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The Polly Wells Case

Author(s)

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Description

A case study that highlights issues of race and discrimination that can be used in a research ethics class or workshop.

Body

Speakers

Narrator; Polly Wells; Tom Black

Background

One day in May of 2001, riders on a city bus at a bus stop saw a police car, lights flashing, on the street corner. Police officers were questioning a young man, in his late teens or early twenties, who had apparently been driving an old, beat-up car.

Two middle aged or elderly male bus riders who appeared to be poor, perhaps homeless, possibly moderately intoxicated, started discussing the situation loudly. One of them claimed that the Bloomington police routinely harassed him and other poor people, and that the police in Bloomington were worse than the police in any of the many other cities in which he had lived.³

A third passenger, obviously of higher financial standing than the two men, joins the conversation.

The Conversation

WELLS: Is it really that bad? (The two men appraise her; she extends her hand.) I'm Polly.

(They shake hands; the two men relax at her friendly manner.)

BLACK: I'm Tom Black. He's Isaac Katzenberger.

WELLS: Pleased to meet you. Is it really that bad? I've always thought the Bloomington police were friendly and helpful. I've never heard anyone say differently.

BLACK: (Snorts.) You just don't know. The cops in this town hate poor people. Just walking down the street, they stop you every time. Frisk you. Ask you, you drunk? On drugs? Steal anything lately?

WELLS: (Listening respectfully and with evident sympathy.) Hmm.

BLACK: Never hassle rich folks, folks got nice clothes.

WELLS: What's the worst they do?

BLACK: Rough you up. You been frisked? It can hurt. Throw you to the ground, twist your arms. Take you to jail when you ain't done nothing.

WELLS: That's bad.

BLACK: Worse than Chicago. Worse than Indy. They got nothing better to do than hassle poor folks.

The conversation continues for several minutes; Katzenberger never enters the conversation, but nods approvingly at everything Black says.

The two men debark near a homeless shelter; Wells stays on the bus.

For Discussion

Case 1: Polly Wells is the owner of a small diner. In the next few days she will comment on the conversation to a few friends, then it will fade from her memory.

Case 2: Polly Wells, is a columnist for the local newspaper; she uses her full name, Pauline Wells, for her byline. When she gets home she writes a column about the conversation; it is published two days later.

Case 3: Polly Wells is a sociologist working on a research project concerning relationships between the Bloomington police and the poor. When she gets home she takes notes on the conversation, capturing as accurately as she is able the actual words spoken. She later quotes her notes in a scholarly paper published in a highly esteemed journal.

Questions for discussion

- What practical differences are there between cases 1, 2, and 3? What effects are her actions likely to have on Black and Katzenberger in each case? On anyone else? (Who else?)
- What moral differences are there between cases 1, 2, and 3?
- What legal differences are there?

Notes

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(2) To this point, the case accurately represents an actual experience I had in Bloomington, Indiana, in late May or early June of 2001. The rest of the case is fictional. I should note that the conversation I overheard on the bus is the only indication I have that the Bloomington police harass poor people. I can neither support nor deny the truth or accuracy of the comments I heard.

(3) Polly Wells is a completely fictional character.

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