

INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL CONCERNS

# COMMUNITY CASES

## SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

**SUMMARY:** Exploring the ways a sociological imagination opens people to curiosity about what informs human behaviors, choices, and actions.

**CASE TYPE:** Reflective

Reflective cases are internally oriented. These cases invite reflection on one's own place in community engaged work. They typically will not have clear 'right' answers and are open to many interpretations.

FOCUS AREAS	LEARNING OBJECTIVES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sociological Imagination</li><li>• Moral Imagination</li><li>• Structural vs. Individual Response</li></ul>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Examine the insights that can be unlocked via curiosity about human behaviors, choices, and actions</li><li>2. Explore the interplay between structural forces and individual agency</li><li>3. Reflect on the importance of curiosity and moral imagination in contextual understanding and responses</li></ol>

## SCENARIO

Logan is a rising sophomore studying biological sciences. During the summer, he decides to participate in a four-week tutoring program in his hometown. The program works with a local middle school, which was selected for partnership due to its low reading scores. Each morning, Logan will work one-on-one with students on phonics, reading, and comprehension.

Logan has always been a hard worker, and he feels confident he can make a difference. After his first week, he's not so sure. Despite his best efforts, some of his students are not exactly taking to the material. Kevin, getting ready to repeat 6th grade, is totally disengaged and wants nothing to do with the tutoring process. Each morning, he finds new ways to ignore or defy Logan's efforts to keep him focused. After a tense week, Kevin finally tells Logan directly, "I don't care about any of this!"

Dayana is a different story. While she is not openly defiant, she is not making much more progress. She is kind and respectful, but Logan can tell her mind is not on the material. He often has to repeat basic instructions, and when it's time for independent reading, she typically falls asleep.

The four weeks trudge by in much the same pattern, and without any significant progress. Logan leaves feeling immensely frustrated. Talking with a grade school friend before returning to school, he vents, "I really don't know what to think. We were giving them all these opportunities to learn, and they weren't taking them seriously. I mean, you had to do summer tutoring growing up, but you did it, and now you're on track. I know these kids are coming from different circumstances, but if they can't take advantage of the opportunity when it's given to them, what else can you do?"

Logan, still thinking about his experience, decides to take a course in the fall on Education, Schooling, and Society. During this course, he is introduced to the concept of sociological imagination, which is described as a mode of curiosity about what informs human behaviors, choices, and actions. He is challenged to think about a situation in which patterns might signal that there are wider systemic and structural forces at work shaping human behavior.

Logan immediately recognizes patterns in the lives of Kevin and Dayana that he had completely ignored before. He thought back to Dayana dozing off during sessions, and realized she once mentioned staying up late watching her younger siblings so her mom could work her second job. He knew she spoke Spanish at home, and suddenly it hit him that she might not have been ignoring him, she might have been confused by his instructions and too embarrassed to ask. And Kevin, how would he have felt having to attend tutoring sessions while his friends were advancing to 7th grade and enjoying their summer? Logan starts to realize the situation might be much more complex than the individual choices he outlined when talking with his friend.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is something about your own experience or background that someone else might not know based on initial interactions?
2. Have you ever made a simple observation, one that then led to more questions, the answers to which seemed to actually reveal a much more complex truth? What was this experience like? What did you learn from it?
3. A sociological imagination challenges us to think deeply about the complex interplay between structural factors and individual choices in a given situation. Where do you see elements of both in this scenario?
  - a. Thinking from a systems level perspective, what type of responses or next steps might be appropriate in this situation? For Logan? For the school or beyond?
  - b. Thinking from an individual perspective, what type of responses or next steps might be appropriate in this situation? For Logan? For his students?
4. Empathy requires us to understand the broader forces, but we still need to think about accountability for individuals in a given situation. Is there tension between empathy and accountability? Are they necessarily in tension?
  - a. What might it look like to attempt to balance the two as we utilize our sociological imagination in response to justice-oriented issues?
5. Structural and systemic realities are often deeply entrenched and are not things we can fix directly or easily. This can lead to apathy or discouragement when you find yourself up against their impacts. How might you suggest someone like Logan prepare for work like his tutoring, mindful he might bump up against systemic challenges, but without letting them stop him from trying to make a difference?

## FACILITATOR CONSIDERATIONS

- **FINDING PATTERNS.** Students should be encouraged to actively seek out patterns in human behaviors, choices, and actions that can help them identify structural forces at play in the justice-oriented issues they care about.
- **BALANCE AGENCY AND ENVIRONMENT.** It is essential that students recognize that structural and systemic forces are real, and that these environmental factors impact people, communities, and outcomes. At the same time, it is important to balance this with the importance of agency and individual effort. Students should be challenged to recognize that these two are in tension, and that their impacts on each person might be different. Holding these complexities in mind is part of developing a sociological imagination.
- **EXPLORE MORAL IMAGINATION.** Curiosity is essential when we are expanding our own moral imagination. Moral imagination is our capacity to put ourselves in the place of others, considering perspectives different from our own, and thinking creatively about what might be the most ethical course in any given situation. Emphasize that by learning to examine the various perspectives in a given situation, we can grow our own moral imagination and use this to inform our responses.
- **ENCOURAGE ACTION AND REFLECTION.** This case involves the interplay between two very powerful realities - structural/system forces and individual agency. These are made more complex by the fact that students are often in positions in which they can recognize systemic challenges, but cannot do much to address or correct them. This can lead to discouragement. Make sure students recognize that they can still have an impact within broken systems, and while working for higher level change.

## CLOSING QUESTIONS

- What's one thing you learned or thought about differently during this discussion?
- Thinking about any upcoming community engagement, in what ways can you apply a sociological imagination to the justice-oriented issues you might be encountering? How might this look different once you arrive and learn more about the context?