

CANADIAN JOURNAL of URBAN RESEARCH

REVUE CANADIENNE de RECHERCHE URBAINE

BOOK REVIEW

Ranasinghe, Prashan

Helter-Shelter: Security, Legality, and an Ethic of Care in an Emergency Shelter

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017

288 pages

ISBN 9781487522063

While much has been written about the plight of homeless people and the multiple challenges of providing both temporary and permanent housing, there has been considerably less focus on the nature of these temporary shelters, what they consist of and how they are operated. *Helter Shelter* provides a close examination of the dynamics of this type of environment through the lens of a single observer, the author Prashan Ranasinghe who spent over 300 hours spanning a year and a half observing the workings and interactions of a homeless shelter for men. The work is primarily an ethnographic lens that explores various aspects of the workings of this shelter through the actions of front-line employees, case managers and supervisors. There are few written works that help us understand the dynamics that exist in a homeless shelter and how they impact the ethic of care this is a main focus of the book, so this book is a venture into a new understanding of a complex world.

Divided into nine chapters, the primary theme that is woven throughout is the exploration of the fundamental spirit or culture, the ethos of the shelter, through the eyes of those who work there and as it manifested by an ethic of care in various domains. By ethic of care, Ranasinghe includes the provision of a vast array of services, meeting both basic needs such as food, clothing and shelter as well as those that are restorative: treatment for addictions, education and employment which are grounded in both the desire and moral commitment to serve those who are in need (p. 7). Beginning in the second chapter, each explores a different aspect of this care ethos. It begins with locating the shelter in the local municipal environment and then looks at the internal physical aspects of the building and how its various components contribute to discordant and dissonant aspects of the provision of care. The fourth chapter turns to exploring the roles and relationships of both frontline staff, their interactions with clients and more senior management. Subsequent chapters examine issues of safety and security in the shelter and how the gendered nature of this security is impacted by the presence of female staff in a men only shelter. Finally there is a discussion of the legal issue, both external governmental rules and regulations that dictate provision of care and the internal rules of the workplace that guide staff in their daily activities.

One of the challenges in this book is understanding its intended audience. As a sociological exploration, it draws on spatial and socio-legal perspectives that reflect the writings of Bachelard and Lefebvre in its critical examination of the shelter's spatial configurations and meanings. It looks to the writings of Held, Noddings and others to explore the concepts of ethic of care and thus reaches out to academics who will readily understand the terminology used. However this precise languaging makes it difficult for readers who lack a background in sociology to fully comprehend its meanings. We know that most shelters have staff with minimal post-secondary education and training and background in social services. Thus shelter administrators and front-line

Canadian Journal of Urban Research, Winter 2018, Volume 27, Issue 2, pages 69-70.

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ISSN: 2371-0292

staff who may benefit from a clear explanation of the structure and functions of a shelter are not likely to struggle thorough the text.

Another challenge with this book is that Ranasinghe's intent to provide an ethnography of the shelter through the perspectives of frontline staff is clouded by his own perspectives and leave the voices of staff more in the background than would be desired. As such the book becomes a combination of autoethnography and sociological examination of the shelter. This comes across clearly in chapter three where he explored the interior spaces of the shelter, frequently interspersing his own thoughts and reactions on negative aspects of space and function. Such interjections make it difficult for the reader to untangle the operations, staff reactions, and author's impressions in order to clearly comprehend the challenges that he has very accurately identified as the chaos in the shelter.

Regrettably, because of this specific ethnographic perspective, the book lacks the perspectives of other interpretations of shelter space, culture, and operations that may also shed light on the perceived chaos and lack of logical adherence to rules. Issues of inadequate funding, inexperienced and untrained staff, clients with complex traumatic histories, uncertainties that accompany chaotic lives, are all challenges that social workers, psychologists and organizational behaviorists might interpret in very different ways. It is important that we have opportunities to hear different perspectives and understandings of complex social phenomena, and Ranasinghe's work is a brave undertaking for one whose

Jeannette Waegemakers Schiff
Social Work
University of Calgary