

## **ARCHIVAL RESEARCH**

### **1 PERSONAL DATA IN ARCHIVES**

All archival research that involves 'personal data', whether in public or private archives, requires ethics review and approval via the Research Ethics Approval Procedure. The University's Research Ethics Policy uses the General Data Protection Regulation definition of personal data:

'Personal data' means any information relating to an identified or identifiable natural (living) person ('data subject'); an identifiable natural person is one who can be identified, directly or indirectly, in particular by reference to an identifier such as a name, an identification number, location data, an online identifier or to one or more factors specific to the physical, physiological, genetic, mental, economic, cultural or social identity of that natural person'

Archival research involving personal data is subject to all the strictures and principles of the Ethics Policy Governing Research Involving Human Participants, Personal Data and Human Tissue.

### **2 OTHER ETHICAL ISSUES IN ARCHIVAL RESEARCH**

Notwithstanding the above, much archival research relates to individuals who are not living and, therefore, does not involve 'personal data', thus defined. This does not, however, mean that there are no ethical issues involved in this kind of archival research.

Public archives are generally straightforward, in that the material in them can be considered to be in the public domain already. Even here, however, there may be issues about ownership, publication and confidentiality that require explicit agreements.

The following ethical issues should be considered when undertaking research in private archives (which should be taken to mean everything from modest files of individual or family documents to large, managed documentary repositories, and to include on-line material as well as hard copy).

First, there is a responsibility to treat ethically the owner(s) or controller(s) of the archive. Explicit agreements should ideally be entered into, and recorded, about:

- the uses to which archival material will be put;
- if relevant, the nature of any anonymising strategies that will be employed;
- the ownership and copyright of the material; and
- the rights of approval of publication (if any) of the owner(s) or controller(s).

There may, depending on circumstances, be other matters to consider in this respect. It is important, and in the best interest of all parties, that factors such as these be dealt with explicitly and recorded appropriately.

Second, the competence and legal right of ownership (or control) of those with whom access to archival material is negotiated should not merely be assumed. It is a researcher's responsibility to satisfy her/himself of the propriety and legality of her/his actions in this respect.

Finally, it should be remembered that the dead may have living relatives, whose sensitivities should at least be explicitly considered. This does not mean that those sensitivities should always be able to prevent research or publication. It does mean that researchers should be clear and transparent about their reasons for setting such sensitivities aside, should they deem this to be necessary or appropriate.