

A NEW GOAL FOR AAPOR

Presidential Address

BY RICHARD H. BAXTER

Like many of you in this room, I have had a long-time affection for AAPOR and a strong commitment to it as a useful professional organization. Probably like most of you, I also think that AAPOR is a delightful social club. Maybe this affection and commitment have made me less than objective about AAPOR's place as a professional organization responsive to the changing climate of research in the democratic process and in the marketplace.

Let us meet the question head on: Is AAPOR as relevant as it should be—relevant to the role it could fulfill as the only professional organization essentially concerned with systematic, scientifically disciplined inquiry into public opinion?

We face a number of challenges, some of which might be considered opportunities; some liabilities.

There is the increasing recognition of authentic public opinion surveys as a basis for all kinds of action at various levels of government. Legislation and regulation almost always depend upon an accurate reflection of public needs and hopes, and current levels of satisfaction of these needs. In making their deliberations, regulatory agencies and lawmakers need something more than constituents' mail, the pressures of special interest groups, or the editorial opinion of mass media.

There is the increasing exploitation of the survey approach by those who fraudulently use it for sales canvassing purposes. They do so because they know of the general acceptance and legitimacy of bona fide surveys. They see the reservoir of public good will, by and large, toward honest public opinion polling. One of our greatest assets becomes, then, at the same time, a liability. Because people use our techniques, deceptively, to get sales leads or to *sell* during the "interview," the practice of our profession is being seriously affected in many places.

There is the rapid proliferation of private polls conducted for candidates for public office. The selective "leaking" of results of such surveys has presented ethical problems for legitimate survey professionals.

There is the increasing depersonalization and massive growth of the research community. Our profession is so new that twenty years ago virtually every public opinion research practitioner in the United

States could have been correctly named and identified by at least someone attending an AAPOR conference. Today one-man operations probably number in the thousands, and at the other end of the size continuum, several research empires have been built through mergers and acquisitions. This depersonalization and growth probably also contribute to growing problems of control over the quality of performance in our field.

There is the continuing prevalence of the view among the more intellectually competent and academically trained researchers that business is no place to develop your career. This is not to say that some of the better graduating students are not siphoned off into business and industry. Some are, but from what I see and hear I think there is still far too much misunderstanding between business-employed researchers and academicians concerning the content and technologies existing in the public and private sectors of our profession.

Now let us see how AAPOR has been responding to some of these developments. Four kinds of response have been made through the formal channels of the organization.

First, we have had consistently high-caliber annual conference programs. Of course, there have been weak spots. But by and large we can be proud of the relevance and quality of AAPOR's annual programs. I think this year's conference is a good example. The theme itself is the statement of a response to the American social and political climate.

Second, we should note the consistently dedicated activity of successive AAPOR Standing Committees on Standards. I have served under five different Standards Committee chairmen since the early 1950's. I can recall each one's honest concern and hard work in meeting day-to-day ethical problems—to say nothing of the tortuous building of our Code of Professional Ethics and Practices and the more recent and vitally needed Standards of Disclosure. You may remember that AAPOR was incorporated not because we thought it would be nice to be a Delaware corporation, but to protect each individual member of AAPOR from liability resulting from actions taken by AAPOR officers against any alleged offender of our Code. Down through the years the Standards Committees have contributed subtly to the discouragement of unsound or unethical research practices. There are, in fact, cases where AAPOR stopped or notably lessened unethical activities by certain firms. Maybe you haven't heard about these, but they are there as examples of what an association can do. And this with virtually no funds to pursue these matters in litigation through the courts.

A third response by AAPOR has been the encouragement and development of young people having an interest in public opinion research. The Annual AAPOR Student Competition has helped in this

regard. In addition, there has been a special ad hoc committee on student training. It was given early impetus by Don Cahalan and has been under the recent direction of Herbert E. Krugman. It involves an internship program in which AAPOR acts as a catalyst for identifying and placing students for a period of time in the research departments of various business organizations.

This year's Executive Council also has appointed a Committee on Undergraduate Training in Public Opinion Research. As Chairman, Eugene Hartley is developing a seminar at the University of Wisconsin at Green Bay which can become a prototype for other seminars. Professional researchers are brought to campus for an intensive lecture and discussion series. The purpose is to provide a social research orientation to faculty and undergraduate students in social sciences and other disciplines who have no opportunity to enroll in courses on research methodology and practice.

A fourth, very recent response to the need for relevance by AAPOR is the establishment of an ad hoc committee chaired by Barbara Lee—the AAPOR Committee on Social Concerns. As many of you know, this committee grew out of a round-table session and ensuing discussions at the 1970 AAPOR Conference. You will recall that each of us has received a letter and questionnaire from the Committee on Social Concerns asking for summaries or reports of research conducted on various issues.

So, as an organization, we have tried to address ourselves to the social and political climate affecting public opinion research. What concerns some of us is that these responses are not pervasive through any sizable segment of our membership.

AAPOR will not be effective until more of us are in some way involved in responding to factors which affect the practice and use of public opinion research.

