Original Research Article

Assessment of ethical concerns among practicing librarians in Nigeria

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Abstract

This study assessed ethical concerns faced by practicing librarians in federal, state and private universities in Ogun State, Nigeria. The study adopted a descriptive survey design. Questionnaire was the tool used for data collection. The study population consisted of the 50 professional librarians from Federal University of Agriculture (FUNAAB), Abeokuta, Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye and Babcock Unviersity, Ilishan-Remo. The respondents consisted a total of the 50 practicing librarians from the three selected universities in Ogun State, Nigeria. A total of 50 questionnaires were administered on all the respondents and 44 questionnaires were retrieved and analyzed given a response rate of 88%. A descriptive statistical method was used to analyze the data displayed in tables and percentages. Findings from the study shows that intellectual property rights issues are the highest ethical issue confronting librarians. The study also shows that abusing confidential information and using official position for personal advantage are perceived as high unethical behavior among librarians. The study also reveals that a majority of librarians do not have a copy of the Librarians' Registration Council of Nigeria Code of Ethics. Based on the findings, recommendations were proffered.

Keywords: Professional ethics, Librarians, Ethical dilemma, Code of ethics, Ogun State, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Professional ethics relates to moral rules that influence a professional's actions or behavior in discharge of his professional responsibilities. Professional ethics helps a professional choose what to do when faced with a problem at work that raises a moral issue (Strahlendorf, n.d)

Library and information professionals are the essential link between information users and the information required. Hence librarians have privileged position which carries corresponding responsibilities. This is highlighted by the fact that librarianship is a service-oriented profession with the responsibility to serve users. The position that librarians and information professionals occupy is a delicate one, which necessitate the need

to balance conflicting demands.

A code of ethics is a list of guiding principles for ethical behavior. Codes of professional ethics for library organizations are mainly intended to guide the behavior of library professionals. Librarians need to understand ethics and ethical implications of their actions and how they should behave ethically and make the best decisions. There is therefore the need to be kept informed in order to safeguard library and information professionals from embarrassments that may arise from ethical impropriety.

Librarians and information professionals employ specialist knowledge and expertise. The use of this knowledge and expertise should be governed by ethics in

the provision of service to the public. It is however observed that librarians and information professionals in making professional decisions that affect their service delivery do not have a guide to follow when faced with a problem at work that raises a moral issue. And little is being done to help library and information professionals in Nigeria to understand ethics and ethical implications of their actions and how they should behave ethically and make the best decisions when confronted with ethical dilemmas.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study seeks to:
1. Identify ethical issues faced by librarians in practice.
2. Find out what practicing librarians consider being unethical behavior.
3. Identify what practicing librarians consider being the most important aspect of the code of ethics.
4. Find out whether the code of ethics influence librarians' practice
5. Identify the perception of practicing librarians concerning ethics and professionalism.

Literature review

Concept of ethics in information professionalism

Professional people and those working in acknowledged professions exercise specialist knowledge and skill. How the use of this knowledge should be governed when providing service to the public can be considered a moral issue and is termed professional ethics (Chadwick 1998). Stueart and Moran (2002) assert that ethics is a set of principles and values that govern the behaviour of an individual or a group with respect to what is right and wrong. Agulanna (2011) opines that ethics helps direct our attention to the appropriate way to conduct ourselves as individuals in order to achieve human well-being in the community. Carbo and Almagno (2009) citing Hammond, Keeney and Raiffa, (1998) propose that individuals seeking to become professional librarians or archivists, or seeking to work in other types of cultural heritage institutions or information-related organizations must first learn to develop and hone their own individual sense of ethics, live an ethical life, and be educated about ethical issues in their professional life. In addition, the information professional must learn how—and be ready—to make ethical decisions and take ethical actions.

Professionals are capable of making judgments, applying their skills and reaching informed decisions in situations that the general public cannot, because they have not received the relevant training (Chadwick 1998). Library and information professionals are usually the essential link between information users and the

information or piece of literature which they require and therefore occupy a privileged position which carries corresponding responsibilities (CILIP 2012). Knowing how to create, find, manage, access, preserve, and use information effectively provides a form of power to the information professional, whether it is through speed of access to needed sources or complex skills to find and create new multimedia information resources. Information professionals, as well as those who rely on them to provide a wide array of services to help people work more efficiently, compete with others, or improve the quality of their lives, must recognize and understand that with power comes responsibility (Carbo and Almagno).

