
Ethical Issues in Reference

An In-Depth View from the Librarians' Perspective

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It is always good to reflect occasionally on professional ethics and the implications of those ethics in library practice. In this paper, based on a presentation given by the author at the 2014 IFLA satellite meeting “Ethical Dilemmas in the Information Society: How Codes of Ethics Help to Find Ethical Solutions,” August 14–15, 2014, Lili Luo examines some ethical issues addressed in contemporary reference work and reports on the results of a survey of reference librarians.—*Editor*

Librarianship is a service profession, and reference is the area where interactions with users most frequently occur. It is important that reference librarians endeavor to bring to users unbiased and equitable services with the promise of confidentiality and the protection of intellectual freedom. As Ecklund explains, reference librarians are expected to “maintain the highest possible standards of diligence and ethical conduct under time restraints that often require compromise.”¹ According to Ecklund, while both personal attitudes and institutional obligations remain an integral aspect of library ethics today, library standards, customs, and even missions have evolved significantly. In the digital age, Ecklund believes that “service and access have grown closer together, or that access, and knowledge of how to access, is the main service demanded of librarians.”² This shift from emphasis on service to providing unfettered access, along with other changes brought by technology evolution and social transformation, requires that reference professionals’ collective understanding of ethical issues be reevaluated and reinterpreted.

To obtain an up-to-date view on ethical issues in reference, a survey study was conducted to examine the ethical situations frequently encountered by reference professionals, how they are resolved, what the challenges are, and what kinds of support are needed. Findings of the study will provide an empirically grounded view on reference ethics, offer a basis on which training and education can be developed to help librarians deliver reference service ethically and successfully, and generate new ideas for continuous discussion and research on the topic of ethics.

BACKGROUND

Professional ethics are the principles of conduct that guide and govern behavior. Preer believes that the evolution of ethical standards for librarians parallels the development of librarianship as a profession. In her book, *Library Ethics*,³

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five historical precedents and current examples of ethical issues facing the profession are discussed. As a key piece of work in the literature of library ethics, this book examines broadly the domains where librarians face ethical choices, seeking to help library professionals identify and respond to ethical dilemmas.

Professional associations often have codes of ethics that state the values and aspirations and set explicit standards for a profession. Barsh and Lisewski point out that professional associations' codes of ethics address the issues of expertise and trust, and the obligation of individuals within the profession to fulfill the public's expectation of ethics and competencies.⁴ The American Library Association (ALA) established its code of ethics in 1939. Barbara Ford, past-president of ALA, summarized the key values and priorities of librarians as outlined in the ALA Code to be "supporting intellectual freedom, protecting users' right to privacy, respecting intellectual property rights, treating colleagues with respect, and safeguarding the rights and welfare of employees, distinguishing between personal convictions and professional duties, striving for excellence by enhancing one's own knowledge and skills and those of coworkers."⁵

Like ALA, library associations in other countries also have their own codes of ethics. Shachaf conducted a comparative content analysis of the codes of ethics proposed by professional associations in twenty-eight countries and found that professionalism, integrity, confidentiality/privacy, and free and equal access to information were the most frequently noted principles.⁶ She explained that there were three key types of codes: aspirational, regulatory, and educational.⁷ Barsh and Lisewski believe that the ALA Code is primarily aspirational as it does not regulate or provide concrete guidance on implementing systems of procedures for dealing with ethical dilemmas.⁸

According to Shachaf, although the statements contained in the ALA Code do not "advance to the application stage, consider stakeholder's interests, or attempt to use a moral-philosophical rationale to derive ethical solutions such as rules or prescriptions,"⁹ they represent the core values of the profession. Empirical studies have been conducted to understand individual librarians' awareness of, familiarity with, and internalization of the Code at work. In her book *Professional Ethics in Librarianship: A Real Life Casebook*, which sought to "evoke the recognition of ethical dilemmas and help the individual focus on personal values and professional standards of behavior in the solution of these dilemmas," Zipkowitz used real life case studies to illustrate how the ALA Code can guide the management of ethical situations.¹⁰ Hoffman surveyed members of the Texas Library Association and found that close to 40 percent of the respondents had experienced at least one ethical dilemma at work, and one third consciously apply the Code to situations in their daily work once a month or more often.¹¹ In their survey of library managers, Barsh and Lisewski discovered that they face many ethical issues in their workplaces, but 57 percent of them were merely somewhat familiar or unfamiliar with the Code.¹²

