Collegial ethics: What, why and how☆

Michael J. Kuhar *

Yerkes National Primate Research Center of Emory University, 954 Gatewood Rd, NE, Atlanta, GA 30329, United States

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Collegial ethics (CE) proposes that we support our colleagues whenever possible. It is more of a focus on the feelings of others rather than on our own. In spite of the importance of collegial interactions, CE is not usually taught. Courses in CE need to be developed, and collegial skills need to be identified, taught and practiced. Such skills would include: use of the golden rule, supportive communication, conflict resolution, and even the development of greater courage in our actions.

1. Introduction

Collegial ethics (CE) proposes that we actively *support* our colleagues, not only in ordinary times but also in troubled times. It is *not* about reporting wrongdoing or the like. It is simply about supporting and building the skills needed to do so. "Support" we know means to give aid and approval, to encourage, to help sustain another, or to argue for. Of course, not every situation is appropriate for support and this is acknowledged. The word "ethics" is used here because ethics is a set of rules of conduct embraced by a group.

Supporting colleagues in everyday life with its routine ups and downs can be relatively easy. Supporting colleagues who are in trouble can be more complicated. We often hear about colleagues who are

suspected of some kind of wrongdoing. If the trouble reflects poor choices or aberrant behaviors by the colleague, then the support that can be offered changes. Some considerations are: Will there be a stigma to us if we give support? Will there be danger of any kind if support is given? Is there any benefit to us, either short term or long term? We also need to ask what we lose if support is not given. These are important questions. When someone is in trouble, it is natural to turn away and stay out of it. Our evolved brains almost reflexively do this for survival, but in the modern world, our survival reflexes are not always in our best interest.

2. Why bother?

The reason to invest in CE is a good one. It improves our quality of life, both professionally and personally, whether we are the ones giving or receiving support. But some might argue "Why bother?" They might say that CE is simply part of overall ethics and therefore not worthy of special attention. Well, it is part of overall ethics, but it has been useful, for purposes of focus, emphasis and development, to name or label subtypes of ethics. For example, we have business ethics,

biomedical ethics, etc. The same lack-of-importance argument could have been stated decades ago, for example, about the current rules in IRBs and IACUCs. But, we missed a lot back then that is explicitly required now and recognized as helpful.

In fact, CE has already been proven to be helpful, even though it has not been referred to by that name. Colleagues have grouped together to be more effective and mutually supportive. For example, women in science have formed the Association for Women in Science (AWIS, 2011) for advancing common issues. A psychologist from Colorado started his own personal colleague assistance program after needing help for a problem with his counseling practice (Munsey, 2006). Other groups as diverse as school administrators (LaPlant, 1986), dentists (Berthelsen et al., 2011), and adjunct faculty (Cristiano, 2011) have searched for collegial support. Not all of these groups and their procedures follow CE as described here, but they are similar. Importantly, collegiality is becoming more and more recognized by various institutions and is sometimes a criterion for promotion and tenure, although the AAUP has questioned the wisdom of this (AAUP, 2011). As collegiality becomes more of a focus and interest,

formal assessment of how it is taught and maintained will become more important.

Is it possible that some of the existing training in ethics tends to create some collegial problems? For example, our training in research misconduct alerts us to unexplained data and inappropriate behaviors. Can this suspicion of colleagues sometimes create tension, mistrust and damage, even though a satisfactory explanation may exist? Another example might be how the ethics of authorship requires specific intellectual contributions to papers, which is totally appropriate. But perhaps this feeling of arming and guarding yourself against the requests of colleagues may create some barriers and rough edges in our interactions. So, perhaps existing ethical training and programs can create problems in relationships with colleagues. Hopefully, this is not a major problem. However, we obviously need to strive for *both* ethical guidelines *and* supportive positions with our colleagues. CE would be a good addition to what is already taught, and perhaps it would be a positive counterweight to many of the negatives already in the system. There are sometimes struggles between PIs and members of the IRBs and IACUCs, between mentors and trainees, and among lab members. CE could only help these relations.