A number of professional organizations define their ethical approach as a number of discrete components (Whitbeck,1998) Typically these include: honesty, integrity, transparency, accountability, confidentiality, objectivity, respectfulness, obedience to the law.

In the library and information profession, the core issues of information ethics include intellectual freedom, equitable access to information, information privacy, and intellectual property (Fallis, 2005). Dole and Hurych (2001) also point out the core values of the North American librarianship to include intellectual freedom, open and free access to information, and resistance to censorship.

Code of ethics

Freeman (1996) emphasizes that a code of conduct outlines 'how to be professional": it makes clear the applications of ethical concepts in everyday professional practice. The code outlines the general principles of professional behaviour which should be followed by members of the association in order to act in an appropriately moral way and to avoid the risk of misconduct (IFLA 2012). IFLA (2012) also highlight that one of the key elements that identify a 'profession' is the existence of an effective code of conduct, which is regarded as an important way to enhance the status of the profession; it can provide a strong central defining function, contributing to the overall identity of the profession itself and promote ethical understanding. IFLA (2012) also proffers that the library association can offer training and advice in ethical conduct to ensure that individuals and library institutions comprehend the distinction between ethical and unethical behavior.

Ethical concerns in library and information profession

Ethical concerns are broadly defined under a number of elements. Laudon and Laudon (1998) identify responsibility, accountability, liability and due process as the basic concepts that form the basis of ethical analysis.

Dzurgba (2011) also highlights these elements to include responsibility, accountability, honesty and integrity.

Responsibility

Laudon and Laudon (1998) insist that responsibility means accepting the potential costs, duties and obligations for decisions made.

Accountability

Accountability is answerability, blameworthiness, liability, and the expectation of account-giving (Dykstra1939). Laudon and Laudon (1998) emphasise that accountability ensures that mechanisms are in place to determine who takes responsible actions and who is responsible. They opine that systems and institutions in which it is impossible to find out who took what actions is inherently incapable of ethical analysis. Dzurgba (2011) points out that everyone is accountable for his thoughts, utterances, deeds, work and relationships.

Integrity

In ethics, integrity is regarded as the honesty and truthfulness or accuracy of one's actions. Integrity can be regarded as the opposite of hypocrisy (Lucaites, Condit and Caudill 1999). Dzurgba (2011) posits that integrity encompasses dignity, honour and respect. He avers that integrity in scholarship has been raised in regard to teaching, research, and publication as it relates to plagiarism, frequent absence/lateness, mismanagement of research funds, falsification of research results, suppression of free expression of knowledge and understanding about the subject matters of the classroom lectures. These elements broadly underline ethical professionalism.

Core ethical values in information profession

International Federation of Library Association (IFLA) notes that the core values of North American librarianship include intellectual freedom, open and free access to information and resistance to censorship. Rubin (2000) highlight the core ethical values as free access to information, copyright, selection decision and privacy.

Information privacy

Privacy according to Laudon and Laudon (1998) is the right of an individual to be left alone, free from surveillance or interference from other individuals or organizations including the state. Rubin (2000) posits that respect for privacy is a fundamental concept in a democratic society and with the increasing computerization and networking of information, the problems are magnified further. Librarians, therefore, should protect user privacy as much as possible. Laudon and Laudon (1998) aver that the internet introduces technology which poses new challenges to the protection of individual privacy. Raseroka (1997) in the same vein, aver that the electronic mail facility (email) is creating the most obvious concern as far as the issue of privacy is concerned. Confidentiality of private communication is generally assumed to be guaranteed because of the password and logging-in procedures. Yet because of the capability for distribution of message and adaptation of content unknown to an originator, there is a potential for invasion of privacy.