In the area of reference, there has not been much empirical research examining how reference librarians recognize and solve ethical dilemmas. An exhaustive literature search only resulted in two book chapters that discussed ethical issues in reference. In his well-known book *Ethics and Librarianship*, Hauptman devoted a chapter to ethics in reference, and he defined ethical reference service to have the following characteristics: (1) serve all patrons equally and objectively; (2) do not allow personal commitments to intrude; (3) do not sacrifice everything for the sake of information provision; (4) avoid conflicts of interest; (5) protect privacy and confidentiality; (6) protect one's employer's investments; (7) cultivate a service ethic; (8) market one's availability and willingness to help; (9) provide added value; and (10) re-create oneself as an indispensable provider of whatever is required.¹³ He believed that traditional issues such as objective information provision, conflict of interest, confidentiality, dishonesty, and protection of minors would continue to concern librarians in the twenty-first century, and that unfiltered access to the Internet would present new ethical challenges. Furthermore, he argued that it could be unethical to waste an employer's money by having professional reference librarians spend time answering trivial questions such as how to use the printer. He also warned about information malpractice and its legal liabilities, and suggested that librarians be mindful about it and protect themselves from legal actions.¹⁴ Ecklund identified six areas where ethical issues often arise in reference work—service ethics (professional competencies), equitable access to information, confidentiality, conflicts of interest, copyright and intellectual property rights, and intellectual freedom and human rights, and she suggested solutions to possible ethical dilemmas in each area.¹⁵ Similarly, Rubin considered the following issues to be the major ethical issues facing reference librarians and other information professionals—tension between protecting the right of access and projecting individuals or society from harm, issues related to equality of access to information, privacy and confidentiality, disparate levels of service, and copyright issues.¹⁶ Hauptman, Ecklund, and Rubin provided a bird's eye view on ethics in reference. Building on that, this study examines ethical issues at the operational level and from the perspective of individual reference librarians, seeking to fill the void in the literature and to enrich the understanding of reference ethics with empirical evidence.

PROCEDURES

Data for this research was gathered using an online survey. The study population consisted of reference librarians in the United States. Individual members of this population are not identifiable via any sampling frame, so the possibility of probability sampling design was ruled out. Thus a nonprobability sampling technique, judgmental sampling, was used to select a sample from the population. Judgmental sampling is a type of nonprobability sampling in which the study units

Table 1. Venues Where Librarians Encounter Ethical Dilemmas

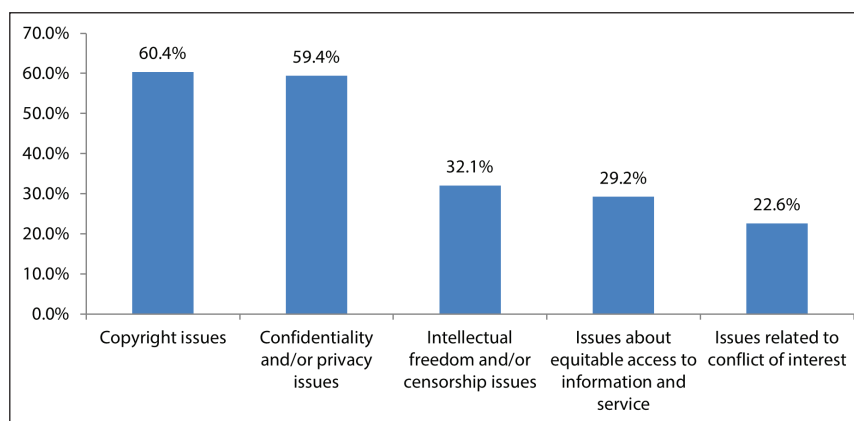
Venue of Reference Work	% of Respondents that Encountered Ethical Dilemmas
At the reference desk	80.7
Via telephone reference service	31.6
Via email reference service	30.7
During information literacy instruction	30.2
Via chat reference service	27.8
During reference collection development	21.2
Via social media	9.9
Interactions with colleagues at the library	4.2
Via text reference service	3.3
Individual interactions with library users outside of the reference area	3.3
Non-reference collection development	2.4
At the circulation desk	1.9
Use of technical facilities such as computers and printers	1.9
Other service areas such as coffee shop, exhibits, or during roving reference service	1.9

