

## *Presidential Address*

# CAVEAT VENDITOR: SOME OBSERVATIONS ON RESEARCH SPONSORS AND PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS

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In case anyone saw an interesting-sounding title to my talk in the printed program, I should announce a change. The new title is "Caveat Venditor," let the seller beware.<sup>1</sup>

Having found a title, let me try to set a tone. My text is taken from an editorial in the Winter, 1944, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, the opening line of which reads: "For the first time, public opinion polls are the subject of serious and widespread criticism." Then, six lines later, the editor identified the focus of the criticism with the question: "Do all of the polls want to get accurate results and interpret them fairly all of the time?"

It is comforting that some questions can persist so long in the midst of so much change.

Ever since its establishment, AAPOR has given more than perfunctory attention to ethical matters. At its very first meeting in 1947, a Committee on Standards was proposed. The Committee was established the next year and has continued ever since. By 1960 we had our written code. Parallel developments were taking place in other fields during the same period. The psychologists adopted their first code, "Ethical Standards of Psychologists," in 1953 (sixty years after the establishment of the Association) and have revised it four times since. The American Sociological Association has been trying hard since about 1956 to decide on generally acceptable principles, and finally, just this year, its members have approved a Code of Ethics. The anthropologists, or more precisely the Fellows of the American Anthropological Association, issued in 1967 a "Statement of Problems of Anthropological Research and Ethics," somewhat hortatory in tone, urging anthropologists and their sponsors to consider a set of ethical prin-

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<sup>1</sup> My own Latin is extremely shaky; the research on the proper Latin form of the second word, "seller," was conducted by my colleague, Dr. Albert Gollin, a classicist of unknown dimensions. Insofar as his conclusion was correct, I gratefully acknowledge his collaboration.

ciples. The Association is now proposing an elected Standing Committee on Ethics under provisions that would permit anthropologists to submit research projects for "registration." This might be granted or refused depending on whether a project appeared to meet professional standards of research and sponsor relationships. Political scientists have never adopted a code, but three years ago set up a committee to review complaints and distributed a committee report discussing ethical matters. The economists have not yet gone beyond an endorsement of an AAUP statement on academic freedom.

A few distinct differences appear among the various existing formulations of standards, but these can usually be attributed to the types of involvement peculiar to individual professions. The anthropologists' worries about sponsorship in the post-Camelot era and their move toward certification of research probably stem from a heavy commitment to overseas field work; and some of the psychologists' emphasis on relationships with research subjects is a reflection of the prominence of experimentation and clinical investigation in the profession. Other differences seem to result from mere oversight of the obvious. Plagiarism as an ethical issue is generally, but not always, ignored in the statements.

Despite such variations, there is enough consensus among the statements of standards to allow one to construct a basic composite social science "Code of Ethics" along the following lines:

The social scientist should use the best available methodology in his research and should always aim to produce the most valid results. He should respect the rights of the human subjects of his research, including their rights to privacy and anonymity, and he should protect them from harm resulting from the research. He should not represent himself as being able to do what he can't. He should try to prevent his research from being misused or misinterpreted by others, and he should contribute to his profession by disseminating his findings as broadly as possible.

These propositions are the core elements of all the codes, and they seem rather simple and obvious. What is surprising is that it took so long for their adoption. Unless my research is faulty, all the significant systematic attempts to codify standards have taken place since World War II and most of them in the last few years.

But maybe it is not so surprising in light of the expansion of the social science fields during the same time period. Memberships of the professional associations have tripled or quadrupled. More significant, from the point of view of my discussion, has been the proliferation of areas of research in which the social scientists have become engaged. In AAPOR's case, one can merely look over the programs at annual conferences for the past several years and see what a heavy diet we

have had of sessions devoted to "new applications" of public opinion research, applications in new settings, new subject areas, and new types of sponsors.

I think we find ourselves in 1970 in a situation where development of professional norms meets problems resulting from the multiplicity of new areas in which the profession of public opinion research operates. "New application" of public opinion research means new involvements with others outside of the fraternity. Of obvious significance to an understanding of our development of ethical standards is the relationship between us and our various types of clients, as well as our relationship to the public, represented by our beloved respondents, and to the organizations that employ us—universities, research firms, or large industries.

Specifically, what follows will be about three categories of clients, for which I'm using the labels *Interventionist*, *Adversarial*,\* and *Proprietary*. Three capsule descriptions of studies, in which I've had some role, may serve to introduce these categories.

The first case was an evaluation study of a government-sponsored series of manpower training programs, run mostly by small colleges in the South to train hard-cored unemployed in skills deemed to be in short supply in the areas these colleges served. The study was of traditional design, involving interviews with a sample of people who had gone through training, with a comparison group, with trainers and other members of the colleges running the local programs, and with local employers and placement people. The inquiry was aimed at the usual evaluation research questions: how well were the programs achieving their goals and what could be done to improve them.

