#### Case Study – Privacy

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**The task:**

Ricardo works for the records department of his local government as a computer records clerk, where he has access to files of property tax records. For a scientific study, a researcher, Beth, has been granted access to the numerical portion “but not the corresponding names” of some records.

Beth finds some information that she would like to use, but she needs the names and addresses corresponding with certain properties. Beth asks Ricardo to retrieve these names and addresses, so she can contact these people for more information and for permission to do further study.

Now consider, what are the ethical issues involved in deciding which of these options to pursue?

* If Ricardo is not responsible for determining allowable access, should he release the names and addresses?
* Suppose Ricardo were responsible for determining allowable access to the files. What ethical issues would be involved in his deciding whether to grant access to Beth?
* Should Beth be allowed to contact the individuals involved? That is, should the Records department release individuals' names to a researcher? What are the ethical issues for the Records department to consider?
* Suppose Beth contacts the individuals to ask their permission, and one-third of them respond giving permission, one-third respond denying permission, and one-third do not respond. Beth claims that at least one-half of the individuals are needed to make a valid study. What options are available to Beth?

**The answer:**

In the given situation and within these four questions, I observe a violation of the core principles of research ethics, which include data protection, confidentiality, avoidance of undue intrusion, and other principles.

Whether Ricardo is responsible or not for access to such personal information as names and addresses, he should protect the collected data and maintain participants' confidentiality. Vanclay et al. (2013) included confidentiality in the list of 18 fundamental rules for ethical social research, along with respect, consent, the right to withdraw, etc. This holds true even if the information needs to be provided to the courts, state, or key stakeholders. Alternatively, the researchers can provide a summarised version of the raw data for review by a court or third party, not excluding any personal details (Baines et al., 2013).

Moreover, according to Baines et al., (2013) when consultants promise confidentiality, they are ethically responsible for ensuring that third parties also maintain confidentiality. That was new information for me; I thought courts had more power.

For instance, what if surveys on sensitive topics such as school shootings or school bullying were conducted coincidentally right before a new shooting case? Should the material be given to judges in this way, or should it still be kept in secret?

Researchers should remove any personal identifiers, such as names and addresses, provide encryption, and segregate sensitive from nonsensitive data on the storage (Singer, 2012).

Singer also noted that the requirement for obtaining informed consent should be provided. In my opinion, if the researchers intend to share private information with fellow colleagues, the research process should start with a clear and prominent warning that the participants consent to the further processing of not only their responses but also their personal data. This warning should not, under any circumstances, be relegated to small print placed somewhere at the end.

**References**

Vanclay, F., Baines, J.T. & Taylor, C.N. (2013) Principles for ethical research involving humans: ethical professional practice in impact assessment Part I. *Impact assessment and project appraisal, 31*(4), pp.243-253.

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