial image of model developed by Jocelyn Shealy McGee, Ph.D., MSG

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