

Unit 4 Seminar

Title: Case Study on Privacy

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?

1. If Ricardo is not responsible for determining allowable access, should he release the names and addresses?
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?
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?
4. 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?

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

Ricardo should not disclose personal information, such as names and addresses, because he is not authorised to determine allowable access. Doing so could lead to privacy breaches and data security concerns (ICO, 2023). His lack of authority to determine allowable access violates individuals' privacy rights and poses security risks.

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 responsible for determining who could access the files, granting Beth access would raise ethical concerns. For instance, balancing the researcher's need for data with privacy rights and ensuring data anonymity would require Beth to only access numerical data and not link it back to individuals. According to ACM (2018), computing professionals must respect privacy by understanding the rights and responsibilities of collecting and using personal information. They should use data for legitimate purposes without violating individuals' rights, establish transparent policies, and ensure informed consent for automatic data collection.

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?

Beth should be allowed to contact individuals involved in research only with their consent. Informed consent is crucial, and individuals should have the option to opt-out. Clear policies on data sharing and data use limits should be in place to ensure data is only used for the stated purpose (ICO, 2023). Besides, Sim & Waterfield, (2019) argue that consent is a crucial ethical concern in research involving human participants, especially in focus group research. It legitimises researcher actions based on autonomy, respect for persons, and four essential elements: disclosure,

comprehension, competence, and voluntariness. Inadequate disclosure constrains autonomous decision-making, and the researcher must provide sufficient information to the participant. The process should be seen as creating or modifying expectations in the participant's mind rather than just conveying information.

- 4. 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?**

Beth needs to contact at least half the individuals to make a valid study, and one-third respond with permission. She should respect their choices and not use the data of those who didn't respond and those who denied it. Alternative approaches include anonymised data analysis or revising her research methods. According to Saunders et al. (2015), anonymisation in research involves changing participants' names or locations, balancing protection with data integrity. Critics argue it can negatively impact outcomes and power structures. On the other hand, Beth could revise her research plan, reduce the threshold for a valid study, seek additional participants who explicitly consent to the study, or analyse only the anonymised data to which she already has access. This will help ensure a valid study and ensure that all individuals are involved in the process.

References:

ACM (2018) *ACM Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct*. [online] Association for Computing Machinery. Available from: <https://www.acm.org/code-of-ethics> [Accessed 5 June 2024].

ICO (2023) *Personal Data breaches: a Guide*. Available from: <https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/report-a-breach/personal-data-breach/personal-data-breaches-a-guide/> [Accessed 5 June 2024].

ICO (2023) *What Is Valid consent?* Available from: <https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/uk-gdpr-guidance-and-resources/lawful-basis/consent/what-is-valid-consent/> [Accessed 5 June 2024].

Saunders, B., Kitzinger, J. & Kitzinger, C. (2015) Anonymising Interview data: Challenges and Compromise in Practice. *Qualitative Research*, [online] 15(5), pp.616–632. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794114550439>.

Sim, J. & Waterfield, J. (2019). Focus Group methodology: Some Ethical Challenges. *Quality & Quantity*, [online] 53(6), pp.3003–3022. Available from: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11135-019-00914-5>.