The second study involved a small survey of housing availability in an area of San Francisco, on behalf of the San Francisco Neighborhood Legal Services program. The lawyers were representing the interests of a group of poor people in an urban renewal area, in their struggle against relocation by the city's redevelopment agency. The agency was trying to relocate them into allegedly inadequate housing and the poverty lawyers wanted to block the plan with whatever help they could get from survey research. They had an extra problem to confront because the redevelopment agency had already done its own survey, the results of which seemed to support the agency's position.

In the third case, the client was a political party in the early stages of a national campaign. The topic was the image of the candidate as a campaigner, or more specifically how he came across to the public as a platform speaker. The campaign organization had reason to

\* Editor's Note: We can't find this word in our dictionary, but such a word is obviously needed.

believe that his performance could stand improvement, but they distrusted their own assessment of public reactions.

The first case I see as fitting into a general class of clients whose orientation toward research stems from their need for assistance in carrying out and improving programs of social change or control—the client orientation I'm calling "Interventionist." The Labor Department programs for training the less easily employed, the OEO community action program, Upward Bound or Head-Start in HEW. Model Cities in HUD, community health facilities in NIH, or—to go beyond domestic programs of the New Frontier and Great Society—the military efforts toward improvement of troop morale or control of troop dissidence, or—outside of domestic government operations entirely—the large industries which attend to questions of employee relations and the foundations which embark on social action programs—all of these have in common the intent to intervene in the conditions of people's lives for ends deemed desirable.

Although this interventionist orientation exists in both the public and the private sectors, the federal role deserves to be emphasized here because of its obvious rapid growth as we move toward some American version of a Welfare State. Since 1960 there have been some 130 new programs of social intervention (by rough count), programs large enough to support their own contracted-out evaluation research efforts. Also during this same period we have seen a proliferation of state and local programs, for the most part stimulated by federal grants-in-aid.

The researcher's role, in connection with these programs, gets its definition both from the interventionist nature of the programs and from the fact that they are, by design or de facto, experimental. Despite notable advances in the state of American sociological knowledge, it is fair to say that we cannot yet predict with great accuracy the effects of an educational innovation, or a penal reform system, or a new welfare plan. Some of the programs give explicit recognition to the tentative state of knowledge by designing small-scale experiments to precede programs, or by calling themselves "demonstration" projects.

Social scientists have, as we know, been recruited in substantial numbers to administrative positions in these areas of activity. Even more frequently survey researchers have been embraced, because of their ability to assess the effects of large-scale social experiments on peoples' opinions and attitudes and behaviors. But what the client is asking of the researcher here is apt to go way beyond a request for just an outside, objective evaluation of effects. If I were to paraphrase what the administrators of the program for training of hard-

core unemployed seemed to be saying, it would go something like this:

"We want to know how these programs are working and how they may be improved, and we need information in time to institute changes. Most of all we need information that will pin-point the areas or aspects where there are flaws of the sort that we can correct."

In our study the most pronounced and clear-cut conclusion was that program success varied with the state of the local job market, but the client was far more interested, from the beginning, in any information he could get about internal program details—were some trainers incompetent, or were they alienating the trainees? Were the project directors attending to their jobs? Were the colleges providing adequate facilities and back-up for the projects? Were the projects recruiting those for whom the program was intended? All legitimate questions, as seen from the standpoint of the client whose job it is to make programs work. He could act upon the information by insisting upon the removal of a project director or a trainer, by not renewing a project at a college, by establishing new criteria for trainee selection so as to remove some local residents from consideration.

This can quickly cast the researcher into the role of the hatchet man's helper; it may be subtly proposed by the client, and vigorously resisted by the researchers, and only performed (if at all) in some informal way rather than in written reports or memoranda. The point here is that this imperative of the client's orientation in the area of social action programs, of a need for actionable information, exists and that the researcher must confront it and resolve the dilemma it creates.

This orientation hits close to the heart of our own code of ethics, where we protect forthrightly the anonymity of our respondents. Perhaps what we meant by this was really only one sort of respondent—that already anonymous member of the "public"—the interviewed householder, 18 years old or older, in cross-sectional surveys. In many areas, but in the social action program area especially, the respondent (or informant) may be a project, or an institution, or a key individual whose identity is impossible to hide, if the researcher is to meet the needs of the client, and who stands in clear and present danger from the information he may give, or what his files may reveal, or from the things that others (in his small system) may say about him in the course of the research. This problem may be carried one step further. It can happen, in studies commissioned with the aim of social amelioration or control, that groups are identified with sufficient precision so that actions can be taken in reference to them, *even though* specific individuals are not identified, e.g. the merchants of a local community,

or the activists on a campus. If the purpose of assuring anonymity is to protect the respondent against annoyance and harm, then the injunction against identification becomes meaningless when he can be annoyed or harmed by virtue of his group identification or community role.

