



Teaching Caselettes

LA CARPIO, COSTA RICA

Friendship

Ming Jiu Li

A student working in a Costa Rican slum community must decide how to respond to a request for financial assistance from a local woman she has befriended. The dilemma sets in when it is revealed that even though the woman has already received aid to pay for her son's surgical procedure, she is still approaching the student for money, apparently hoping to exploit the personal relationship that has been established.

This case reflects the classic Right-Right Dilemma of justice versus mercy, and draws out the larger question surrounding relationships between foreign aid-providers and locals looking to improve their lives: can true friendships ever develop in contexts of deep power and economic disparities?

Please refer to the "Ethics of Engagement" overview at the end of this document to familiarize yourself with the general ethical framework this case was created to illustrate.

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Michelle is spending her summer civic engagement internship in La Carpio, Costa Rica. La Carpio is a large slum outside of San Jose and is comprised primarily of illegal Nicaraguan immigrants. Most La Carpio residents do not have proper identification papers that allow them to be legally employed. Often, they work in construction and housekeeping, receiving approximately a third of what equally qualified, legal Costa Rican residents are paid. Michelle's local community partner is the Costa Rican Foundation (pseudonym, CRF). Long term goals of the CRF are to create a better quality of life for at-risk and special needs populations. The CRF runs community centers in La Carpio that serve as supplementary education and day care centers for children who would otherwise be left alone when their parents go to work. The CRF also runs support groups for women, offers microfinance opportunities, and has a clinic to address basic medical needs.

Over the course of her work with the CRF, Michelle befriends a local woman, Soledad, who one day asks Michelle and Michelle's colleague Neha to stop by her house. Soledad wants them to see her son Jorge, who has been the victim of a gunshot wound to the stomach. Michelle and Neha are told that Jorge's injury is the result of an accident; Jorge took a bullet meant for someone else. Jorge has seven intestinal perforations and has already spent 13 days in the hospital. When Michelle and Neha arrive at the house, they see that Jorge is indeed in pretty bad shape, immobilized on his bed with a bag connected to his intestines. This bag has to stay in place until a final operation, for which the family does not have money. Soledad asks the girls for financial assistance — a sum of 35,000 colones (70 U.S. dollars) for the operation.

Michelle is initially thrilled that Soledad has approached the two volunteers for assistance, seeing this as a show of trust and the presence of a meaningful friendship. When Michelle and Neha talk to their coordinator at the CRF, however, they find out that Soledad has already been given the money to cover Jorge's surgery. In fact, upon further investigation, they discover that an evangelical church group in the area has also given Soledad money to solve the same problem.

Michelle feels betrayed and exploited. Yet she is also aware that Soledad is probably not using the money to splurge on indulgences. It is much more likely that the money has been used to purchase necessities, especially foodstuffs such as coffee, rice, and beans. As Michelle ponders the possibility of ever truly having unconditional friendships with the residents of La Carpio, she also must decide whether or not to give the money to Soledad, and whether or not to reveal to Soledad her knowledge of the other payments.

Overview of Ethics of Engagement Case Studies

These case studies were developed as part of a workshop series the Kenan Institute for Ethics provided for students preparing for intensive civic engagement experiences. The goals for the summer experience were three-fold: to gain self-knowledge, to deepen students' commitment to life-long civic engagement, and to help the communities in which they lived and worked for the summer. Student projects took place in local and global locations, ranging from working with African immigrants in Ireland, to documenting social change movements in South Africa, to managing environmental organizations in Portland, Oregon.

The cases are based on actual student experiences in the field. They set forward the ethical dilemmas the students faced on personal, organizational, and systemic levels. They also present scenarios in which there is no clear right answer. Rather, the students in each case study are challenged by seemingly intractable problems for which there seem to be only wrong and perhaps less wrong solutions.

In constructing the teaching notes, we referred to the "Right-Right Dilemmas" paradigm drawn from Rush Kidder's book, *How Good People Make Tough Choices*. We modified this concept, suggesting that the students will likely face "Wrong-Wrong Dilemmas" in their summer placements, in which both the community and individual goods are compromised; neither loyalty nor truth can be fully achieved; long-term and short-term prospects are equally pessimistic; and neither justice nor mercy can be experienced by all those affected by the dilemma.

In the workshop, we also introduced the students to three "Resolution Principles," which we offered as frameworks to enable clear thinking about ethical dilemmas. These principles are the classical ethical principles of

Utilitarianism - providing the greatest good for the greatest number

Deontology / Principle-Based (Kantianism) - following the highest principle as absolutely as possible

Care-Based - emphasizing the importance of relationships and paying attention to the particular context and individuals involved

After reading the cases, students in the workshop were divided into small groups to discuss the questions listed in the teaching notes and then returned to the large group for a facilitator-led discussion. Given the significance and difficulty of the tensions faced by the characters in the cases, a good session often ended with significant debate, rather than consensus about a right course of action.

Our aim with these cases is to provide students preparing for civic engagement experiences with tools they will find helpful as they face morally serious dilemmas in real-world contexts radically different than those in a university setting.