

Ethical Considerations of Library and Information Professionals

I. Ethical Principles

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Outline

- I. Ethical Principles**
- II. Issues Concerning Ethical Principles
- III. Stakeholder interests
- IV. The influence of obligations and loyalties
- V. Challenges

I. Ethical Principles

1. Respect the moral autonomy of self and others
2. Seek justice or fairness
3. Seek social harmony
4. Act in such a way that the amount of harm is minimized (or better:) that existing functional relationships are maintained or promoted
5. Be faithful to organizational, professional or public trust

Ethical Principles

There are many ethical principles that are invoked in ethical situations in professional work

They are principles that have emerged in the Western philosophical tradition (whether from deontological theories or consequentialist approaches) and that ethical decision makers have invoked when ethical problems arise, whether consciously or unconsciously.

The following set of principles does not pretend to be exhaustive, and these principles are not mutually exclusive, but they are a good starting point for moral deliberation

1. Respect the moral autonomy of the self and others

- This principle flows from and reinforces the belief in the moral autonomy and dignity of human beings.
- Perhaps it was most effectively articulated by Immanuel Kant in his categorical imperative: one must treat human beings as ends and never merely means (Kant (1959)).
- Most major social and political documents, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), support this view.

1. Respect the moral autonomy of the self and others

According to Michael Bayles, there are a set of values that should be accorded all human beings, foundational for all professions, based on the value and dignity of human beings, based primarily in this principle: freedom and self-determination, protection from injury, equality of opportunity, privacy and minimal well-being (Bayles, pp. 6-7). To this list should be added: recognition of a human being's labor, whether intellectual, social or economic.

[Bayles, Michael D. 1989. Professional Ethics. 2d ed. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co.]

Values derived from beliefs about fundamental rights of human beings

- (a) freedom and self-determination (moral autonomy)
- (b) protection from injury
- (c) equality of opportunity
- (d) privacy
- (e) minimal well-being (a-e, Bayles)
- (f) recognition for one's work

(a) Freedom and self-determination (moral autonomy)

- If people are accorded a right to self-determination, then they have a right to a diversity of materials and information through which they would actualize their self-determination.
- Digital libraries, databases and library collections should therefore contain as balanced, complete and diversified viewpoints as possible
- No viewpoint will be given undue weight, and there will be avoidance of conscious bias and censorship.

(a) Freedom and self-determination (moral autonomy)

- For librarians and information professionals, this would imply a belief in tolerance for a wide variety of viewpoints.
- Contrary to the face value of Foskett's **The Creed of a Librarian -- No Politics, No Morals, No Religion** (which he qualifies in his essay), the librarian's creed is a tolerance of all politics, all morals and all religions (except for that which would be directly unethical or illegal).

(b) Protection from injury

- Clients (and employees) require a reasonably safe and comfortable environment in which to do their work or pursue their interests.
- The Hippocratic adage, "Do No Harm," must also apply in libraries: e.g., materials for adults should not be accessible to children.

(c) Equality of opportunity

- Equality of opportunity imply equitable circulation and service policies, and balance in collection development for digital libraries and databases (again, no viewpoint should be given undue weight, and one should avoid conscious bias and censorship).
- Also third parties, such as contractors bidding on work for a public library or book jobbers, must be provided equality of opportunity.
- And hiring and promotions within a library or information center should follow equitable guidelines: each internal qualified person, whether internal or external to the library, should be equally considered for a potential hire or promotion.

(d) Privacy

- Transactions between the patron and the information system (digital library, library, online database, internet) should be treated as confidential
- Patrons' privacy in the access and use of the system should be respected.
- Paper or digital trails of client searches (e.g., through cookies and other devices) should not be used to compromise a patron's access and use of library resources, electronic or paper

(e) Minimal well-being

- In addition to self-determination and equality of opportunity, the right of human beings in the modern world to a minimal well-being includes the right to information.
- Or does it?
- To any and all information (e.g., copyrighted information)?
- What kind of information?

(e) Minimal well-being

Dowlin suggests the following:

- information as it pertains to candidates for public office or as it pertains to issues that will be decided by voters;
- information that is necessary for individuals to cope with their environment;
- information about their local, state or federal government;
- information that is relevant to their consumption of basic necessities, such as food, housing, transportation and medicine;
- information to improve health and safety; and information to increase their employment and careers.

[Dowlin, Kenneth E. "Access to Information: A Human Right?" in Simora, Filomena, comp., ed., **The Bowker Annual of Library and Book Trade Information**, 32 ed. New York: R. R. Bowker Co., 1987: 64-68.]