are selected on the basis of the researcher's judgment about which ones will be most useful or representative.¹⁷ An educated judgment was made that reference librarians are likely to be subscribers to the three most popular professional email discussion lists related to reference and information services: LIBREF-L, ILI-L, and DIG-REF. Therefore an invitation, including a link to the online survey, was sent to the three lists to invite participation from reference librarians. The survey was open for three weeks. One week before the survey closed, an email reminder was sent to encourage more participation. The main variables examined in the survey included ethical situations encountered by reference librarians, solutions to the ethical situations, training on ethics, and organizational support for providing reference service ethically.

RESULTS

A total of 212 valid responses were received. Among the respondents, 80 percent work in an academic library, 16.9 percent in a public library, and 3.1 percent in a special library. The prevalence of responses from academic librarians might be attributed to the fact that the three reference-related email lists are more heavily populated by academic librarians. Future research may consider expanding to lists such as PUBLIB to have a wider coverage of public librarians.

In terms of work experience, the majority (30.8 percent) of the respondents worked as a reference professional for

**Figure 1.** Types of Ethical Dilemmas

0–5 years, and the rest were rather evenly distributed: 22.6 percent had 6–10 years of experience, another 22.6 percent had 11–20 years of experience, and 23.9 percent had more than 20 years of experience.

Ethical situations appear in a variety of venues, as shown in table 1. The reference desk was reported to be the most typical venue—more than 80 percent of the respondents indicated that they have encountered ethical dilemmas at the reference desk.

Regarding the types of ethical issues that reference librarians encounter, as shown in figure 1, the two most common categories were copyright issues and confidentiality and privacy issues.

For each type of ethical situation, respondents were asked to provide examples to illustrate the dilemmas they have encountered. For issues concerning copyright, problems mostly arose when user requests or behavior violated

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Table 2. Ethical Situations Related to Copyright

Type	Direct Quotes from Survey Respondents
User requests/behavior violating copyright law	<p>“Numerous students make photocopies of their required text books that we keep on reserve. There is a rule of passive acceptance in my library if students want to copy it, but I was instructed never to place my hands on the book on the copy machine as I cannot be an active participant in copyright infringement. However, many of the students speak English as a second language, so trying to describe how to use the copy machine in the past has not helped and I’ve had no choice but to place the book on the copy machine to show them, and then press the copy button.”</p> <p>“Faculty often would like to know where/how to post articles on our course management system. Our dilemma is trying to be clear about why it’s best to post a permalink from a database, even though their off-campus students will have to log in.”</p> <p>“Patrons have asked for help making copies of library CDs and DVDs.”</p> <p>“Students who want to print more pages of an e-book than they are technically allowed. However, if the student logs out, and re-logs in, his/her page limit on printing renews itself, so, theoretically, he/she could print the entire book by re-logging in several times. Telling the student about this workaround is basically facilitating a copyright violation.”</p>
Library/librarians’ own violation of copyright or licensing agreement	<p>“The library director instructs us to scan/print huge amounts of materials borrowed from other libraries to use consistently in classes. The library director engages in reproducing VHS tapes into DVD for check out.”</p> <p>“Providing materials or documents when our vendor licenses do not permit me to do so. Differences between my own and administrations’ perspectives on copyright interpretation re: fair use and my own, which tends to be more liberal. How do I frame the issue for patrons?”</p> <p>“My bosses insist that we post signs falsely asserting that copying more than 10% of anything is always an infringement. This ignores Fair Use rights and that much of what we have is not under copyright. I received ‘counseling’ because I wanted the signs to be legally accurate.”</p> <p>“a supervisor provides a login for ebook acquisitions module to a competing vendor so they can build a similar product”</p>
Librarians’ inadequate knowledge about licensing/copyright	<p>“I work at multiple libraries. If I have tried to get an article through Interlibrary Loan for a student at Library A but the request went unfilled or the lending library sent it but it was never received, can I use my legal login to the resources at Library B to get the article for the student? Does the fact that both libraries participate in a cooperative collections program that allows Library A students to physically walk in to Library B and get the article change or affect the fact that I am doing it for them electronically?”</p> <p>“I work for a nonprofit news organization that publishes behind a metered-model paywall. Copyright-related ethical dilemmas include determining when sharing information from behind the paywall is appropriate: with educators? reporters? parents? academic researchers?”</p>
Use of information sources that violate copyright	<p>“A user wants to check out a book, but it is not available. I have seen the book illegally posted on a website. Should I share that information?”</p>

copyright law. Table 2 provides a detailed view of the copyright-related ethical situations, with direct quotes from the survey respondents.

