

---

## Unit 4: Case Studies, Focus Groups and Observations

---

### Unit 3 Seminar: Case Study on Privacy

#### Task:

Please read the case below and answer the questions. You need to determine the ethical issues involved with this case.

#### The Case

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?

#### Answers:

**1. If Ricardo is not responsible for determining allowable access, should he release the names and addresses?**

Ethical Issues:

Privacy and Confidentiality: The names and addresses of individuals are sensitive personal information. Releasing this data without proper authorization violates their right to privacy.

Professional Responsibility: Ricardo has a duty to follow the policies and procedures of his organization. If he is not authorized to determine access, releasing the information would be a breach of his professional obligations.

Trust and Integrity: Ricardo's role requires him to act with integrity. Releasing the data without proper authorization could undermine public trust in the records department.

Conclusion: Ricardo should not release the names and addresses unless he has explicit permission from a supervisor or the appropriate authority. He should consult his organization's policies and seek guidance before taking any action.

**2. 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?**

Ethical Issues:

Balancing Public Interest and Privacy: Ricardo must weigh the potential benefits of the scientific study against the individuals' right to privacy. Releasing personal data for research purposes could serve the public good, but it must be done ethically.

Informed Consent: The individuals whose data is being used did not consent to having their names and addresses shared with a researcher. Ricardo must consider whether the lack of consent makes the release unethical.

Data Minimization: Ethical data practices require that only the minimum necessary information be shared. Ricardo should consider whether Beth truly needs the names and addresses or if the study can proceed with anonymized data.

Accountability: Ricardo must ensure that any decision he makes is justifiable and aligns with legal and organizational policies.

Conclusion: Ricardo should carefully evaluate the necessity of releasing the names and addresses, ensure compliance with privacy laws (e.g., GDPR, HIPAA, or local regulations), and consider seeking approval from a higher authority or ethics board.

**3. 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?**

Ethical Issues:

Informed Consent: The individuals did not consent to being contacted for research purposes. Releasing their names and addresses without consent could be seen as a violation of their autonomy.

Purpose Limitation: The records were initially collected for property tax purposes, not for research. Using the data for a different purpose without consent may violate ethical and legal principles.

Potential Harm: Contacting individuals could cause discomfort, anxiety, or harm, especially if they are unaware of how their data is being used.

Transparency and Trust: The Records department has a responsibility to be transparent about how personal data is used. Releasing names without a clear and justified reason could erode public trust.

Conclusion: The Records department should not release the names and addresses unless there is a compelling public interest, proper consent mechanisms are in place, and the release complies with legal and ethical standards.

**4. Suppose Beth contacts the individuals to ask their permission, and one-third 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?**

Ethical Issues:

Respecting Denial of Consent: Individuals who explicitly deny permission must have their wishes respected. Using their data without consent would be unethical and potentially illegal.

Non-Response as Implicit Denial: Ethically, non-responses should be treated as a lack of consent, as individuals may not have received the request or may have chosen not to respond.

Validity of the Study: Beth's claim that at least half of the individuals are needed raises questions about the feasibility and ethics of proceeding with the study. If the required sample size cannot be achieved ethically, the study may need to be redesigned or abandoned.

Options for Beth:

Proceed with Only Consenting Individuals: Beth could use the data from the one-third who gave permission, but this may limit the validity of the study.

Seek Alternative Data Sources: Beth could look for other datasets or participants who are willing to consent, ensuring ethical compliance.

Redesign the Study: Beth could modify the study to work with a smaller sample size or use anonymized data that does not require individual consent.

Abandon the Study: If the ethical and practical challenges cannot be resolved, Beth may need to abandon the study.

Conclusion: Beth should prioritize ethical principles over the study's goals. Proceeding without proper consent or using data from individuals who denied permission would be unethical.

#### Overall Ethical Considerations:

Respect for Privacy: Individuals have a right to control their personal information.

Informed Consent: Any use of personal data for purposes beyond its original intent requires explicit consent.

Transparency and Accountability: Organizations and researchers must be transparent about how data is used and accountable for their decisions.

Minimization of Harm: Decisions should aim to minimize potential harm to individuals and maintain public trust.