



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

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The American Statistician, Vol. 37, No. 1. (Feb., 1983), pp. 18-19.

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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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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.