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AUTHOR	Spivey, Mark A.
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ABSTRACT

Cultural diversity raises dilemmas for the library profession, some of which are difficult to resolve on the basis of its absolutist ethical prescriptions. Psychological studies of class, cultural, and gender differences in moral reasoning support a professional ethics based upon care and cultural sensitivity, instead of universal and obligatory principles. Librarians can change their professional codes of conduct, in order to express more realistically their aspirations and community responsibilities, while accommodating social differences. (Contains 19 references.) (Author)

Library Ethics: An Aspirational and Culturally Sensitive Alternative to its Commandments

A Position Paper by:

Mark A. Spivey

Assistant Librarian in General Reference at:

Marriott Library of the University of Utah

Mark A. Spivey
General Reference Department
Marriott Library
University of Utah
Salt Lake City, UT 84112

Abstract

Cultural diversity raises dilemmas for the library profession, some of which are difficult to resolve on the basis of its absolutist ethical prescriptions. Psychological studies of class, cultural, and gender differences in moral reasoning support a professional ethics based upon care and cultural sensitivity, instead of universal and obligatory principles. Librarians can change their professional codes of conduct, in order to express more realistically their aspirations and community responsiblities, while accommodating social differences.

Library Ethics: An Aspirational and Culturally Sensitive Alternative to its Commandments

I. The Dilemma of Mr. Broadview and Ms. Caring-Tu

Mr. Broadview, a well-traveled librarian at a liberal arts college, explained his decision to add culturally varied materials to the library's collection with some biographical remarks. He talked about his background in the Peace Corps in Third World countries, and he referred to an upcoming meeting of Amnesty International.

Ms. Caring-Tu, an Asian-American librarian at the same college, decided that the library should use its remaining collection development funds to replace tattered classics of Western civilization and to add other great books of the tradition. In defense of her decision, she told the campus press about her nephew, who participated in the Tiananmen Square demonstrations. He had written recently and asked for a copy of John Stuart Mills's essay, "On Liberty." She found that it, and other important documents, were not represented in her library's collection.

The two mature and professional librarians defended their opposing choices in interviews, which were not examples of fine critical thinking. They used no logical arguments. The librarians appealed to no universal principles, and to no profession's code of ethics. Instead their narrative and biographical explanations were stories with the kind of wisdom some of us get from grandmothers and grandfathers.

II. Moral Reasoning with Cultural & Gender Sensitivity

The dilemmas of public service in libraries are aggravated by the library profession's obligatory and absolutist principles, such as those in the *Intellectual Freedom Manual* and in the "Statement on Professional Ethics 1981."[1] Library professionals need to examine their absolutist stance on censorship and confidentiality, and their naivete in demanding that professionals distinguish clearly between their own opinions and those of their clientele. If librarianship is typical of professions, it has some ideological and elitist components.[2] We are understandably suspicious that "neutrality is just following the crowd."[3]

The decision of reference librarians who supply suspicious patrons with information, which could jeopardize property or persons, can be questionable. Yet, as one popular study found, these librarians act deliberately upon the basis of the principle of freedom of access to information. We may ask, "Does the social responsibility of librarians ever take precedence over information dispensing?"[4] The ALA stand on intellectual freedom assumes that such freedom is exercised without the possibility of countervailing obligations. However, the decisions made at a busy reference desk and in collection development are full of implicit countervailing obligations.

Many of us act responsibly without identifying ethical principles. When we are called upon to defend our choices,

sometimes we explain them with biographical stories in conversations, such as those of Mr. Broadview and Ms. Caring-Tu. Several kinds of stories are put into dialogue: The stories of our lives, namely our experiences; the stories of our culture, including the ideologies in which we are immersed; and the stories, which have come from the roots of a faith, that is, our traditions and loyalties.[5]

Persons' everyday interactions can be taken as the basic units of moral analysis. A lived-ethic is decision-making, and it involves communication in order to discover another's position.[6] Dialogue replaces logical inference in the process of a moral discovery.[7]

Objectivity and universality are characteristic of other contexts of reasoning, such as science, philosophical ethics, and legal analysis. In particular, the world of the lawyer is constructed of rights and duties, privileges and powers. The experience of people is viewed under the lens of judicial opinions.[8]

We are not caught in an incomplete phase of moral development, as suggested by Kohlberg's stages of moral development. Nor are we assuming that our colleagues and clientele have "limited good will," and that we need to enforce the profession's code with sanctions.[9] Librarianship does not have to "make virtue pay" for members of the profession.

