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Ethics and the Reference Librarian

INTRODUCTION

The intent of this paper is to help reference librarians and others answer the question, "What is ethical reference practice?" or "How should the librarian act or behave in providing reference service?" The emphasis will be on the individual reference librarian's interactions with clients. Ethical concerns of the library as a whole or of librarians in general, such as fees for service and equitable availability of service, will be left to other papers at this institute. The paper will set out a group of norms or obligations that should guide the reference librarian's service to clients. Guidelines for following these norms will be put forward, along with strategies for applying them.

Issues to be discussed in the paper, examples of situations that raise ethical concerns, and ideas for dealing with them have been drawn from the literature on reference ethics, especially the issue of *The Reference Librarian* that was devoted to the topic (Katz & Fraley, 1982). Statements in the American Library Association (ALA) 1981 "Statement on Professional Ethics" (ALA, 1981, pp. 63-64) that are particularly relevant to reference librarians are discussed, as are the norms articulated in the section on "Ethics of Service" in the guidelines of the Reference and Adult Services Division (RASD) of ALA (ALA, RASD, 1979).

The conceptual framework for this paper relies heavily on Michael D. Bayles' (1981) work, *Professional Ethics*. Helpful insights on the complexities of public services practice and coping behaviors that public services professionals develop have come from Michael Lipsky's (1980) book, *Street-Level Bureaucracy*, and from Jane Robbins (1972). The emphasis in this paper on the importance of continual reflection by the reference librarian on his or her reference practice and how it can be made to conform to ethical norms has been influenced strongly by

Donald A. Schön's (1983) *The Reflective Practitioner*. All these works would be useful reading for reference librarians who wish to understand and improve their reference practice, including its ethical dimension.

THE REFERENCE LIBRARIAN'S OBLIGATIONS TO CLIENTS

The Professional-Client Relationship

The distinctiveness of the ethical concerns of reference librarians derives from the reference librarian's distinctive role in library and information services, i.e., direct service to individual clients. What ethical obligations does the reference librarian have to clients? The following section will explore this question by discussing the professional-client relationship in general and then several specific obligations that derive from that relationship.

As Bayles says, "The central issue in the professional-client relationship is the allocation of responsibility and authority for decision making—who makes what decisions" (p. 61). Obviously, models of such allocation can range from one in which the client has the most authority and responsibility, through a relationship of equality, to one in which the professional has the most authority and responsibility.

For example, many of the articles on the reference interview are based on what Bayles calls the "paternalism" model, wherein the professional is in the superior position and is making decisions on behalf of the client for his or her well-being (pp. 65-68). One reason that is given for conducting a reference interview is that the client does not really know what he or she needs. Also, some of the articles on ethics in reference service pose dilemmas based on the assumption that reference librarians need to protect inquirers from obtaining information that would be harmful to them, whether information on committing suicide or "shortcut" materials that would undermine the learning intended by a teacher (Is It . . . Do, 1983; Delaney, 1955).

This conception of the reference librarian-client relationship is a poor one on which to base ethical decisions because it fails to recognize the knowledge of their own situation that clients bring to the reference desk, it fails to recognize the competence that clients have to recognize when their information needs are met, and it denies clients the freedom to direct their own lives. Dorothy Broderick (1982) writes that value judgments derived from this paternalistic view of clients put librarians in the same category as censors.

They, too, are sure that if the potential for misuse of information exists, it will be misused. This is a very poor view of the human race, one that I do not share. I am convinced that most people, given

access to all points of view, will choose for themselves that which is least destructive personally and for society. I worry far more about decisions based on ignorance than those based on information, . . . (p. 22)

If the paternalistic model is not a satisfactory basis for settling ethical dilemmas, perhaps a better model is one wherein authority and responsibility are shared equally. Readers of reference literature will recognize this model as the one underlying arguments for client-centered or counseling approaches to reference service, as well as arguments for demystifying (or even deprofessionalizing) reference service. As Bayles points out, this concept of a professional-client relationship based on an agreement between equals, in which there are mutual obligations and rights (the "contract" model), "accords well with the liberal values of freedom and equality of opportunity" (p. 63).

