



The public library as therapeutic landscape: A qualitative case study



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ABSTRACT

The idea of the therapeutic landscape has been widely used to describe the relationship between place and improvements in mental health. This paper uses data from a qualitative study conducted with people with mental health problems to outline the role of the public library as a therapeutic landscape. It situates the public library as a space that is simultaneously familiar and welcoming, comforting and calming, and empowering. Further, the paper reflects on the impact of proposed library closures in light of these previously hidden benefits, thinking about the library's role as an environment and not as a service provider.

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1. The public library as place

Public libraries represent the values of liberal democracy, open access to knowledge and equality (Lees, 1997). Recent challenges to the public library service have opened an international dialog about what the public library means as an institution in society (Flood, 2013a). The author Neil Gaiman recently referred to the public library as a place that is: 'about freedom. Freedom to read, freedom of ideas, freedom of communication' (Gaiman, 2013). Debates about whether public libraries are valuable repositories of knowledge and social values or outdated and unnecessary have shown how the public library inspires a passionate response and is valued (or denigrated) as a place (Flood, 2013b).

Several studies have started to explore the impact of the public library on well-being, trying to identify the qualities that make the public library an essential element of community life (Curry and Alstad, 2003; Toyne and Usherwood, 2001). However, studies have struggled to define the real benefits of the public library; the rewards of engaging with the public library are seen as intrinsic, intangible qualities. Indeed, although in the UK there is a statutory duty under the 1964 Public Libraries and Museums Act to provide a 'comprehensive and efficient' public library service, there has been little clarity about what this service should look like (HM Government, 1964).

While demonstrating the impact that a community location such as the public library has on the population is difficult, its removal – even temporarily – provides an opportunity to examine that role. During a strike in 1995, the entire public library service

in Sheffield was closed for 8 weeks, and subsequent research with library users identified two factors relevant to the study reported here (Proctor et al., 1997). First, library use was found to be more frequent than previous studies estimated; second, those using the library did not just value the books and information available via the library. Instead, library users 'missed the library for a reason related to its social value or because it had become an indispensable part of their lives' (Proctor et al., 1997, p. 63). Analysis of the Mass Observation Archive, a UK-based data set focused on everyday life experiences, similarly concluded that the public library is a place of 'reflection, self-realization and sanctuary' (Black, 2011, p. 34). Thus, there is evidence that the public library can play a significant and fundamental role for those who use it. The focus here is not on the services provided by the public library; it is about the public library as an institution and a space.

Public libraries have long had a tacit role in providing an open and a safe environment for vulnerable groups, including people with mental health problems.¹ Public libraries are also associated with philanthropic and self-improving tendencies (Greenhalgh

¹ While the literature addresses the needs and use of public library services for vulnerable groups such as homeless people, asylum seekers and elderly people, little has been written about their use by people with mental health problems. The knowledge is indeed tacit, though an integral aspect of education and training in librarianship. Several older texts refer to deinstitutionalisation and the role of libraries in community care, demonstrating how this has come to be accepted as implicit (Martin, 1989; Shapland-Howes and Crossley, 1989). A quote from a librarian collected as a part of this wider study on which this paper is based summarizes this best: 'libraries have always been a place that attracts quite a lot of vulnerable people, because they're seen as safe spaces. During – was it the 1990s, when the whole care in the community act came out? People with mental health issues who've come back into the community were encouraged to go to libraries. In the sort-of package of information they received, it was explicitly stated that libraries are safe,

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et al., 1995, p. 54). This paper aims to explore the role of the public library for one particular group of public library service users (those with mental health problems), questioning whether the public library forms part of a 'therapeutic landscape' (Gesler, 1992).

2. Thinking about therapeutic landscapes

The impact of the built and natural environment on mental health is widely documented in the mental health geographies literature (Korpela et al., 2008; Parr, 1997, 2008; Wood et al., 2013; Yates et al., 2012). The role of place in the recovery process has also been discussed, and concepts including 'safe spaces,' 'favorite places' and 'enabling places' have been outlined to suggest that people with mental health problems identify locations that have attributes which support recovery and encourage well-being (Duff, 2012; Yates et al., 2012). According to those who regard particular spaces as safe or enabling, these locations have different qualities compared with those found elsewhere (Tucker, 2010). These characteristics are difficult to concretely define, and vary from person to person, but contribute to the everyday life work of illness and recovery (Adler et al., 1987). Debate around the value of places has typically been framed around residential and community care spaces in the built environment, or on the impact of green space and access to the natural world (Korpela et al., 2008; Yates et al., 2012). The problematic nature of medicalized spaces has also been identified (Martin et al., 2005). Non-commercial community service settings such as public libraries and community centers have been identified as locations which can be restorative and relaxing, though little work has been done to identify the factors that encourage this (Korpela and Ylén, 2007).