Confidentiality and privacy issues mostly appear when users request private or personal information about others. Table 3 displays the variety of ethical situations related to confidentiality and privacy.

As shown in table 4, a variety of issues emerge when intellectual freedom and censorship are concerned. Two main sources of censorship are institutional ideology and library staff’s personal beliefs, biases, and prejudices.

Two issues regarding equitable access to information and service are prevalent—special user populations’ access to library resources and services and the public’s access to resources and services at public university libraries. Special populations refer to library users with special needs, such as those with disabilities, who are minors, or who are economically disadvantaged. Ethical dilemmas surrounding these two issues are illustrated in respondents’ direct quotes in table 5, along with other issues related to equitable access.

Ethical issues related to conflict of interest can be categorized into those between library personnel, those between

Table 3. Ethical Situations Related to Confidentiality and Privacy

Type	Direct Quotes from Survey Respondents
Users requesting private or personal information about others	<p>“Parents seeking information about their children’s accounts; persons seeking information about their spouse’s accounts; Library card PIN sought by persons other than card owner.”</p> <p>“Regularly asked by faculty, students, staff - Who has the book? Who has checked out this item?”</p> <p>“An FBI agent came to the desk and asked if a certain student who was being recruited by the FBI owed any money on overdue books, or he may have asked what books the student had out on loan.”</p>
Users revealing private or personal information excessively	<p>“Students attempting to access their personal accounts and having problems—they want to give me personal info like SS# or login information which is inappropriate.”</p>
Library administrator and staff’s violation of user privacy and confidentiality	<p>“Library staff members, although having been told privacy and ethical standards continue to comment on specific patron’s research habits/materials requested. Other library staff reads items printed for patrons at the printer.”</p> <p>“I’ve had the VP who oversee a previous library I worked at (and who wasn’t a librarian) not be concerned about protecting patron’s privacy.”</p>
Confidentiality of users that may be involved in unethical, illegal, or harmful behavior	<p>“As librarians, we are supposed to answer students’ questions, even when we know that students may be asking for information to aid in their academic dishonesty. My ethical dilemma comes in the conflict between the ALA stance on serving patrons and my responsibility as part of an academic community to stop and to report academic dishonesty—which our college policy requires us to do.”</p> <p>“I got a series of calls from a patron while I was on the desk. The patron was tracking down information from a notebook she bought. It contained instructions on what and where to file forms to never pay income tax again. It was a scam but patron confidentiality prevented me from following up. Fortunately, the AZ Attorney General also found out and shut the operation down.”</p> <p>“We had a patron tell us on the phone that he was going to kill himself. Ultimately the director ok’d us calling the police. The other challenge is when police ask show us photos and ask if this person has been in the building. When we refuse (which we always do) I worry that we have enabled criminals and assisted (minors) runaways.”</p>
Reference transactions of private and sensitive nature	<p>“Patrons needing help with sensitive legal forms.”</p> <p>“Patron was asking about subject matter that related to a personal medical issue and they were visibly embarrassed that they had to ask in earshot of other patrons.”</p>
Confidentiality and privacy issues related to special legislature	<p>“The reference clients were individuals who each otherwise were bound under the Sunshine Act.”</p> <p>“Providing any type of information in violation of FERPA restrictions sometimes seems illogical but is done to avoid litigation potential.”</p>
Privacy challenges due to library or university policy	<p>“Participating in campus referral program for students deemed to be at risk for failure”</p> <p>“Our policy for computer use is that either a library card is required or a photo ID. The library’s policy is to write the names of the ID computer users in a log book. In theory this is to know who is responsible for any damage that may be done to the machine during the usage period. I am uncomfortable with the log book because it keeps a record of who was in our building and on what days. Also, because it is used frequently it is not often closed, or put under the reference desk so it is actually pretty public.”</p>
Confidentiality and privacy issues at workplace	<p>“Personnel problems—people think nothing is being done about a problem employee because the supervisor cannot say what is being done.”</p> <p>“The person writing my review put his final copy in my inbox without an envelope. How was there any confidentiality in that? He was not told anything.”</p>

library users, and those between library staff and library users, as shown in table 6.

