

Difficult Choice Scenarios

Researchers working in schools, neighborhoods, and in other community settings are often faced with difficult choices. Here are several examples drawn from published research. Please read the scenario with your partner and respond to the question that follows.

1. You are an observer in a recently desegregated school. You have been observing student patterns of play in their classrooms. Several of the students come from Trackton, others from Roadville. You notice again and again that students from Trackton get in trouble with the teacher for misusing the kitchen play set. The girls keep bringing water and juice to use in the kitchen role-play, when the rule is “no food or drink allowed in the play area.” You see that the kids from Roadville are more comfortable with imaginary play. You also see the teacher scolding the girls from Trackton, telling them to be more like the girls from Roadville. From your experience observing in community homes, you know that the kids from Trackton often play using real items, such as flour, and water, etc. Gradually, the girls from Trackton stop playing with the girls from Roadville, and they stop using the kitchen play area. As a researcher do you say anything to the teacher or to anyone else about your observations? Whether you do or don’t, what are the implications of your decision?

Heath, S. B. (1994.) *Ways with words: Language, life, and work in communities and classrooms*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

2. You have been working with Donny and Jenny documenting their progress as they learn to read, while you tutor them. You are a trained expert in this field as well as a researcher. Donny is in the second grade and Jenny is his mother who has already completed public high school. While Donny struggles you notice teachers are sending home notes saying he should “stay on task” and do his homework. (You know this because Jenny asks you to read the notes when Donny brings them home.) You know that he is not able to read well enough to do his homework. You note the curriculum is often irrelevant to the home life that Donny has experienced and you also note that the tests he is given in school are not identifying his reading ability. Do you discuss what you know with Donny’s teachers or to anyone else? Whether you do or don’t, what are the implications of your decision?

Purcell-Gates, V. (1997). *Other people’s words: The cycle of low literacy*. Cambridge: MA, Harvard University Press.

3. You have been following two boys who are brothers in a Chicago housing project, with three years of interviews and observations. Throughout the course of your study you never pay the family to participate, though on occasion you have bought new jeans or sneakers for them. Another time you provided bail money for a family member. When you publish your book you have a national best seller. Do you give any of the money to the family? Whether you do or don't, what are the implications of your decision?

Kotlowitz, A. (1991). *There are no children here*. New York, NY: Anchor Books.

4. You have negotiated entry into a very elusive, remote Eskimo clan. From all of your research they are pagans. Your plan is to study and understand the role of the "shaman" (religious healer) and his/her social role in the community. When you arrive you find out that thirty years ago the clan was converted to Christianity and they tell you all of the shamans "are in hell or hiding." Well. There you are. So you decide to refocus your study. After the first year has passed, you move from observation to interviews – your language skills are much stronger. But when a visiting fisherman breaks one of the Eskimo canoes, you lose your temper and snap at him, scolding. At the time you did not know you were breaking an unwritten rule: these people never express anger externally. One month passes. Then two months. No one will speak to you, in silence they are uneasy around you. Do you leave or stay? Whether you do or don't, what are the implications of your decision?

Briggs, J.L. (1995). *Never in anger: Portrait of an Eskimo family*. Cambridge: MA, Harvard University Press.

5. You have been investigating life as a "low wage worker" taking jobs for minimum wage across several states in the country, including Florida. At each stop you rent an apartment within town that can fit your budget and hit the streets filling out applications trying to get a job. After you have been working over a few months and it is time to move on, do you tell any of your co-workers about your real reason for being there? Whether you do or don't, what are the implications of your decision?

Ehrenreich, B. (2001). *Nickel and dimed: On (not) getting by in America*. New York, NY: Henry Holt & Co.

6. You have been following two groups of boys in the same low-income neighborhood over three years, and ten years later you return to conduct a follow-up study. In the language of your book the "Hangers" are white and the "Brothers" are black. The "Hangers" repeatedly express racist sentiments, while at the same time several of the "Brothers" have confided in you over time about the painful experiences they have had as victims of prejudice. Your annoyance is growing into anger. Do you ever say anything to the "Hangers?" Whether you do or don't, what are the implications of your decision?

MacLeod, J. (1995.) *Ain't no making it: Aspirations and attainment in low income neighborhoods*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Ways to Use the Difficult Scenarios in Your Classroom

The scenarios can be helpful discussion starters, as they connect the work of researchers to settings that may be familiar to your students. The scenarios can be useful for assessment when students are asked to apply the schools of thought within ethics. For example, a decision guided by utilitarianism may look different when compared to a decisions guided by virtue (for more information see: <https://www.brown.edu/academics/science-and-technology-studies/framework-making-ethical-decisions>). When you ask them to apply the theories you should be able to see the results in their responses. If more time is available students can apply the “Six-Step Method for Ethical Decision-making” (available in various forms online, such as: <http://newsletter.aspb.org/downloads/mandoli1.pdf>). In this way you can observe whether or not they can apply the steps, perhaps including an opportunity to reflect on the elements of the process that are not based on the application of an external set of rules.

Note that the handout can be cut into strips so that each group has one to discuss without seeing the others. The students can then be asked to present their scenarios to the group, they can share their decisions after reaching consensus, and then the class can make its own judgment before you reveal the answer. The answers are provided below (stating what actually happened in each situation). As a faculty member you can have the answers on a PowerPoint and reveal them after each scenario is discussed. Even if you only use one or two scenarios, you can make connections to a broad range of professional fields as best supports your goals for the class. Note that you can adapt this scenario format using research from your field.

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Answers: 1. Heath: No; 2. Purcell-Gates: Yes; 3. Kotlowitz: Yes; 4. Briggs: Stay; 5. Ehrenreich: Yes, selectively; 6. MacLeod: No.