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The Annual Birmingham City University/HMP Grendon Debate: What Are the Benefits?

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A regular feature of HMP Grendon's regime over the past fifteen years has been the annual debate between 3rd Year Birmingham City University (BCU) Criminology Students and Grendon residents. This follows a tour of the establishment and an opportunity for students to meet with prisoners over lunch. The event is eagerly anticipated by both students and residents, with the outcome of the debate usually being a comprehensive victory for Grendon residents (the score is 14-2). But apart from being an interesting activity for all concerned, are there any other benefits to be derived from this experience? This article will summarise evaluation projects undertaken by academics from Birmingham City University and by a Custodial Manager at HMP Grendon. Outcomes include students positively evaluating the experience of meeting with offenders who have committed serious offences, gaining a greater appreciation of the work of prison officers and an increased awareness of prison life; Grendon residents appreciating being able to share their experiences with those who had no knowledge of custodial life while prison staff saw the visit by students as a good opportunity to promote the work undertaken at HMP Grendon.

Public Interest in Prisons

While walls and fences of prisons keep prisoners in, they also keep members of the public out. Perhaps because prisons and punishment have become a 'secret world', gaining insight into custodial establishments, their interiors, regimes and impact upon those incarcerated has long been of general interest: 'For

prisons are at once extraordinary and ordinary institutions. They are extraordinary in that they are places in which larger numbers of strangers are forced to live, in close proximity with each other, often for sustained periods. ordinary in that much of prison life, especially long-term prison life, revolves around those mundane matters which concern all of us in our non-prison lives — eating, sleeping, cleaning and tidying, doing the laundry, working (or looking for work), thinking about the family and friends, attempting to alleviate boredom'.¹

Attractions or events linked with death, suffering, violence or disaster have historically drawn people to them.² Such has been the fascination in these places that this has been termed within both the media and academia as 'dark tourism'.³ Former sites of state-sanctioned incarceration are among the most popular of dark tourist locations⁴ with prison 'tourism' generally centring on prison buildings rather than their inhabitants.⁵ Additionally, the creation of prison museums with their focus on the fabric and structure of the building can also create a false impression of prison life and not the authentic, uncomfortable, realities of penal history.⁶ For the impact of imprisonment can be 'an unremitting challenge to a person's self-respect, autonomy, security and personal safety.(creating)...in prisoners intense feelings of loneliness, hopelessness, guilt, depression, anxiety, fear and distress'.⁷

How then are the public to find out about prisons, the work that goes on inside and the impact of imprisonment upon prisoners, especially given 'the steady and gradual disappearance of the prison from public view'?⁸ Is it just a question of viewing the building and then making inferences about what life inside must be like? Is it through reading books and articles by academics, prison officials and former prisoners? But to

1. Crawley, E. (2004) *Doing Prison Work: The public and private lives of prison officers*. Cullompton: Willan Publishing. p. xi.
2. Sharpley, R. and Stone, P. R. (2009) *The Darker Side of Travel: The Theory and Practice of Dark Tourism*. Bristol: Channel View Publications.
3. Foley, M. & Lennon, J. (1996) 'JFK and Dark Tourism: Heart of Darkness' in *Journal of International Heritage Studies*, 2, 198-211.
4. Strange C & Kempa M (2003) 'Shades of Dark Tourism: Alcatraz and Robben Island' in *Annals of Tourism Research* 30 (2): 386-405.
5. Wilson, J. Z. (2008) *Prison: Cultural memory and dark tourism*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.
6. Barton, A. and Brown, A. (2012) 'Dark Tourism and the Modern Prison' in *Prison Service Journal* 199: 44-49.
7. Scott, D. (2008) 'Creating ghosts in the penal machine: prison officer occupational morality and the techniques of denial'. In J. Bennett, B. Crewe & A. Wahidin (Eds.), *Understanding Prison Staff*. Cullompton: Willan Publishing. p. 168.
8. Wilson, D. (2014). *Pain and Retribution. A Short History of British Prisons, 1066-the Present*. London: Reaktion. p. 190.