Intellectual property rights

Intellectual property is a broad concept that covers several types of legally recognized rights arising from some type of intellectual creativity; these rights are rights to intangible things—to ideas, as expressed (copyrights), or as embodied in a practical implementation (patents) (Kinsella, 2001). Rubin (2000) postulates that copyright under intellectual property is an ethical issue because at its heart is the question whether individuals should copy the intellectual work of others without asking the originator's permission. Librarians feel an ethical tension to protect the rights of both authors and patrons; they want authors to profit, but not to permit authors and publishers to unnecessarily restrict and control the flow of information.

Accuracy

Libraries are used for preserving and disseminating information which is contained in a tangible medium which maintains the integrity of content. Through the internet's lack of permanence, instability of medium and of content has been introduced (Stuart and Moran 2002). Raseroka (1997) avers that developing countries whose access to external information has generally been limited by financial considerations will naturally be tempted to redress this situation through indiscriminate seizure of available free information on the internet, the level of accuracy of information content which cannot be guaranteed. Rasesoka (2009) sees it as a necessity for professionals to nurture and further enhance their critical evaluative approach to information embodied in their professional training and activities. She also suggests development of information literacy skills prog-rammes for use in training of library patrons at the different stages of life, and at various levels of education

as imperative for empowerment of the general public.

Ethical principles and frameworks

Philosophers have developed a number of approaches to deal with ethical matters. Stueart and Moran (2002), Laudon and Laudon (1998) state that some ethical principles and frameworks with deep roots in many cultures have survived throughout recorded history. These ethical principles serve as a framework which guide the actions people should take and about which actions people should not take. In other words, they provide criteria for distinguishing between right actions and wrong actions. As a result, they can be used to justify particular courses of action (Strahlendorf, n. d)
These principles include the following:

The golden rule

'Whatever you want men to do unto you do also to them' (NKJV Mt 7:12). Putting yourself into the situation of others and thinking of yourself as the object of the decision can help you think about fairness in decision-making.

Kantianism

Named after the philosopher Immanuel Kant, Under Kantianism, one decides if an act is right or wrong without looking at the consequences. Strahlendorf (n.d) summaries Kantianism in these words; "if an action is not right for everyone to take, then it is not right for anyone. Ask yourself 'if everyone did this, would the organization or society survive?"

Utilitarianism

"Choose the greatest good for the greatest number". An act is right only if it tends to result in the greatest net good. All acts are potentially permissible; it all depends on the consequences (Strahlendorf, n. d).

Aversion principle

Take the action that produces the least harm or the least potential cost (Gitonga 2010)

Descartes rule of change

'If an action cannot be taken repeatedly, then it is not right to be taken at anytime'. An action may bring about a

small change now that is acceptable, but if repeated would bring unacceptable changes in the long run: once started down a slippery path, you may not be able to stop (Gitonga 2010)

No free lunch rule

'Assume that all tangible and intangible objects are owned by someone else unless there is a specific declaration otherwise'. If something created by someone else is useful to you, it has value and you should assume the creator wants compensation for his work. Examples of people affected by this principle are those pirating other people's work (Gitonga 2010)

Social justice

This approach holds that decisions must be based on standards that involve the fair treatment of all, fair application of rules and fair compensation. For instance, gender equality ensures that both males and females doing the same job are compensated equally (Froehlich, 1998).

Laudon and Laudon (1998) round off discussion by stating that these frameworks have too many logical and substantive exceptions to be absolutely guides to action. They argue that actions that do not easily pass these rules deserve some very close attention and a great deal of caution. In like manner, Stuart and Moran (2002) aver that the ethical principles and frameworks give a manager a context to use in considering ethical problems and a means of identifying the most important ethical considerations but they do not provide clear cut solutions.

Ethical dilemma and conflicts

Ethical dilemma is a situation where there is a conflict between principles and a choice of action that needs to be determined. Stuart & Moran (2002) list some ethical dilemmas that might be confronted by librarians in the course of their official duties.

Self-dealing

This means using one's position to one's personal advantage. An example of self-dealing would occur when a librarian uses his or her position to secure a contract for a private consulting firm that is partially owned by that librarian's spouse

Accepting benefits

These are any benefit that might be thought to affect ind-

Table 1. Number of Professional Librarians in the Universities

Institution	Number of librarians
FUNNAB	23
OOU	16
Babcock	11
TOTAL	50

Table 2. Distribution of Librarians by Gender

Institution	Gender		
	Male	Female	No response
FUNNAB	8	9	2
OOU	5	5	4
Babcock	2	9	
TOTAL	15 (34.1%)	23 (52.3%)	6 (13.6%)

ependent judgement. For instance, some libraries make policies against allowing collection development librarians to be entertained by vendors to avoid having any suggestion that a vendor selection decision might be influenced by accepting a certain vendor's hospitality.

