

Kevin Ball and Charles Oppenheim:

Attitudes of UK Librarians and Librarianship Students to Ethical Issues

Abstract:

There have been a number of studies examining the attitudes of librarians to ethical dilemmas, but few examining them in comparison with Library and Information Science students as we did in our study. According to that UK librarians and students in general hold surprisingly similar ethical attitudes. We expected the students to be more liberal, more willing to uphold idealistic principles, and given their student status, with attitudes balanced in favour of other students' and patrons' rights in terms of fees, and accessibility, and copyright law. On the contrary, in many areas such as Internet filtering, looking at online erotic images, and removing books at the request of patrons, we found practitioners more liberal than the students. A reason for that might be that the students are keen to emulate what they perceive to be a conservative and mature outlook, i.e., a stance of responsibility, as a pressing concern for ILS students is likely to be the establishment of a career. Though there is a fair level of teaching ethical issues it seems to lead into a mediocre level of student awareness of basic issues or of the CILIP Code which is meant as a 'framework' to help information professionals 'manage the responsibilities and sensitivities which figure prominently in their work' (CILIP 2003).

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Introduction

Library ethics has become a familiar topic in the UK in recent years. The chief professional association of UK library and information professionals is the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP). With the capacity to grant Chartership status on some of its members, CILIP's stated mission is to promote the profession's profile and back up the information community's needs with training, services and information (CILIP 2003). This includes a code of ethics, which was recently adopted. Prior to this, one of the bodies that now make up CILIP, the Library Association had a Code of Professional Conduct, not a code of ethics. The other precursor, the Institute of Information Scientists, produced Guidelines for Professional Ethics for Information Professionals (Inform, 1998, pp 4-5). CILIP see its new code primarily as a supporting tool, a 'framework' to help information professionals 'manage the responsibilities and sensitivities which figure prominently in their work' (CILIP 2003).

A library profession's code typically includes the need to protect the public (Welsh, 1991, p.76), the need to be responsible to the profession and to one's employer (Vosper, 1991, p.74), the need to support and guide professionals, and the need to express its service orientation. The CILIP code is enforceable: CILIP warn that where there appears to have been a 'significant breach' of the code, then this 'may be a matter' for the CILIP Disciplinary Committee, which has the capacity to admonish, to suspend, or to expel its members from CILIP (CILIP 2003). Those who are expelled from CILIP can still continue work as an information professional. Of the three types of code identified by Frankel (1989, pp. 109-115), CILIP's is aspirational as it presents ideals to follow. With the promise of the Code's associated practical examples, it will also be what Frankel terms 'educational' (1989, pp. 109-115).

As recommended by Oppenheim and Pollecutt (1998, 198), CILIP set up an Ethics Panel in 2002, composed of experienced information specialists, who together with CILIP's professional staff, are accessible to CILIP members who require additional guidance. CILIP plan to supplement the code with practical examples to demonstrate to practitioners how the code may be applied.

Is a code of ethics necessary? Oppenheim (1980) favours a code, not so that transgressors can be subject to expulsion from membership, and not as a

means to gain the profession a higher standing, but as a tool for professional bodies to offer advice to its members, and to demonstrate that these bodies are committed to a particular stance when a member is in dispute with an employer.

Lonsdale and Oppenheim (1995, pp.69-78) examined how the topic was taught at UK library schools. They found that no uniform approach existed for teaching ethics: its presence varies on courses, from specific classes to 'pervasive' instruction. They argued for a minimum of two hours of class discussion to make theories relevant to students. These authors also recommended that professional associations insist during course validation procedures that ethical matters are 'explicitly covered'. Despite these comments from a decade ago, and the clear recommendations by Hannabuss (1996) on how to teach the topic, UK LIS departments still generally fail to teach the topic fully (Gordon-Till 2002).

White (1991) saw the importance of awakening analytical skills in students when dealing with ethical case studies, to guide them away from hasty polarized decisions of what is correct or incorrect, so to see the complexity of an issue. He also stresses the golden rule of not indoctrinating students, or of instilling a teacher's own value system upon them. Both White (1991) and Hauptman (2002) lament that most educators continue to give ethics low priority.

