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Decolonizing the ethics of intellectual freedom: Exploring a new intersectional framework for allyship and ethical practice (Paper)

Abstract or Résumé:
The intersection between Indigenous allyship, intellectual freedom, and social responsibility is understudied in LIS literature. This conceptual paper employs literature-based critical analysis to explore the tension between these concepts and forwards the theoretical basis for a new interdisciplinary model for ethical information practice. The model draws on foundational aspects of human rights scholarship, human resources literature, philosophy, and uncertainty as a critical tradition for librarianship.

1. Introduction

As Canadian institutions continue the work of decolonization after Canada's 2016 statement of unqualified support for the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), interest in positioning libraries as socially responsible institutions has grown. However, our profession's interest in social justice has come at a time when disparity has widened both in society and within the profession itself. It is in this intersection, between our engrained institutional commitments to intellectual freedom as the basis of our ethics and our new commitments to allyship and social responsibility, where investigating our ethical positioning is more critical than ever.

The ethical codes which define professional conduct have been the subject of much critical debate. Within the literature, works address the intersection of individual ethics and intellectual freedom (Welsh, 2016), the legal basis of librarianship's ethical documents (Atkin, 2012; Baldwin, 1996; Bossaler & Budd, 2015), and the protection of librarians abiding by them (Buschman, 2009; Samek, 2009). What has received little attention, however, is how practitioners might reasonably navigate intersectional complexities when challenges to these ethical structures inevitably arise. This paper discusses the conceptual basis for a framework to support ethical and intersectional practice for LIS professionals.

2. Intellectual Freedom and Allyship in Context

Intellectual freedom is a systemic right with a strong foundation in substantial political and social entities. There is a coherent connection as the philosophical and legal structures to support intellectual freedom flow between the standards set by international organizations (IFLA 1999/2015; UN General Assembly, 1948), civil law (e.g. §2(b) of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms), the positional and ethical statements of professional bodies (ALA 1939/1996; ALA 1939/2008; ALA, 2006; CFLA 1974/2015), through to the practice of individual library staff. The cumulative effect of this commitment sees intellectual freedom applied *pars pro toto* in librarianship's ethical positioning. It is an inalienable right, upheld regardless of conflict, politics, personal beliefs or private interests.

In contrast, when we contextualize Indigenous allyship in the same international, civic, and professional frameworks, the translation of international norms has been fragmented at best. While both §35(1) of Canada's *Constitution Act* and the government's endorsement of the UNDRIP outwardly align with existing affirmations of self-governance, the burden of internal dissent has slowed the implementation of the legal minimums for respectful relationships with Indigenous populations (Champagne, 2013). The resulting environment is one where, as Borrows (2010) comments, the existing political structure lacks the processes which might ease the whole-cloth application of collective Indigenous rights or form the philosophical basis to address the inconsistencies that will inevitably arise.

This concept of missing harmonization processes is a critical one for librarianship as it is reflected precisely in the intersection between intellectual freedom and Indigenous allyship. Namely, while positional statements like the ALA's Core Values document or the *CFLA Truth and Reconciliation Committee Recommendations* espouse social responsibility and align with the UNDRIPs emphasis on the right of Indigenous peoples to control, protect, and develop their culture, knowledge, and cultural expressions and espouse social responsibility, neither the CLA nor the ALA codes of ethics mention social responsibility, equity, or the role of librarianship is supporting a pluralistic culture. Indeed, unlike the wealth of First Amendment scholarship from which we draw our commitment to intellectual freedom (Oltmann, 2016), it is impossible to traditionally define the ethical foundations for a commitment to allyship because it does not exist in a legal or professional context.

3. Critical Ethics and Librarianship
Rather than scrambling to relocate our ethics within these political frameworks, the path forward may lie in broadening the scope of our ethical foundation to include systemic oppression and an acknowledgement of reconciliation as an ongoing process. Perhaps we are better served by pursuing practice that does not dictate terms based on the same settler state structures that exploited Indigenous peoples in the first place (Coulthard, 2014; Garneau, 2012; Rice & Snyder, 2012). To avoid this shift is to leave practitioners to face a fundamental and abiding philosophical debate between the collective and the individual without a coherent ethical response.

Here, critical librarianship plays an important role in resisting reductive ethics which obscure the ability to think reflexively about our practice. Challenging the persistent assumption that our institutional values are inherently sacred and therefore beyond critique does not weaken our profession (Ettarh, 2018; Maxwell, 2006; Richmond, 2017). Noting the potential for a neoliberal conflation between political and economic choice in recent trends like community-led service does not necessitate disavowing the core values of our profession (Buschman, 2017; Kolutsky, 2013). Rather, this critical thought encourages us to better our practice with a genuine interest in challenging oppressive power structures (Pateman, 2018).

4. A New Ethical Framework
While the development of a full framework is outside of the scope of this paper, the following sections outline some constructs which align with the tensions outlined supra. Namely, four key questions can be identified:
  1) How do we ensure that the rights of all individuals are considered in ethical decision making?

2) How do we address contradiction and philosophical inconsistencies when they arise in intersectional practice?
3) How do we integrate practitioner beliefs, values, motives, and experiences into the ethical decision-making process while working within LIS organizations?
4) How do we promote reflexive and critical engagement with existing ethical structures?

If we take these questions to represent aspects of an intersection between intellectual freedom and allyship, embedding deliberation on them within the ethical discourse may help to reduce barriers to necessary complexity. Here, I forward four constructs, summarized in Table 1, which I believe have potential in creating productive conversations in decolonizing ethical practice.