what extent do they, can they, convey a real sense of incarcerated lives and the experience of those who work in prisons? Can films, TV dramas or documentaries assist in realistically portraying prison life? Even in documentaries false depictions can occur. While staff can be professionally portrayed, knowledgeable about prisoners, caring and dynamic in their approach to dealing with problematic people; programme makers, focusing on the dramatic, on incidents or aggressive and demanding offender behaviour, may misrepresent the reality of daily prison life. It can lead to offenders phoning families saying the establishment was not really as shown, that it was a good establishment.⁹ Staff too may have to respond to incoming call from offenders' families concerned about the way in which the establishment was being portrayed and seeking confirmation that this was not an accurate representation of the way in which that institution normally functioned.

Carceral Tours: Potential Difficulties

An innovative approach to assist the public understand more about prisons and punishment is that undertaken by Rideout (Creative Arts for Rehabilitation).¹⁰ One of their projects 'The Creative Prison' was taken into galleries and museum and concerned re-imagining and re-designing prison. Another project 'GOTOJAIL', was taken to shopping centres, festivals and art galleries. This offered the public a sense of the lived experience of imprisonment and an opportunity to engage with former prisoner/actors in dialogue in a mock cell.¹¹

Carceral tours offer another approach whereby members of the public can gain a greater understanding of prison life though there has been, within the criminological literature, much debate about their value. Based on Correctional Service of Canada

(CSC) penitentiary tour materials, carceral tours were found to be highly scripted and regulated in ways that obscured many of the central aspects of incarceration, particularly, the experiences of prisoners, with the consequence that these tours afforded little insight into the nature of imprisonment.¹² The criticism was that such tours were often more concerned with impression management as staff and prisoners took on the role of performers to demonstrate that prisons are tolerable and well-ordered,¹³ with there being limited opportunity for deeper discussion with prisoners or staff about imprisonment experiences.^{14,15} Even when prisoners were selected to take part in these tours often those selected were those who were not going to say anything which might upset the prison authorities, with those chosen therefore being 'subservient, complacent and docile',¹⁶ careful in what they said if they wanted to be involved in future events.¹⁷ However, even if prison tours are choreographed, there is an argument that perceptive participants can still gain an insight into how that establishment operates.¹⁸ What is required is a 'counter-visual' approach where eyes are retrained to see that which is not 'there'¹⁹ similar, perhaps, to what is sometimes required when watching a play where there are few actors or props and the audience is required to use their imagination.²⁰

In organising carceral tours there is also a need to ensure that prisoners are not treated as occupants in a zoo,²¹ that power imbalances are recognised²² and that while those in positions in power are often cumbersome, unimaginative and bureaucratic,²³ within prisons the 'weak' can create their own spaces, 'making them temporarily their own as they occupy and move through them'.²⁴ What is therefore advisable is that during carceral tours, prisoners are empowered to speak freely about their imprisonment experiences and to be involved in the organisation of these events.²⁵