However, for many reference transactions this model assumes an equality that does not fully pertain. Normally, the professional's knowledge and expertise in finding information exceed considerably that of the client. Also, to the extent that the information need of the client is an important one, the client has more at stake in the reference encounter than does the reference librarian, placing the client in a weaker position.

What is needed, then, is a conception of the reference librarian-client relationship that not only recognizes the professional's superior knowledge and expertise but also recognizes the importance of the client's competence, authority, and responsibility. Using a concept from the law, Bayles calls the appropriate model a "fiduciary relationship."

In a fiduciary relationship, both parties are responsible and their judgments are given consideration. Because one party is in a more advantageous position, he or she has special obligations to the other. The weaker party depends upon the stronger in ways in which the other does not and so must *trust* the stronger party. (p. 68)

In a typical situation, the reference librarian is consulted by clients with a wide range of levels of competence and knowledge regarding the subject areas of their questions, available information sources, and strategies for using them. This means that in some (perhaps most) reference encounters, the relationship with the client will be close to a contract between equals, while in others, the librarian will need to assume relatively more responsibility for making recommendations and even decisions on the client's behalf. This variation in the reference situation is one of the main reasons that ethical prescriptions designed to cover all cases are so unhelpful to the reference librarian. The fiduciary model accommodates this variety, allowing the client as much authority and responsibility as is warranted by his or her ability to make decisions. Normally, the reference librarian will have superior technical

knowledge and expertise regarding information sources and their use, and it is appropriate that the librarian make judgments in these matters. However, the librarian does not have expertise in the inquirer's values, in how the information should be used, or in the inquirer's goals in life. These are areas in which the client should be allowed the fullest possible freedom to make judgments and decisions.

The fiduciary ethical model for the reference librarian-client relationship emphasizes the obligation the librarian has to be worthy of the client's trust. A useful way to explore ethical norms for librarians in their relationships with clients is to ask what obligations the librarian must meet in order to be worthy of the client's trust that reference service will be provided "in a manner that promotes the client's interest—including the freedom to make decisions regarding his or her life" (Bayles, 1981, p. 70). The next few paragraphs will discuss the obligations of competence, diligence, confidentiality, independence of judgment, honesty, and candor.

Competence

Competence is the most crucial obligation. No matter how hard reference librarians work at other ethical mandates, if they are incompetent, they are unworthy of their clients' trust. Both the ALA and RASD ethics statements require competent ("skillful," "accurate") responses to inquiries. This obligation has two important aspects: That the reference librarian not attempt to provide information of a sort he or she is not competent to provide and that the reference librarian be as competent as possible in providing the information that he or she and the employing agency purport to be able to provide.

The obligation not to practice in areas where one is not competent is the basis for the proscription against the reference librarian's providing medical or legal advice. Because the lengthy training periods required for doctors and lawyers are well known, the librarian's lack of competence to provide advice in these areas is quite obvious. However, the literature contains other examples, such as the provision of the librarian's evaluative opinions on consumer products and recommending particular service providers (Wood & Renford, 1982; Schanck, 1979; Is It . . . Mechanic, 1983).

There are various guidelines that might be used to assist the reference librarian in acting ethically in this regard. One such guideline is to avoid providing information personally that cannot be documented or confirmed in information sources, except in limited circumstances where the reference librarian's special knowledge or training gives him or her competence to provide substantive information of the sort required. This was the tenor of most of the responses to the ALA Ethics

Committee's question regarding the ethics of a librarian's recommending an auto mechanic to a patron (*Is It . . . Mechanic*, 1983). Another guideline is to try always to make a distinction between assisting the inquirer in finding information sources or using them to locate desired information, and interpreting the meaning of the information found or advising on a course of action based on the information found. The librarian has special knowledge and expertise (i.e., competence) in the former but not in the latter. Of course, this is simpler to say than to do in many instances because the line between explaining how to use a tool and interpreting what an entry in a tool means is often a fine one. Peter C. Schanck (1979) has some useful advice on how to avoid crossing this line (pp. 63-64).