Insert Table 1 here

4a. Human Rights

Samek (2007) argues that "the priority for twenty-first century librarianship is to act on IFLA's 1983 and 1989 human rights resolution" (xxiv). I agree with this call wholeheartedly and add that, in the absence of its integration into legislation and the foundational documents of librarianship, the implementation of the 2007 UNDRIP resolution must also be acted on with equivalent exigency. When complexities and conflict emerge, as they inevitably will, utilizing a human rights approach to conflicting rights allows practitioners to access an existing jurisprudential framework of dialogue by which we might manifest action (Ontario Human Rights Commission, n.d.). That is, as we recognize the broader dynamics of oppression and develop our understanding of the limitations on intellectual freedom where it may substantially interfere with the rights of others.

4b. Metamodernism

The assertion of both Indigenous rights and intellectual freedom as equal rights requires librarians grappling with some amount of dialetheism. However, contradictions rely on context to determine whether they are logically acceptable or unacceptable (Yagisawa, 2013). Metamodernism provides a contemporary philosophical framework in which dialethic statements are consistent, and that is, importantly, "fully grounded in [the ally's] own ancestral history and culture" (Gehl, 2011, para.6). Metamodernism is a discourse that oscillates between "postmodern irony (encompassing nihilism, sarcasm, and the distrust and deconstruction of grand narrative, the singular and the Truth) and modern enthusiasm" (Vermeulen and van den Akker, 2010, p.4). This philosophical discourse offers a useful attitude for librarian allies. Despite the impossibility of "utopia," or full reconciliation, metamodernism accepts uncertainty and continues "to seek a truth that it never expects to find. Indeed, because it never finds it, it never stops it search" (Vermeulen & van den Akker, 2015, p.66).

4c. Professional Identity

While metamodernism allows for oscillation between diametric views, it is necessary to include a mechanism by which individuals might act reduce the potential for personal or professional suffering when core values cannot be reconciled (Buschman, 2009; Samek, 2018; Schrader & Brundin, 2012). Borrowing from human resources literature, professional identity is a mechanism of resilience where professionals formulate a "voice" which allows them to identify the influence of traditional values, recognize potential conflict with their own values, develop a response, and carry out that action while reconciling its effects on a personal and professional level (Chan, Pratt, Poole, & Sidhu, 2018; Ibarra, 1999; Reay, Goodrick, Waldorff, & Casebeer,

2017). Rather than continuing to forward an idealized vision of librarianship, our collective identity forms one constituent component of a system of ethical integrity. The intricate work of decision making for ethical practice is recognized and valued.

4d. Uncertainty

Uncertainty has had a persistent relationship with LIS literature over the past 30 years (Alòt, De Korvin, & Kleyle, 1987; Graham, 2009; Kuhlthau, Caspari, & Maniotes, 2015; Trott, 2018; VanScoy, 2015). Importantly, it aligns with the ally's duty to "remain critical thinkers" (Gehl, 2011, para. 8). While uncertainty may be fear invoking, destabilizing, and unnerving, practice in the intersection of allyship and intellectual freedom is exciting. We, as librarians, must anticipate and plan for change rather than fearing it. We must influence the discourse, lest the challenge overwhelms and passes us. Above all else, we must employ a productive uncertainty which uses a critical eye to identify those areas in which we may contribute individually and benefit communally.

5. Limitations

It is necessary to acknowledge the limitations of this paper. First, it is in its early stages, conceptualized by a single individual, and based in literature where there is little existing research on this topic in LIS. Further, and unavoidably, the author's settler identity should be considered. While not a limitation *per se*, it does beg the question, as Smith (2013) argues, if this is not a continuance of "individuals confessing their privileges or trying to think themselves into a new subject position" (para. 2). Yet, discussion and engaging in critical thought is also a responsibility of allyship. I forward this paper firm in the knowledge that unlearning colonial practices requires proactive, ongoing, and frank discussion. As such, future collaborative examination of the constructs and the relationships between them by both practitioners and LIS researchers, with emphasis on Indigenous voices and perspectives, would be beneficial in developing it into a more generalizable framework.

6. Conclusion

I have attempted to approach allyship throughout this paper enough subtlety to ensure that I do not claim that librarianship should become complicit in a complex which romanticizes claiming allyship as an identity while maintaining institutional power (Indigenous Action, 2014). Rather, I aim to articulate, as a starting point, the need for a complication of our professional ethics where allyship may be woven into the foundation for a new framework that provides for explicit recognition of the agendas that we bring to decolonization as librarians.

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Table

Key Question	Construct	Description
How do we ensure that the rights of all individuals are considered in ethical decision making?	Human Rights	The practitioner focuses on understanding the nature of one another's rights and obligations and engages in dialogue and debate in the spirit of mutual dignity and worth for all involved.
How do we address contradiction and philosophical inconsistencies when they arise in intersectional practice?	Metamodernism	The practitioner resists both ideological naivety and cynical insincerity to navigate and oscillate between diametrically opposed ideas.
How do we integrate practitioners beliefs, values, motives, and experiences into the ethical decision-making process while working within LIS organizations?	Professional Identity	The practitioner develops an identity outside, but inclusive of, the definition of professionalism set out in ethical codes and institutional frameworks.
How do we promote reflexive and critical engagement with the existing ethical structures within the LIS profession?	Uncertainty	The practitioner employs a productive uncertainty that recognizes endemic complexity, bias, and intuition.

Table 1. Four elements of decolonizing and complicating ethics with brief description.