

Seminar 4 Prep: Ethical Analysis

1. If Ricardo is not responsible for determining access

If Ricardo does not have the authority to decide who can view personal information, releasing names and addresses would clearly be unethical. The data was shared with Beth under strict conditions that excluded identifying details, and going beyond that would violate both privacy rules and institutional trust. Even if Beth's research is well-intentioned, Ricardo has a duty to follow policy and protect confidential records. Acting outside his role would undermine integrity and could even breach data protection laws.

2. If Ricardo is responsible for determining access

If Ricardo were in charge of deciding, he would still face an ethical dilemma between supporting research and safeguarding citizens' privacy. In this situation, he would need to weigh the public benefit of the study against the rights of individuals not to have their personal information shared without consent. The fair approach would be to refer the request to an ethics or data governance committee and only release data if there is formal approval and clear justification.

3. Should Beth be allowed to contact individuals?

From an ethical standpoint, Beth should not receive personal identifiers unless participants have consented in advance. The records were anonymised for a reason, to protect individuals from unwanted contact or misuse of their data. If the department released those names, it would blur the line between anonymised and identifiable data, damaging public trust. The safer option is for Beth to request an official process for contacting participants through proper channels, such as an ethics board or data custodian.

4. If Beth receives mixed responses

If a third of participants give permission, a third refuse, and a third don't respond, only those who have actively consented can ethically be included. Non-response cannot be assumed to mean consent. Beth may need to accept a smaller sample, adapt her research design, or seek additional participants through approved methods. Scientific goals cannot override participants' rights to privacy and choice.

Summary:

The main ethical issues in this case revolve around confidentiality, consent, and accountability. Ricardo must respect institutional boundaries and data privacy laws, while Beth has an obligation to ensure her research upholds participant autonomy. Protecting individuals' information is not only a legal duty but also a matter of maintaining integrity and public trust in both government and research.

References

ACM (2018) *ACM Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct*. Available at: <https://www.acm.org/code-of-ethics>

U.S. Department of Homeland Security (2012) *The Menlo Report: Ethical Principles Guiding Information and Communication Technology Research*.

Resnik, D. B. (2018) *The Ethics of Research with Human Subjects: Protecting People, Advancing Science, Promoting Trust*. Springer.