A key factor in this matter is the client's perception of the situation. It is important that the reference librarian be honest and candid with the patron regarding the complexity of the information sought and its interpretation, the limitations on the information that is available, and the kind of assistance the reference librarian is providing. Schanck recommends avoiding giving the patron the impression that "This is the law" and advises attempting to get the patron to understand the complexity of the law (p. 63). Other authors offer similar advice for health-related information (Wood & Renford, pp. 78-79). In areas such as law and health, it is important that reference clients understand that, while the library attempts to obtain the most complete and current information feasible, there may well be more recent and more complete information and that consulting a competent health or legal professional may be advisable. It is also important that the reference librarian try to have the client understand the nature of the assistance that is being provided, i.e., assistance in finding and using information rather than in interpreting the information or deciding on a course of action based on it.

The other aspect of the obligation of competence, i.e., that the librarian be as competent as possible in assisting clients in obtaining and using the information they need, is an especially troublesome area. Every reference librarian is all too aware that the more one knows about information sources, whether in print or electronic formats, the more one has yet to learn. The same can be said of the librarian's knowledge and skill in the varying information needs of his or her clients and the complexities of interacting with them effectively.

Two obvious guidelines here are that the reference librarian continue learning and that colleagues with specialized knowledge be involved on questions that go beyond his or her competence. In practice, these guidelines can raise more dilemmas than they settle. As Samuel Rothstein (1982) points out, most reference librarians receive inadequate institu-

tional support for pursuing continuing education (p. 4). The schedules of reference librarians often preclude getting assistance from a colleague except on a considerably delayed basis. However, at the least, the obligation of competence requires that reference librarians, individually and in staffing groups, reflect on the limits of their competence, pursue all feasible opportunities for maintaining and improving knowledge and skills, and attempt to make the best match possible between the needs of individual clients and the competencies of the staff members who assist them.

Honesty and candor with the client regarding the reference librarian's competence are important here as well. Potential disadvantage or even harm to the client due to assistance from a reference librarian who is not fully knowledgeable or skilled in the area of the client's question can be considerably lessened if the reference librarian explains the limitations on the assistance that he or she is able to provide, outlines alternatives (e.g., consulting a specialist colleague, referral to another source), and allows the client freedom of decision in the matter.

Diligence

Another obligation following from the requirement that the reference librarian be worthy of the client's trust is that the professional exercise sufficient care and effort in responding to inquiries. A very high level of competence will be for naught if the reference librarian does not apply it to reference questions with diligence. Rothstein notes that "It has been pointed out that reference librarians are frequently less than assiduous in the information service they render. . . ." citing failure to conduct adequate reference interviews and the findings of various reference evaluation studies as evidence (pp. 4-5).

Why should such seemingly unethical behavior by reference librarians be so prevalent? A great many such lapses from diligence result from habits and patterns of behavior borne of what Rothstein calls the "extraordinarily difficult circumstances" under which reference questions are answered.

The reference librarians must serve anonymous clients whose needs and capabilities they cannot really know; they must be prepared to give instant answers to questions covering almost every conceivable subject; they must operate in full public view and under harassing requirements of speed. (p. 5)

Reference librarians develop coping mechanisms to deal with such circumstances, including truncated reference interviews, hurried use of information sources, and rationing time among users—sometimes treating different types of users or questions differentially.

Such coping behavior can represent a necessary balancing of obli-

gations to various clients and can result in fuller and more equitable service to more people than would otherwise be the case. Unfortunately, without reflection and monitoring, this behavior can feed on itself and develop into habits of poor reference practice and discrimination among clients or questions on indefensible grounds.

How does the reference librarian work through the ethical dilemmas involved in the obligation to provide diligent service under difficult circumstances? Surely, an important step is to identify the characteristics and behaviors associated with effective reference service, to make such service the standard against which one compares one's practice, and to attempt to make such behaviors habitual. Seeking support and evaluation from reference colleagues can be helpful in this regard. When conflicting demands and time pressures seem to mandate providing less than ideal service, it can be helpful to concentrate on the client at hand (i.e., to honor to the fullest extent possible one's obligation of diligence to that client) and to try not to overcompromise, so as to provide poor service to many clients rather than at least adequate service to a reasonable number. Finally, if the situation seems to demand discrimination among types of patrons or questions in the allocation of time and effort (rather than using the principle of first come-first served), the reference librarian should make judgments based on principles of equality of access (e.g., offering more help to the naïve or confused user than to the self-assured) or on the distinctive role and primary clientele of the library rather than on personal biases or preferences.