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9. See Bennett, J. (2013) 'Behind the Scenes of Her Majesty's Prison: Aylesbury — Interview with Kevin Leggett' in *Prison Service Journal* 210: 44-47.
 10. For more information on Rideout see <http://rideout.org.uk/index.aspx>
 11. For more information on these two projects see Fiddler, M. (2010). 'Interview: Saul Hewish' in *Prison Service Journal* 210: 39-43.
 12. Piche, J. and Walby, K. (2010) 'Problematizing carceral tours' in *British Journal of Criminology* 50: 570-81.
 13. Goffman, E. (1961) *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*. New York: Anchor Books.
 14. Bordt, R. L. and Lawler, M. J. (2005) 'Teaching a Course on Prisons: A Design, Some Resources and a Little Advice' in *Journal of Criminal Justice Education* 16: 180-92.
 15. Meisel, J. (2008) 'The Ethics of Observing: Confronting the Harm of Experiential Learning' in *Teaching Sociology* 36: 196-210.
 16. Dey, E. (2009) 'Prison Tours as a Research Tool in the Golden Gulag' in *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*, 18: 119-25 p. 122.
 17. Nagelsen, S. and Huckelbury, C. (2009) 'The Prisoner's Role in Ethnographic Examinations of the Carceral State' in *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*, 18: 111-18.
 18. Huckelbury, C. (2009) 'Tour de Farce', in *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*, 18: 126-8.
 19. Schept, J. (2014) '(Un)seeing like a prison: Counter-visual ethnography of the carceral state' in *Theoretical Criminology* 18(2): 198-223.
 20. See Herford, R (2013) 'Little Did I Imagine' 'Woman in Black' Theatre Programme.
 21. Wacquand, L. (2002) 'The Curious Eclipse of Prison Ethnography in the Age of Mass Incarceration' in *Ethnography*, 3: 371-97.
 22. Minogue, C. (2009), 'The Engaged Specific Intellectual: Resisting Unethical Prison Tourism and the Hubris of the Objectifying Modality of the Universal Intellectual' in *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*, 18: 129-42.
 23. de Certeau, M. (1984) *The Practice of Everyday Life*. California: University of California Press.
 24. Jewkes, Y. (2012) 'What has prison ethnography to offer in an age of mass incarceration?' in *Criminal Justice Matters* 91 (1): 14-15 p.15.
 25. Response — An Overview of the Dialogue on Prison Ethnography and Carceral Tours From the 2009 Meeting of the Canadian Society of Criminology in *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* 18: 143-46.

The BCU/HMP Grendon Annual Debate

These carceral tour organisational principles are applied at HMP Grendon, a therapeutic community prison opened in 1962 and which continues to operate in accordance with that treatment model.²⁶ The involvement of prisoners and the opportunity to speak freely are integral to the way in which this establishment operates. This is recognised in the continued accreditation of Grendon by NOMS' Correctional Services Advice and Accreditation Panel and by the Royal College of Psychiatrists sponsored 'Community of Communities', a quality improvement and accreditation programme for Therapeutic Communities (TCs) in the UK and overseas.²⁷

Once a year, for the past fifteen years, an annual debate occurs between 3rd year undergraduate students taking Birmingham City University's Applied Criminology module and Grendon residents. This debate is preceded by a tour of the establishment, including community living areas, combined with an opportunity for students and prisoners to meet over lunch. Students are encouraged to interact openly and freely with Grendon's residents. In total, the students are in the prison for approximately five hours. After the visit they are verbally debriefed.

The number of students able to take part in the debate is limited to 40 from a module cohort of approximately 120. A greater number of participants would limit the interactional opportunities to talk with Grendon prisoners. Lots are held amongst the students given the popularity of this component of the module with those selected required, for the module assessment process, to write a reflexive account of all aspects of the day. Two students volunteer as the debate 'proposer' and 'seconded' with two of Grendon's residents chosen through the therapeutic process of group and community backing as those who would benefit from acting as the prison's 'proposer' and 'seconded'. Topics debated, which are moderated by BCU's Professor of Criminology, David Wilson, have included 'This House would reintroduce capital punishment'; 'Children should be seen and not heard'; and 'This House believes that we should understand a little less, and condemn a little more'. Grendon residents usually have to advocate the most proactive position so that, for instance, those who have been convicted of murder have been required to put forward the case for the reintroduction of capital punishment. At the end of the debate a vote is taken from those in attendance, resident and students each having one vote. The outcome is usually a comprehensive victory for Grendon residents (the current score is 14-2).

Staff and prisoner views of the value of the BCU Grendon tour and debate

What though are the views of staff and prisoners involved with the tour and who attended or participated in the debate? A recent research project to explore these opinions was undertaken by one of HMP Grendon's Custodial Managers.²⁸ 60 questionnaires were distributed, 30 to staff involved with some aspect of the BCU/Grendon debate and 30 to prisoners who attended the Grendon debate. Questions were phrased in a way so as to invite respondents to state the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with particular statements regarding the BCU Grendon tour and debate. The ages of staff and prisoner respondents are given in Table 1, the length of staff service at Grendon and with the Prison Service in Table 2, and the results for the study in Table 3.

