

## Critique on Study of Library Codes of Ethics

Being a resident of Switzerland for ten years, I am interested in discovering how the code of ethics of Swiss librarians compares to those of other countries. I searched the *Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts with Full Text* database at the King Library. The search term "global codes of ethics" led me to *A global perspective on library association codes of ethics*, a peer reviewed study by Pnina Shachaf (2005).

Shachaf compares the library codes of ethics of 28 countries by identifying common principles. The purpose of the study is to discover a common set of values of library and information professionals across the globe. The analysis is important in guiding professional practice and, as Froehlich observes, establishing "shared values for library and information professionals worldwide due to globalization, the growth of national and international electronic networks, and the growing number of professionals" (p. 513).

Shachaf describes her methodology as an "empirically grounded typology of principles" (2005, p. 514). The study identifies the most frequently appearing principles in codes of ethics, as well as the emphasis placed on these principles. This is a quantitative approach, which "seeks how many- in relation to the research question" (Beck & Manuel, 2008, p. 11). The study also attempts to explain the variations in codes as a reflection of sociocultural differences. This is a qualitative analysis, which, according to Sandelowski, attempts to "explain 'how human beings understand, experience, interpret, and produce' that part of the 'social world' relating to the research question" (Beck & Manuel, 2008, p. 11).

Confidentiality, privacy, free and equal access, professional development, and

integrity are the principles that occur most commonly in the codes of ethics of the various countries. Shachaf uses her quantitative results to categorize the countries. She attempts to explain differences in the codes of ethics of each category in terms of sociocultural contexts.

There are several weaknesses to this study. Since the study was limited to 28 countries whose codes were written in English or who provide an English translation (Shachaf, 2005, p. 517), the scope and meaning of the results are limited. Also, the study is based largely on a comparison of terminology, yet it relies on translations, which are inherently inexact and can be misleading. Lastly, Shachaf's categories of countries are extremely broad, simplifying the complexity of each country's sociocultural context to the point where delineations are meaningless. Given the limited scope of the study and the futile categorizations, I find that its usefulness in guiding professional practice and establishing shared values are questionable.

### **References**

- Beck, S. E., & Manuel, K. (2008). *Practical research methods for librarians and information professionals*. Chicago, IL: Neal-Schuman Publishers. Inc.
- Shachaf, P. (2005). A global perspective on library associations codes of ethics. *Library & Information Science Research*, 27(4), 513-533. doi:10.1016/j.lisr.2005.08.008