Confidentiality

Privacy is a central value in American society. Its crucial relationship to the free pursuit and use of information is recognized in both the ALA and RASD statements. Both statements require that reference librarians not reveal information about their clients, either about the information they seek or use, or information about the client gained from the reference interaction. Most dilemmas in this area of ethics involve the possibility of inadvertently revealing information that should be confidential and deciding when revealing confidential information might be permissible because it is in the client's best interest or in the best interest of society at large.

The potential for violating the client's privacy is the reason for the injunction that reference librarians not discuss with others their interactions with patrons, whether as interesting staff room conversation or with persons outside the library. Potential for betraying confidential information also arises from library recordkeeping systems, including those for interlibrary loan or online search services. M. Kathleen Cook and Mary K. Isbell (1986) have useful suggestions in this regard,

including limiting access to such records, limiting the length of time the records are kept, limiting client identification on the records, and revealing information only with client approval.

The question of when information about a client and his or her use of library resources might ethically be revealed is a complex one. Surely, at times, service to the client would be improved if the question were discussed with a colleague. A useful guideline here is to seek the client's permission for such discussion. When this is not feasible, perhaps the best guide is the reference librarian's good faith assessment of what the client would approve, having assessed the necessity for sharing confidential information and the colleague's commitment to confidentiality.

In some circumstances the reference librarian becomes aware that two clients could benefit if each knew that the other was working on a particular problem. The work of each client or of the company that operates the information service could possibly be enhanced if one client knew of the other's work. Here again, obtaining the client's permission to discuss his or her information use with others is an obvious guideline.

Sometimes, the needs of other members of society or of society at large seem to suggest revealing information about a client's use of information. Mark Stover (1987) uses examples of clients who use the information for known or suspected criminal activity and of helping a teacher determine whether a student library user has committed plagiarism. A more general discussion of obligations to such third parties is the subject of another section of this paper. It is sufficient here to articulate the guideline of revealing confidential information only after very careful consideration, only when there is a high degree of certainty that serious negative consequences will result from maintaining confidence, or when required by competent legal authority.

Independence of Judgment

Both the ALA and RASD ethics statements specify that the service provided by the librarian should not be influenced by personal philosophies and attitudes and should not be compromised by conflicting financial interests of the librarian. If the reference librarian does not apply his or her special knowledge and skills to make judgments that will promote the client's best interests, the librarian is not worthy of the client's trust.

Judith Farley (1982) mentions the potential for unethical reference behavior that arises with requests for information on topics on which the reference librarian has a strongly held philosophical position, and Broderick (1982) discusses various biases of reference librarians that can influence reference practice. Obviously, a reference librarian who

allows such personal philosophies and attitudes to influence the amount and quality of reference that is provided is unworthy of the client's trust and is acting unethically.

This is not to say that the reference librarian should be without personal beliefs and attitudes. In fact, the more fully aware the librarian is of his or her beliefs and attitudes, the more likely he or she is to be able to keep them from detrimentally influencing professional practice. The best approach is continual awareness and reflection so as to keep one's judgments from being clouded or colored by personal philosophies and biases.

Broderick points out that a written reference service policy can also help in reducing the influence of personal biases on reference practice (p. 19). If a library or its reference staff believes that restrictions are necessary in responding to certain types of questions or certain client groups in order to allocate resources and to serve the primary clientele appropriately, such policies should be arrived at carefully and should be made known to the public so that users and potential users can make choices and decisions with full information. Point 6.4 of the RASD statement makes this point along with the point that such rules and practices should be carried out impartially.

Financial conflicts of interest are another source of loss of independence of judgment. John C. Swan (1982) points out that one's judgments and information provision regarding information sources can be influenced by special relationships that one has with a particular tool or publisher, e.g., as a salesperson, consultant, or reviewer. Steps that Swan recommends to minimize such conflicts include making clear to the client one's special relation with reference resources, refraining absolutely from allowing outside work to creep into regular reference work, and "careful, honest scrutiny of oneself . . ." in each reference situation (p. 109-110).