**Table 1:
Age of Questionnaire Respondents**

| | Under 35 | 35-40 | 40-50 | Over 50 |
|----------|----------|-------|-------|---------|
| Staff | 9% | 27% | 27% | 36% |
| Prisoner | 38% | 17% | 45% | 0% |

**Table 2:
Length of Staff Service**

| | Under 5 yrs | 5-10 yrs | 10-15 yrs | Over 15 yrs |
|-------------------|-------------|----------|-----------|-------------|
| HMP Grendon | 56% | 22% | 11% | 11% |
| HM Prison Service | 44% | 22% | 22% | 11% |

This study found that 83 per cent of prisoners did not think that visits to the prison by 'outsiders' compromised the community (Question 1) — compromise being defined as bringing into disrepute or danger by indiscreet, foolish, or reckless behaviour. Staff were less certain this was the case, with only 44 per cent considering that the community had definitely not been compromised. Some staff therefore had reservations about a large number of students visiting the establishment and the potential risks this posed. However, nothing yet has occurred which has necessitated this regime activity being cancelled or postponed.

There was a much stronger consensus that the students were not the only ones who gained from this

26. For more information on HMP Grendon see Shuker, R. and Sullivan, E. (Eds.) (2010) *Grendon and the Emergence of Forensic Therapeutic Communities*. Chichester: Wiley.

27. For more information on the Community of Communities visit <http://www.communityofcommunities.org.uk>

28. Laidler, E. (2012) *Are Prison Tours A Constructive Use of Time? A Prison Officer's View from Grendon Prison*. Unpublished MA. Birmingham City University.

**Table 3:
Prisoner and Staff Questionnaire Responses**

| Question | Prisoner/ Staff | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neither Agree or Disagree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|---|--------------------|-------------------|-------|------------------------------|----------|----------------------|
| Q1. Did visits to the prison by 'outsiders' compromise the community? | Prisoners | 7% | 0% | 10% | 38% | 45% |
| | Staff | 11% | 11% | 33% | 44% | 0% |
| Q2. The only people who get the most out of the visits are the visitors? | Prisoners | 7% | 0% | 3% | 38% | 51% |
| | Staff | 0% | 11% | 22% | 44% | 22% |
| Q3. Do Visitors turn Grendon into a human zoo? | Prisoners | 0% | 3% | 13% | 45% | 38% |
| | Staff | 0% | 11% | 33% | 22% | 33% |
| Q4. Prisoners do not like taking part in visits by students | Prisoners | 0% | 10% | 14% | 41% | 35% |
| | Staff | 0% | 0% | 22% | 78% | 0% |
| Q5. The prison can use visits by students as a positive experience | Prisoners | 62% | 28% | 0% | 3% | 7% |
| | Staff | 22% | 44% | 22% | 11% | 0% |
| Q6. Staff can use visits by students to promote the work that is going on | Prisoners | 48% | 35% | 0% | 10% | 7% |
| | Staff | 35% | 33% | 11% | 11% | 11% |
| Q7. Students have no understanding of prisons | Prisoners | 14% | 21% | 52% | 13% | 0% |
| | Staff | 0% | 56% | 22% | 11% | 11% |
| Q8. By and large students need to read less and experience more | Prisoners | 14% | 45% | 21% | 14% | 6% |
| | Staff | 0% | 11% | 67% | 22% | 0% |
| Q9. The people who get the most out of visits to the prison are the prisoners | Prisoners | 7% | 17% | 17% | 45% | 14% |
| | Staff | 0% | 11% | 22% | 44% | 11% |
| Q 10. Do you think prisoners get rehabilitated at Grendon? | Prisoners | 35% | 38% | 14% | 7% | 6% |
| | Staff | 18% | 64% | 18% | 0% | 0% |

activity occurring (Question 2). 90 per cent of prisoners and 66 per cent of staff were of this view. There are therefore clear benefits too for prisoners of being able to take part in a debate and discussions with members of the general public, though both staff (59 per cent) and prisoners (55 per cent) thought that it was not the prisoners who gained most from the visit by BCU students (Question 9).

