



Research Paper

Ethics in Librarianship

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ABSTRACT: In this paper I have discussed on the aspects of ethics in the profession of librarianship. In general, ethics is a set of moral principles. They may be rules of conduct related to some group, culture and the like. The professional associations always try to develop ethical values to be followed by their professionals. The professions like medicine, education, law and others always keep on reviewing on the formation of ethical codes so as to set up minimum standards of performance by their professionals. But these ethical codes cannot be enforced as they are not statutory laws. The technical terms related to the professional ethics like 'Profession', 'Professionals' and 'Professionalism' have been defined in this paper. The term 'Professional Ethics' has also been discussed in this paper. 'The Five Laws of Library Science' of Dr. S. R. Ranganathan, 'The Father of Library Science in India' have been elaborated in this paper. These Five Laws are the basic guiding principles based upon which the library profession works not only in India but also outside India. It has been stated that the ethical values are easy to be conceived for achieving high quality of performance but it is difficult to design a universally accepted code of professional ethics. Since the ethical behaviour varies in different societies and cultures, it is reasonable to formulate the professional ethics at various levels appropriate to different cultures and societies. The ethics may be conceived at primary, institutional, professional, national and international levels. The suggestions of a leading authority on ethics in librarianship, Johan Bekker, for designing a code, have also been dealt with in this paper. These suggestions are mainly that the librarians should exercise their best professional judgement on behalf of users, the librarians should strive to improve libraries and library services, the librarians should create and maintain the environment in which learning and scholarship can flourish and the librarians should be sensitive to the concerns of the larger society of which they are a part. It has been concluded that the library profession fulfills all the basic characteristics to be deemed to be a profession and so the professional activities in this field should be guided by some ethical values.

KEYWORDS: Ethics, Profession, Professionals, Professionalism, Professional ethics, Librarianship

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I. INTRODUCTION

In general, ethics is a set of moral principles. They may be rules of conduct related to some group, culture and the like. The professional associations always try to develop ethical values to be followed by their professionals. The professions like medicine, education, law and others always keep on reviewing on the formation of ethical codes so as to set up minimum standards of performance by their professionals. But these ethical codes cannot be imposed by others on the professionals since they are not statutory laws. The professionals should inculcate within themselves the ethical values related to their profession.

II. GENERAL ETHICS

'Webster's International Dictionary' defines 'Ethics' as:

- 1) "the discipline dealing with what is good and bad or right and wrong with moral duty and obligation"
- 2) "a group of moral principles or set of values; a particular theory or system or moral values; the principles of conduct governing an individual or a profession; standards of behaviour"
- 3) "the adjective 'Ethical' connotes conformity to professionally endorsed principles and practice or a system/ philosophy of conduct and principles practised by a person or group."

Ethics has been an area of study in philosophy for long. In Western Philosophy there had been three views with relation to enquiry of ethics. They are Monistic, Relativistic and Pluralistic views. According to Monistic view, there is a single set of moral principles or golden rules based on which one can behave correctly in different

situations. Relativistic view suggests that the moral principles are diverse and we cannot say that one is better than the other. So they are all individual or personal principles. These two views, that is, Monistic and Relativistic, have been rejected since they were not suitable to be applied in practice. The Pluralistic view, which advocates that there are many moral principles which guide our correct behaviour, has been widely accepted. In Indian Philosophy, ethics is related to religious beliefs and practices. All these views have given rise to the aspect of the study of ethics from different angles, such as, personal, organisational, professional, business ethics and the like. Sometimes conflicts among the different ethics occur in case of practical application in the life of an individual.

III. PROFESSION, PROFESSIONALS & PROFESSIONALISM

The technical words related to the professional ethics are – ‘Profession’, ‘Professionals’ and ‘Professionalism’.

The ‘Random House Dictionary of English Language’ (RHD) defines these three terms as follows:

Profession: “As an occupation, especially that one requiring extensive education in a branch of science or the liberal arts; or the body of persons engaged in such an occupation. Synonymous with ‘profession’ are words, such as, vocation, employment, occupation, business, trade – All refers to the activity to which a person regularly devotes himself, especially, his regular work, a means of getting a living. Whereas ‘occupation’ is the general word to indicate an activity in which a person is engaged for his living, the ‘profession’ implies an occupation requiring special knowledge and training in some field of science or learning.”

Professional: “A Professional is one who is engaged in an activity as a means of livelihood or for a gain or pertaining to or connected with a profession. For example: A professional tennis player, a researcher, musician or who are experts in their respective fields.”

Professionalism: “Professionalism is the professional character, spirit or methods, the standard practices of a professional as distinguished from an amateur. An expertise is expected of professionals with full involvement in and commitment to those who receive services from them.”

Some traditional professions are agriculture, medicine, education, fine arts like painting, sculptor, music, etc. As a consequence of industrialization, social and economic growth, many new professions developed in the 20th century when the area of knowledge expanded thus necessitating the services of knowledge organisation, retrieval and dissemination.