When asked about how familiar they are with ALA’s

Code of Ethics, more than 60 percent of the respondents were either moderately or very familiar with it, as shown in figure 2.

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Table 4. Ethical Situations Related to Intellectual Freedom and Censorship

Type	Direct Quotes from Survey Respondents
Censorship by library's home institution	<p>"As a middle school librarian I was not allowed to purchase books about teen pregnancy."</p> <p>"I work for a Christian University with a conservative administration. There is pressure to not add anything to the collection that might potentially upset the President or Board of Trustees if someone were to complain to them."</p>
Censorship by library staff	<p>"Was not allowed to teach using a very illustrative website because our instruction librarian thought it was too controversial."</p> <p>"A supervisor deletes comments from patrons in the catalog or on social media that are perceived as negative."</p>
Personal biases or prejudices affecting selection of books and other information resources	<p>"Confronting personal prejudices. Do I avoid a book because I know the science behind it is bad and it provides misleading information, or do I purchase it because there is patron demand for it?"</p> <p>"One of the librarians I work with has extreme biases that s/he refuses to acknowledge. These are apparent by sources provided to patrons during a reference interview/meeting."</p>
Collection development on controversial topics	<p>"Do I keep a book that puts forth controversial views, such as a book that states vaccines may cause autism? On the one hand, it's been scientifically disproven; on the other, it's part of the history of autism research and there are many people who do believe that vaccines cause autism. Which side do I support, and am I supporting it because of my own personal views on the topic rather than an objective evaluation?"</p>
Pornography being viewed in the library	<p>"Asking students to not look at pornographic material for the sake of other patrons, despite the academic nature of the project."</p> <p>"I work in at an academic library. Occasionally, I've had community members (never students) use the library's commuters to view pornographic materials."</p>
User complaints about library collections	<p>"Dealing with patrons who have issues with the library providing information on controversial topics such as abortion, legalization of marijuana, Islam . . ."</p>
Users requesting information that's harmful or illegal	<p>"A person who is known to self-mutilate often asks for anatomy charts because she doesn't want to cut into anything important."</p> <p>"Requesting explicit data that violates CIPA[Children's Internet Protection Act]."</p>
Handling information of sensitive nature	<p>"Should an image of the Koran be included in a display of banned books? There was concern about the position of the image on a poster (at the bottom) and fear that the image might provoke a violent reaction due to perceived insult to a sacred book."</p>

Respondents were then asked about whether their institution has its own ethics policy, and 38.1 percent answered "Yes," 26.8 percent "No," and 35.1 percent "Not sure."

Regarding how they handle an ethical dilemma, the majority of the respondents chose to consult supervisors or colleagues to seek guidance, as shown in figure 3. In addition to the four listed approaches, respondents shared that they also rely on their conscience (or personal code of ethics), gut feeling, experience, social norms, and common sense to make a judgment in an ethical situation. Other sources they consult included other professional organizations' (e.g., Medical Library Association) code of ethics, professional email discussion lists, and the faculty they work with.

Looking at ethics training, 34.9 percent of the respondents took courses covering ethics in their MLIS program, 15.6 percent participated in training sessions on ethics offered by their institution, and 7.1 percent took continuing education courses about ethics. In addition to these formal

training venues, respondents also mentioned the following ways ethical issues were explored:

- librarians at a statewide chat reference service regularly engaging in formative assessments of how to handle tricky reference questions, including ethical dilemmas
- state ethics training for all state employees
- professional experience (e.g., serving on the intellectual freedom advisory boards for library associations; teaching a class in fair use and US copyright laws)
- self-learning (e.g., reading articles and books about ethics)

Respondents reported a variety of challenges they face when trying to resolve an ethical situation, covering the following examples:

