



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

The Ad Hoc Committee on Professional Ethics

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Statisticians have a public duty to maintain integrity in their professional work, particularly in the application of statistical skills to problems where ^{special} private interests may inappropriately affect the development or application of statistical knowledge.

2. Statement I.C.4: Statistical reports can be prepared by anyone including the client and/or end user. If this statement pertains to the statistician, it should say so. Some thought should be given to protecting the statistician from misuse of the results by others. If we are to minimize the misuse of statistics by uninformed users in their applications of statistical results to their everyday problems, then we should provide a handbook version of acceptable practices, in a format conducive to easy understanding by this community. The Advertising Research Foundation provides an interesting model in two of its publications: *Guidelines for the Public Use of Market Research and Standards and Procedures for ARF Audits of Syndicated Survey Research*.

3. In Statement II.B.2, we run into a very complex area for any statistician, but it is particularly difficult for

those of us in product- and service-related market research. Would it be unethical, if we had information that respondents would give biased answers to some inquiries if they knew who is sponsoring the study, for us not to reveal to the respondent the "... general nature and sponsorship ... and the intended uses ..." of the study? Do we not have an equal "ethical" responsibility to our employers who are seeking truth about consumer attitudes and actions towards product features and price to withhold such sponsorship information from the respondents to minimize such bias?

Perhaps it would be a good test of the meaningfulness of these guidelines to apply them against the public testimony presented by statisticians during the two major litigations (New York and Detroit) that ensued during the taking of the 1980 Census. As a participant in those events, I found myself, from time to time, seeking guidance as to what was the ethical role of the statisticians, on both sides of the adjustment issue, as we sought to "provide a measure by which both individuals and organizations can avoid compromise of truth and can be protected from the misuse of statistics and statistical data."

Reply

THE AD HOC COMMITTEE ON PROFESSIONAL ETHICS

The Ad Hoc Committee on Professional Ethics has been in existence for five years. During that time, the committee has produced one document, the trial "Ethical Guidelines for Statistical Practice," which fills less than two pages in this issue of *The American Statistician*. What then has the committee been doing?

Although the Ethical Guidelines were a basic objective of the committee, there was a greater objective, to open up a dialogue on ethical issues within the ASA membership. Towards that end *The American Statistician* is also publishing 14 commentaries on the trial Guidelines.

The issues and criticisms raised in each commentary are important. Although the overall response favors the Guidelines, the unfavorable comments should not go unheeded for they raise problems that the committee has wrestled with since its creation, problems for which there are no easy answers.

As many of the commentaries point out, the real difficulty lies not in the content of the Ethical Guidelines but in the precise meaning of its statements, in the tone of its statements, and in the resolution of conflicts between its statements that come to our attention when attempting to use these Guidelines.

Rather than respond to these commentaries, we encourage all statisticians to read them and to consider them in formulating their own opinions about ethical guidelines.

It may be helpful to read the commentary by Margaret Martin first. She has in a few words distilled the

essential beliefs held by the Ad Hoc Committee on Professional Ethics when it completed the Ethical Guidelines. In developing these beliefs, the committee made use of more than 100 written comments on the Preliminary Guidelines, three spirited meetings with the Board of Directors, and numerous discussions among committee members. Because we believe continued input from the membership is so important, we have initiated a sample survey of ASA members.

Dr. Martin references an excellent article by Roger Jowell that should be more widely disseminated. Although we had not completely perceived it when we started, we now believe our objective was what Roger Jowell calls an educational code. Such a code would give form to ethical principles consistent with statistical training—the objectivity of statistical methodology as opposed to formulation of underlying assumptions is of special importance. It would also educate the consumers of statistics to better understand the ethical framework under which a practicing statistician operates. We hope that the Ethical Guidelines will evolve in this direction.

Why did the production of Ethical Guidelines take so long? Initially, several of us thought that an ethical code for statisticians could be developed in a year. After all, other professional groups had ethical codes. We could build on their models, and in many respects we did.

We wanted a living document that would evolve as ethical concerns were made clearer by the conflicts arising between actual practice and the Ethical Guidelines.

We thought that a code with the following three characteristics would be appropriate to achieve this. There should be

1. An initial set of guidelines that are in some sense fundamental, but open to modification;
2. A stated intent to expand the document by modifying the Guidelines, by adding sections that relate to areas of statistical application, and by including a casebook of practical examples;
3. The establishment of a continuing committee that would monitor the whole process.

Each of these parts brought difficulties with it. Distilling an initial set of guidelines from other codes and from discussions both within and outside the committee took little time. The efforts to perfect these initial guidelines have taken countless hours, and are still going on.

One interesting example is the guideline that admonishes statisticians not to accept contingency-fee arrangements. This guideline was meant to distinguish the profession of statistics from others such as law, where practitioners may receive additional payment because of successful advocacy for a client. This is in conflict with the neutrality the committee felt was desired from a statistician. Concerns were raised in committee and are still being raised (see the commentary by Frederick Mosteller). Consider the client who requests statistical analysis for a preliminary survey. After examining this analysis the client decides to do a follow-up survey and again requests a statistical analysis. Is payment for the follow-up survey analysis a contingency fee? The issue hinges on a precise definition of a contingency fee.

The potential for extension of the Guidelines raises a different set of issues. Will the extensions grow in reasonable directions? Will there be too many extensions? For example, many people seem to regard the establish-

ment of ethical guidelines as a preliminary to certification of statisticians. The committee has always believed certification to be an entirely separate issue, one that should not be incorporated into the Ethical Guidelines. The committee is optimistic that future members will support a continued but careful evolution of ethical principles.

A related concern is the development of specific guidelines for the use of statistics in particular areas. It may be difficult to separate the statistician's responsibility from that of the subject matter specialist. Examples of this arise in interpreting survey results, selecting independent variables for regression analysis, and determining sample size.

The creation of a Continuing Committee on Professional Ethics has been the most difficult issue. Many worry about the power that such a committee could acquire. If, at the beginning, we agree that the primary purpose of the committee is to be educational, then we may be able to preserve a sensitive, constructive approach that will distill actual disputes into a casebook of examples that would lay out the ethical landscape for future statistical practice.

The ASA Board of Directors has established a three-year trial period to examine these issues more closely. During this time period, what should the Ad Hoc Committee on Professional Ethics be doing? We have begun several activities. With the support of ASA Managing Director, Ed Bisgyer, we plan to inaugurate an occasional column on ethics in the *Amstat News*. We plan to develop guidelines in areas of application. We plan to use the commentaries in this issue and the responses to our recent survey to improve the trial "Ethical Guidelines for Statistical Practice." And most of all, we hope for a continuing dialogue with the ASA membership and with the wider community that uses statistics in their professional work.