Gordon-Till (2002) urges professional associations to take a more prominent role as educators, as previously recommended by Oppenheim and Pollecutt (1998, p.197). Gordon-Till also stressed the need for Continuing Professional Development (CPD) in ethics.

Previous studies

There have been a number of studies examining the attitudes of librarians to ethical dilemmas, but few examining Library and Information Science students. Perhaps the most frequently cited ethics study involved an investigation of professional-client relationships, of the nature of whether reference librarians' responsibility to supply information to patrons outweighs their responsibility to society (Hauptman, 1976, pp.626-627). Replicating this legendary study, Dowd (1989) examined the professional neutrality of reference librarians by testing their conduct when encountering a query for information that may lead to drug abuse. He investigated whether reference librarians would help a patron to

locate material that would inform how to go about freebasing cocaine, that is purifying it to become smokable crack. The librarians' responses were varied, though there were no categorical refusals.

Rosenqvist et al. (1996) investigated how Nordic librarians would react when faced with practical ethical problems posed in a questionnaire. The findings suggest that Nordic librarians share a common understanding of what constituted ethical values. Overall, Nordic librarians hold a position of neutrality, coupled with 'caring objectivity'.

Juznic et al. (2001) carried out an investigation in Slovenian public libraries; researchers, posing as patrons, requested material on suicide, necrophilia, and photographs of corpses. The librarians' verbal and non-verbal responses, and the quality and appropriateness of the received material were evaluated. The librarians were not shocked by the questions posed, and did not appear to recognise that they were encountering an ethical dilemma.

Our research

UK ILS students were compared with practitioners to see whether entrants to the profession are being ethically prepared, and to see whether attitudes change with experience. In common with previous studies (Prior et al. 2001, Schleihagen 2002), respondents were asked to indicate the degree to which they agreed or disagreed to a series of statements. The available responses were: strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree. A more direct approach, such as posing as a patron (Hauptman 1976) and observing how the librarians react in a work setting would have been a reasonable way to obtain the data on questions of a reference-desk inquiry nature; however, most ILS students currently do not work in libraries.

The ethical statements were worded from different angles to avoid any bias. Half proposed what may be considered an ethical course of action, whilst the others an unethical course. In addition to the statements, two yes/no questions investigated the subjects' awareness of ethical codes and their completion of any programme of library ethics education. Finally a short series of questions were devoted to gathering demographic data, including the respondents' sex and age, along with some professional background details: membership of CILIP; the year they obtained a professional qualification.

The questionnaires were devised and sent out in May and June 2003. One questionnaire was designed for LIS students, the other for practising librarians. A copy of both is available in the appendix. They were identical in content, with the exception of the some of the demographic and background questions. Using the list of accredited UK Library and Information Science courses on CILIP's homepage (CILIP, 2003), a list was compiled of suitable universities that offered courses with librarianship content. Departmental websites were used to gather email addresses of suitable contacts. These contacts were asked if they would be willing to forward a questionnaire to their current students. The questionnaire was distributed to ten departments: Aberystwyth, Robert Gordon, Bristol, Strathclyde, University College London, Northumbria, Sheffield, City, Leeds Metropolitan, and Loughborough.

In addition, questionnaires were sent to two UK online discussion groups for library professionals. The first, LIS-CILIP, with 615 subscribers (www.jiscmail.ac.uk/lists/) is a forum for online debate used by some CILIP members for issues of professional concern. The second, LIS-LINK, with 3,263 subscribers is a forum for debate on general library issues.

As a follow-up, selections of the results were sent in August 2003 to lecturers in UK universities. The questions were sent via email in a word attachment. Their names were chosen and email addresses were noted from departmental websites, where it was indicated that information ethics was an area of their interest. These results were sent to individuals in the following universities: Northumbria, Aberystwyth, Sheffield, Strathclyde, Loughborough, and University College London. Two replies were received.

Results

214 responses were received: 100 from practising librarians and 114 from ILS students; the majority of respondents were female (77% of students and 80% of practitioners).

Just over one-third of the ILS students were over 30 years old, an indication of the high majority of postgraduates. The librarian respondents were slightly older overall, with about one third 21-30 year olds, and a similar number in the 31-40 age range.

