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Ethical Tensions of Library and Information Science Profession: Theoretical Perspective

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Abstract

The present paper focuses on the issue of professional ethics and related problems in the field of Library and Information Science. The study, to begin with, reveals the dichotomy of professional ethics from the general social ethics through visible boundaries and jurisdictions. Further, some most general and universally found issues and reasons of ethical tensions are discussed. The study argues that unawareness about professional ethics, lack of universal patterns of ethics as well as universal mechanism for the implementation and the dilemma of social ethics versus professional ethics are the issues, which result in ethical tensions. Besides these, in certain cases, the individual preference of a library professional to self-interest while ignoring the professional ethics also creates problems. The study suggests that a universal mechanism of prescribing and implementing the professional ethics in the field of Library and Information Science is sturdily required to reduce the amount as well as enormity of ethical tensions in the discipline.

Keywords: Social Ethics, Codes of Ethics, Ethical Tensions, Professionals, Users.

Introduction

Ethics are the foundational stone of all human relationships and associations. In sociological terms, ethics are the conditions of the contract of any social relationship or association, constructed through the cultural norms, which are to be complied with by all the parties involved, and if these conditions are breached, the social contract may jeopardise. The process of inculcating ethics in the socio-psychic life of a person starts from his birth. The functions of making the person realising ethics is performed by the institutions of family, clan, community and society in general. When these institutions teach the person to differentiate between the individual actions as good and bad, moral and immoral, sacred and profane, acceptable and prohibited, the process can be recognised as the training of an individual with regard to social ethics. These socio-cultural ethics are general and common to all in nature. These social ethics are not formally sanctioned but rather can be recognised as moral prescriptions and wishful expectations. Moreover, there is no formal agency which formally and constantly checks every individual with regard to the obedience of these ethics and in case of disobedience or neglect, there is no formal agency which can penalise the individual. Social status and reputation are the rewards of the compliance of these ethics. Besides these general-to-all and morally entitled ethics, individuals also experience the formally sanctioned, structurally arranged, sturdily expected professional ethics as well. Professional ethics are those formal obligations which a professional has to inevitably follow while exercising his professional duties. Professional ethics can further be interpreted as those legal-rational responsibilities of a service-provider towards the client, patron or customer which are legally assigned to the professional. These are not general in nature and specifically are to be delivered while at duty. Professional ethics are formally defined which further means that these are written and formally prescribed to be complied with as mandatory requirements of the profession.

Social ethics and professional ethics share the cordial as well as contradictory inter-relationships. The cordiality of their mutual relationship

is that professional ethics are largely based on the social ethics. It is not incorrect to consider that social ethics are root-ethics and professional ethics are secondary as well as dependent to social ethics. The relationship usually gets contradictory when any particular professional ethics are not in accordance with the social ethics or clearly overrule the social ethics. In these circumstances, any professional individual playing the role of service-provider is always in dilemma of preferring any particular ethic and ignoring the other.

The profession in the field of Library and Information Science has also formally and explicitly defined ethics explained as the responsibilities and rules of the job. The professionals in this field experience several problems with regard to these professional ethics at various parts and levels of their jobs, i.e. problem of knowing and adopting the professional ethics, problem of realising and actually practicing the professional ethics, dealing with the dilemma of social ethics versus professional ethics, and problem of opportunist-personal interest versus unbiased compliance of professional ethics.

Nature of Professional Ethics

Professional ethics are formal, defined and specified. These are the moral rules are apply as authoritative bindings. Ignoring, compromising or violating these professional ethics may result in risk, including the serious threats to the survival of the job. The main characteristics of the professional ethics are defined as underneath.

Professional Ethics are Motive-Oriented

Professional ethics are not merely subjective and moral obligations, but there are the objective oriented rules. Every professional ethics has an aim to be achieved through the compliance of that ethic. This is the primary feature which distinguishes the professional ethics from general social ethics. However, social ethics have also objectives to achieve in society but these objectives are not formally with regard to the fulfilment of a definite

objective of a particular individual. In case of professional ethics, these are formally drafted with the intention that the professional service-provider will comply with the professional ethics to fulfil the particular objective of satisfying any particular choice or demand of the clients.

Professional Ethics are Prescribed

The professional ethics demand from a professional to keep on exercising his duties rightfully, i.e. as per the prescribed norms. Here, the issues of right and wrong, ethical and unethical are seen through the prism of the formal prescription of the set of professional norms. If there arises any contradiction between the general moral ethics and professional ethics, the professional has to give priority to the formally prescribed professional ethics.

