[Ethical Guidelines for Statistical Practice: Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Professional Ethics]: Comment

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Comment

HARRY V. ROBERTS*

I hope that the Guidelines will remain guidelines and not become a first step towards restriction of entry into the statistical profession under the pretext of improving standards of statistical practice. I feel that restriction of entry would itself be unethical.

The Guidelines will help to remind statisticians, now and in the future, that statistical practice requires integrity as well as professional skill. The Guidelines mention all the important questions and say nothing objectionable. But they sound bland. As a supplement, I feel the need for a forceful statement to remind us that we are tempted to sin in our statistical practice as well as in our ordinary lives. The temptations are pervasive, yet subtle, and it is not always easy to recognize them. I've set down my own list, without attempting to order the temptations by urgency or priority.

1. Temptation to modify one's best evaluation of the data by what the audience or client wants to hear. A particularly severe temptation is posed by statistical work in jurisprudence, where it is rare that the import of the data will uniformly favor one side or the other, yet the statistician may be pressured to bring out only the favorable evidence.

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2. Temptation to elevate technical sophistication and virtuosity over the requirements of a particular application, with the danger of statistical overkill: too much, too costly, and too late.

3. (The other extreme.) Temptation to reject needed tools on the grounds that they will prove too difficult to explain.

4. Temptation to be lax in seeking out the most appropriate statistical tools.

5. Temptation to pay insufficient attention to the quality of the data under analysis.

6. Temptation to skimp on documentation of statistical methodology.

7. Temptation to neglect checks and safeguards against data problems, model failure, and processing errors.

8. Temptation to overcommit in the hope that somehow one will find the necessary time.

Some New Testament scholars prefer to render "lead us not into temptation" as "do not bring us to the test." As I review my list, I can see that I have been tested unequally by the temptations. For example, in spite of extensive legal work, I have been largely spared the first, but I have made a continuing and only partly successful struggle against the last. Yet construction of the list has helped me to face the ethical issues presented more abstractly by the Guidelines. My list is necessarily personal. Perhaps other statisticians would be helped by the exercise of constructing their own lists.

Comment

VINCENT P. BARABBA*

Reviewing and commenting on the "Ethical Guidelines for Statistical Practice" is difficult for a practicing statistician.

There is a need. My experience tells me that the objectives embodied in these guidelines by the committee are worthwhile and would make the prime purpose of my work, the utilization of information, more meaningful and, in many ways, easier to perform.

These guidelines are a good beginning but do not fully meet the need. I also know that I can find many weaknesses in the presentation, but I am equally aware of my inability to provide alternatives without weaknesses of their own. For example, though the preamble calls for statisticians to increase their competency, the guidelines tend to focus primarily on the honesty aspects of the statistician's efforts. I am sure we can all envision an example of an extremely ethical but incompetent statistician causing as much harm as his somewhat less ethical but competent counterpart. It is, of course, much easier to point out this weakness than it is to envision a viable procedure that would cause statisticians to increase their professional competence—at least in a statement of ethical guidelines.

Therefore, with significant respect for the difficulty of the task faced by the committee, I offer the following comments:

1. Having had the opportunity of working both in and out of government recently, my latest review of the guidelines leaves me with an impression they were written primarily for those involved in large-scale surveys and enumerations, with particular emphasis on government. For example, Paragraph II.A could be edited as follows:

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