Before pursuing this point any further, let's talk about the nature of AAPOR. I know that one of the delights of AAPOR has been its unique character for most of us. AAPOR evokes such memories as the sharing of our annual conference site one year with the Simian Society of America and the John Birch Society. AAPOR means a time every year for old friends to get together for three or four relaxed days. After all, as many of us have said, there are other organizations which we take more seriously as *professional* affiliations—the American Psychological and Sociological and Statistical and Anthropological associations, for example.

So, when we talk of more serious involvement by individual AAPOR members in activities more relevant to current needs, we know we have a problem. But the need for increasing participation by individual

AAPOR members won't go away. It will increase. So if many of us consider AAPOR to be a social organization traveling under the guise of a professional group, we should address ourselves to the issue: How can this organization be more effective in fulfilling the purpose, among others, outlined in our Certificate of Incorporation: "To stimulate research and study in the field of public opinion and social behavior; to facilitate the dissemination of research methods, techniques and findings . . . and to promote the use of public opinion research in democratic policy formation." I submit to you that committees alone, and the Executive Council alone, and a few score members volunteering their services to AAPOR committee work, can in no way approach the effectiveness which we must achieve.

I am thinking of the role of individual AAPOR members as research ombudsmen in their communities. By communities I mean local, state, perhaps even regional areas. I ask you to consider the value and propriety of establishing—under AAPOR auspices—professional consultation panels which could be called upon by legislators, public administrators, regulatory agencies, and quasi-public groups organized to serve some public good. These AAPOR professional consultation panels would serve as sources of information of both a substantive and technical character. To illustrate: through an instrument such as the Committee on Social Concern's recent questionnaire to AAPOR members, we could identify individual members having special interest and expertise in a particular area of study. Individual panels could then be developed from this inventory. Panel chairmen or their representatives would alert the Executive Council on possible opportunities for AAPOR to offer the services of the panels when legislative hearings or other public agency meetings are announced.

Now, we must make it clear that we are not in any way suggesting that these AAPOR consultation panels would substitute for research organizations or consultants.

Research would *not* be conducted by the panels. The purpose of the panels would be to bring to the *attention* of public and private agencies concerned with public issues, the availability of research technology to help gain information of value to such agencies. Furthermore, existing knowledge related to a given public issue can be brought to the attention of the appropriate agency.

Besides contributing to the solution of problems, the plan could help increase awareness of the value of bona fide public opinion research toward the solution of social problems. The AAPOR consultation panels could be called upon to report on (not to advocate) study findings and techniques pertinent to issues under study by agencies. Presumably this kind of service would be in the public interest.

A couple of practical questions could be raised here. One is—doesn't this change the character of AAPOR's mission? That is, aren't we getting into the area of lobbying or advocacy for certain causes? And, don't agencies such as legislative subcommittees, regulatory commissions, and others already have access to qualified social researchers as counselors?

I believe the answer to the first question is that clearly the consultation panels would be sources of information and that AAPOR members would not be making themselves available as spokesmen for a cause. This distinction may seem naive, but we all are conversant with the use of expert testimony in courts of law and in legislative committee deliberations. As to the second question, concerning duplication of already existing sources of expertise: the availability of AAPOR consulting panels would *supplement* whatever other sources of information and counsel are requested. Any program which promulgates professionally sound research methodology, or which makes available public opinion research findings that might not otherwise come to light, can only serve the interests of professional research and the common public good.

Let me give an example of how the professional consultation panel might work. Suppose that a state legislative subcommittee were looking into the question of establishing statewide information centers for teenagers. These information centers, according to some proposals under consideration, would be staffed by professionals and young adult volunteers who would counsel with youth on a host of personal problems—related to education, health, parental relationships, sex, use of drugs, employment, and so on. These proposed centers might be planned so as to put under one roof—with guidance from a staff empathic with young people—counseling services now available in the state from a number of other agencies.

One can see at once a host of vested interests making their views known to the legislative subcommittee—medical associations, religious groups, youth organizations, parents, school boards and administrators, employment services, just to name a few. What is needed—along with testimony from these advocacy positions—are data from bona fide research studies and professional assessments of the methodologies employed in developing this information for a particular point of view. The AAPOR professional consultation panel most appropriate to the subject could be called in. Members with reasonable access to the particular state capital would have been identified and would be invited to serve by the Executive Council, through some kind of central “clearing house” function. I don't think that we need to go into the mechanics of it now. Let's assume that if the idea has any merit,

we can develop the logistics and mechanics for it. There is nothing profound about this proposal, but I believe it can be a meaningful one. It can serve the basic purpose given in our charter. It can bring into play the values of research to the democratic process.

At this Conference we have heard and discussed many examples of social research making contributions at the *national* level. What of *other* opportunities for fulfilling our charter commitment? I don't care so much today whether my suggested approach is *the* right one. I care a great deal that we give serious consideration to it or some alternatives.

There well may be a better solution than the one I propose. If you think of it, please come forward with it, so that we can begin working toward a new goal for AAPOR: getting more involvement by more members in responsive, relevant year-round programs.