

## Basic Assumptions of Labyrinth Research

When a new field of research begins to emerge, it is important that a set of basic assumptions be presented to provide a base for and to guide the development of the new area of inquiry. The basic assumptions outlined here were developed and are presented to serve as springboard for thought and discussion. These basic assumptions were presented for the first time at the annual Gathering of the Labyrinth Society in November 2006 in Texas. Without a doubt these basic assumptions will be modified and refined several times as the discussions and the research continue in this emerging field.

The first assumption relates to **authenticity**. Labyrinth research must be **authentic** to the labyrinth and to labyrinth experiences. For example, individuals who have been trained to facilitate labyrinth events are taught a guiding principle that each person's labyrinth experience is different, that the same person experiences the labyrinth differently at different times, and that a person's expectations regarding a labyrinth experience often interfere with the labyrinth experience. In terms of labyrinth research, this tells us that, simply because of the nature of labyrinths and the experiences of those who walk them, labyrinth research studies often will provide results that are event specific. The results might not be predictive of other labyrinth events or experiences and they might not be broadly generalizable to other situations or populations. This is an artifact of the nature of labyrinth experiences and not necessarily the result of research design flaws. For this reason, much useful and valuable labyrinth research might not meet the "gold standard" of research regarding predictability and generalizability applied to much empirical scientific research.

A second basic assumption relates to **intrusiveness**. Except in clearly defined and controlled research situations, labyrinth research should not interfere with (or at least be minimally intrusive of) people's labyrinth experiences. This is a vital consideration for action research that is conducted during "real" labyrinth events. From quantum physics we learn that any time you observe or study something, no matter how unobtrusive you attempt to be, you interfere to some degree with what you are observing or studying. The classic description of this effect from quantum physics is that light can behave as a particle or as a wave. When researchers attempt to study the wave actions of light, the particle characteristics are suspended. Likewise, when researchers attempt to study the particle actions of light, the wave characteristics are suspended. In labyrinth research it is important that researchers know and acknowledge whenever we attempt to measure something related to the labyrinth, especially an effect, that we are often interfering with the very thing we are attempting to measure. Even when we do something as simple as asking a walker to complete a questionnaire after walking a labyrinth, we are having an impact on the effect of the person's walk. To some degree we are directing their response or directing their attention to what it is we are attempting to measure.

A third assumption relates to care in **interpreting** the results of labyrinth research studies. The interpretation issues of predictability and generalizability have been mentioned previously. Another interpretation issue relates to the direction of the effects observed and interpretations of their "desirability" as effects. If, for example, research

studies indicate that individuals are more relaxed after walking a labyrinth than they were prior to walking a labyrinth, and if other research indicates that individuals' blood pressure, as a whole, is lower following labyrinth walks, we need to exercise caution in identifying these effects as "good" or "desirable" effects or that walkers who exhibited these effects had "good" labyrinth experiences or "better" labyrinth experiences than those who did not exhibit these changes. These effects could be "desirable" if the labyrinth were used as a meditation tool. However, it is quite possible that, as a result of a labyrinth walk, an individual who was dealing with heavy personal or emotional issues could feel more agitated and have higher blood pressure upon completion of a labyrinth walk. For this individual a state of increased agitation and higher blood pressure could well be indicative of a meaningful labyrinth experience.

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