(f) Recognition for one's work

- Such a recognition would result in economic rewards (e.g., royalties on the sale and use of one's work, copyright, and public lending bills that reward authors after the first sale) or in moral rights (the author's name is associated with the work and the work cannot be modified).
- In the Western cultures, the recognition often results in economic rewards or reputation (moral rights); in Eastern cultures, great works are often recognized through copying (ethical values in cultures may be the same -- good work must be recognized -- but the mores are different).

Circumscription of Rights

- These various human rights may be circumscribed or compromised dependent upon the context.
- For example, in a corporate or business library, privacy, equality of opportunity or diversity in collection development may be compromised based on the needs of the organization:
 - an employee's privacy regarding online searches performed may be compromised because expensive services must be accountable to management;
 - persons with higher responsibility in an organization would be awarded service first; and
 - collection development would be biased to the purposes of the organization.

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2. Seek justice or fairness

This principle validates another aspect of the moral worth of human beings, that if one respects persons, then as a consequence one would seek to be just or fair to them.

The principle is a general principle, and there may be a variety of ways in which justice may be realized in a given context.

In fact, different stakeholders frequently have widely varying views of what is most fair for a particular ethical problem or issue: e.g., in the use of surplus funds – should one install an information literacy program for the library to get new users or to add more books for the library to satisfy current users?

3. Seek social harmony

This principle tries to uphold the good aspects and motivation of the utilitarianism: that any action should seek to maximize the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest number of people.

Such a principle supports factors of social utility, e.g., that library services should benefit the greatest number of patrons.

4. Act in such a way that the amount of harm is minimized

- In many situations, harm does occur, e.g., when funding declines, cuts have to be made in the organization that may cause lack of pay raises or layoffs.
- This principle is necessary because it argues for an inverse articulation of utilitarianism.
- Rather than to promote or maximize the happiness for everyone, one must "do no harm" or minimize the amount of unhappiness.

4. Act in such a way that the amount of harm is minimized: feminist principle?

- Upon further reflection of a feminist ethic, this principle seems to demand both a stronger and positive formulation, one that might better articulate feminist concerns in moral deliberation:

“Act in such a way that the existing, functional relationships are maintained and sustained and that the amount of harm occur in a minimal way or with the most minimum impact.”

4. Act in such a way that the amount of harm is minimized: feminist principle?

- Carol Gilligan has argued that women's moral development is different than men's, and that women add a unique, distinctive voice to ethical deliberation by promoting "ethic of care" as opposed to an "ethic of rights."
- In an ethic of care, established, non-dysfunctional relationships are cherished and the amount of harm to these structures should be minimized. So, for example, in the case of static budgets, an administrator might typically cut back on new book purchases rather than firing employees, for there may be lesser harm to the human community by following the first action.

[Gilligan, Carol. (1982). *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.]

Ethic of Rights versus Ethic of Care

- If her research and/or those of other feminists are grounded, then certain moral contrasts appear among men and women.
- Men view moral debates in terms of rights or fairness, women see them more in terms of potential suffering and the effects it has on concrete lives.
- Men's moral imperative is to make sure to treat everyone fairly and justly, but women's moral imperative centers on caring about themselves and others.
- Men view moral choices as applying rules fairly and impartially, but women are more likely to seek moral resolutions that preserve the emotional connectedness of all those involved.
- Men judge the correctness of a moral decision based on the correctness and impartiality of applying the rules, whereas women looked to what relationships were preserved and whether anyone was hurt.

Ethic of Rights versus Ethic of Care

Gilligan, using the same case study used by Kohlberg in his experiments, set up an experiment to see how two children, one male, Jake, and one female, Amy, would analyze a moral dilemma.

The following was the case that was presented to them:

Case Study of Jake and Amy

'In Europe, a woman was near death from a special kind of cancer. There was one drug that the doctors thought might save her. It was a form of radium that a druggist in the same town had recently discovered. The drug was expensive to make, but the druggist was charging ten times what the drug cost him to make. He paid \$200 for the radium and charged \$2,000 for a small dose of the drug. The sick woman's husband, Heinz, went to everyone he knew to borrow the money, but he could only get together about \$1,000 which is half of what it cost. He told the druggist that his wife was dying and asked him to sell it cheaper or let him pay later. But the druggist said: "No, I discovered the drug and I'm going to make money from it." So Heinz got desperate and broke into the man's store to steal the drug-for his wife. Should the husband have done that?'