Some skeptics might argue that all-too-often *excess* in collegiality prevents us from getting to the bottom of bad behavior and fixing responsibility. But, that is a failure of enforcement, not a failure of ethics, which is a set of guidelines for behavior. CE argues that a focus on and study of both appropriate and inappropriate collegial behaviors will help us more readily make the distinction between the two. In any case, it seems that an emphasis on appropriate collegial behaviors can only help all of us.

3. How is CE practiced and developed?

In spite of how important collegial interactions are in our everyday personal and professional lives, there does not seem to be any training in CE. Quite amazing. There are informal discussions on how to be a good colleague, but CE, as important as it is, is not a subject in school curricula as far as I am aware. Courses on CE are needed and should be structured so that they could be done privately if necessary. Some existing training in ethics impacts on collegial interactions. The ethics of collaborations suggests common courtesies and reasonable procedures to avoid misunderstandings. The ethics of

mentoring delineates the responsibilities of mentors and mentees. The ethics of reviewing grants and papers maintains confidentiality and avoids conflicts of interest. There are other examples as well, and adding strong collegial considerations could in fact *enhance* our abilities to be ethical as collaborators, mentors and community members. Thus, ethical behavior is being taught and is in our psyche. Supportive behavior is in our psyche as well, although individuals seem to vary in its practice.

When confronted with a situation involving a colleague, some *judgment* is needed. Should we support or not support our colleague? Or, should we even prosecute and defame the colleague? Sometimes there is little or no risk in giving compassionate support. For example, a colleague may lose his or her job because of budget cutbacks, a lack of seniority, and through no personal fault. Perhaps a medical caregiver has made an honest mistake that results in serious harm to a patient, which is totally devastating not only to the patient but also to the caregiver. On the other hand, some situations are not so simple. Suppose a colleague has been charged with something, and an investigation is ongoing. It is not clear whether or not there is guilt, and we do not know all the facts. But, there can still be appropriate support by referring to the charges as "alleged" and by using benign language (see below) when discussing it.

Often *courage* will determine our actions and seems to be a *needed and missing ingredient* in many ethical situations. Imagine you get an email, at work, that refers to an important public official as a "long-winded, lying (racial word) that sounds like Hitler and drives some to drink!" It is from an important colleague who can have a big influence on your career – not someone you want as an enemy. You can ignore the email, or you can reply. If you reply, there are many things you could say. In a similar situation, here is what one colleague did. She replied by asking to be taken off the email list and said that the person referred to should be respected and honored, and she wondered what had happened to decency in this country. This led to comments from others on the email list with the same complaint. A little courage by one individual catalyzed a broader and more appropriate response by many. Another example might be a situation where a colleague is accused of wrongdoing. Many may judge and say the equivalent of "off with his head!" But, if you feel that nothing is proven, and you are not even sure if there is an official accusation or if it is just rumors,

then you have to decide whether or not to speak up and offer support by stating the limitations of what is known. In the face of loudly outspoken and blaming colleagues, it may take some courage to speak fairly about the accused. The difficulty increases if you are younger and less experienced. Courage is critical, particularly if we have to stand alone, or go against friends or powerful people. Are we able to resist a call for blacklisting when it is a personal grudge and a cruelty that denies due process (Kuhar, 2008, 2009)? Do we "go along and get along," or do we stand up for principle? Can courage be developed and nurtured? Of course it can. Many of the skills needed to be supportive can be practiced and developed.

If we examine how research ethics is currently taught in graduate schools, for example, we see a very effective approach and perhaps a good example for how CE should be taught. Training includes courses and workshops, with discussions of case studies often being at the heart of the teaching sessions. Case studies are popular because they put the issue in a real life setting, and discussion brings out many different aspects of the situation and multiple opinions. In discussion sessions, general principles are applied to specific circumstances as best one can. Outside of the classroom, mentors are required to teach ethics, and students are urged to discuss problems with the mentor. In some cases, as with IRBs and IACUCs, the principles are interpreted and experimental details are put into specific plans that are critiqued and then revised. This overall process is repeated many times. This format – the study of principles and specific cases, discussion, mentoring, putting principles into action, and then critiquing and rethinking – is very powerful. Students given this training are better prepared than those in earlier generations. Why not apply this same, proven, format to learning the skills of CE?