97 of the 100 librarians stated that they had obtained a library qualification: all but two gave the date obtained. The median year in which the library practitioners obtained a library qualification was 1997: an average length of professional employment of six years.

104 (91 per cent) of the student respondents were enrolled on postgraduate ILS courses, with seven students (6 per cent) on undergraduate courses. Three respondents did not state their level of study. The preponderance of postgraduates reflects the period in the academic year in which the questionnaire was sent out: a period when undergraduates are busy with exams.

61.9 per cent of student respondents and 27.6 per cent of librarian respondents had encountered some ethics instruction as part of a university or job training course.

Awareness of CILIP's code of ethics (at the time of the research it was a published draft) was stronger amongst the library practitioners (74%) than ILS students (48%). 87 librarian respondents and two students were CILIP members.

The results of each of the questionnaire's statements are briefly summarised below.

76% of librarians disagreed or strongly disagreed that withholding access to a book is permissible in some instances, such as if a violent-looking person asked for a book containing fighting techniques hinting that they might make use of it against someone else. This mirrors the results of previous experiments (Hauptman, 1976; Juznic et al., 2001). ILS students were slightly more concerned with their responsibility to third parties, with fewer students, 66.3 per cent, willing to provide access to this material. Slightly more of the ILS students than librarians were in favour of withholding the book: 20 per cent compared with 12 per cent.

A slight majority of librarians (55%) and of students (59.7%) felt that a request from the police for a patron's details should be obeyed. In both cases, roughly one-third felt that a patron's identity should be protected in the circumstance given, where a library book of the perpetrator is found at the scene of a minor crime. If the divergent opinions expressed in this statement were representative of library staff generally, it would be a futile gesture for a librarian to defy the police, as so many colleagues would willingly comply. As one librarian who agreed

that the patron's details should be withheld acknowledged, 'in practice, I would probably comply'.

The majority of the librarian and student respondents felt that library charges are an acceptable restriction to services. However, 28.9 per cent of students and 20 per cent of librarians disagreed or strongly disagreed on the acceptability of such fees. Jochumsen's (2000) study speculated that librarians' opposition to fees is a 'massive' philosophical ideal.

Responses to the question of using revenue from a service to purchase material were evenly spread. Around one-third of both types of respondents, ticked either the 'agree' or 'disagree' box, with relatively few strongly opposed or strongly in favour.

There was overwhelming endorsement of conduct that recognises equality.

Over half of the librarians and students "strongly disagreed", plus a further 31 librarians and 31 students (27.2 per cent) "disagreed" with giving any patrons special treatment. One respondent, who strongly agreed with providing special treatment, annotated the questionnaire and explained that 'I can't believe there is a single librarian in the world who doesn't fast-track requests from friends or wipe family members' fines'. However, the results showed that only 6% of librarians and 12% of students felt that this is acceptable practice. This adds an element of uncertainty about the honesty of the respondents. Some of the results may reflect how people claim they would act, rather than how they might actually act in practice.

The majority of both sets of respondents agreed that a patron should have access to services regardless of ability to pay.

A large majority of both the librarians and ILS students felt that a reference service should not be influenced by one's personal attitudes or the subject matter. One librarian commented that when her personal values do clash with the subject matter requested by a patron, 'I would request another member in certain circumstances to take over. For example, I would be unwilling to personally provide abortion information at a reference desk'.

68% of the librarians and 58.8% of the students indicated that they felt library employees are not entitled to prominently display their political or sexual views through their dress. One librarian respondent commented that

As a manager, I disagree with an employee of any workplace overtly stating their views on religion, sexuality, etc. I feel it is especially important when offering a service that staff are seen as approachable as possible.

Similarly, another librarian suggested that an implication of displays of personal values could be to limit a user's access, by being 'off-putting and this will impair their ability to access information'.

From the opposite pole, one respondent explained that: 'I have been known to wear political badges myself... I don't think that there should be any way of stopping people from wearing badges'. More neutrally, a librarian was 'Not against it per se, but we should avoid being confrontational and upsetting others by doing so'.

