

INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL CONCERNS

COMMUNITY CASES

CONTRASTING OPINIONS: CONFEDERATE FLAGS

SUMMARY: When you disagree strongly with someone, how can you move forward?

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.

FOCUS AREAS

- Cultural Humility
- Intent vs. Impact
- Perception

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Consider how identity, background, and assumptions influence cultural or individual beliefs and differences.
2. Reflect on social identities and how these shape experiences and perceptions, including intent versus impact.
3. Discuss strategies for respectful, equitable interactions and dialogue across differences.

SCENARIO

Kim and Aaron are both taking a university course that includes an immersive trip to the southern United States during their fall break. During this immersive experience, they will partner with community organizations who work closely to address specific local needs. Kim, a white woman from Ohio, is a sophomore studying chemical engineering. Aaron, a black man from Colorado, is a junior studying finance. Kim and Aaron both joined the class to explore how justice and the common good can be integrated into their daily lives and their future careers. They are excited to learn that their group will be working with a home repair organization in Tennessee. Their site partner works with disabled community members to help make their homes more accessible.

Kim and Aaron are assigned to work with Larry, a white man in his late 50s. Larry is a veteran, and his military service led to the amputation of both of his legs. He now uses a motorized wheelchair. Kim and Aaron are going to be repairing a ramp at his home. Larry and the other community members join the student group for dinner, and Kim and Aaron feel like they bond well with Larry over the meal.

Upon arriving at Larry's home, the first thing they see is a large Confederate flag flying proudly in the front yard. Kim and Aaron are both taken aback, but knowing how kind Larry was to them the night before, they decide to push their discomfort to the back of their minds. Larry greets them warmly, and they get to work. That evening, Kim says to Aaron, "I still can't get over working under that flag all day. I know it's pretty common here, but I can't believe someone like Larry would fly it, especially when he knows you're going to be there helping him. Maybe I should ask him about it." Aaron replies, "I really don't like it either, but I'm not sure what to do. It's not like he's done anything to me personally. He's been nothing but kind so far. Let's just see how it goes."

The next day, during lunch, Aaron can tell Kim is still bothered by the flag. Before he can talk to her, she blurts out, “Larry, I don’t want to be rude, but I’m really not comfortable with your confederate flag. I know I’m not from around here, but I really can’t see it as anything other than a symbol of slavery. Why would you want that in your front yard?”

Larry seems taken aback, “That’s your northern upbringing talking, I know plenty of people from around here who fly that flag, it’s just a symbol of heritage and pride. There’s nothing more to it than that, anyone telling you otherwise is lying to you. They’re trying to bring up problems from a hundred years ago.” Larry is clearly agitated, but his treatment of Kim and Aaron remains kind for the rest of the day.

That evening, as they discuss more, Aaron interjects, “I think we need to remember we’re in his community, and even if we disagree, this might be a moment to practice cultural humility.” Kim objects, “Cultural humility is fine when you’re talking about food, but this is about a symbol of hatred. I don’t care if we’re outsiders, I can’t accept that his perspective is neutral, let alone ok.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How might identity, background, and assumptions be influencing the perspectives of each person?
2. Do you think there are limits to cultural humility? Is there ever a time when respectful dialogue about cultural or ethical differences is not possible? Why or why not?
3. Do you feel one interpretation of the meaning of the flag is more important or more accurate than another?
4. Do you believe respectful dialogue about the meaning and interpretation of the flag is possible? Is it your place to engage in this discussion? What might be the positive or negative outcomes?
5. Would your interpretation change if Larry was not as kind and respectful of Kim and Aaron?
6. Often the intent and impact of a given scenario are not the same. How do you see this dynamic playing out here? How might this be impacted by further dialogue?

FACILITATOR CONSIDERATIONS

- **NORMALIZE DISCOMFORT.** Acknowledge that immersive experiences can often bring different communities together and that this can sometimes create dissonance or confusion.
- **FOSTER REFLECTION.** Ask students to consider how they might feel if roles were reversed—if an outsider came to their community with a difference in opinion about the intent or impact of a given activity or symbol.
- **INSTILL BOTH CONFIDENCE AND CONNECTION.** Students might feel that they should always be deferential when entering another community. Help them think through ways in which they can be confident in their own beliefs while still being open to dialogue and encounter. There are many situations in which it would be OK to disengage entirely and in which dialogue is neither possible nor desirable. Make sure students know they should trust themselves after reflecting.
- **CONSIDER OPPOSING VIEWPOINTS.** Point students to further resources, such as those below, which highlight stronger stances on both sides of this argument.

CLOSING QUESTIONS

- What’s one thing you learned or thought about differently during this discussion?
- Can you envision similar topics you are passionate about or circumstances that you might encounter when working in immersive experiences? How might you prepare in advance for such encounters?
- What beliefs or opinions do you hold which might elicit tension or confusion from others?