

Seminar 3: Research Methods and Professional Practice – Case Study: Privacy - Preparation

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?
 - ➔ He should not release any information. In fact, he could be prosecuted for doing so (GDPR). Instead, he should inform his responsible superior (e.g. the data protection officer or compliance officer) and ask for further behave.

- 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?
 - ➔ Beth “has been granted access to the numerical portion, but not the corresponding names”. This is because the names associated with the data allow individuals to be uniquely identified and therefore fall under the guidelines of the General Data Protection Regulation (The European Parliament and the Council of the European Union, 2016).
 - ➔ Ricardo should not provide any information without the consent of those affected.

- 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?
 - ➔ The Records department is not allowed to release the individuals' identifiable personal details without the explicit permission of the affected.
 - ➔ The publication of personal data could have unexpected negative consequences for those affected.

- 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?
 - ➔ Option 1: Only use the information of the individuals who have replied and giving their permission. Indicate a lack of statistical validity in the study.
 - ➔ Option 2: Contact again the individuals who have not respond. Ask the individuals who denied permission for the reasons and try to explain for what purpose exactly the information is needed and used for.
 - ➔ Option 3: If possible change the research model.

References:

The European Parliament and the Council of the European Union (2016) Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016. *Official Journal of the European Union*. Available from: <https://gdpr-info.eu/> [Accessed 24 November 2022].