Influence peddling

This consists of an individual soliciting benefit in exchange for unfairly advancing the interests of another party. For example, a librarian who is instrumental in the selection of a new automated system might be accused of influence peddling if he or she agreed to advocate for a particular system if that organization would offer him or her a part-time position.

Using an employer's property for private advantage

This could involve taking office supplies for home use, or using software licensed to an employer for personal use.

Using confidential information

Using information that you became privy to as part of your position to your advantage. Perhaps a reference librarian becomes aware of confidential information about a person by means of a reference interview and reveals that information in a way that advantages the librarian.

Outside employment or moonlighting

A conflict of interest would arise if an employee spends so much time on his or her outside consulting job that the regular job is neglected.

Post-employment conflict of interest

Occurs when an employee uses knowledge of information gained in a position to benefit after leaving that position. Perhaps an employee in a library of a private corporation resigns and uses knowledge from the previous employment to compete directly with his/her former employer.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a descriptive survey design. Questionnaire was the primary tool used for data collection. The study population consists of 50 professional librarians of the three selected universities in Ogun State; namely Federal University of Agriculture (FUNAAB), Abeokuta, Olabisi Onabanjo University (OOU), Ago-Iwoye and Babcock University, Ilishan-Remo. Purposive sampling technique was used to select the universities. The population was made up of all the 23 professional librarians from FUNAAB, 16 professional librarians from OOU and 11 professional librarians from Babcock University. A total of 44 questionnaires were retrieved out of 50 administered giving a response rate of 88%. The questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics which results were displayed in tables.

Table 1 shows there were 23 librarians from FUNAAB, 16 librarians from OOU and 11 librarians from Babcock universities respectively.

Table 2 shows that 52.3%) of respondents are female, 34.1% are male. 13.6% did not respond to whether they were male of female.

Table 3 shows that FUNNAB has the highest number of professional librarians with 23 among the three universities in this study. This was followed by OOU with 16 professional librarians and Babcock with 11 professional librarians. The questionnaires were adminis-

Table 3. Number of Questionnaire Distributed and Retrieved

Institution	Questionnaires distributed	Questionnaires returned	Percentage (%)
FUNNAB	23	19	43.2
OOU	16	14	31.8
Babcock	11	11	25
	50	44	100

Table 4. Years of Practicing Librarianship

Years of practice	FUNNAB	OOU	Babcock	TOTAL
0 -5	4	1	6	11
6 -10	5	2	2	9
11 – 15	4	3	-	7
16 – 19	5	3	1	9
20 and above	1	5	2	8
TOTAL	19	14	11	44

Table 5. Ethical Issues Faced by Librarians in Practice

Ethical issues	FUNNAB	OOU	Babcock	Total	%
Information privacy issues	9	5	5	19	23.5
Intellectual property rights issues	11	7	4	22	27.1
Issues of information accuracy	9	6	5	20	24.7
Selection decisions	10	5	5	20	24.7

Table 6. Unethical Behavior in Librarianship

Unethical behavior	FUNNAB	OOU	Babcock	Total	%
Accepting benefits	4	2	4	10	7.4
Using employer's property for private advantage	11	7	8	26	19.3
Abusing confidential information	13	8	8	29	21.5
Outside employment	7	5	1	13	9.6
Selection of vendors to advance one's interests	10	10	8	28	20.7
Using official position for personal advantage	11	10	8	29	21.5

tered on all the professional librarians from the various universities in this study. A total of 19 (43.2) were retrieved from FUNAAB, 14 (31.8%) were retrieved from OOU, and 11 (25%) retrieved from Babcock. Out of the 50 questionnaires that were administered, a total sum of 44 (88%) were retrieved from the three Universities and analyzed.

