Shelter: where Harvard meets the homeless

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In an era where youth-led revolts have become the catalyst for sweeping political change in the Middle East and elsewhere, an obvious question emerges: Is there something particular about the stage of development of these youth and young adults that contributes to the success in their role as agents of social change? Scott Seider investigated this question in the less sweeping but no less important context of a homeless shelter in Harvard Square in his book entitled *Shelter: where Harvard meets the homeless*. For over 25 years, this shelter has been entirely run, staffed and administered by students from area colleges and universities, primarily Harvard University. By grounding his research in the developmental theories of Erik Erikson, along with research on emerging adulthood, altruism studies and the ethic of care, the book gives us valuable insights into the motivations, thoughts and actions of the students. These insights are not only valuable for understanding the particular context of the Harvard homeless shelter, but help us understand the power and potential for youth-led movements in the broader world and point us to methods that can enhance the moral development of emerging adults.

The data for the study are derived from qualitative interviews with 53 individuals who come from five groups associated with the shelter: first-time volunteers, current shelter staff, shelter staff alumni, homeless and formerly homeless shelter ‘guests’ and professional stakeholders. From these sources Seider expertly weaves a compelling account of the impact the students and homeless have on each other. By means of an engaging narrative, he chronicles the mutual benefits of the relationships and analyses how the characteristics of each group, especially the students, contribute to the success of the shelter.

This book is of great interest for those who study moral development because much of the success of the shelter is attributed to the unique qualities of the developmental stages of both the students and the homeless. Based on the work of psychologist Jeffery Arnett, Seider characterises the students as in the stage of ‘emerging adulthood’. Some of the qualities of this developmental stage that work particularly in the context of the shelter are:
• Passion and idealism: students see the work of the shelter as a cause of social transformation and not just a ‘job’.

• Energy and time: students are relatively free from commitments and able to devote large amounts of time and energy to the work.

• Optimism and naïveté: students are free to try new and creative approaches to the problems of homelessness and to the tasks of running the shelter.

• Openness to the world: students are at a point in life where they are interested in learning about the world and their place in it. This openness to other’s experience makes them effective, non-judgemental listeners.

Because of these attributes the homeless clients experienced the students as genuine and authentic, especially compared to the ‘professionals’ they encountered at other shelters. The book acknowledges both the positive and negative impact of these developmental attributes on the workings of the shelter. For example, the students’ naïveté would not always serve them well when working with the worldly-wise population of the homeless. For their part, the book demonstrates that many of the homeless were in the stage of life in which the need to advise and help the next generation prevailed (Erikson’s generativity versus stagnation stage). Many of the homeless eagerly shared some of the worldly wisdom they had with the students whose ‘sheltered’ lives had not afforded such lessons to be learned.

Opportunities for moral development could be found in the various uses of the word ‘shelter’ in the book. The shelter provided a place for students to encounter the issues of poverty and homelessness that challenged their ‘sheltered’ lives. As a shelter from the academic and social pressures of student life, the students had the opportunity to think about the larger world and their place in it. Many pursued careers of service because of their experience at the shelter. Finally, the shelter was a place to put moral ideals into practice and to do the hard work of justice through direct service to the clients.

It was in the work of administering the shelter where the greatest potential for growth in moral development occurred. In facing dilemmas of fairness that grew out of serving the homeless, in discussing and enforcing rules and regulations that made the shelter a safe place for all and by negotiating with fellow students and other stakeholders regarding the best way to proceed, the students grew in their moral reasoning and moral capacity. The book’s one weakness is that it draws too narrowly on the ethic of care from the moral development literature and neglects what could be a rich vein of insight from Kohlberg and colleagues’ writings on ‘just community’. In the final analysis this is what the students were attempting: to build a community of justice and service around the issues of poverty and homelessness. In speaking of the impact of this model Seider concludes the shelter is a place ‘where, night after night, America’s most privileged and most marginalized citizens break bread together…. (T)his juxtaposition of privilege and poverty offers powerful effects for the homeless men and women who stay at the shelter, the Harvard students who volunteer there and the wider society into which both groups will emerge’ (p. 20).
Seider hopes that the success of the shelter could be replicated and serve as a model for moral action and moral development in other settings. At the very least, this book can inform and instruct those who would want to harness the power of service learning for emerging adults.

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**Being white, being good: white complicity, white moral responsibility and social justice pedagogy**
Barbara Applebaum, 2010
New York, Lexington Books
$15.00 (hbk), 221 pp.

Barbara Applebaum began her journey, which became the premise for this book, by asking the question, ‘Do I implement what I argue for theoretically?’ (p. 197). She was referring to her belief that teaching for social justice requires more than good intentions, but in fact requires a strong dose of ethical responsibility and accountability. She found that her own ‘well-intentioned’ white students had a difficult time understanding their personal investment in complicity as it related to undoing racism. This disconnect led her to the idea that a pedagogy which addresses this dilemma needs to be explicit and from this she birthed ‘white complicity pedagogy’. Applebaum makes the case that complicity may in fact be unavoidable due to unearned privilege, but that does not denote the necessity of responsibility.

Applebaum offers a strong review of the literature on whiteness and critical white studies. One of the primary concepts she addresses is the concept of being ‘whitely’ which is essentially unwillingness on the part of white people to be challenged, even when they attempt to disrupt racism. This is referring to whiteness as a ‘performative way of being’ (p. 17) and is essential to her argument that complicity is unacceptable and not a neutral state of being but in fact an active tenet of racist behaviour. She specifically references examples of this in her own teaching practice, when ‘good’ white students have a difficult time understanding the difference between ‘benefiting’ from racism (an unequal system that privileges white people) to ‘contributing’ to (everyday behaviours that reinforce this system unintentionally) (p. 46). She makes a very important distinction that oftentimes white people prefer to detach from whiteness and