

INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL CONCERNS COMMUNITY CASES

CONFLICT IN COMMUNITY LIVING

SUMMARY: Constructively addressing conflicts in community living situations.

CASE TYPE: Practical

Practical cases offer procedures and strategies for handling situations that one might encounter in community engaged work. These cases have answers that would be considered appropriate and others that would be ill advised.

FOCUS AREAS	LEARNING OBJECTIVES
• Conflict Resolution • Interpersonal Interactions • Interpersonal Tensions	1. Reflect on the complexities of boundaries and collaboration in communal living in immersive settings. 2. Practice naming interpersonal tensions with care and clarity. 3. Explore constructive conflict resolution and communication strategies. 4. Consider how past experiences influence shared living experiences.

SCENARIO

Ana, Reid, and Aarya are all sophomores who are participating in a summer community research project. Reid and Aarya are both from the US, but come from different family backgrounds. Aarya is a first generation college student, while Reid comes from a family of legacy college graduates. Ana is an international student. Throughout their eight week experience, the students are all living together in a shared home. For each of them, this is the first time they have lived “on their own” outside of their family and college environment. During the first and second weeks, the three housemates share responsibilities like cooking and cleaning for their communal meals. However, during their second week, Reid and Aarya start to notice dishes left around the house and piled in the sink. During their weekly community meeting, Aarya and Reid bring this up. Ana agrees she needs to do better with cleanliness. At the same time, when the topic of shared expenses comes up, Ana protests that she shouldn’t have to contribute because of her financial challenges, even though all three students are receiving the same stipend for program expenses. The meeting ends with tension. The next week, the dishes are piled up again, and Ana still hasn’t contributed for group groceries. Reid is feeling resentful but is hesitant to speak up, fearing conflict and wanting to “keep the peace.” Aarya wants to mediate but feels caught in the middle, worried anything she does could lead to a rupture in their community.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What stands out to you in this scenario?
2. Have you ever been in a situation like this (in immersive programs, dorms, teams)? How did it feel?
3. What assumptions might each person be making about the others?
4. Think through the various student perspectives.
 - a. What might be going on for Ana?
 - b. Why might Aarya and Reid be hesitant to speak up?

- c. What assumptions or expectations might have been overlooked before this situation developed?
5. What might a group conversation look like that resets expectations? What are the positive outcomes you might anticipate from this path? What are the negative ones?
 6. What are the risks and responsibilities Aarya and Reid could face by trying to mediate?
 7. What are possible ways they could express their concerns without creating unnecessary tension?
 8. How can Aarya avoid being triangulated or caught in the middle?
 9. If you were in this situation, what might you do to best facilitate a successful outcome? What might you do next if the outcome is uncertain or negative?
 10. How might the past experiences of the community members be impacting their current situation? What about their ability to engage in open dialogue?
 11. What norms regarding community life and conflict resolution could be helpful to set as a group early on?
 12. What might be a useful communication tool (e.g., shared check-ins, group agreements) going forward?
 13. Often communities grow stronger after successful conflict resolution in situations like this one. Why might that be? Have you experienced this in your own life?

FACILITATOR CONSIDERATIONS

- **ANALYZE PERSPECTIVES.** Stay neutral and encourage perspective-taking. Emphasize that conflict is normal—and can be healthy if handled with respect.
- **MAINTAIN NEUTRALITY.** Make students aware that such scenarios can lead to heated emotions. Guide them to think about how to gently name avoidance or scapegoating if it shows up in discussion.
- **PROBLEM SOLVING FOCUS.** Encourage students to devote sustained attention to constructive problem-solving and forward-looking strategies, rather than primarily recounting past difficult experiences in detail. When participants draw on prior situations, guide them to reflect on what they learned and how they grew, rather than rehearsing grievances or cataloguing others' shortcomings.
- **IMAGINE PERSPECTIVES.** Encourage students to imagine themselves in each role—even if it's uncomfortable.
- **NORMALIZE CHALLENGES.** Normalize growing pains in shared living and offer language like “grace and accountability” to guide group dynamics.
- **APPRECIATE POTENTIAL FOR GROWTH.** Students might be unfamiliar with direct conflict resolution and the idea of directly addressing challenges in groups. They might not understand that such conversation can and should lead to stronger communities if done well. Guiding them toward this is essential.

CLOSING QUESTIONS

- What's one thing you learned or thought about differently during this discussion?
- How can students best support themselves and each other when living in community? Can this include conflict?