What happens when you bring society’s most privileged and most disadvantaged individuals together under one roof? What do these individuals learn about themselves and others at this gathering?

Every winter evening since 1983 there has been such an encounter at the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter, located in a church basement just a few blocks from Harvard Yard. It is the only completely student-run homeless shelter in the country. Over the years, nearly 100 college-aged volunteers have worked to keep the shelter open seven nights a week from November through April. The shelter provides a nightly refuge for women and men struggling to survive on the fringes of society. Yet, the homeless individuals are certainly not the only ones benefiting from this encounter. The Harvard students utilize their experience volunteering at the shelter to step outside their normal personal, social, and academic pressures to explore some important questions about who they are, their relationships with others, and their place in the world. The shelter provides a space for the students and homeless people to share stories, sustenance, and security. Both groups emerge from their interactions at the shelter different than when they entered. Drawing on detailed field notes and interviews with those involved with the shelter - including current and former guests and student volunteers, and staff members - Scott Seider provides an insightful exploration of this encounter between two drastically different groups in Shelter: Where Harvard Meets the Homeless.

With amenities such as washer and dryer, computers, and lockers, the shelter is, as Seider describes, the “Cadillac” of homeless shelters. Attached to one of the most prestigious universities in the world, this privileged status should be expected. What is surprising, though, is the symbiotic nature of the relationships formed between privileged and disadvantaged individuals in this context. Seider begins exploring how these relationships are formed with a rich chronological description of what happens in this meeting place between the arrival of the first Harvard volunteer at 6:30 p.m. and the volunteers’ departure the next day at 8:30 a.m. During these hours, the college students stay busy cooking and serving meals, washing dirty laundry, cleaning facilities, and regularly serving as confidants to those staying at the shelter. They make small and large decisions. They build intimate connections with fellow volunteers and with guests who seemingly are very different from themselves. These differences give form to particular kinds of connections and interactions that make being a part of this context a powerful learning experience.

Both instructive and emotionally moving, Shelter explores this experience from the perspectives of the volunteers, staff members, and guests. Seider does a masterful job at providing numerous examples of positive transformations for those involved in the shelter. In so doing, his work provides an important and unique contribution to the extensive body of scholarship on college students’ involvement in community service and service-learning activities. There is no shortage of studies that emphasize the numerous benefits of engaging in service work. This body of research demonstrates that participation in service has the capacity to rebuild civic society and even communicate the goals of social justice (e.g., Astin & Sax, 1998; Rockquemore & Schaffer, 2000). Involvement in service also offers the conditions for participants to examine social issues critically and to be engaged in an intentional and thoughtful process of understanding self and self in relation to others (e.g., Eyler & Giles, 1999; Kezar, 2002). However, as Robinson (2000) points out, the service activities offered to most young people do not provide the necessary conditions to achieve these goals. Researchers have offered a number of suggestions for what it would take to create these conditions but rarely do they provide actual examples. Shelter is packed with such examples of productive, life-changing, and transformational community service work.

Shelter also is an important contribution to the growing body of literature on emerging adulthood. As several scholars have pointed out (e.g., Arnett, 2000, 2004), emerging adulthood is the peak developmental period for identity exploration, instability, self-focus, transition, and possibility. This is also the peak period of idealism in the lifespan. Seider contends that these characteristics allow the college students operating the shelter to provide unique support and service to the homeless individuals. He explores the ways their level of optimism drives them to think outside the box in making decisions.
about the kinds of support they offer and the kinds of relationships they form with the homeless guests. Seider makes a convincing case that the students interact with the homeless men and women in ways that older professional workers cannot. These interactions, defined and driven by the optimism of the college students, offer unique ways of empowering homeless women and men.

_Shelter_ is accessible, well researched, and firmly grounded in relevant college student and emerging adult developmental research, all of which is documented in the extensive notes included at the back of the book. In addition to his comprehensive notes, Seider includes a methodological appendix that provides detailed information about research design, methods of gathering data, participants, and data analysis. This appendix provides a thorough description of the various parts to this extensive research project. Graduate student readers who are about to undertake a qualitative study (and even those who have studies in progress) are likely to find this section quite helpful. For all readers, the description of the different parts of this study paints a clear picture of what it means to conduct a rigorous qualitative study.

Although the book takes the reader on an interesting, well-informed, and relevant tour of ideas about social class relations, Seider does not go far enough in developing a critical analysis of the college students' privilege. Throughout the book, he acknowledges the ways their privileged backgrounds and circumstances influenced their relationships with the homeless men and women. The students primarily come from affluent and insular families and have had little contact with people different from themselves prior to volunteering at the shelter. As Seider points out, the encounter between homeless people and Harvard students could have been a total disaster for this lack of prior knowledge and experience and other various reasons. He does not, however, provide a thorough discussion of the ways the students' privilege was negotiated or perhaps even rationalized through their interactions with the homeless people. Moreover, although Seider provides a thorough discussion of how the students' experiences at the shelter encouraged identity exploration and impacted identity development, he does not fully address the ways in which privilege remains a central aspect in how the students understood themselves and their relationships with others. The significance of their privileged identities is not fully explored. Another (very minor) critique of the book has to do with the lack of bibliography. While the notes include extensive references to works cited in the text and other relevant works, there is no single list of works referenced in the text. An interested reader, therefore, must sift through twenty pages to find bibliographical information of the cited works.

Overall, _Shelter_ offers a lot for the reader to consider about various issues relating to social class, divisions between groups of people, homelessness, and inequality. Clearly written, arguments well supported, and meticulously annotated, Seider's book offers an insightful and rather complicated conversation about these complex issues. For the most part, he engages in this conversation by addressing topics head-on that are too often ignored and certainly not discussed enough in the United States. _Shelter_ makes a persuasive argument for the replication of the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter’s student-run model at other universities across the nation to serve those trying to survive homelessness and possibly even other marginalized communities as well. Seider makes a convincing case that it is a model providing the necessary context and conditions for something quite powerful to happen to those involved.

References


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