[Kohlberg, 1963, 19].

Jake's and Amy's Responses

- Jake says that Heinz should steal the drug to save his sick wife.
- Amy argues that Heinz should take a loan, because if he were thrown in jail, he could not take care of his wife.
- For Amy, the moral problem is the valuation of property over life and of unnecessary exclusion, the failure of the druggist to respond to the situation of Heinz's wife.
- As a result of these differing approaches, Gilligan comes to the conclusion that moral development in boys and men is different than girls and women.

Contrasting Moral Development

- Prototypically, women tend to define themselves in relation to others and connection more than men. Young girls tend to bond with their mothers.
- Men prototypically come to define themselves in terms of separation from others, often as a counterpoint to their mothers.
- Because of this, male gender identity tends to be challenged by intimacy.
- In contrast, female gender identity tends to be threatened by individuation and separation.
- Prototypically, men have difficulty with relationships while women have difficulty with acquiring individual identity

Consequences to Gilligan's Research

1. Gilligan does not therefore assert that the feminist perspective should take higher priority, only that women's voice has been ignored in moral deliberation and should be taken into account;
2. However, this does raise the interesting question as to whether justice or care have equal priority in moral deliberation: traditionally, when there is a conflict among moral principles, justice trumps or supercedes all other principles. This has been a long-standing view in Western ethics, but this was an ethic that was male-dominated and male-oriented (e.g., the feminists point out that women's concerns, such as nurturance, have been absent from moral reflection in philosophic texts). We will look at the issue more later.
3. Finally, the need for a dialog of "rights" and "care" are not really a dialog of men versus women, but of each sex paying attention to what Jung calls its shadow figure, those aspects of the personality that may be suppressed based on gender, socialization and/or acculturation.

Ethics of Care

According to Wikipedia, the ethics of care “is a normative ethical theory that holds interpersonal relationships and care or benevolence as a virtue as central to moral action. It is one of a cluster of normative ethical theories that were developed by feminists in the second half of the twentieth century.^[1] While consequentialist and deontological ethical theories emphasize universal standards and impartiality, ethics of care emphasize the importance of response.”

“Ethics of care,” *Wikipedia*, retrieved November 17, 2017, from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethics_of_care.

Ethics of Care

- “The shift in moral perspective is manifested by a change in the moral question from ‘what is just?’ to ‘how to respond?’
- “Ethics of care criticize application of universal standards as ‘morally problematic, since it breeds moral blindness or indifference.”

“Ethics of care,” *Wikipedia*, retrieved November 17, 2017, from:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethics_of_care.

Ethics of Care

Basic beliefs:

- “Persons are understood to have varying degrees of dependence and interdependence on one another. This is in contrast to deontological and consequentialist theories that tend to view persons as having independent interests and interactions.
- Those particularly vulnerable to one's choices and their outcomes deserve extra consideration to be measured according to their vulnerability to one's choices.
- It is necessary to attend to contextual details of situations in order to safeguard and promote the actual specific interests of those involved.”

“Ethics of care,” *Wikipedia*, retrieved November 17, 2017, from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethics_of_care.

Feminist Ethics

The Ethics of Care marks an important developmental stage of feminist ethics, but feminist ethics is a larger domain. For a good overall treatment of feminist ethics, see the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, particularly the following sections:

3. Status-Oriented Feminist Approaches to Ethics

3.1 Liberal, Radical, Marxist/Socialist, Multicultural, Global, and Ecological Approaches

3.2 Existentialist, Psychoanalytic, Postmodern, and Third-Wave Approaches

Feminist Ethics, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, retrieved November 17, 2017, from:

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-ethics/>

Feminist Ethics

The larger role of feminist ethics see such things as male privilege and the oppression of women, their concerns and their labor.

We will discuss this some more in the next lecture.

Another good source is:

<http://www.encyclopedia.com/humanities/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/feminist-ethics> /

5. Be faithful to organizational, professional and public trust.

- As part of the professional commitments, professionals enjoy the trust of different aspects of their roles (e.g., public servant, employee or professional), and it is part of their role to sustain these trusts.
- Such faithfulness manifests itself in being and staying competent, avoiding conflicts of interest, safeguarding clients' and source privacy and confidentiality and intellectual property; and avoiding bias in selection policies.
- This principle is reflected in professional, organizational or public obligations and loyalties, not that these are always harmonious: e.g., professional authority (ALA, IAI) versus organizational loyalty (local library or employing information organization) on such issues as wage or censorship recommendations.

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