- explaining carefully to library users that their requests could not be fulfilled because of legal reasons (e.g.,

Table 5. Ethical Situations Related to Equitable Access to Information and Service

Type	Direct Quotes from Survey Respondents
Special user populations' access to library resources and services	<p>“Our policy for computer use is that either a library card or a guest pass must be used to log into to host software. For those that need guest passes they must provide photo ID. This limits our internet usage to older teens and adults as minors do not have state issued ID cards. Also, if someone doesn't have a photo ID they cannot obtain a guest pass. If anyone can walk in the building and read a newspaper or magazine unregulated why do we limit access to our internet I wonder? I think guest passes should be given freely to any person who needs one.”</p> <p>“Political powers in my small community place an emphasis on getting high tech resources in the public library while ignoring the needs of our most vulnerable citizens. They would rather spend money on expensive ebooks than provide basic information for our poorest citizens.”</p> <p>“It is more of an ethical problem of the profession that not all library material is actually accessible to all students. Most recently I have experienced this with blind students who cannot use the databases as they are so poorly compatible with text to audio readers.”</p> <p>“We have dilemmas on how much service we can offer to visually disabled student.”</p>
The public's access to resources and services at public university libraries	<p>“Homeless patrons seek to use the library lab computers, but cannot do so since they are not current students (despite the computers being available).”</p> <p>“The public can no longer access computers in my library (at a university) as a result of budget cuts and policies. We are a public university, and it would seem appropriate (if somewhat expensive) to allow the public to just use computers.”</p>
Some users' excessive use of library service preventing others from using the service	<p>“A text messaging patron was treating our service as his best friend. He was sending dozens of messages per day, often as soon as we could send a reply. His use of the service in a conversational way prohibited other people from using the service to get answers.”</p> <p>“Inmates and law firm librarians seeking information that is time consuming to locate and copy, library does not have enough staff to offer these services.”</p>
Challenging user requests regarding information access	<p>“Patrons wanting help reading and writing: i.e. filling out applications (maybe this is NOT 'equitable access' . . . but this is not a service we provide, so it wouldn't be fair to help one and not all).”</p> <p>“If a person has a large fine, but needs access to the internet, do you give them a day pass or not.”</p> <p>“Is it right to use workarounds and 'cheats' to find information for free on behalf of reporters in my organization, when the general public may not have access to said information AND work the reporter produces using that information may not be available for free either?”</p>
Licensing restrictions limiting information access	<p>“Because I have access to library collections at sister colleges (in our district), I will often know of a source that may not be directly available to the student I'm helping. I prefer to avoid making the student place an article request at the sister college (to await delivery) and will bend toward accessing and printing the article for the student's use immediately.”</p> <p>“Some patrons are from other countries and the policy—because of licensing costs, is to deny them electronic resources.”</p>
Inadequate library resources limiting information access	<p>“Having just 1 copy of a controversial book with lots of patrons wanting to read it.”</p> <p>“Our technology is old and not up to standards sometimes, so those students who are able to purchase their own computers, software, etc. have a definite advantage.”</p>

- licensing or copyright violation) without hurting their feelings, and helping them understand that it is not personal
- conflicts between personal beliefs and institutional or professional policies
- finding a balance between upholding ethical rules and policies and satisfying user needs, and between doing

- “what's right” and “what's practical”
- respecting and balancing the viewpoints and interests of all parties involved in an ethical situation, and attempting to meet everyone's needs
- handling ethical grey areas—assessing a situation judicially, understanding the context, and making a reasonable judgment

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Table 6. Ethical Situations Related to Conflict of Interest