Psychologists have learned that the moral reasoning of many adults and young people have a conceptual and practical basis in relationships of care and responsibility, rather than in obligation.

Philosophical ethics, with its criteria of generalizability and impartiality, assumes that human beings and situations are similar in morally relevant aspects. Although most philosophers in the Anglo-American tradition march to the beat of Western logic, an increasing number of them fall out-of-step with commonsensical proclamations such as this one from a feminist philosopher:

> ... the approach that I praise here may be taken to involve a fallacy of relevance ... an argumentum ad hominem ... insofar as evaluating does occur or is appropriate, it is usually helped by knowing where the author is coming from.[10]

Philosophers and cognitive development psychologists, such as Lawrence Kohlberg, have used socio-economically advantaged men and their work as the basis for determining the structure of moral reasoning.[11] However, psychological research has found differences in moral reasoning, which are attributed to social class, ethnic, and gender variables.

Kohlberg's stages of moral development do not reflect closely the development of moral reasoning among ethnic groups. One sociologist found that concern over care and responsibility was more common among the Chicanos, blacks, and women in a research

sample in which standard dilemmas were presented. However, a white male was similar to the other research subjects, because he explained his decision in terms of "love."[12]

The "moral judgment interview" is a scoring device used to measure moral development along Kohlberg's scale. A Chicano male responded to a psychologist-interrogator:

> Question: "Would you steal for your pet?"
> Answer: "If the pet were the only friend I had."[13]

Trained scorers have been unable to evaluate some types of interview material, such as the narrative form of moral discourse. A subject may respond in the manner of "Let me tell you a story." With that transition to storytelling, the interviewee becomes the teacher, who is trying to stimulate the interviewer's reasoning.[14]

Women's moral thinking appears to be dominated by life-long considerations of care and connection, and a concern for detachment and abandonment. Their views of the self and others place weight upon interdependence and the need for attention and response.[15] On the other hand, values of justice, autonomy, reciprocity, and equal respect dominate the hierarchial and contractual perspective upon human relationships.[16]

A response consideration is one which the psychologists consider to involve care; a rights consideration involves justice. Both kinds of considerations are found among males and females in

real-life conflicts. However, women use considerations of response more frequently than rights, and men use considerations of rights more frequently than response.[17]

An adversarial and critical style of thinking is learned in school. However, studies of girls and women from various ethnic and economic backgrounds, in academic settings and in family agencies, revealed that their subjects exercised a "connected way of knowing." The exceptions among the research subjects were students in an elite liberal arts college, and recent graduates from such an institution. Yet even these students had a proclivity toward responses showing empathy, care, collaborative exploration, and a nonjudgmental stance.[18]

Debate continues in regard to whether differences in moral reasoning are attributable more to social class and ethnic variables than to gender differences. We are cautioned about a polaristic and gender-based interpretation of Carol Gilligan's remediation of Kohlberg's research.[19]

III. The Ethics of Organizational & Human Systems' Development

The relatively new profession of organizational and human systems' development (OD-HSD) is developing an elaborate code of ethics, which takes into account the moral dilemmas arising from cultural diversity, confidentiality, and conscientious objection. Cultural and subcultural differences are recognized in several

different ethical guidelines, including this one: "Practice in cultures different from our own only with consultation from people native to or knowledgeable about those specific cultures."[20]

The OD-HSD profession also has a more sophisticated stand on freedom of choice and confidentiality than the library profession. Its code of ethics identifies limits to freedom of choice and confidentiality.[21]