The growth of fee-based information services has been accompanied by an increased potential for conflicts of interest for the reference librarian. The freelance, for-fee reference librarian is involved in a conflict between obligations to the client and the need to make a living that cannot be entirely removed. Bayles writes that such conflicts are inherent in private practice professions. He points out that they can be minimized through firm agreements with clients as to what will be done and its total cost. Where the cost cannot reasonably be estimated in advance, the professional should try to develop alternative fee systems (e.g., standard fees for certain categories of service) that will reduce the potential for financial issues interfering with independent professional judgments regarding what will best serve the client's interests (p. 78).

When the reference librarian is employed both at a "free" reference desk and by a fee-based information service (whether within the same library or outside), obvious potential conflicts of interest arise. Here again, it is easier to write into ethics codes an injunction not to let such considerations cloud judgments than it is to tread the line between referrals to fee-based services that are truly in the client's best interest and decisions to refer that are based on the librarian's (perhaps unconscious) desire to keep the fee-based service's volume at a viable level. Sometimes, honest reflection will cause the reference librarian to conclude that avoiding unethical conflict of interest would be so difficult as to preclude holding both positions. In other situations, honesty and candor with clients along with continuous monitoring of one's judgments and behavior will result in ethical practice. Swan's advice, cited above, of honest scrutiny of oneself in each situation holds here as well.

Honesty and Candor

The importance of dealing with the reference client honestly and candidly has been mentioned a number of times above, so that only a summary treatment is needed here. As Bayles says, "By definition, a dishonest professional is not worthy of a client's trust" (p. 71). The ethical obligation not to lie to a client is clear and is probably seldom violated by reference librarians.

The obligation for candor is not so straightforward, though it is at the heart of the fiduciary relationship with one's clients. In this relationship, the reference librarian respects the judgment of the client and involves the client in decisions regarding the search for information. If the reference librarian withholds or manipulates information that would help the client participate fully in such decisions, the librarian is acting on his or her own judgments of what is good for the client, and the relationship is paternalistic.

Because candor involves the amount and kind of information to be shared with the client rather than simply its truth or falsity, meeting this obligation involves the reference librarian's continually making judgments regarding how much and what kinds of information regarding the situation and options that are open to the client should be shared with him or her. Examples of areas where the issue of candor arises that have been used elsewhere in this paper include sharing knowledge regarding the reference librarian's competence and the reference collection's completeness regarding a particular question, informing the client regarding options available such as taking the question to another source of information, and disclosing the reference librarian's financial interests that might cause conflicts of interest. Certainly, candor re-

garding fees for service and options available to the client in attempting to gain the best value for fees paid is very important.

Are there situations where full candor is not desirable or necessary? The most obvious one would be when candor with one client would violate confidentiality with another. Another is when honest reflection convinces the reference librarian that sharing of information would not affect the client's decisions and would only result in unnecessarily taking the time of the client and the librarian. The best overall guideline is for the reference librarian to ask in each situation, "How can I best help my client make judgments and decisions regarding the pursuit and use of information that will be in his or her best interest?"

OBLIGATIONS TO THIRD PARTIES

The ethical dilemmas that receive the most attention in the literature of reference ethics concern conflicts between the reference librarian's obligations to a client and obligations to others, including society at large. Perhaps the best-known example is Robert Hauptman's (1976) experiment, wherein he asked reference librarians for information on constructing a small bomb that would blow up a home (pp. 626-627). Other examples include requests for information from city directories that could result in invasion of the privacy of those listed, requests for information that might result in or facilitate illegal activities, and requests that the reference librarian commit dishonest or illegal acts in the pursuit of information (Prokop & McClure, 1982; O'Brien, 1982).

Such conflicts raise some of the most difficult problems of professional ethics. Because librarianship has a special role and function in society and because the professional-client relationship is crucial to that function, the reference librarian must give special attention to clients that is not given to others. Thus, such obligations as diligence in serving the client's needs, confidentiality, and use of judgment independent of influence by social or political considerations are of primary importance.