Professional Ethics are Bindings

The professional ethics are not merely the subjective or wishful moral obligations. But rather, these are the bindings. It further means that it is formally mandatory for the professional to comply with the professional ethics. These are the formal rules which are enforced with the legal authority. The professionals are consistently supervised by the superior authorities and in case of the disobedience of any of the professional ethics the professional concerned may be questioned or even penalized.

Professional Ethics are Objective and have Boundaries

Professional ethics are not individual priorities based on subjective perceptions. Rather, these are the objectively defined rules for the professionals to follow. Every professional ethic has a definite boundary. It means that a professional ethic has a limit of exercise. The professional, while exercising professional ethics cannot exercise these ethics less than or beyond the prescribed boundary of the professional ethic.

The Origin of the Concept of Professional Ethics

The term ethics is defined as a system of moral principles and codes that determine right and wrong conduct in society, nation or religious group. This system has two objectives among the member of a profession -

1. These provide a systematic and objective-oriented directions to the persons involved in managing the functions of a group or organisation.

2. The contribution of professional ethics towards public, especially the prescribed users is that these ethics ensure the impartial, timely and proportionate delivery of services to public.

Professional ethics are the principles of conduct that govern an individual or a group. Code of ethics is important agencies for social control. These help the professional in performing their duties with due regards. These develop the sense of obligation among the professionals. These are essential for upgrading the dignity and prestige of the profession. These are important chiefly for the well-being of all. Being in science itself the profession of Library and Information science is guided by a code of ethics directly associated with the field.

Ethical Tensions

During the last 25 years, with the advent of information technology and information revolution the ethical challenges faced by the library and information science professionals have increased dramatically. Ethical dilemmas occur when values are in conflict. Ethical dilemmas result in what is called ethical tension. Ethical tension means a conflicting situation which arises when ever one human beings actions materially affect another human being ability to achieve his/her own goals. It results of an individual's behaviour which may not be socially desirable.

The various ethical tensions that are being faced by library and information science professionals today are:

- Interlibrary loans with/without formal agreements
- Accuracy of information

- Balanced library collection
- Plagiarism
- Databases and vendor licensing agreements
- Advanced technologies, including the Web and mobile devices
- Intellectual freedom
- Privacy of users information
- Intellectual property
- Censorship of selection
- Rising cost of information
- Copyright infringements and fair use
- Sexual harassment
- Internet Filtering
- Access to information/Right to information
- Technology implications

In essence it can be said that to deal with the ethical dilemmas and tensions, library and information professionals must have a good working knowledge of information ethics. The literature on this area is very scarce so more needs to be written on professional ethics and information ethics. Courses on professional ethics must be incorporated as part of library and information science education. Following procedures have been identified that can be imparted among professionals to reduces cases of ethical tension.

- Ethics code Part of mission/values statement
- Ethics training course Online possibilities
- Strict control procedures
- Ombudsman/Ethics Committee
- Annual review of internal ethics
- Penalties for offenders
- Clear legal sanctions
- Good corporate reputation
- Strong ethical culture

- Clear corporate policy
- Open discussion of ethics

Major Reasons of Defiance or Neglect of Professional Ethics

The problem of 'Social Value Hyperism'

Generally the library employees are hyper-motivated by their social values. Especially in the orthodox or conventional societies, the social values are inculcated very deeply in the mindset of persons. Therefore, all social actions of the persons, including their professional activities, are dominated by the momentum of the social-value narrative. In certain cases, the persons, while exercising their professional assignments prefer social ethics over professional ethics. This situation becomes problematic for the professional organisation where such employees work. There are certain ethics with regard to the timings of libraries, jurisdiction and claims of users of demanding any particular services in libraries. Moreover, there is always a universal and objectively prescribed procedure which the users have to follow to avail any particular service in library. However, the empirical studies conducted with this regard confirm that those library employees, who are stimulated by the social-value hyperism generally neglect the professional ethics of library profession and try to deal with users as per their inculcation as training through the social ethics.

Problem of unawareness about Professional Ethics

Generally, it is expected that all library professional should possess the thorough information as well understanding of his or her professional ethics. Nevertheless, in exceptional or typical cases, especially with regard to the newly recruited and/or under-educated (who do not carry the professional education or training of the library profession), the library employees are found without any or much awareness about the professional ethics. In these cases, the library professional, who is unaware or seldom aware about the professional ethics, tries to tackle the situation occurred due to the question of professional ethics, with his or her own perception

and wisdom. It further creates the problem of subjectivity and 'individual-abstractive' approach towards professional ethics. It is totally contrary to the basic principle of objectivity and universalism of professional ethics.