The flexibility, which the OD-HSD professional allows into a code of ethics, acknowledges finally that there are legitimate moral appeals beyond even the most flexible of ethical guidelines: "... violation of ethical standards (including morals) may be justified under certain conditions because such violation is required to minimize harm or to serve most fully the ideals represented by our values and ethics as a whole."[22]

With that disclaimer in one of the most flexible of ethical codes, the primacy of something else, such as conscience or care, is admitted. It is acknowledged finally that the good can be served in violation of any prescription. One analyst of professional behavior proposes a second tier of morality beyond that of rules. This level consists of ideals, which can inspire some of us to do more than the rules require.[23]

IV. An Aspirational and Culturally Sensitive Ethics for the Library Profession

In view of the limits acknowledged in the flexible, professional ethics of organizational & human systems' development, and in view of the irrelevant manner in which legalistic models reflect the moral reasoning of many professionals, it would make sense to look for an alternative to the absolutist and obligatory character of the library profession's ethics.

One ethicist believes that professional codes are more meaningful when they are interpreted as an ethics of character or virtue, rather than regulations of behavior -- "They tell the professional not only what to *do* but whom to *be*." A viable test that we can apply to a contemplated action is whether or not that course fits our life story, that is, does it contribute to our integrity?[24] We can understand how both Mr. Broadview and Ms. Caring-Tu can justify their opposing choices, for each has made a decision which fits well into their biographies.

The alternative proposed, here, is to abandon the absolutist and obligatory language of the library profession's ethical code. Yet we can express our aspirations and responsibilities. Since the focus in this paper has been upon the dilemma posed by cultural diversity for our professional ethics, the paper will close with a recommendation on how to address that dilemma in a professional statement of our ethical responsibility.

The following substitution is recommended for the first and second items in the "Library Bill of Rights":

Original items:

1. Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves. Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation.

2. Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues. Materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval.[25]

Substitution:

Librarians strive to meet the information needs of the primary community, which their mission calls upon them to serve. Material selection is undertaken with an acknowledgment of the filters of different cultures, philosophies, theories, and methodologies, and with the objective of presenting various points of view.

This revision accepts the assertion in the Introduction to the "Statement on Professional Ethics 1981" that librarians influence or control significantly the selection and dissemination of information, *while acknowledging certain implications of that responsibility.*

Librarians do not pretend to be completely impartial and unaffected beings. They have the distinctive limitations of *human* being. From a theological perspective, the statement accepts our

"fallen" and frail nature. We have constraints imposed by a particular cultural heritage, and yet we have things to contribute and to achieve within our heritage and across cultures.

The statement is aspirational. The library cannot be the ideal of an institution, which meets the needs of everyone perfectly. However, those working in the library have realistic objectives of service, which can be held up to public scrutiny (ie. librarians try to meet the information needs of a particular community).

The language avoids a judicial and obligatory structure. We are moral beings even when we are not obeying a contract. We are moral by virtue of our intentions, not simply by the degree to which our actual performance is consistent with a prescription. Mr. Broadview and Ms. Caring-Tu do not have to justify their different choices by virtue of citing compliance with a regulation. Their little stories, which are part of their biographies, constitute a full and moral explanation. Their integrity is unquestionable.

In summary, the library profession does not need to jettison codes of ethics, as Samuel Rothstein recommended. Instead, I recommend that we change the legalistic character of the Library Bill of Rights and the Statement on Professional Ethics. Although we need not draw his conclusion, we can ask, along with Rothstein, "Where does it Hurt?"[26] Then we share our stories, and from them we select certain aspirations and service interests, which identify us. These become our ethical statements.

References and Notes

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3. Myles Horton and Paulo Freire, *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 102.

4. Robert Hauptman, *Ethical Challenges in Librarianship* (Phoenix: Oryx Press, 1988), 72.

5. Eric Mount, Jr., *Professional Ethics in Context: Institutions, Images, and Empathy* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press. 1990), 52.

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10. Joyce Trebilcot, "Ethics of Method: Greasing the Machine and Telling Stories," in *Feminist Ethics*, edited by Claudine Card (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 1991), 51.

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