Type	Direct Quotes from Survey Respondents
Conflict of interest among library personnel	<p>“Retired librarian who works as a volunteer in collection development and unwittingly steers ‘rare’ books from her paid employee to our library.”</p> <p>“A supervisor wanted me to do research for her child who was attending a different school.”</p> <p>“Several recent search committees selected the candidate they felt was the best choice; that person was not hired and instead, the candidate that administration preferred was chosen”</p>
Conflict of interest among library users	<p>“We have a computer lab in the adult area that has internet access, a children’s lab that doesn’t have internet access and a business area which is limited to business research and test proctoring only. Parents with children who need to use the internet must do so in the Adult lab and their children sometimes become restless to say the least. While I sympathize very much with the parent and children who are accessing information via the internet, it is our policy that the adult area is a quiet place and sometimes we must ask the parent to make sure their children are not upsetting other patrons who expect quiet. This is one of my least favorite things to do. If only parents could access the internet alongside their children in an appropriate place.”</p>
Conflict of interest between library staff and library users	<p>“Patrons constantly ask me to interpret either legal information or medical research, which I refuse to do because that is not my area of expertise.”</p> <p>“I live in a rural, Southern place so there are times when the religion of a student, which may not be the same religion as mine or other students, is made very clear. The same is true with my colleagues, making for uncomfortable situations.”</p> <p>“Once I had a new father call in. He wanted information about circumcision. He had recently had a son. His wanted his son to be circumcised while his wife did not. I tried to just stick with the facts that I could find about why it is done, why it was done in the past, and other cultural information I could find. But, as our discussion continued, it was clear that the father was still conflicted. After about 10-15 minutes, I ended up explaining my own situation to him . . . I had recently given birth to a son. I had him circumcised, and regretted it. I think my personal story helped him. It also helped that I was anonymous to him - a third person opinion. But, I know that we are not to give out our personal opinions...we are always just supposed to provide the facts.”</p>

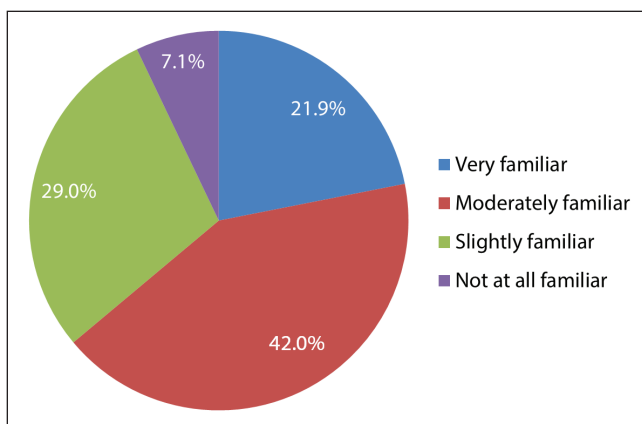


Figure 2. Librarians' Familiarity with ALA's Code of Ethics

- dealing with difficult library users
- recognizing ethical situations when they occur
- librarians handling the same ethical situations consistently
- remaining neutral and not getting personal in ethical situations
- lack of administrative support in resolving ethical situations

- teaching library users about ethical behavior (e.g., fair use)
- conflicting policies

Finally, respondents voiced the support they wished to receive to more effectively and efficiently handle ethical issues, including (1) more training; (2) support from colleagues (e.g., a collegial environment where colleagues consult each other when making decisions about ethical situations); (3) support from library leadership (e.g., administrators stand behind staff and are open to discussions and questions); (4) clear and consistent ethics policies, and clear communication between library staff about the policies; (5) easy access to those ethics policies.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As indicated by the study findings, reference librarians face a variety of ethical issues at work. This echoes the results of Barsh and Lisewski's study about library managers, who also have to deal with many ethical issues in their workplaces.¹⁸ Barsh and Lisewski introduced the concept "ethics literacy,"¹⁹ suggesting that library managers need to both

