

Seminar 3: Case Study on Privacy

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

No. Ricardo has a professional and moral duty to protect the information entrusted to him and act only within his authorised role. Even if he believes Beth's research is worthwhile, it would be unethical for him to disclose personal details without proper approval. Doing so would represent an unauthorised use of confidential information and a breach of both privacy and institutional trust. The correct course is for Ricardo to refer Beth's request to his supervisor or to the department responsible for data governance, ensuring that any decision about data release is made transparently and with accountability.

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?

If Ricardo were the decision-maker, his task would be to weigh the potential benefits of Beth's research against the privacy rights of the individuals concerned. He would need to consider whether sharing identifiable data is truly necessary or whether the research could proceed using anonymised or aggregated information. There is also the question of fairness: individuals provided their information for one purpose, and using it for another could be seen as a breach of that trust. Ethically sound decision-making would require proportionality, transparency about how data will be used, and strong safeguards against misuse or harm.

3. Should Beth be allowed to contact the individuals involved? What are the ethical issues for the Records department to consider?

Beth should not contact individuals directly using information obtained from the records. Doing so would extend the data's use beyond its original purpose and compromise individuals' right to privacy. The Records department must consider how to balance the public interest in supporting legitimate research with the obligation to protect citizens' personal information. It must also safeguard its own reputation: if government data are perceived as being shared too freely, public confidence in the institution could be damaged. A more ethical alternative would be for the department itself to act as an intermediary, inviting individuals to participate voluntarily without disclosing their identities to Beth.

4. Suppose Beth contacts the individuals and receives mixed responses—one-third consent, one-third deny, and one-third do not respond. What options are available to Beth?

Beth can only use information from individuals who have clearly given permission. Silence cannot be assumed to mean consent. Ethically, she has several options: she could adapt her study to work with the smaller, consenting group; she could collaborate with the Records department to send a further, neutral invitation for consent; or she could redesign her methodology to use anonymised data instead of identifiable records. If it proves impossible to achieve a sufficiently large sample without compromising privacy, the most responsible course may be to modify or postpone the research rather than proceed unethically.