My second anecdote about the San Francisco case is an example of the adversarial sponsor, fighting on one side of a controversial issue. This is an area of research sponsorship on which we have had a lot of recent discussion (especially Sid Hollander and his Standards Committee). Here's where we've had our main publicity about the use or abuse of surveys. We heard yesterday about several cases of surveys conducted to advance the interests of one side of a controversial issue. The steadily increasing use of polls by political adversaries in campaigns continues to provide a flood of new examples. In connection with political polls, by the way, I would distinguish between the surveys conducted privately for internal use in improving the conduct of a campaign, by better understanding of voting patterns and salience of issues, and the polls, or parts of polls, commissioned for the purpose of producing results for release to donors or the public, thus attempting to affect the fortunes of the candidate. The first I would call "proprietary," the second "adversarial."

Beyond campaigning, political officeholders continue to use survey research for adversarial purposes. At least two studies of congressmen's use of polls show a predominant interest in employing the technique to promote the congressman's points of view on current political issues rather than as a real attempt to learn about constituents' views. Results are publicized only if they accord with his position, and serve a legitimizing function for him. Congressmen as a class vie with Encyclopedia Britannica salesmen as the main abusers of the survey technique, in this misrepresentation of the purposes of their "polls."

And, I should add, it is in this area that we researchers are most apt, out of interest in issues that seem important to us, to initiate our surveys. I'm not referring here to the regularly published syndicated polls, but rather the self-generated, *ad hoc* surveys several of us have done with our students or by tapping a conscience fund in the organization. I see no evidence that we are immune to adversarial passions.

The San Francisco poverty law case, cited earlier, provides a rather clear-cut example of how sponsor's and researcher's norms may conflict in this area. The lawyer-client made it quite clear that he would *like* to use the survey in any way, short of illegality, that he thought would best promote the interest of his clients. This is a position firmly embedded in the canon of legal ethics. The researcher felt he must guard against the selective use of his findings, and against in-

complete or misleading interpretations, a position more recently imbedded in the AAPOR code.

The lawyer-client engaged in litigation may be an uncommon case in this area, but one can construct a composite statement by the client to the researcher that fits both the lawyer and the more usual adversarial client, going something like this:

"At the moment I am only interested in promoting my cause. Your survey can help if it comes out right and it can only do harm if it doesn't. I'm not interested in any detailed analysis of factors relating to the issue, because I know where I stand on that already. And I will know how, when, and where to use any or all of the findings, so my say on that should prevail."

If I'm overstating this, I think it's only to the extent that a sophisticated sponsor realizes that it may seem a bit impolite to say all those things to a researcher so bluntly.

It seems apparent that the performance of careful, detailed, scientifically respectable work is not prominent among the requirements of such an adversarial client. In point of fact there is nothing imperative, to the client's effective use of the research, that would impel the researcher to do a good job (except in litigation where the research may be admitted as evidence and may be subject to challenge).

Apparent also is an inclination, if not indeed a pronounced predisposition, toward manipulative intent. In a broad sense, all information may be seen as something useful, sooner or later, in manipulating one's environment for one's purposes. But in the case of the adversarial use of polls, there appears to be a tendency to manipulate the information-gathering procedure—the poll itself—in the furtherance of adversarial ends.

The potential for this sort of manipulation is always there, as we know, in the case where we know enough about the state of public opinion to predict how a survey will come out, and can participate in the decision to conduct it or not, accordingly; in the case where the results of studies can be suppressed or exploited; in the case where a study done two weeks from now will produce predictably different results from the one done now, because of anticipated intervening events that will shape opinions; and in the case where one can use what is known about how variations in question wording or in sampling procedures can affect the results.

It could be considered a tribute to the advanced state of our scientific specialty that enough is known by its practitioners to permit effective manipulation in producing desired results; but that could be a mixed blessing when combined with outside client pressures, or with intense ideological convictions on the part of the practitioner himself.

Another evident aspect of adversarially inspired research is its tendency to spawn rival surveys to discount the earlier findings. One of our studies a few years back concerned how people felt about having music played on Washington buses and streetcars. It followed hard on the heels of a study done on the topic by the other side—the side of the music purveyors. Using a different sample and different types of questions, we ended up with quite a different conclusion about public attitudes toward in-transit music. In a more prominent case about four years ago, Verba and others used some new questions concerning American involvement in Vietnam, and produced a reading of public opinion somewhat at variance with previously published poll data then being used by the White House in various ways.

I suppose the case might be made that such rival surveys have some public value: the public gets a better reading of the true state of public opinion by taking the midpoint of divergent findings. But so far the rival surveys have mainly led to confusion among the public and suspicion among the practitioners.