The term 'therapeutic landscapes' is often used to think about spaces that have a positive impact on mental health and well-being (Gesler, 1992). It has been defined as: 'an environment conducive to well-being' and 'helping to promote holistic healing' (Martin et al., 2005; Wood et al., 2013). It has been widely applied to think about everyday spaces as having the potential to be therapeutic (Cattell et al., 2008; Parr, 1997, 2008). Typically, work has been framed around asking people directly what spaces they find therapeutic. The approach taken here differs in that it started by asking people about a specific location (the public library) and then, building on their responses, identified therapeutic qualities post hoc. The emphasis here will be on the public library as a space of restoration and the promotion of well-being, rather than as a curative environment. Some questions have been raised as to whether the spaces described are truly 'therapeutic' and have long-term benefits, or if they can more accurately be described as 'micro-restorative experiences' (Kaplan, quoted in Cattell et al., 2008, p. 557).

It is argued here that the physical space of the library represents something more than a building in which services are housed, and that there is a need to go beyond library-as-access-to-materials to think about the public library as a space. Questions can be raised as to whether public library use has previously unrecognized benefits for people with mental health problems such as stress reduction and improved well-being. Consideration of these potential effects has direct implication in light of current public library closures in the UK, emphasizing the value of the public library as a space may have for people with mental health problems. Thus, this paper aims to answer the question: what impact does the public library have on mental health and how might the closure of public libraries affect this?

3. Methodology

3.1. The study and its context

This paper reports on 16 in-depth, life course interviews with people with mental health problems who use public libraries which were conducted as a part of the collection of a larger data set including participant observations, interviews with information and mental health professionals, health policy analysis and quantitative analysis of book borrowing. The wider study focused on the provision of bibliotherapy schemes in the public library, and compared policy aims with service user experiences (Brewster, 2011). Bibliotherapy is the provision of texts (non-fiction or fiction) with the intention of improving mental health, and around 100 public library services operate a bibliotherapy scheme (Hicks et al., 2010). The majority of schemes focus on the provision of evidence-based cognitive-behavioral therapeutic texts, but some use fiction and poetry to work with people with mental health problems. Schemes initially focused on people with mild-to-moderate mental health problems like depression and anxiety, but there is increasing evidence that bibliotherapy (mainly using fiction and poetry) can be beneficial for people with more severe and enduring conditions like schizophrenia and bipolar (Volpe et al., 2013; Farrington and Fearnley, 2010).

Thus, the role of place was not the main focus of this work, but arose in interview data as a concern for participants. At the time the research was being conducted (2009–2010), cuts to public library services were taking place across the UK. Participants often commented that they did not see this as a positive development and wanted to contribute to the research project to ensure that services they valued were not taken away in budget cuts. Public library use has been seen to grow as economic decline affects a country, with reference to their role as 'recession sanctuaries' (Rooney-Browne, 2009). The research took place in Sheffield, a large northern English city with an ethnically and socio-economically diverse population of over 550,000. The city has 27 community libraries, and a central library which houses a reference and community information service. Since this research was conducted, Sheffield City Council have confirmed that decreases in the library service budget mean that 15 of these 27 branch libraries are under threat of closure (Anon, 2013; Flood, 2013a).

Participants visited and discussed 10 of these libraries; the libraries were a diverse selection in terms of age of building and type of space, but some general remarks can be made about their characteristics. Names of specific libraries have been removed to help to maintain participant confidentiality and anonymity. This may represent a problem to the reader trying to visualize specific spaces, but it is necessary to minimize the possibility of participant identification. As buildings, libraries discussed included: a converted 18th-century house; a purpose-built Victorian library; a mid-20th-century purpose-built library; a purpose-built steel-framed building designed in the early 2000s. All had some element of what could be described as a typical traditional library atmosphere – they were mostly quiet spaces. In some libraries, this was more of a 'quiet corner' than the whole building. In the majority, the children's and adult books were separate, though in the more modern purpose-built libraries this separation was less pronounced. Older buildings tended to have the children's stock in a separate room or on a separate floor. All the libraries had Internet-enabled computers, and most had café facilities and comfortable chairs for reading. There were light, bright spaces with large windows and all had been made as accessible as possible (with difficulty in some of the older buildings). All the libraries had the same local branding, but maintained a unique feel in terms of having notice boards of local events, children's artwork and the same staff working there regularly.

(footnote continued)

neutral spaces and they were encouraged to go there.' (Librarian 5, unpublished data, Brewster, 2011)

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