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LIBR 200 Discussion Post - Ethics

Ethical decisions should be fluid

I chose to examine one of the questions Fallis includes at the start of his article regarding allowing library use by a homeless person who smells bad (2007). I considered this question through the rights-based theory using John Rawls idea of the “veil of ignorance” (Fallis, 2007, p. 29) and the consequence-based theory using the idea of utilitarianism.

The rights-based theory lead me to the decision that, yes, a poor-smelling homeless person should be allowed access to the library because one of the main goals of the library is to provide access to information for all members of society. Though a homeless person may not be technically actively contributing to society, he/she is still a member of society, and his/her use of the library seems to imply effort toward self-improvement. Behind the veil of ignorance, I myself might be a poor-smelling homeless person and, as such, would not seek to deny my own self-improvement efforts nor those of any member of society. Equally, who’s to say that only homeless people are smelly? What if someone comes into the library wearing an overwhelming amount of expensive cologne? Could this smell not also be considered offensive?

The consequence-based theory also led me to the decision that a homeless person should be allowed access to the library regardless of their smell because their access does increase happiness in the world. Allowing access to information might enable the homeless person to change their lot in life by getting the help they need (e.g. a job, counseling, etc.). Helping the homeless person to become an active and contributing

member of society increases the happiness of society in general and therefore is a good and right thing to do. However, I feel it can also be argued that they should not be allowed because their presence may have a deleterious effect on other library users who might then cease using the library. I think this argument can be overcome by explaining the inclusive mission of the library to users who are uncomfortable and encouraging those who still have issues to perhaps move to another area within the library.

Understandably, this decision might be met with consternation, and it will be the job of the library personnel to explain the reasoning behind the decision with the intelligence and sensitivity that comes from the thoughtful consideration of the situation made possible by employing the ethical theories. If we start denying library access based on a person's smell, we establish a precedent that might be taken too far. For instance, what if someone is a mechanic or roofer or restaurant cook? They might have a strong smell about them from their jobs. What if a woman just received a gift of new perfume and was a bit excessive with its application? Should these people also be denied service because of strong smells? If we take the decision to its logical end, would we even have any patrons left who could access the library?

The ethical theories that Fallis detailed helped provide a framework to think about the question, but I think the specific circumstances surrounding an ethical dilemma will be very key to consider. With the homeless person situation, I *assume* that the person is actually intending to use library services, not just seeking shelter in a heated public space. The library offers access to information, education or entertainment; it's not a shelter. Having said this, however, I think it would be good of the library to form a partnership with a local shelter such that librarians and library staff could recommend the shelter and

its services to the homeless library user. If hygiene is the issue specifically, then perhaps the shelter could even provide some sort of hygiene kit that can be offered to homeless users at the library.

I think we need to realize that the final decision to “resolve” an ethical dilemma isn’t necessarily going to be a simple yes or no one; it will be qualified. The actual resolution of the issue will have many aspects and involve many people as illustrated above where the services of a local homeless shelter might be requested. Equally there has to be some expectation of experimentation. The solution has to be implemented, and we have to observe the actual ramifications and be ready to revise the solution as necessary. It must be fluid. There are always consequences to every decision that can’t be anticipated, especially as things change in society over time.

The ethical theories allowed me to consider a situation from multiple perspectives. How would all sides involved be impacted by a decision? I also learned to rely on the ALA Library Code of Ethics as a guide. I think the code provides a goal to strive for, but the particulars of any given situation must be weighed prior to making a decision.

References

Fallis, D. (2007). Information ethics for twenty-first century library professionals.

Library Hi Tech 25(1), 23-36. doi: 10.1108/07378830710735830