I meant my third case, on the image of the candidate, as an example of work for *proprietary* interests. Here we had a political candidate as the proprietor; more typically it is the commercial client of consumer research. It would be presumptuous of me to expound on this area since I know little about it and most of you know a great deal; but a few rather obvious comments on how client interests bear on our ethical problems might be ventured.

What the strategists for my unnamed political candidate were saying, and what I assume the typical proprietor says to the researcher, goes something like this:

"In the interest of selling my product (or service) to as many people as possible, I need to know about popular preferences and what influences them. Therefore I want the best research job you can do within the budget. And naturally the results of the research should be kept confidential, for our own private use, since we are competing with others for the same customers."

As in the other cases discussed above, this is a legitimate client perspective, but again it involves elements of dissonance with the development of some of our standards for public opinion research. As things stand, AAPOR has no quarrel with the provision of confidentiality that is involved in contractual arrangements with proprietary clients; our code itself affirms the sanctity of the arrangement in one of its clauses; and almost all of us are involved in confidential research at one time or another. The internal revenue codes do limit the extent to which a university or nonprofit organization can engage in research to be used to the competitive advantage of a commercial enterprise as well as the conduct of partisan political research, but

there are no such restrictions on private consultantships or individual involvements of university professors or others in confidential studies.

The requirement of confidentiality of course runs counter to our aim of professional advancement through "full disclosure" of our research findings to the critical eyes of our colleagues; more specifically, it jars against the statement in our code of ethics that "we recognize our responsibility to disseminate as truly and fully as possible the ideas and findings which emerge from our research."

This is an old dilemma, and we have developed some mechanisms to mitigate its effects. For example, one of the distinguishing features of these annual conferences has been the free discussion of methodological (and sometimes theoretical) innovations stemming from confidential work on both academic and commercial studies.

The Roper Center's formulation of various levels of restriction on access to study results is a good attempt at accommodating the conflicting interests of proprietorship and dissemination. The old problem remains, however, in that the placing of restrictions on study findings for proprietary purposes can offer the researcher a safe refuge from outside critical review.

#### CONCLUSION

I've been talking about only three variants of client perspective and their relationship to professional norms—the adversary, with his interest in manipulative potentials and lack of interest in high technical standards; the social action program official, who raises problems for us in protecting the interests of our respondents; and the proprietor, who inhibits the full and free exchange of survey results. This typology is not all-inclusive. It includes what Crawford and Biderman have called the "engineering function" and the "intelligence function" in their classification of uses of social science, but it omits what they call the "enlightenment function." An example of the latter from meteorology would be the weather report that can be used by anyone according to his individual interests—by the sportsman in one way and by the farmer down the road in another. An example from our field is the regularly published syndicated poll, and there are plenty of others.

The three characters I *have* dealt with, admittedly in an oversimplified and selective way, are the ones, it seems to me, who will continue to cause the most concern as we strive for the further development and assertion of professional standards.

What should we do? I've noticed in the past that outgoing AAPOR presidents are allowed a limited number of prescriptive comments on the occasion of their swan song; here, then, are mine.

I doubt that it would help to inveigh against the importunities of clients who don't seem to understand us, though understanding more about their settings and perspectives has some value. To withdraw from participation in any of the three worrisome areas is exactly what we should not do. These are the areas of our expanding social usefulness, especially the ones I've called adversarial and interventionist. At the same time, these are also the areas of our main unresolved ethical problems, and our attention to these problems should be increased.

My first suggestion is for a much stronger assertion of our claims. Our profession seems to have advanced to a reasonably comfortable level of public acceptance, occasional "crises of credibility" notwithstanding; some think *too* high a level of acceptance. Obviously we aren't where the medical profession is in established claims to social utility. But we are enough beyond where we were in 1944 (to refer back to my opening quote) to assert our norms more strongly than has been our wont.

There is a limited sort of conflict model which says that when the claims of two sides of a bargain are in conflict, the outcome may be shaped by each side's perception of the other side's public legitimacy. I think we, as a profession, have been rather generous in our recognition of the sponsor's claims, and somewhat abstemious in promoting our own: I mean here, specifically, what we permit to be said or assumed in our agreements with our clients and in our written contracts.

My related suggestion is simply for further discussion, further attempts to gain some consensus on our standards as we confront new types of client demands, and especially further elaboration of our code to meet those contingencies with which we have not yet adequately dealt. These lie, in my view, mainly in the "adversarial" and "interventionist" areas. I realize that getting agreement on codes is not so easily achieved. Experience has shown that, in the drafting of codes of ethics, precision and clarity are the enemies of consensus. But if the traveler is lost on the way to Delphi, a point in the right direction might be helpful even if the precise route is unmapped.