Table 4 shows that 11 librarians have been practicing librarianship for 5 years and below. 9 librarians have been practicing for between 6 to 10 years, 7 librarians have been practicing librarianship for between 11 to 15 years. 9 librarians have been practicing for between 16 to 19 years while 8 librarians have been practicing for 20 years and above.

Table 5 reveals that intellectual property rights issues is the highest ethical issue confronting librarians with 27.1% response followed by issues of information accuracy and selection decisions which attracted a response rate of 24.7% each.

Table 6 shows that practicing librarians see abusing

confidential information and using official position for personal advantage as unethical behavior with a response rate of 21.5%. This is followed by selection of vendors to advance one's interests which attracted 20.7%. Using employer's property for private advantage got a response rate of 19.3%. Outside employment took 9.6% and accepting benefits 7.4%.

Table 7 shows that 93.2% of practicing librarians in Ogun state are aware that librarians are professionals and have a code of ethics they must follow while 6.8% did not respond. While 40.9% of librarians have copies of the LRCN Code of Ethics, 52.3% do not have and 6.8% did not indicate whether they had or not. 63.6% of librarians indicated that the LRCN Code of Ethics influence their practice while 18.2% indicated that the Code does not influence their practice. 18.2% did not respond.

Table 8 shows that 95.4% of librarians assent to the fact that ethics should be learned like any other library skill while 2.3% disagree. 2.3% did not respond. 88.6 %

Table 7. Ethics and Professionalism

	Yes	No	No response
Are you aware that librarians are professionals and have a code of ethics they must follow?	41 (93.2%)		3 (6.8%)
Do you have a copy of the LRCN Code of Ethics?	18 (40.9%)	23 (52.3%)	3 (6.8%)
As a librarian, does the Code of Ethics influence your practice?	28 (63.6%)	8 (18.2%)	8 (18.2%)

Table 8. Perception of Ethics Development

	Yes	No	No response
Ethics should be learned like any other library skill	41 (95.4%)	1 (2.3%)	1 (2.3%)
The Librarians' Registration Council (LRCN) has a significant role in ethics development.	39 (88.6 %)	4 (9.1%)	1 (2.3%)
Ethics should be learned as part of pre-qualifying programme.	38 (86.4 %)	6 (13.6 %)	
Copies of the LRCN Code of Ethics should be given to licensed librarians free of charge.	39 (88.7%)	5 (11.3 %)	

agrees that the LRCN has a significant role in ethics development while 9.1% disagree and 2.3% did not respond. 86.4 % agrees that ethics should be learned as part of pre-qualifying programme, 13.6 % disagree. 88.7% agrees that copies of the LRCN Code of Ethics should be given to licensed librarians free of charge while 11.3 % disagree.

FINDINGS

The study reveals that intellectual property rights issues are the highest ethical issue confronting librarians. The study also shows that librarians see abusing confidential information and using official position for personal advantage as high unethical behavior. The study shows that librarians are aware that they are professionals and have a code of ethics they must follow. However, more than half of the practicing librarians used for the study do not have a copy of the LRCN Code of Ethics.

The study also reveals that ethics should be learned like any other library skill and be learned as part of pre-

qualifying programme for induction into librarianship. The study points out that LRCN have a significant role in ethics development.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Librarians' role in society is very important as their mission is to provide their users with access to information they need. Librarians needs to be kept abreast with ethical issues in order to fulfill their commission and be kept informed in order to safeguard themselves from humiliation that may arise from unethical behavior.

The following recommendations are proffered;
1. Librarians and information professionals need to appreciate their position as information providers and be conversant with their professional Code of Ethics.
2. Librarians and information professionals need to have holistic appreciation of ethical issues.
3. The Librarians' Registration Council of Nigeria (LRCN) need to give the Code of Ethics to licensed librarians as part of the induction package.

4. The Librarians' Registration Council of Nigeria (LRCN) should ensure that ethics is learned as part of pre-qualifying programme for induction into librarianship and also that ethics is learned like other library skill.

5. Librarians and information professionals need to be guided by the code of ethics and be intentional in holding every aspect of their service above ethical reproach.

6. Librarians and information professionals should have understanding of ethical behavour and ensure compliance to rules and laws.

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