4. CE skills

Support is given by actions and communications. It can be an almost subliminal gesture, or it can be a stridently loud and persistent voice. But, the exact form it takes will depend on the situation and your options. Training in CE techniques would be very useful in developing and selecting options. There are many CE techniques and skills, and a few can be noted here. One of these options is to be supportive or at least neutral in our style of communication.

5. Language

We communicate by language, and we influence others and even *ourselves* by the words that we speak. Therefore, we need to be careful about what we say, and how we say it. We often do not realize the power of our spoken words. Consider the following situation and conversations.

A colleague has come under investigation regarding expenditures of his grant funds. He has a flawless track record and this has surprised everyone. A group of faculty in the dining hall are discussing this (the colleague under investigation is not there).

"Hey Fred, you know this guy best, what did he do?"
Fred replies, "I have no idea."
Someone else says "He must have done something to get investigated."
"Yeah, didn't he get a new car recently?" and everyone laughs at the intended humor.
"He hasn't shown his face lately."
"Yeah, sounds like guilty behavior to me."
"I'm going to stay away from him or else I might get investigated." There are a few serious nods and introspective faces around the table.

Now consider this alternative conversation.

"Hey Fred, you know this guy the best, what is happening?"
"I'm not sure. The alleged charges are being investigated, so I don't know. Maybe he did something bad. But, it could be a misunderstanding or maybe something minor. I've seen that before."
"Where's he been? We haven't seen him."
"I think he feels bad and maybe he's ashamed because of the investigation. But I think I'll give him a call and invite him to join us one of these days. Not so we can grill him, but so he can explain if he wants to. If he has made a mistake, then I'd like to learn from it."

It is obvious which conversation is more supportive. Does competition in the workplace – a positive force in many ways – set us up to be harsh to others? Probably so. Does human nature want us to deflate others in a self-aggrandizing way, and even to enjoy their misfortune (schadenfreude)? Perhaps yes. But again, our learned and natural tendencies may not always be appropriate or just in every situation.

Consider another situation where a young faculty member has trouble getting along with his colleagues. He feels that he must express his feelings in every interaction, but he does this in a harsh and abrasive way. Eventually, his colleagues get tired of being understanding and begin to treat him in the same, harsh way. Promotion seems unlikely and he is not very happy at work. The situation for the young man keeps deteriorating. His boss begins to think that he should look for another job. Now, how can a colleague or superior deal with this according to CE? Could he be approached with "Hey, I can help you." Or should it be "Please listen to me or you will ruin your career." It seems that a decent attempt should be made to help the socially inept colleague with collegial interactions. The young colleague has much to learn from CE and he has to take responsibility for his own actions and their effects on others. Perhaps it is exactly this type of person who has a lot to gain from studying CE. Making this somewhat more complicated is the fact that there are differences among groups in how actions are perceived. What is assertive to some may be interpreted as brash and out-of-line by others. CE focuses on the feelings of others and not so much on our own.

In our thinking and speaking, it is helpful to separate facts from judgments, and our feelings from judgments, criticisms, accusations, and punishments. This approach is recommended by some psychotherapeutic schools (Winston et al., 2004), the Center for Nonviolent Communication (CNVC, 2011), and others (for example, SCAR, 2011). Thinking based on hard evidence – or what is often referred to as evidence-based thinking – is critical in many disciplines, and an important life skill. Also, are we to express *all* our feelings, or just those that are appropriate to the situation? Expression of our feelings, no matter what they are, is not always productive.

