

INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL CONCERNS COMMUNITY CASES

THE ETHICS OF ENGAGEMENT AND INQUIRY

SUMMARY: Navigating the dual responsibilities of community engagement and research.

CASE TYPE: Ethical

Ethical cases involve value tradeoffs no matter the decision. They involve weighing competing values. For these, there is often no clear 'right' answer.

This case follows a student navigating the dual roles of community support worker and academic researcher. Although this dynamic creates complex practical and procedural questions, the following text focuses exclusively on ethical considerations. For the practical perspective, please refer to the companion case: "[Managing Dual Roles in Community Practice](#)."

FOCUS AREAS	LEARNING OBJECTIVES
• Navigating Dual Roles • Cultural Humility • Learning from Discomfort	1. Identify potential conflicts between research goals and community engagement values. 2. Recognize ethical considerations in conducting research within communities. 3. Reflect on positionality, trust, perception, and accountability in immersive learning contexts. 4. Critique the concept of "informed consent" within shared living spaces and immersive environments.

SCENARIO

Sarah, a sophomore political science student, is spending the summer living in a small community and working with a grassroots nonprofit which provides transitional housing and support to formerly incarcerated women. Sarah's primary role at the site is to support their reentry services, working with the women as they seek employment and long-term housing. At the same time, Sarah has been tasked with gathering data for a faculty-mentored research project. She has chosen to study the challenges faced by women when seeking employment after incarceration. Her faculty mentor has helped her to craft a research design which will gather data through direct community engagement.

Throughout the summer, Sarah tries to ask neutral questions of residents that don't seem intrusive. She is acutely aware of the challenges of respectful community-based research and the vulnerability of the population she is working with. Despite these efforts, she senses discomfort from some of the participants. After approaching a resident to remind her of their research interview later that day, the resident asks, "Are you here to help us or study us?" Sarah feels torn. On the one hand, she wants to build trust and authentic relationships, but on the other hand, she wonders if her "data" is essentially the women's lived trauma. Sarah is beginning to feel like her efforts are undermining both her research and her relationships in the community, and she questions the morality of using her neighbors as subjects for her academic advancement.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How could research—even with good intentions—feel extractive to a community? Do you think this tension can be mitigated? Why might this specific population feel particularly scrutinized?
2. How would you be feeling in this scenario? What do you think the residents might be feeling or perceiving?
3. Is it ethical to act as both a supportive peer/service provider and a data collector? How does the power imbalance inherent in this role complicate developing a friendship?
4. Do you feel there are natural limits to the women's freedom to say yes or no? For example, if the women live there, do they truly feel free to say "no" to Sarah?
5. Does Sarah have a moral obligation to prioritize the community's comfort over her academic requirements? If so, what does that look like in practice?
6. How might Sarah (or her faculty mentor) have better prepared for these ethical dilemmas regarding positionality and privilege?

FACILITATOR CONSIDERATIONS

- **NAVIGATE UNCERTAINTY.** Students often struggle to find a balance between contributing meaningfully to a community and fulfilling the demands of academic research. They need guidance to navigate situations where these goals seem at odds.
- **EXPAND MORAL IMAGINATION.** Normalize ethical complexity in immersive experiences; they are learning environments.
- **LIVE WITH TENSION.** Encourage students to name discomfort without rushing to fix it. This case may not have a "happy ending." Explore why the tension between "helping" and "studying" exists and whether it can ever be fully resolved.
- **POSITIONALITY.** Use this case to discuss how race, class, and education status affect how a student is perceived by the community, regardless of their actions.

CLOSING QUESTIONS

- What's one thing you learned or thought about differently during this discussion regarding the ethics of service?
- Can you envision mutual benefits in this scenario? How might authentic partnership and trusting relationships contribute to academic research outcomes? How could academic research generate or contribute to authentic partnership and interpersonal connection?