IV. PROFESSIONAL ETHICS

Professional ethics may be termed as the expression of ‘ethos’, i.e., character, spirit, nature, culture of an occupation. It deals with the basic values related to an occupation. It reveals what the nature of an occupation is and what its practitioners think of themselves and their position in society. According to the professional ethics, the quality of service rendered by the practitioners of a profession should render them a distinguished position in the society. To continue to be highly esteemed in society and give its best, every profession endeavours to establish its code of professional ethics to guide its practitioners. It is very important to raise the ethical problems of a profession through the writings in journal articles, seminars, training programmes with the social scientists. In this way, the professional ethics would come under scrutiny and debate and a more acceptable and justifiable code of ethics will be reset from time to time for professional practice. The history of professional ethics is very long. The rules of conduct have been there for many centuries but the modern codes had originated in the nineteenth century. For example, in United States, the Code of Ethics of the American Medical Association (AMA) was adopted in 1848 when AMA was organised. Between 1890 and 1925, more than two hundred American Business and professional groups adopted their code of ethics. The legal profession adopted its first code in 1908.

V. LIBRARIANSHIP AS A PROFESSION

A Code of Professional Ethics for Librarians describes that “The goal of librarianship is to mediate between humanity and humanity’s store of recorded knowledge and information; to encourage an informal, enlightened and empowered citizenry; and to join with others in the fight for intellectual freedom and access to information.”

VI. PROFESSIONAL ETHICS IN LIBRARIANSHIP

The ‘Father of Library Science in India’, Dr. S.R. Ranganathan, conceived the ‘Five Laws of Library Science’ in 1924. He formulated statements embodying these laws in 1928. These laws were published in his classic book entitled, ‘Five Laws of Library Science’ in 1931.

The Five Laws are as follows:

1) Books are for use.

It means every book in the library should be utilized. No book should remain unused.

2) Every reader his or her book.

It means every reader or user in the library should get his or her required books.

3) Every book its reader.

It means that the library professionals should try that each and every book in the library gets its reader or user. It is a kind of corollary of the first law.

4) Save the time of the reader.

It means that the reader or user should be served in the library as speedily as possible with their required book or information.

5) A library is a growing organism.

Here, the library has been compared to a living organism. It states that it should continue to grow, i.e. stocks of a library should keep on increasing from time to time.

In the modern context, the term 'book' is now being replaced by the term 'information' and the term 'reader' by the term 'user'. These five laws are the five basic principles based on which the library profession not only in India but also abroad, works. These principles guide and motivate the professionals in the field towards service orientation, intellectual involvement in developing tools and techniques and giving a body of professional knowledge so that librarianship gains recognition as a profession.

The ethical values are easy to be conceived for assuring high quality of professional performance. But it is difficult to design a universally accepted code of professional ethics since individual or personal ethics are fundamental to any ethical code and they are not stated in any code of professional ethics because they are assumed to be basic in every situation. Again, there are differences in the conception of ethical behaviour in different societies and cultures. So, it is reasonable to formulate professional ethics at various levels appropriate to different societies and cultures. The ethics may be conceived at primary, institutional, professional, national and international levels. The primary level ethics are a set of basic guiding principles to human behaviour with respect to any activity, such as, honesty, good conduct, adherence to truth and the like. Sometimes, there may be a conflict between the professional ethics and organizational ethics, when one has to judge in making a choice for a course of action. For example, the professional ethics may clash with the organizational loyalty on some occasions. These types of conflicts occur in any profession. So, to design a code of professional ethics is ideal. But, it is difficult to make the codes realistic, especially, when the codes of professional ethics cannot be enforced by law as they are not statutory laws. They can at most be self-imposed by the professionals so that they can perform their jobs following certain ethical principles.

Johan Bekker, a leading authority on ethics in librarianship, has suggested a few broad principles for designing a code. They are as follows:

1) Librarians should exercise their best professional judgement on behalf of users. They should, therefore, provide the highest level of service, not only complying with requests, but also anticipating needs, consider the needs of users the central focus of their work, assist actively in preventing incompetence and misconduct in their profession and in encouraging adherence to this code and other standards, protect each user's right to privacy.

2) Librarians should strive to improve libraries and library services. They should, therefore, be active members of local and national professional associations, pursue continuing education in order to improve their skills, knowledge and qualifications, protect and enhance the reputation of libraries by exemplary professional conduct and service, involve themselves in research and other systematic efforts to understand and improve library service, avoid situations that could compromise professional judgement or provide personal benefits at the expense of the library and its users.

3) Librarians should help create and maintain conditions under which learning and scholarship can flourish, freedom of inquiry and of thought and its expression. They should, therefore, ensure the free flow of information between libraries, allow access to the library holdings and services to everyone in need of information, avoid bias in the acquisition and presentation of information, resist efforts to censor library materials or restrict intellectual freedom.

4) Librarians should be sensitive to the concerns of the larger society of which they are a part. They should, therefore, protect and preserve sources of information for future use, assure that confidential and proprietary information is safeguarded, avoid transgression into the practice of other professions, take care that the access to information provided to users is not misused to curtail the freedom of others.

Thus, these types of principles represent what the librarians stand for and what should be expected from them by the community.

VII. CONCLUSION

The professional bodies have always been interested in setting a set of ethical values so that a code of conduct can be designed for the profession. Different professions like medicine, education, law, etc. have set up their ethical codes and constantly keep on reviewing their codes for setting up a minimum standard of performance. The library and information science professionals also try to formulate their ethical codes to

govern their professional activities. The library profession fulfils all the basic characteristics to be deemed to be a profession and so the professional activities in this field should be guided by some ethical values.

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