

THE AAPOR CODE OF PROFESSIONAL ETHICS AND PRACTICES

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My role here today is to tell you about the code of professional ethics and practices that AAPOR, the American Association for Public Opinion Research, attempts to promote and enforce. My talk will fall into three parts: in the first, I describe the provisions of the code and, briefly, a bit of the history of how it developed; in the second, I describe the procedures that are followed to ensure that due process is observed; finally, I will describe a few of the cases that have been considered by the standards committee in the past few years.

Provisions of the Code

The code is in three major parts:

- I. Principles of Professional Practice in the Conduct of Work;
- II. Principles of Professional Responsibility in Dealing with the Public, Clients or Sponsors, the Profession and the Respondent; and, the most recently added section, III, Standards for Minimal Disclosure.

The Code reflects a continuing tension in the organization between those who wanted AAPOR to have a minimum set of performance standards versus those who argued that the quality of a study depended on its purpose so that disclosure was the major element of a code. At least, as of now, there is a reasonable consensus that it would be impossible to develop a set of performance standards that would be universally applicable or agreed upon. Thus, recent attention has centered on disclosure.

To be a bit more explicit, AAPOR, unlike OMB, has never been able to agree that surveys should have a minimum cooperation rate of 75 or any percent, or even that probability sampling procedures should always be used, or that there be n callbacks on a telephone survey and m mailings on a mail survey or that there should be a pretest of a questionnaire before it is fielded or many other quality practices that many of us follow routinely. There are always commercial or media researchers who can give counter-examples of studies when it would not have made sense to adhere to such performance standards.

Instead, the code stresses essential ethical principles as applied to surveys as in D1. where it states "we shall strive to avoid the use of practices or methods that may harm, humiliate, or seriously mislead survey respondents."

In the most recent revision of the code in 1986 much greater stress was placed on specific standards for minimal disclosure. As you can see from the handout, the AAPOR code requires that if a report is made public, the following minimum details be disclosed, either in the report itself, or in a supplementary document when the report is released:

1. sponsorship of the study
2. question wording, including instructions or explanations to interviewer and respondent
3. a description of the population, sampling frame, sample selection method, size of sample, completion rates, including

screening procedures, if used

4. a description of precision of the findings indicating which results are based on parts of the sample rather than the total sample, and weighting and estimation procedures. Note that the code calls for sampling errors if appropriate, but does not absolutely demand them, since they might be inappropriate for some sample designs.
5. method, location and dates of data collection.

Investigating and Punishing Violations

There is a detailed five page procedure for investigating alleged violations. The procedure is in place to ensure that the accused person or organization has due process and that AAPOR has a set of procedures that pass legal muster. We have never been sued because of these procedures, but have several times been threatened with legal action.

The process starts with a written inquiry to the AAPOR Chair of the Standards Committee. After obtaining additional information, if required, the Chair may decide no investigation is required. Otherwise, a Preliminary Review subcommittee of the Standards Committee will examine the material and decide whether or not an investigation is necessary. The executive council of AAPOR must confirm any recommendation of the Standards Committee. The name and affiliation of the original source of the complaint is known only to the Chair of the Standards Committee unless the AAPOR council requests the name of the original source. No one else is ever told the name of the source of the complaint.

If a formal investigation is decided, it is conducted by an ad hoc Evaluation committee consisting of 3 or more AAPOR members, but not the Chair of Standards. The members of the Evaluation Committee are known only to Council and each other. The committee will usually ask for additional information or clarification of existing information in writing. After considering the documentation, the Evaluation committee recommends an action which is usually one of the following:

- public or private exoneration
- public or private censure
- suspension or termination of membership

The report of the committee along with a statement from the Chair of the Standards Committee is sent to the subject of the inquiry who may request a hearing before the AAPOR Executive Council. The Council then makes a final decision and the subject of the inquiry is notified in writing of the decision by the President of AAPOR.

As you can see, this is a lengthy process and is not undertaken lightly. The number of individuals censured or suspended from membership has been very small. Some people have looked at the outcomes and scoffed at the process. I think these people miss the point.

The best analogy I can give to this group is one that we are familiar with, the validation of interviews. As we know, validating of interviews does occasionally turn up a cheater who gets fired, but that isn't the main purpose of validation. The purpose is preventive maintenance-to discourage cheating and encourage high quality work, and this is exactly the purpose of the AAPOR Code. It is to sensitize AAPOR members and, indeed, the entire survey research community, to the need for ethical behavior and minimum disclosure.

Does it work? We think it does, although obviously there is no controlled experiment. Certainly, people are aware of the code when they join and are kept aware of the code with continuing stories in the AAPOR newsletter and at AAPOR conferences. Concern about standards is one of the major agenda items at every AAPOR Council meeting.

Some Examples

Here are a few examples to illustrate the kinds of issues that have surfaced. One has related to question wording. On controversial issues where opposing sides have used survey data to support their views, we have had complaints that the question or questions were biased, thus violating section 1A2 which states "We shall not select research tools and methods of analysis because of their capacity to yield misleading conclusions."

This violation is a tough one to judge. As Schuman pointed out, in his AAPOR Presidential address last year, the different sides of an issue see the world differently and both sides claim that their wording is unbiased while the other side's is misleading. Given the inexactitude of language, it is difficult to document a deliberate attempt to mislead.