6. Golden rule

A powerful guide to collegial behavior is the golden rule. It is ancient, enduring and found in virtually every culture. Treating others like you want to be treated – compassionately, fairly, and supportively – is very appropriate. We sometimes forget this amidst the pressures and battering of a busy and stressful life. Maybe there are some problems with using the Golden Rule when the interaction includes or requires a hierarchy, such as supervisor and employee. But respect and compassion can be included in any interaction. Also, it seems important to mention cultural differences again; how one person may want to be treated may not be how another wants to be treated. As mentioned above CE focuses on supporting others, and how they interpret our actions has to be taken into account.

"First, do no harm."

The Hippocratic Oath gives us an important hint about dealing with others. "First, do no harm" is something to think about. If our actions are destructive to others in some ways, then we should not do them, or at least we need to think twice about doing them. Sometimes you *have* to do something that could be viewed as destructive, such as giving a failing grade when it is deserved, or firing an incompetent employee. Again, we need to think twice and be sure of our evidence, but even those actions can be taken with compassion and respect.

7. Conflict resolution

There are often conflicts among colleagues, and they can be difficult to manage. Conflict is one of the things we fear and try to avoid most. But, the resolution of conflicts is a very good life skill that can be learned. CE would place a high value on "conflict resolution" (Augsburger, 1992; Bar-Siman-Tov, 2004; de Waal, 2000; CR, 2011) with its 4 Ns: conflict is neutral, natural, normal and necessary. It can and has to be managed. It requires active listening, tactful honesty, and the search for a win–win solution. Perhaps conflict resolution becomes more and more important as you rise in a hierarchy and begin to manage more and more people. Thus, there are many techniques and skills that could be assembled as part of a program on CE.

In summary, the advancement of CE, which is to be appropriately supportive of our colleagues, is desirable and would enrich our lives. Training programs need to be developed to bring together a variety of useful and existing skills. Courageously applying the golden rule and avoiding destructive acts, if possible, seem reasonable and basic parts of CE.

The author welcomes the reader's comments.

Conflict of interest

The author has no conflicts of interest relating to the contents of this paper.

Funding

Contributors

Michael Kuhar is the sole author of this original paper.

Acknowledgments

References

AAUP, 2011. http://www.aaup.org/AAUP/pubsres/policydocs/contents/collegiality.htm, accessed on August 1.

Augsburger, D., 1992. Conflict Mediation Across Cultures. Westminster /John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky.

AWIS, 2011. http://www.awis.org/, accessed on August 1.

Bar-Siman-Tov, Y. (Ed.), 2004. From Conflict Resolution to Reconciliation. Oxford University Press.

Berthelsen, H., Söderfeldt, B., Harris, R., Pejtersen, J.H., Bergström, K., Hjalmers, K., Ordell, S., 2011. Collegial support and community with trust in Swedish and Danish dentistry. Acta Odontol. Scand 69, 343–354. doi:10.3109/00016357.2011.568966.

CNVC, 2011. http://www.cnvc.org/, accessed on July 30.

CR: Conflict Resolution Skills, 2011. http://helpguide.org/mental/eq8_conflict_resolution.htm, accessed on July 30.

Cristiano, M., 2011. Adjunct Faculty Collegial Support Partnership Program (AF-CSPP) at Paradise Valley Community College, http://www.mcli.dist.maricopa.edu/LF/Fall00/forum6.html, accessed on August 1.

de Waal, Frans B.M., 2000. Primates—a natural heritage of conflict resolution. Science 289, 586–590.

Kuhar, M.J., 2008. On blacklisting in science. Sci. Eng. Ethics 14, 301–303.

Kuhar, M.J., 2009. Blacklisting among scientists. Synapse 63, 539–540.

LaPlant, J.C., 1986. Collegial support for professional development and school improvement. Theor. Pract. 25, 185–190.

Munsey, C., 2006. Helping colleagues to help themselves. Monitor Psychol. 37 (7), 35, Also found at http://www.apa.org/monitor/julaug06/colleagues.aspx, accessed on August 30, 2011.

SCAR, 2011. http://scar.gmu.edu/, accessed on August 3.

Winston, A., Rosenthal, R.N., Pinsker, H., 2004. Introduction to Supportive Psychotherapy. American Psychiatric Publishing, Washington, DC.