On the other hand, the special function of librarianship and its authority to devise and follow special ethical obligations are for the good of society as a whole. That is, reference librarians, by carrying out their obligations to their clients, enhance the functioning of a democratic society without which the client would not be able to use the information provided. It does not make sense, then, that professional ethics would require actions that would be contrary to the values of a democratic society or that would undermine its operation or viability. When conflicts arise between the reference librarian's obligations to clients and to others, the issue is whether or not the special obligations

to the client should be limited by general obligations to others and to the values of a democratic society.

Hauptman (1976) frames the issue incorrectly when he describes the dilemma as a conflict between professional ethics and personal ethics and accuses reference librarians who provided "bomb" information of failure to make personal ethical judgments and of simplistically or unthinkingly following professional ethics. Surely, purely personal ethical norms, such as those based on religious or political beliefs that are not part of the laws and values of a democratic society, cannot restrict professional obligations in the librarian's practice. Conflicts between obligations to the reference client and personal religious beliefs (e.g., aversion to certain religious practices or birth control methods) must be resolved in favor of the obligation to assist the client diligently and with independence of judgment. On the other hand, in order to assure ethical behavior, the reference librarian must make a personal commitment to the norms of professional ethics and to the values of a democratic society to which professional norms must bear a functional relationship. Thus, the conflict is not between professional ethics and personal ethics but is between special obligations to clients and general obligations to third parties within society as a whole. Acting ethically in particular instances is a matter of weighing responsibilities so as to produce a balance that most fully enhances the values of a democratic society.

Bayles (1981) further points out that the problem of conflicts between obligations to clients and to third parties is especially acute for employee professionals (as opposed to those in private practice) because such professionals can be caught between the demands of the employer and what they consider best for the client (p. 23). Reference librarians sometimes experience such conflicts between policies and practices of the library and what would best serve the needs of an individual client. An additional concern is the fact that the library in which the reference librarian works has been set up and is funded to serve the functions of a parent institution or organization (e.g., an educational institution or a corporation), adding other possible areas of conflict between obligations to the client and to others. Robert M. Pierson (1967), for example, says that reference librarians in libraries committed to the support of education should take this into account when students ask for help in shortcutting school assignments.

What general obligations to others might limit the reference librarian's obligations to the client? Because governance by law and truthfulness (if not full candor) are basic values in a democratic society, the professional should not act illegally or dishonestly even if the client's access to information would seem to be enhanced thereby. Compliance with copyright laws and honoring agreements with vendors of infor-

mation sources are examples of areas where the potential for acting illegally on behalf of clients is said to be especially high. The same general obligation or principle would make it unethical to assist a patron to commit an illegal act or one that is immoral according to the values of society.

The obligation of honesty and for honoring agreements into which one has entered might also underlie the reference librarian's obligations to the employing library and to the larger institution that the library serves. To the extent that the reference librarian has made an explicit or implied agreement to carry out the policies of the library, or to the extent that the library's existence and support is understood to derive from its agreement to serve the objectives of a parent institution (e.g., the educational goals of an educational institution), obligations to the policies and functions of the library and its parent institution might restrict the librarian's obligations to assist the client in obtaining the information he or she requests.

Another fundamental value of a democratic society is the protection of people from injury by others. This means that the reference librarian's obligation to clients to act with diligence and confidentiality in assisting them to find and use the information they request is limited by the obligation that such actions not result in injury to third persons. Hauptman (1988) argues that this is the limitation that the reference librarians in his experiment should have applied (pp. 42-46).

Stating these areas of possible restrictions on the reference librarian's obligations to the client provides little help in the question-by-question attempt to balance special obligations to the client and general obligations to others. What guidelines might the reference librarian follow in attempting to weigh and balance these obligations and to act ethically? It is useful to reflect on the fiduciary model of the professional-client relationship. This model considers clients to be competent, responsible persons. As Swan puts it, we "put our faith in the connection between knowledge and responsible action" (Wiener, 1987, p. 162). An important guideline, then, is to consider the probability (or the reference librarian's certainty) that violation of the values of society or injury to third parties will actually occur. Swan points out that "Reading about bomb building is not the same as bombing; reading about suicide is not the same as committing it . . . (p. 162). Surely, merely the potential that the information might be used for illegal purposes or to injure someone, or even the vague suspicion that this will be the case, is not sufficient reason to limit one's obligation to one's client to assist in finding requested information. However, faced with reasonably clear and certain knowledge that the client intends to use the requested information for illegal

or injurious purposes, the reference librarian could ethically refuse to provide requested assistance.