Only one prisoner thought that Grendon had been turned into a human zoo (Question 3), though four members of staff did. There were also a minority of prisoners who did not like taking part in the day (Question 4) or who were ambivalent about it (24 per

cent). Given the personality profiles of Grendon men, a proportion of whom score higher than prisoners in a non-TC prison on anxiety, depression and borderline personality characteristics,²⁹ this is perhaps not surprising. However, because Grendon men tend to acknowledge their difficulties and perceive the need for help in dealing with these problems, participation in discussions with students and being part of the debate can be an aspect of Grendon's therapeutic experience through assisting them develop appropriate interactional and social skills. For this reason, as well as other associated benefits, it can be inferred that both staff (66 per cent) and prisoners (90

29. Newberry, M. & Shuker, R. (2012). Personality Assessment Inventory (PAI) Profiles of Offenders and Their Relationship to Institutional Misconduct and Risk of Reconviction in *Journal of Personality Assessment* 94(6): 586-592.

per cent) thought that the prison can use the visit by students as a positive experience (Question 5).

It was also the case that 83 per cent of prisoners and 66 per cent of staff thought that the tour and debate were good opportunities to promote Grendon's work (Question 6), especially given the students perceived limited knowledge of prisons (Question 7), with 59 per cent prisoners considering that students needed to experience more and read less (Question 8). Staff were of the opposite view. There was greater agreement on whether prisoners can be rehabilitated at Grendon (Question 10). 82 per cent of staff and 73 per cent of prisoners thought that they can be.

Analysis of Students' Reflexive Accounts

An analysis of students' reflexive accounts³⁰ of the day spent at Grendon identified three main themes. Firstly, students' expectations regarding the prison environment were both supported and challenged. Even though Grendon was designed in the 1950s and so is radically different to the popular image of the Victorian radial prison, perceptions of the exterior physical structure of the prison were reinforced. Expectations of the interior structure and décor and, of the emotional and social environment, were however challenged.

Of the exterior structure, 'Many students noted that their expectations of both the physical structure of the outside of the prison and of security, mostly derived from documentaries and popular films such as *Shawshank Redemption*, were accurate. For example, one wrote: 'the security was similar to what has been portrayed on prison documentaries and through the media'. Another commented: 'When arriving at the prison it was as expected. When first reaching it, the prison looks quite miserable . . . huge fences which surround it, on top of which are reams of razor wire'; another noted: 'On arrival at HMP Grendon I saw the tall walls and the large gates that I had thought would be there'.³¹

On Grendon's interior and following entry into the visits room, one student recorded that 'the inside of the prison building differed from expectations. Paintings and artwork created by the prisoners are displayed on walls and the visitors' room is quite cheerful with flowers on

each table and a room full of toys for children', while another student wrote 'my first observation of the wing is that it was nothing like what I was expecting'.

Secondly, students' expectations of the people that they would meet within the prison were challenged by their visit. Prisoners did not look like psychopaths, serial killers or paedophiles, nor were they middle-aged, aggressive and intimidating, with poor verbal skills, low intelligence and distinctive physical characteristics. Students were also surprised by the ease with which prisoners spoke about the crimes that they had committed and with how they conducted themselves during the debate. They were also impressed with prisoners' 'expert knowledge' about the prison system and government policy on prisons. Students were surprised too by the quality of relationships between prisoners and between staff and prisoners. These were better than they had expected.

Comments expressed included: 'everyone seemed to be getting along, which was quite bizarre considering we were in a prison'; 'I expected the prison officers to have a very bad attitude towards [prisoners] and to treat prisoners like scum' and 'everyone was friendly, helpful, and welcoming'.