Issue of the Neglect of Professional Ethics

It takes place as a routine and one of the most common issue relating to the professional ethics that the library professionals, despite being formally educated and thoroughly trained as well experienced, generally neglect the professional ethics while exercising their professional duties. There are a number of reasons behind this neglect of professional ethics. Firstly, the research in the field of professional ethics in the discipline of library and information still persists at the emerging stage and has not much developed yet. Secondly, the professionals belonging to the higher authority in hierarchy have not yet been able to create a professional work environment where the compliance of professional ethics is rewarded and the non-compliance of the same results into penalties.

The Problem of the Lack of a Universal Framework of Professional Ethics

Nevertheless, research has been taking place in the field of defining ethics in the discipline of library and information science; still there is lack of a universally acceptable framework of professional ethics in the field. The international institutions, which possess the path-showing role in the discipline of Library and Information Science, have started the process of defining and disseminating the sets and patterns of various codes of professional ethics from time to time. However, the problem of these codes is that these are not universally acceptable. Each pattern of professional ethics given by any nodal institution has limitations. Hence, the difficulty arises in settling the universal pattern of professional ethics in the discipline. Different institutions imparting education and training in the field of information science have no choice but to adopt a particular pattern of professional ethics and neglect others. However, this procedure further results into the complications in the compliance of professional ethics. For

example, when a particular library professional, who has formal education as well as professional training from institutions following a particular set or pattern of professional ethics, gets employment in the other institution where a pattern of professional ethics different from his qualification as well as training is followed.

The dilemma of Social Ethics versus Professional Ethics

The library professional is obviously a social being as well. More practically, the library professional is generally and largely a social being. His affiliations and orientations are more natural towards society. On the contrary, the affiliations and orientations of a library professional towards his profession are artificial, crafted and formal in nature. In this situation, it is natural and quite acceptable from a library professional, if he, at any particular point or in general, faces the dilemma of choosing either social or professional ethics. The problem further aggravates when a particular professional ethic may result compliance of social ethic may result positive for users. The library professionals, while tackling these complexities, are generally in confusion of choosing ethics

Problem of Self-Relief versus Selfless Service

In majority number of cases, the unethical practices are performed by the library professionals while preferring their self-interest and thus avoiding the professional service to be delivered to the user. These self-interests may include the minor tendencies such the reaching late at the work-place, departing earlier than the prescribed time, expressing laziness, lack of hospitality towards the clients, reluctant approach towards the queries and demands of users etc. The problem of giving priority to the self-interest besides the professional ethics may include some serious tendencies such as maltreatment with the colleagues and subordinates, maltreatment, including the sexual violence against the female colleagues and subordinates, corrupt practices for getting promotions, embezzlements in the library funds etc.

Conclusion

Ethics are the evitable features of all groups, communities and organisations. The professional organisations particularly have to set certain patterns of objectively defined codes, which can be complied by all members affiliated to the systematic functioning of the organisation. In the discipline Library and Information Science, there are certain ethic codes advised by the nodal institutions which are designed for the methodical and impartial functioning of libraries. However, there is lack of any universally acceptable codes of ethics which can be exactly acceptable to all countries, regions and employees. Still, there is large agreement on the patterns of ethics guided by the international nodal institutions on the recommendations of the renowned scholars. Despite the existence, adoption as well as implementation of professional ethics in the discipline of library and information science and training of the same in the educational institutions imparting education in the field of library and information science, the compliance of the same is as the expectations worldwide. There are several ethical tensions, which the library professionals go through. Largely, there is dearth of appropriate awareness as well as training of the professional ethics to the library professionals. The professional ethics, in numerous universities and other educational institutions are not taught as a compulsory subject of the courses. Even if the theoretical education has been imparted to the students, aspiring to be the library professionals, there is lack of in-field training for the students during their educational courses. Other major issue of ethical tensions is that there are cases where social values, taboos, stereotypes and perceptions overpower the professional ethics. There may occur other instances or situations in which the library professional prefers his or her self-interest over the professional ethics and hence, the professional ethics are deliberately ignored for the desire of personal gains. Above all, the dogma of professional ethics in Library and Information Science has been still growing gradually, which is very positive sign for the profession. Nevertheless, if the internationally renowned nodal agencies take the endeavour of prescribing the universally acceptable codes and patterns of professional ethics in the discipline, and the same are

adopted as well as actually realised by the concerned institutions worldwide, it will obviously minimise the problems of ethical tensions in the field.

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