66% of librarians and 61.4% of students were in favour of ordering a diet book that has been identified by reviews as detrimental to the follower's health. One solution offered by a respondent is to 'alert users to the fact that there are reservations about it in expert circles'. Another wrote 'who are we to decide what readers can and can't read?'

87% of the librarians and 76.4% of the ILS students indicated that a call from patrons to remove a book should not be heeded. 7% of librarians and 23.7% of students would withdraw the work. As with many of the responses and perhaps surprisingly, the students were slightly more conservative than the librarians. A representative comment from a respondent that disagrees with patrons' sway over a collection explains that 'people are not forced to read material they find offensive'. 12% of librarians and 13% of students would wish to exclude some material from the library.

With regard to the role of a librarian as a protector of children's morals, 30% of students disagreed that the onus falls on parents rather than library staff to protect them from unsuitable material. This compares with 19% of librarians, who saw the responsibility falling more on a child's parents. One librarian felt that 'library staff should ensure that children are not browsing in [unsuitable] sections, or have easy access to other parts of the library if not accompanying their parents'.

10% of librarians and 13.4% of students felt that information on contraception or drugs should not be supplied to patrons due to their age. One respondent felt comfortable in supplying only one of the examples: 'I think information on drugs should be

supplied, but am less sure about contraception or abortion'. Hauptman (2002, p.20) and Taylor (1997, p.67-74) believe that age should not be a deciding factor. One respondent commented that: 'I have been "disciplined" by a former manager for allowing an adult with Down's Syndrome to take a book of her choice out of the library (nothing at all distasteful or injurious, it was on the subject of the biological make-up our skin) as he felt that book was inappropriate for this person'.

Opinions differed as to the acceptability of a member of library staff using a computer for non-work activities. The students and librarians can be put into three roughly equal camps, those who saw no harm in using computer equipment, perhaps seeing it as a permissible perk, those who used equipment strictly for work, and those with no strong feelings either way. Only a fraction more students than librarians, 35.4% to 28%, indicated a relaxed approach to this practice.

The respondents' perception of copying software for home use was unequivocal. The attitude of the bulk of both sets of respondents was that it is unacceptable for employees to make unauthorised copies of software. Only 2% of librarians and 4.5% of students felt that this was an acceptable practice. Library students and librarians appear to be slightly more scrupulous than information systems employees, of whom in an earlier study, 7.8% felt that copying software was acceptable (Prior et al. 2002, p.35).

Respondents were asked whether they agree that staff who violate the CILIP code should be disciplined. 55.7% of librarians and 53.1% of students support disciplining. It appears the profession generally agrees that the code should be backed up by disciplinary measures. Interestingly, in an earlier study, only 25 per cent of reference librarians felt that the then LA Code should be enforceable by disciplinary action (Lonsdale and Oppenheim, 1995, p.76).

45.5% of students and 47.8% of librarians felt that copyright law governing photocopying is fair. There was also little difference between numbers who held the opposing view. Roughly one in five of the ILS students and librarians disagreed that it is fair. However, in further question only 45.5% of librarians agreed and 24.2% of librarians disagreed that copyright law should be rigidly enforced. Students were slightly less committed (33.6% agreed).

Contrary to CILIP's position, 48.0% of librarians, and 69.0% of students favoured the use of Internet filters. Of these 78 students, 34 (43.6 per cent) were aware of CILIP's code (not far below the 47.8 per cent for the whole student sample); 47 had received some ethics education (the figure for the whole students population was 61.9 per cent); and the ages of the 78 were representative of the whole sample. Looking at the background of the librarians who endorsed filtering, 25% had received some ethics instruction (comparable with 27.6 per cent for the whole sample); 64.6 per cent were aware of the code (slightly lower than 74 per cent for the whole sample); and their ages were representative of the greater sample. However, 29.4% of students and 42.9% of librarians agreed that a patron in a semi-secluded workstation with high-sides should be allowed to look at erotic material.

Statistical analysis

Chi-squared tests were carried out on all the data obtained, to compare the responses of students and practitioners. Only the differences between the responses to statement twenty (endorsing filtering software) were significant at the 1% level of significance. In all other cases, students and practitioners showed no statistically significant differences in views. The two sets of respondents responded to the ethical questions in a surprisingly similar way.