Students considered that staff were not overly authoritarian, cold or unemotional and that they were honest about undesirable incidents that had occurred. For example, prison officers acknowledged that more could be done to assist minority ethnic

prisoners and that their rehabilitative efforts were not always successful. An example given was a prisoner trying to self-harm.

The final theme was students stating that the experience had changed them and their thoughts, attitudes, and/or behaviours with regard to incarceration. Longer term impacts upon students of the tour, discussions with residents and the debate was that for some it was a life-changing experience, with one student volunteering for victim support due to the prisoners explaining about the harm caused to their victims. Another student, due to changed perceptions of what prisoners were like, was thinking about becoming a probation officer. A number of students noted that the day at Grendon would stay with them forever. Their engagement with Grendon residents made them believe that people can change, that offenders were human,

The final theme was students stating that the experience had changed them and their thoughts, attitudes, and/or behaviours with regard to incarceration.

30. Wilson, D., Spina, R. and Canaan, J.E. (2011) 'In praise of the carceral tour: learning from the Grendon Experience' in *The Howard Journal* 50(4): 343-355.

31. See n.30. p.348.

that there was help for them to transform the way that they lived their lives and that we should not be judgemental. There was though a recognition that prisoners must want to change in order for prisons like Grendon to work.

Another study³² examined whether engaging with prisoners during the Grendon tour and debate would increase empathy, reduce prejudice and raise tolerance levels towards serious offenders. This involved thematically analysing the reflexive accounts of eight students (four male, four female) to identify whether any change in empathy, prejudice or discrimination emerged during and after the visit. Seven labels emerged, three indicative of empathy (lack of concern for offenders, emotional detachment and perspective taking) and, four indicative of prejudice (resentment toward offenders, negative stereotyping, stereotype disconfirmation and change in attitude).

Prior to the visit, even though the BCU Applied Criminology course model included a variety of conceptual and theoretical explanations for engaging in criminal acts, students' reflexive accounts all indicated a lack of concern for imprisoned offenders, with punishment being viewed as the natural solution for criminal behaviour. For example, one student was of the view that those who offend are emotionless, aggressive individuals, deserving of harsh punishment. There were though in some accounts, indications of empathetic capacity. One student in particular, as she was nearing the prison, began to imagine what it must be like for prisoners to live in a place surrounded by barbed wire, especially when the surrounding countryside was so beautiful.

During the visit a number of students began to develop deeper insight into the impact on others of the offences Grendon residents had committed. What stuck one student was the mug they were given to drink from which, on one side, had HMP Grendon written on it while, on the other side, was a child's picture with the word 'dad' painted on. This made the student realise and remember that no matter what crimes these men had committed, they still had families; wives, children, brothers and sisters: that while offenders at Grendon serve their lengthy prison sentences, loved ones on the outside are serving that sentence with them.

Students also gained an insight into prison life and the concerns of prisoners. Comments made included:

During the visit a number of students began to develop deeper insight into the impact on others of the offences Grendon residents had committed.

'What instantly struck me were the two men cleaning a fish tank in the communal corridor and it made me think that allowing them responsibility for living things must be very therapeutic and satisfying for these men'; 'the interior of the prison is what challenged my perceptions, or should I say misperceptions of what is 'hidden' on the inside of those four barbed wired fences'; 'the wing we visited also presented problems when comparing my expectations to the reality that faced me. When we were let through locked doors onto the wing, I was confronted by what I can only describe as a 'mini community', people were hustling around the corridors, painting their own cell doors, using the telephone and holding conversations with each other. I had expected to see cage like cells, with big heavy locks and bolts across with all the men locked inside them'.

Prior to the visit, some students expressed concern about meeting offenders given Grendon's population consists of those who have been convicted of murder, rape and sexual offences, including sexual offences against young children, with a proportion having psychopathic tendencies. After interacting with Grendon residents, one student recorded: 'Initially, I felt intimidated and panicked at the thought of having to go over to the canteen and speak directly with prisoners. When I eventually mustered up the courage, I was astounded by

how they were not the hardened, violent, destructive individuals, immune from compassion I had originally thought. In fact they were quite the opposite in terms of how polite, respectful and well-mannered they were. This on its own challenged my viewpoint as it did not fit the stereotype of how I perceived prisoners to be'.