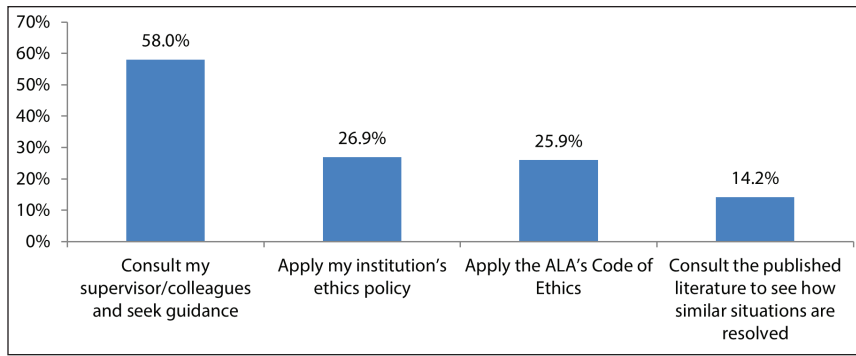


Figure 3. How Librarians Handle Ethical Dilemmas

recognize the underlying key concepts of ethics and to acquire the skill set and analytical tools that can be applied to handle ethical situations. They believe that ethics literacy is important for managers so that they can be alert to potential ethical problems and proficient in the mechanics of ethical decision-making. Given the wide array of ethical situations reference librarians encounter, it is also crucial for them to become “ethics literate” and be equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to efficiently and effectively solve ethical problems at work. Particularly, librarians mostly consult their supervisors and colleagues to seek guidance when facing ethical dilemmas, making it more imperative for the entire reference staff to master ethics literacy skills so they can successfully assist each other in the resolution of ethical situations.

To accomplish the goals of ethics literacy, two elements are indispensable—clear and consistent ethics policies and ethics training. Librarians have explicitly expressed their need for support in these two areas. Although almost 64 percent of the survey respondents indicated that they were moderately or very familiar with ALA’s Code of Ethics, only a mere one-fourth reported applying the Code in handling ethical situations. It’s understandable because as Barsh and Lisewski note, the Code only provides guidance on the shared values of the profession and is not a roadmap for how to recognize or respond to ethical problems at work.²⁰ Additionally, not all ethical issues encountered by reference librarians fit precisely under the ALA Code, and there are many other factors such as organizational culture and institutional values that need to be considered. Thus having ethics policies at the organizational level is both necessary and practical. In this study, more than one-fourth of the respondents’ organizations did not have ethics policies, and more than one-third of them were not sure about it, which suggests that in addition to establishing ethics policies, it is equally critical to make them known to the staff.

Furthermore, different organizations may have different interpretations of the ALA Code, thus resulting in policies that might clash with librarians’ personal interpretations of the Code. For example, the fourth tenet of the ALA Code of Ethics states, “We respect intellectual property rights and

advocate balance between the interests of information users and rights holders.” This is a general statement, and libraries may have their own definitions of “balance.” As shown in this study, when addressing the issue of students copying textbooks in its entirety, there are libraries that “post signs falsely asserting that copying more than 10 percent of anything is always an infringement,” there are libraries that have “a rule of passive acceptance,” and there are libraries that “provide a collection of textbooks and allow students to photocopy their contents.” Librarians’ own interpretations

of the Code can be quite different from that of their libraries, and conflicts between personal beliefs and institutional or professional policies are listed as one of the challenges librarians experience when handling ethical situations. Addressing such conflicts needs to be an integral part of the continuous discourse of ethics in reference.

In this study, the lack of formal ethics training is evident among the survey respondents—only a little more than one third of the respondents had taken ethics-related courses in their MLIS program, 15.6 percent had participated in ethics training offered by their institution, and 7.1 percent had taken continuing education courses about ethics. These findings reiterate both the necessity and importance of ethics education and training for reference librarians. These findings can provide a solid basis for the proper design and delivery of ethics training that meet the needs of reference librarians. Particularly, the two areas where ethical problems mostly occur, copyright and confidentiality and privacy, may be listed as training priorities. It is worth noting that respondents in this survey study revealed that some ethical problems resulted from librarians’ own misunderstandings in these areas. This further demonstrates the importance of providing ethics training to reference librarians. Challenges identified by respondents should also be properly noted and carefully addressed in ethics training. For example, librarians find it challenging to explain to users that their requests could not be fulfilled because of legal reasons without hurting their feelings. This suggests that librarians understand the course of action that needs to be taken but have difficulty executing it because we are a service profession and we seek to provide users the optimal library experience. How to artfully handle requests involving copyright or licensing violation should be addressed in ethics training for reference librarians.

In conclusion, this paper provides an empirically grounded, in-depth view of ethical issues in reference. Through the examination of the types of ethical situations reference librarians encounter, how they handle them, the challenges they experience, and the support they need, this study will help advance the understanding of ethical practice in reference, generate ideas for continuing discussion and research on this topic, and guide the development of professional

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ethics in library and information science. Libraries can draw on the findings to develop ethical guidelines and policies, provide effective training to help reference librarians successfully handle ethical situations, and ultimately lead to enhanced library experience for library users.

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