Another recent example concerned a government agency (not a federal one) that promised confidentiality to respondents, but then made the information available on an individual level as the result of a request based on the Freedom of Information Act. This agency was not a member of AAPOR, but the code is not limited to AAPOR members. The process that followed raised the sensitivity of everyone about what can be done to maintain confidentiality if promised as well as when it is and is not appropriate to promise confidentiality.

Two recent complaints claimed that standards of minimum disclosure had been violated. In one case, it was determined that all the necessary methodological information had been published in a different source. This meets the standards, but there are some people who believe that there is a certain minimum amount of information that should be part of any report made public, and not only in a separate document. This view is opposed by many others, especially the broadcast and print media, who claim they usually do not have the time or space to devote to methodological issues. In any event, this decision is made not by the researcher, but by the news producer or editor.

In the other case, a reporter on a trade paper conducted a small survey and printed a story without any methodological details. He then refused to provide the details when re-

quested to do so. Ultimately, the decision in this case was to write to the reporter and explain the issues.

This last example is not atypical. A very large percentage of code violations (but not all, by any means) are by inexperienced researchers who need to learn the standards in their field. Thus, the standards activities of AAPOR involve a variety of means of communication-letters to violators and their superiors, news stories in the AAPOR newsletter, sessions at the AAPOR conference and individual discussions. The use of the formal procedures for code violation is only the tip. This session here in New Orleans is just one of the more of the means and if we have saved a few souls here the session will have been worthwhile.

The AAPOR Code

The Code of AAPOR shall be entitled and provide as follows:

CODE OF PROFESSIONAL ETHICS AND PRACTICES

We, the members of the American Association for Public Opinion Research, subscribe to the principles expressed in the following code. Our goals are to support sound and ethical practice in the conduct of public opinion research and in the use of such research for policy and decision-making in the public and private sectors, as well as to improve public understanding of opinion research methods and the proper use of opinion research results.

We pledge ourselves to maintain high standards of scientific competence and integrity in conducting, analyzing, and reporting our work and in our relations with survey respondents, with our clients, with those who eventually use the research for decision-making purposes, and with the general public. We further pledge ourselves to reject all tasks or assignments that would require activities inconsistent with the principles of this code.

The Code

I. Principles of Professional Practice in the Conduct of Our Work

- A. We shall exercise due care in developing research designs and survey instruments, and in collecting, processing, and analyzing data, taking all reasonable steps to assure the reliability and validity of results.
 1. We shall recommend and employ only those tools and methods of analysis which, in our professional judgment, are well suited to the research problem at hand.
 2. We shall not select research tools and methods of analysis because of their capacity to yield misleading conclusions.
 3. We shall not knowingly make interpretations of research results, nor shall we tacitly permit interpretations that are inconsistent with the data available.
 4. We shall not knowingly imply that interpretations should be accorded greater confidence than the data actually warrant.

- B. We shall describe our methods and findings accurately and in appropriate detail in all research reports, adhering to the standards for minimal disclosure specified in Section III, below.
- C. If any of our work becomes the subject of a formal investigation of an alleged violation of this Code, undertaken with the approval of the AAPOR Executive Council, we shall provide additional information on the survey in such detail that a fellow survey practitioner would be able to conduct a professional evaluation of the survey.

II. Principles of Professional Responsibility in Our Dealings With People

- A. The Public:
 - 1. If we become aware of the appearance in public of serious distortions of our research, we shall publicly disclose what is required to correct these distortions, including, as appropriate, a statement to the public media, legislative body, regulatory agency, or other appropriate group, in or before which the distorted findings were presented.
- B. Clients or Sponsors:
 - 1. When undertaking work for a private client, we shall hold confidential all proprietary information obtained about the client and about the conduct and findings of the research undertaken for the client, except when the dissemination of the information is expressly authorized by the client, or when disclosure becomes necessary under terms of Section I-C or II-A of this Code.
 - 2. We shall be mindful of the limitations of our techniques and capabilities and shall accept only those research assignments which we can reasonably expect to accomplish within these limitations.
- C. The Profession:
 - 1. We recognize our responsibility to contribute to the science of public opinion research and to disseminate as freely as possible the ideas and findings which emerge from our research.
 - 2. We shall not cite our membership in the Association as evidence of professional competence, since the association does not so certify any persons or organizations.

- D. The Respondent:
 - 1. We shall strive to avoid the use of practices or methods that may harm, humiliate, or seriously mislead survey respondents.
 - 2. Unless the respondent waives confidentiality for specified uses, we shall hold as privileged and confidential all information that might identify a respondent with his or her responses. We shall also not disclose or use the names of respondents for nonresearch purposes unless the respondents grant us permission to do so.

III. Standards for Minimal Disclosure

Good professional practice imposes the obligation upon all public opinion researchers to include, in any report of research results, or to make available when that report is released, certain essential information about how the research was conducted. At a minimum, the following items should be disclosed:

- 1. Who sponsored the survey, and who conducted it.
- 2. The exact wording of questions asked, including the text of any preceding instruction or explanation to the interviewer or respondent that might reasonably be expected to affect the response.
- 3. A definition of the population under study, and a description of the sampling frame used to identify this population.
- 4. A description of the sample selection procedure, giving a clear indication of the method by which the respondents were selected by the researcher, or whether the respondents were entirely self-selected.
- 5. Size of sample and, if applicable, completion rates and information on eligibility criteria and screening procedures.
- 6. A discussion of the precision of the findings, including, if appropriate, estimates of sampling error, and a description of any weighting or estimating procedures used.
- 7. Which results are based on parts of the sample, rather than on the total sample.
- 8. Method, location, and dates of data collection.