Another student commented: 'My idea of what a criminal 'should' look like was also challenged....I had expected them to be intimidating and illiterate with poor social skills and an aggressive nature, instead I was confronted with 'average Joe's' who were clever and able to hold civilised conversations — no different to any passing member of the public on the street'.

When describing their thoughts after the visit, reflections of students became openly more empathic, particularly along the perspective taking dimension, as well as less prejudicial. For example, one student described how resident accounts of their offences spoke in a way that demonstrated the various social challenges people face. This increase in empathy and decrease in

32. Boag, E. M. and Wilson, D. (2013) 'Does engaging with serious offenders change students' attitude and empathy toward offenders? A thematic analysis' in *The Journal of Forensic Psychiatry and Psychology* 24(6): 699-712.

prejudice towards Grendon residents is even more significant given that it has been found³³ that the most frequent outgroup towards whom prejudice and discriminatory behaviour was openly expressed by both community and student populations was serious offenders, and more specifically, sex offenders and murderers. When participants in this study were asked why such offenders were negatively rated, the majority of participants' verbal responses included expletive and derogatory language about the moral values (86 per cent) and psychological states (64 per cent) of these particular offenders. Phrases used included 'they have no normal morals, they just don't care about what other people think', and 'they are mentally sick'. Such views were considered to be socially acceptable and reinforced by the belief that sex offenders and murderers are likely to reoffend.

A further study³⁴ exploring empathy, prejudice and tolerance towards serious offenders involved all 143 BCU Applied Criminology students, including those for whom there were insufficient places to enable them to attend the Grendon tour and debate and, those who did not want to take part in this visit. These students acted as the control group. All participants completed the same measures at two time points: prior to the Grendon tour and debate, at the beginning of the semester and, then again, four weeks later on the return coach journey from Grendon Underwood to Birmingham.

This study found that engagement with imprisoned sex offenders and murderers increased empathy and decreased prejudice toward ex-offenders. It also provided support for the view that empathy is one of the mechanisms through which prejudice may be reduced as high dispositional empathy was associated with low prejudice towards ex-offenders.

The study additionally found that that the relation between engagement with Grendon residents and decreased prejudice, in the group that visited Grendon, was entirely explained by an increase in the empathic concern element of empathy. This has implications for the training of those interested in working with offenders in custody or ex-offenders in the community custody, as prejudice can be reduced through providing

opportunities to constructively engage with offenders or ex-offenders.

Concluding reflections

The inclusion of a Grendon tour and debate within Birmingham City University's Applied Criminology module produces a number of benefits for students, prisoners and staff. These positive outcomes demonstrate that carceral tours can be constructive, though justifiable concerns about the value of this activity for visitors, prisoners and the staff involved do need to be satisfactorily addressed within the event programme.

The visits to HMP Grendon provides students with a positive experience of meeting with offenders who have committed serious offences, a greater appreciation of the work of prison officers, an increased awareness of prison life and an understanding that offenders actively engaging with a therapeutic community intervention does change their lives. This, students judge, increases the likelihood of Grendon residents' successful rehabilitation and reintegration into wider society. These factors help explain why both staff and prisoners consider that the prison can use visits by students as a positive experience for the establishment and as a way of promoting Grendon's role within the prison estate.

While students consider that they benefited from prisoners being able to express their views freely, for the prisoners this too was a beneficial experience.