Another guideline is to consider the seriousness of the potential harm to third parties. Reference librarians argue, for example, that the invasion of privacy and harassment incurred by persons whose names and addresses are obtained from directories in the library are not serious enough to balance limiting their obligation to provide access to information in published sources. Faced with the use of information for clearly illegal purposes or for violence toward other persons, the same librarians would strike a different balance.

Another useful way to look at this balance is to consider the result that might come from limiting the librarian's obligations to the client. For example, students who cannot rely on the confidentiality of their interactions with reference librarians (as would be the case should the librarian report to teachers suspected plagiarism or "shortcuts" on assignments) are likely to avoid using the reference librarian's service and perhaps libraries generally. The detrimental effects that this could have on the students' well-being would more than offset obligations to society or to the educational objectives of the library and the school it serves.

As an overall aid to finding the proper balance among obligations, Bayles proposes that the professional ask what balance a reasonable person with liberal values would conclude best promotes the values of a democratic society. In this process one asks whether one would rather live in a society where the balance is struck in favor of one obligation or another (pp. 99-100). Surely, such a person would conclude that he or she would not want to live in a society where access to information and privacy in its use are restricted because the information *might* be put to a use that is harmful to the user or to others. On the other hand, a reasonable person would recognize that governance by law is fundamental to a democratic society and would not want to live in a society where reference librarians were obligated to use any means, legal or not, to serve their clients' needs, or where professional norms required librarians knowingly to assist clients in the performance of acts of violence toward others.

Bayles and Hauptman, following Kant's categorical imperative, suggest that ethical decisions be tested as to whether or not the actions that would follow from them can be universalized, i.e., whether the same action would be taken in a later similar case (Bayles, 1981, p. 100; Hauptman, 1988, p. 2). Such consideration can keep the reference librarian's judgments from being unduly influenced by unique aspects of the present situation and can remind the librarian to seek basic principles to guide individual decisions and actions.

Finally, the reference librarian should always keep in mind Hauptman's advice to follow Kant's dictum that we "always treat human beings as ends and never merely as means. In other words, always consider the dignity and human worth of each individual" (Hauptman, 1988, p. 2). Such consideration will help give the librarian's special obligations to the client proper weight in balancing apparently conflicting ethical demands. Even if the librarian decides that special obligations to the client must be limited by obligations to others or to society, the client should be treated with the honesty, courtesy, and respect that will affirm his or her worth as a human individual.

CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to provide a philosophical or conceptual framework for considering the ethical concerns of the reference librarian. It has argued that central to the professional-client relationship is the trust in the reference librarian that the client must have. In order to be worthy of this trust, the reference librarian is obligated to act with competence, diligence, confidentiality, independence of judgment, honesty, and candor.

The paper has also tried to show that the obligations of the reference librarian to the client bear a functional relationship to the values of a democratic society and to obligations to third parties that derive from these values. Some of the most complex ethical dilemmas of reference librarians arise from the need to balance special obligations to clients and ordinary obligations to others and to society as a whole.

The paper has provided guidelines and principles that can be used to address ethical issues and dilemmas that arise in reference work, along with strategies for applying the guidelines in particular situations. Central to applying these strategies is the realization that reference service is a very complex undertaking and that it is often practiced under very difficult circumstances of limited resources and almost unlimited expectations. The development of coping behaviors to make the reference situation more manageable and less stressful is a very human response; but without monitoring, these behaviors can become habits of response to clients and their information needs that do not serve librarians' ethical obligations to their clients or to the values of society such as governance by law, freedom, equality of opportunity, prevention of harm, welfare, and privacy.

In order to act ethically in reference practice, the reference librarian must continually be in a reflective dialogue with the situation as it unfolds. As each encounter with a client develops and the librarian

becomes familiar with the client's information need, the reference librarian must ask, "How should I act so as to be worthy of the trust of this client and to support and enhance the values of our democratic society?" The answer will not always be obvious or easy to implement. But if the question is not asked and the answer is not confronted, the chances of the reference librarian's acting ethically will be smaller than they should be.

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