Almost 20 years ago, I noticed that the American Mathematical Society, unlike most professional organizations such as chemists, geologists, statisticians, etc., had no official Code of Ethics. This observation stimulated some pondering on my part, which was vented in a talk to a regional meeting of the Mathematical Association of America, and an article in the *Mathematical Intelligencer* in 1990.

I conjectured that part of the reason such an official code was absent was that, while research in pure mathematics can be good or bad, it is pretty harmless, compared to the possible danger of unethical behavior in, say, nuclear physics or chemical engineering. Such ethical issues in mathematical research as “Don’t steal other people’s results” and “Try to do the best work you can” seemed relatively “small potatoes.” But I thought that this lack of serious human consequences posed a danger for the researcher—a danger of dehumanization. I suggested counteracting this danger by active concern for the welfare of those with whom the researcher interacts—staff, students, and colleagues.

In 1995 the AMS adopted a code of ethics. The committee that developed the Code was chaired by Linda Keen, who was my fellow student at the Courant Institute in New York back in the ‘60’s.

The Code is divided into four sections. Section I, “Mathematical Research and its Presentation”, is mainly about proper attribution of credit, and avoidance of plagiarism or other improper claims of research results. Section II, “Social Responsibility of Mathematicians”, is mostly about confidentiality of recommendations, avoiding conflict of interest in reviewing and refereeing, and keeping careful records. There is a sentence forbidding discrimination by race, gender and so on. Also, mathematicians should disclose any dangers to public health or safety, and should not be exploited by temporary positions at unreasonably low salaries or heavy work load. Section III, “Education and Granting of Degrees”, says Ph. D.’s should be granted only for proper cause, and without plagiarism. Section IV, “Publications”, calls for prompt refereeing and respect for confidentiality.

Linda told me there were a number of power struggles in the committee. She wrote, “I don’t know how successful the guidelines have been. That is, are they read by anyone? Has anyone used them to show a chair or dean in dealing with a problem? Are junior faculty given a good basis on which to think they will be tenured? Are editors and referees more careful about being timely? Do people keep confidence on privileged knowledge such as what someone is working on because they saw it in a proposal or as a
referee? There are lots and lots of other questions one can ask about what is or isn’t ethical behavior.”

Developing a Code of Ethics for the AMS was a good thing to do. But it doesn’t confront the ethical conflicts I saw in my life as a mathematician. Many issues voted on in my department meetings had ethical aspects. Many choices I made day to day, as a teacher and colleague, had ethical relevance. What does it mean for a faculty member in a mathematics department at a university to behave ethically?

Based on my experience and observation since I entered the USA math world 50 years ago, I see three rival ethical codes to choose between: the Organization’s Code, the Profession’s Code, and the Human Code. (By “ethical code,” I simply mean “a set of rules of desired or approved behavior.”) These rules would be modified to fit other times and places. They apply also to other fields of academia, not only to math professors. But they do apply in particular to math professors. I will state clearly what the three codes are, as I see them.

The Organization’s Code is the demands and expectations of the University Administration (Chairs, Deans, Provosts, representing Regents, Legislature, Board of Overseers etc. The people who control the money.) I list five of their Commandments:

I. Bring in money. (Get grants and support from government agencies, private foundations, wealthy individuals or corporations, to the maximum possible amount, with the Institution (University) receiving its share.)

II. Maintain and improve the institution’s Image. (Get publicity for your research, or at least for the quality of your teaching. DON’T attract attention by doing or saying anything controversial, such as attacking government policy, or disputing popular religious or superstitious beliefs.)

III. Keep the students quiet. (DON’T encourage rebellious activity. DON’T upset them by demanding too much effort, or by frightening them with the expectation of Bad Grades.)

IV. DON’T upset Standards by just giving everyone an A. (This is called Grade Inflation.)

V. DON’T embarrass the University by talking in public about the previous Commandments.

That’s the Organization Ethics. Most math professors don’t like them very much. We prefer our Professional Standards. (Professional Standards are the criteria by which a profession measures the prestige of one of its members.)

First, there’s “Rule Zero”: be alert to the current prestige of individuals, institutions and topics. Four “corollaries” follow:
I. Get your Ph.D. at a prestigious department, under the mentorship of a prestigious professor.

II. Work in a prestigious area of research, on problems of interest to prestigious researchers.

III. Publish soon and often, in prestigious journals.

IV. Avoid low-prestige topics and people.

Despite pious words to the contrary, pedagogy remains low-prestige. “Applications” and “computing” used to be low-prestige, but today “financial mathematics”, for instance, is doing better, prestige-wise. Military mathematics has always been “low prestige” with some prestigious mathematicians, and “high prestige” with some others. “Philosophy of mathematics” is off the charts, like playing the tuba or doing abstract sculpture—an irrelevant hobby.

Perhaps these commandments for maximizing professional prestige seem not to be in the domain of ethics. If you violated them you’d be called “impractical” rather than “unethical”. But choosing to maximize your professional prestige would be part of choosing what you consider a good life. On the other hand, maximizing your popularity with Chairs, Deans, and Provosts implies a different choice of a good life.

The Organizational and the Prestige codes are partly compatible. Normal academic success depends on balancing the two. But there is another, a third ethical standard, not strictly required for academic success, that has influenced some mathematicians I know. An outstanding example of that third standard was my friend Carla Wofsy. When asked to explain her success as both a teacher and a scientist, she innocently stated two simple rules:

1. Whatever you do, do it perfectly.
2. Do all you can to help the person who is now standing in front of you.

Of course, Carla was somebody special.

But I have known other people in academia who seemed to use her rule, “Do your best to help everyone you encounter. Try not to hurt anyone.”

These three codes of ethics are not necessarily in direct conflict. They seem to be applicable in three different kinds of situations. But they can collide. For example, if a department chooses faculty primarily for prestige reasons, it may not be acting in the best interest of its students. Writing the budget--allocating money--always reflects priorities. The administration’s priorities, the priorities of professional prestige, or human welfare priorities?
When you vote in a meeting to set some department policy, what is the decisive consideration?

“Getting the Dean and Provost off our backs”?

“Increasing our department’s prestige, compared to our rivals”?

Or “Being helpful to the people involved”?

A teacher can help students or hurt them. He may be conscious of them as human beings whom he has the opportunity to help and to serve. Or he may view them just as passive recipients of his lecture. Or he may even regard them as annoying distractions from serious work. His attitude to his students reflects his priorities, that is to say, his values, his ethical choices.

You can even help or hurt the people who answer the phone or who empty your waste basket.

Everybody has ethics. The question is, which ethics do you have?

REFERENCES


Keen, Linda, undated, Personal communication.