While students consider that they benefited from prisoners being able to express their views freely, for the prisoners this too was a beneficial experience. For, they had the opportunity to share with those who only have a limited knowledge of offenders and prisons, the impact of committing serious (sometimes fatal) offences and of imprisonment. Grendon prisoners are not, as is the case with carceral tours elsewhere, passive deliverers of pre-agreed scripts, nor do they consider themselves to be part of a zoo, there simply to be observed and relegated to the margins. Rather, they are very active in the process, choosing what to say about themselves and their lives and what not to say. Nevertheless, all students 'verbally reported that the prisoners that they engaged with had been explicit about and reported feeling accountable for their crimes'.³⁵ This had though been the expectation,

33. Boag, E.M. and Carnelley, K.B. (2012) 'Self-reported discrimination and discriminatory behaviour: the role of attachment security' in *British Journal of Social Psychology* 51(2): 393-403.

34. Boag, E. M. and Wilson, D. (2014) 'Inside experience: Engagement empathy and prejudice towards prisoners' in *Journal of Criminal Psychology* 4(1): 33-43.

35. See n.32. p.703.

given that Grendon's therapeutic regime is designed to encourage responsibility for offending, a willingness to express this and a desire to change.

Grendon senior management, as part of its commitment to the therapeutic ethos of the establishment, trusts prisoners to act responsibly when engaging with those from wider society and does not seek in any way to impose what can and cannot be discussed. Indeed, those who accompanied the students have written that 'we can say with certainty that the residents with whom the participants engaged were not told to behave or respond to the student visitors in a particular way. Rather, the residents were expected to act *normally* so any restrictions were self-imposed'.³⁶

While the Grendon visit and debate did challenge previous negative perceptions of prisons, prisoners and prison officers, throughout students maintained a healthy level of scepticism, particularly regarding the benefits of therapy. Indeed they were reminded at the commencement of the day, both by staff at BCU and during the security talk, of the need for them not to disclose personal information or to pass on telephone numbers or addresses and that, despite the seemingly relaxed regime and approach, Grendon was a Category B prison which required them to act in a mature and responsible way.

Students were impressed that some prisoners recognised that their criminal activity had had serious consequences for their victims and that they wanted to address the reasons why they offended. This gave students hope that the prison system offered prisoners more opportunities for self-development and responsibility than they had previously imagined. It also influenced future career choices and vocational interests with one student deciding to become a criminal justice professional and another stating their intention to become a victim support volunteer. These developments were all achieved within the severe limitations of what can be conveyed of prison life in a five hour visit. For what seemed to enthral and engage students was the quality of prisoner and prison officer interactions and engagement, combined with their honesty about the difficulties faced.

Furthermore, the tour and debate impacted on student's levels of empathy (increase), prejudice towards

serious offenders (decrease) and tolerance (increase). Prior to the prison visit empathic responding was unapparent whilst prejudice was clear. So the opportunity to interact with prisoners and prison staff had a distinct influence on changing the negative stereotypes that were held by the students prior to their Grendon tour and debate. Time at Grendon enabled more empathic responses to develop as the opportunity to interact with Grendon residents provided a deeper insight into the individual crimes committed. Moreover, although the change in attitude was primarily led by the interaction, the prison environment also appeared to play some role. There were though no key differences by gender and the effects appear to be due to the individual experience itself.

This means that engagement with prisoners seems to have positive implications for the development of greater tolerance. Interacting with serious offenders appears therefore to redress negative stereotypes about offenders with scope for prejudice to be reduced. Consequently, increasing opportunities for constructive engagement with serious offenders and prison officers has the potential to increase tolerance toward offenders in wider society.

Final comment

While the therapeutic environment of Grendon with its prisoner expectations of reflection, engagement, increase in self-understanding and change, provides the setting for a potentially unique tour and debate, it does mean that the Grendon approach may be difficult to exactly replicate in other establishments. Nevertheless, there are, as with all aspects of Grendon's regime, elements that can be shaped and adapted and applied in other custodial settings. And, given the population profile of Grendon prisoners, who should be the most difficult to engage and the least able to present themselves in a constructive way to members of the public; there should be opportunities for other establishments, whose prisoners have committed less serious offences and who have less complex needs; to share with the public, the work undertaken within prisons and the impact of imprisonment.

36. See n.32. p.709.