The follow-up study

Responses to a selection of the results were sought from lecturers in information science ethics. Firstly, the academics were asked whether the extent of respondents indicating to have received instruction in library ethics as part of a university course or job training conformed to their views. One academic felt that so few librarians had undertaken some instruction in ethics because 'ethics as a visible part of programmes is new and many practitioners would pre-date those days in their education'. Another suggested that the figure of 27.6% might represent 'a slight increase amongst librarians because of the discussion with the new CILIP code'. It is possible that some practitioners simply cannot remember every library school class they attended, in some cases up to thirty-five years ago, or that the subject pervaded the curriculum. In the instances where students replied that they had not undertaken any ethics education, perhaps it was offered as an

optional module, which some respondents chose not to take.

Secondly, the ethics lecturers were asked whether they were satisfied with the results of the level of awareness of CILIP's code: 74 per cent amongst practitioners, 47.8 amongst students. Comments revealed their disappointment: 'very poor' and 'no, I am not [satisfied]'. One added that this 'suggests practitioners don't read their professional literature. The draft has been well publicised'. Nonetheless, the 74% result was higher than a 1993 study that found that 67.2% of reference librarians thought that the LA had a code (Lonsdale and Oppenheim, 1995, p. 76). These authors concluded that the LA needs to increase the code's publicity (Lonsdale and Oppenheim, 1995, p.76). Unlike the earlier study, our questionnaire was sent to LIS-LINK and LIS-CILIP, resources that are likely to attract librarians who take an active interest in developments in the profession, so is not necessarily representative of the profession as a whole.

Next, the academics were asked for their response to statement ten, which concerned heeding a patron's request to remove a book from a collection, even though it breaks no laws; 13% of librarians and 24% of LIS students were not committed to upholding access to legally available material. The academics judged the student figure 'uncomfortably high' and 'a horrible disappointment'. One reasoned that the inclusion in the results of foreign students on UK Information Science courses with religious and cultural beliefs that 'work against our liberal consensus' might have skewed the results. The academics thought that the percentage for librarians was not unexpected: 'they have experience, sometimes bruising experience, on which to base their answer and I'd consider that not a surprising percentage'.

The results of statement twenty were also presented to the lecturers, which concerned the acceptability of filtering software. They were asked, given the position of the LA in its Professional Issues Statement which does not endorse filtering, does this level of opposition surprise or concern you? They were in agreement that the librarians' stance was unsurprising. One remarked that 'this fits in with the impressions I have gained when talking to librarians'. Turning to the students' responses, 'they disappoint me immensely' commented one, while another recognised that this mirrors his own observations: 'recent student work in this department has shown support for filtering'.

Conclusions and recommendations

UK librarians and students hold surprisingly similar ethical attitudes. We expected the students to be more liberal, more willing to uphold idealistic principles, and given their student status, with attitudes balanced in favour of other students' and patrons' rights in terms of fees, and accessibility, and copyright law. On the contrary, in many areas such as Internet filtering, looking at online erotic images, and removing books at the request of patrons, practitioners were more liberal than the students.

There is either some lack of awareness or decisions not to adhere to the ideals of CILIP. There was just one significant difference between practitioners and LIS students, in the endorsement of Internet filtering. The common norms of the profession seem to be already in place. This most noticeable disagreement between the respondents' opinions and the position of CILIP and the former LA concerns students' support for Internet filtering. Hannabuss (1996, p.25) and White (1991) argue the importance of making students aware of the complexities of issues, of sensitising students to the ethical implications of topics, and of a discursive and evaluative approach, without indoctrinating students with the a lecturer's own attitudes. However, there are some areas, such as Internet filtering and some areas of intellectual freedom, where the official message is not getting through to students; or perhaps they are aware but exercising their right to ignore it. A pressing concern for ILS students is likely to be the establishment of a career, and so it is possible that they are keen to emulate what they perceive to be a conservative and mature outlook, i.e., a stance of responsibility.

The results showed that there is a fair level of teaching ethical issues, and only a mediocre level of student awareness of basic issues or of the CILIP Code. There is clearly more work to be done to get students involved in ethical issues.

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