

INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL CONCERNS

# COMMUNITY CASES

## WHAT DOES THIS SAY ABOUT US?

**SUMMARY:** Is it possible to present a real experience without reducing others' reality to a single story?

**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	LEARNING OBJECTIVES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ethics of Representation</li><li>• Human Dignity</li><li>• Intent vs. Impact</li></ul>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Examine how choices made in storytelling such as what to include, what to emphasize, which images to use carry ethical weight.</li><li>2. Reflect on the difference between a story that compels an audience and one that upholds the dignity of its subjects.</li><li>3. Consider whose interests are served by a particular narrative and whose may be diminished.</li><li>4. Explore how researchers and community-engaged students can represent communities honestly without reducing people to their circumstances.</li></ol>

## SCENARIO

Becca is a junior majoring in sociology. She spent the past summer in a fellowship working with a food access nonprofit in a rural Appalachian community, coordinating a community pantry and accompanying outreach workers on home visits. Alongside this work, she conducted a faculty-mentored research project on the structural barriers to food security in the region.

Over the summer, Becca grew close to the Miller family. Karen Miller worked part-time at a gas station while caring for her ailing mother; her husband Dale had been out of work for two years after an injury at a local plant. The plant had since downsized and largely left the region. Their circumstances were shaped by a hollowed-out local economy, limited healthcare access, and a fraying safety net—all forces beyond their control. But the Millers were also warm, resourceful, and funny. Karen could stretch almost nothing into a real meal. Dale kept an immaculate garden out back. Their daughter Jaylen was a rising high school junior, sharp and curious, already thinking hard about college applications. Becca and Jaylen had bonded over that, trading thoughts on essays and next steps long after the summer ended.

Early in the summer, during a home visit, Becca had taken a photograph of the inside of the family's refrigerator—nearly empty, just a few condiments, some leftover rice, and a half-gallon of milk. Karen had laughed when she saw Becca notice it. "That's a Wednesday," she said. Becca asked if she could use the photo for her research. Karen shrugged, "Sure."

Back on campus, building her final presentation, Becca kept returning to that image. It was stark and real in a way no statistic could match. She placed it near the opening, before the policy analysis, to make her audience feel the weight of what she'd witnessed. She was proud of what she was putting together.

At her last site visit with the Millers, Jaylen asked if she could see what Becca's presentation looked like so far. They went through the slides together, Jaylen asking thoughtful questions. Then they reached the photograph of the refrigerator. She was quiet for a moment. "Wow," she said. "We look really poor, huh." It wasn't quite a question. There was something flat in her voice, a quiet deflation. She moved on to the next slide without saying anything more.

Becca kept talking through the slides, but something had shifted. Later, alone, she stared at the image. The photograph was still powerful. She still believed it was true and effective. But she found herself thinking about Karen's laugh, about Dale's garden, about the way Jaylen lit up when she talked about her college essay. She had spent her whole presentation arguing that poverty did not define who these families were, but she wasn't sure the photograph said the same thing about the Millers. Something felt off, though she couldn't quite say what, and she didn't know what, if anything, she should do about it.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. If you were in a situation like Becca's, before you include a photo, quote, or personal detail about someone you worked with, what questions should you ask yourself?
2. If Becca wanted to keep the photograph in the presentation, what context or framing could influence how the audience receives it?
  - a. Becca believed the image told an important truth. Do you agree? Can something be true and still be an incomplete or unfair representation of a person?
  - b. Are there times when a representation feels harsh but serves an important purpose? Who has the authority to make that judgment?
3. How would you describe the Miller family in a way that is honest about their hardship, but that does not reduce them to it. Try it out loud.
4. Think about a time you were represented—in a photo, a story, a description. Did it feel like you? What was missing?
5. Becca designed the presentation to move her audience and make them care. Is that a legitimate goal? When does the desire to persuade, even if rightly motivated, begin to compromise the dignity of the people whose stories we are using?
6. Becca had the consent of the family to take and use the photograph, but it clearly had an effect on Jaylen. What does her reaction reveal about the limits of consent?
7. If you were Becca, what would you do next? What options does she have, and what does each one cost?

## FACILITATOR CONSIDERATIONS

- **MAKE IT CONCRETE.** If students were in Becca's shoes, how should they make decisions about what to include in a research presentation and what to leave out? What does the process look like for making those decisions? The goal is for students to leave with actionable reflection, not just abstract awareness.
- **HOLD THE AMBIGUITY.** Students may want to quickly resolve this case by saying Becca should simply remove the photo or ask the family again. Resist the pull toward easy resolution. The more generative question is what the discomfort itself reveals about how we tell stories about justice—and who bears the cost of those choices.
- **AVOID MAKING BECCA THE VILLAIN.** Becca's instincts throughout are good. She genuinely cares about the family, about accuracy, about justice. The tension here is not between good and bad intentions—it is about how even careful, well-meaning storytelling can diminish the people it intends to honor.
- **DISTINGUISH CONSENT FROM DIGNITY.** Karen said "sure." But Jaylen's reaction invites students to think carefully about the difference between permission and genuine partnership in how one's story is told. Consent is necessary but not sufficient.

## CLOSING QUESTIONS

- What's one thing you learned or thought about differently during this discussion?
- What does it mean to tell a story about injustice in a way that is both honest and humanizing, and are those always in tension?
- Who should have more say in how a community's story is told—the researcher, the audience, or the people in the story?