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A little knowledge can be a bad thing: Critical reflections on ‘Therapeutic Community Tourism’

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The aim of this article is to briefly explore the strengths and weaknesses of engaging in short visits to Therapeutic Communities (TCs). As we search in or times of penal excess for different ways of responding to ‘troubled’ individuals, detailed knowledge about interventions such as the TC are becoming increasingly significant. But how can politicians, practitioners, pressure groups, activists and members of the public learn more about the workings of the TC and its potential as a radical alternative? One possibility is through what we loosely refer to as ‘TC Tourism’. There is a growing body of literature on ‘prison tourism’ and other forms of limited engagement from members of the public in the prison place (Barton and Brown, 2012; Brown 2013; Piche and Walby, 2013). Much of this commentary has highlighted how little such ‘tourism’ has done to challenge ‘penological illiteracy’, punitive common sense constructions or established official ‘truths’ mystifying the painful realities of the prison place. Drawing upon our own experiences, we consider the strengths and weaknesses of engaging in visits to TCs in England, France, Italy, Denmark and Australia.

The term Therapeutic Community, or TC as they are colloquially known, has been linked to a range of traditions and approaches that use interpersonal relationships and activities that take place in a purposefully designed social environment or residential setting to promote social and psychological change (Gosling, 2015). They are characterised by a community-as-method treatment approach that directs an individual’s attention towards their thoughts, feelings and relationships with significant others (Ravndal, 2003). Generally speaking, TCs have a number of distinctive characteristics such as an alternative concept of individuals deemed to be *problematic* that is usually much more positive than prevailing beliefs, their activities embody positive values, they help to promote positive social relationships and start a process of socialisation that encourages a more productive way of life (Siegel and

Senna, 2007). Abstinence is not the primary goal of treatment in a TC for substance use; it is a serendipitous outcome of overall behavioural change. The fundamental goal of treatment in a TC is to incite personal change by addressing the lifestyle factors that contribute to an individual's substance use.

Therapeutic Communities are typically located in hidden spaces, such as residential settings, prisons, day centres and secure units. As a result, they could be considered to be 'out of sight' and thus, attractive to inquisitive 'tourists' wanting to know more about the setting and the population served. Our own alternative sightseeing developed as a result of a mutual interest in TCs (Scott and Gosling, 2015). To 'test the water' and facilitate discussion amongst practitioners and residents as to whether they believed TCs could provide an alternative to imprisonment we have so far visited a total of 5 residential TCs situated in England, France, Italy, Denmark and Australia. TC tourism provided an opportunity to 'engage with the field' and develop rapport with 'insiders.' These unique windows of opportunity provided a chance albeit briefly, to talk to those at the coalface of service delivery and critically reflect upon our ideological thoughts about the TC.

Although we have decided to critically reflect upon our experience of 'TC tourism' it is important that we consider the positives which surround this way of gleaning knowledge. First, TC's may welcome 'outsiders' into the programme for short periods of time as part of common practice, colloquially known as a 'tour and talk'. The welcoming of others into the programme provides a way in which the 'news can be spread' about the design and delivery of treatment. This customary practice can be considered as a vital ritual for the movement given the ambiguity which surrounds the operation of the programme (Gosling, 2015). Resident's, who are participants in the programme, are usually tasked with looking after TC tourists so it provides an opportunity for a marginalised and vulnerable population to have their interpretation of the world that they belong to, albeit for a relatively small period of time, without staff presence and/or involvement. It also provides a way in which confidence and self-esteem can be developed amongst residents.

Furthermore, TC tourism does not share all of the problems associated with 'dark tourism' and 'penal / carceral tourism' (Barton and Brown, 2012; Brown, 2013; Piche and Walby, 2013). For example, TC's are not places of death, harm and exploitation and the power relations between residents and staff are fundamentally different than that of a penal establishment. As such, visitors to the TC are not voyeurs of suffering or the witnessing the pain of others for their entertainment. There are, however, a number of limitations with TC tourism. These revolve around two interrelated themes of *knowledge outcomes and impressions management*.

One obvious difficulty with TC tourism is the depth and extent of knowledge gained from such a short visit. There is a problem then around *knowledge outcomes*. TC tourist may actually think that after their tour that they have a good understanding of the programme. Whether the appreciation of the TC is positive or negative is not the central point here, but rather that it is impossible to come to firm conclusions in such a short space of time.

TC tourism should also be framed within an understanding of the relationship between *power and knowledge*. Of great significance is the power of authorities to shape the visitor experience. As Piche and Walby (2013) have argued, drawing on the insights of Erving Goffman, those organising Tours can exercise 'institutional impression management'. What is missing is any appreciation of the 'backstage' – what is really going on rather than impression of reality presented to the visitor. Unsurprisingly a particular narrative compatible with the views and interests of those running / promoting a given TC is constructed during the Tour. Tours can be organised so that voices of certain residents or staff are either privileged or excluded, depending on how well they confirm with dominant narratives. Those who say the right thing, which is not necessarily the same as giving a truthful reflection of their experience, may be selected again and again. TC Tours can be carefully scripted and organised – what is seen, what is heard, what the viewer is told. This would leave a heavy burden on the visitor to question assumptions and look beyond the obvious.

Undertaking research and learning about radical alternatives to prison takes time. Research is based on literature reviews and careful consideration of the key issues and controversies. TC tourism is much less intensive in terms of time but much less valuable in terms of knowledge outcomes. We wonder if it is possible to learn what really goes on inside a TC from such a limited engagement and how well visitors can challenge the scripted presentations they encounter and construct an alternative counter-interpretation. 'Alternatives sightseeing' will inevitably provide only a superficial account; can distort realities; and may detract attention from building towards other radical alternatives. What is required is in-depth, independent research that can provide a holistic picture of the TC and other radical alternatives. TC tours may well invoke sympathy and support for TC and could for some potentially provide good insights, but its value is likely to be limited. We are therefore cautious regarding how much people can actually learn through TC tourism, and acknowledge that a little knowledge can sometimes be a bad thing.

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