

Date: April 22, 2010

To: AAPOR Members

From: Stephen Blumberg, Chair, Standards Committee
Reg Baker, Associate Chair, Standards Committee

RE: Proposed Revisions to the AAPOR Code

The AAPOR Code of Professional Ethics and Practices expresses the principles that we, as an association, believe support sound and ethical practice in the conduct and use of public opinion and survey research. Article IX of the AAPOR Bylaws requires the Standards Committee to review the Code at least every five years to keep it current with changing environmental circumstances.

In May 2009, the AAPOR Executive Council authorized the development of an ad hoc committee to review the current Code and make recommendations to the Standards Committee regarding additions and revisions that are deemed necessary to update and strengthen the Code. The Code Review Committee included: Sandra Bauman, Jill Darling, Jennifer Franz, Tom Guterbock, Deborah Jay, Gary Langer, Ron Langley, Jay Leve, Mary Losch (chair), and Tom Smith. Individually and collectively, they brought a wealth of expertise and admirable professional commitment to this project, and AAPOR owes a debt of gratitude to them for their tireless efforts in this revision.

The Standards Committee reviewed the ad hoc committee's recommendations and offered several revisions of its own. Subsequently, Council accepted the majority of the recommendations, revised some, and ultimately crafted a version that was presented to AAPOR members for comment in March 2010.

The Standards Committee and Council reviewed all comments from 18 AAPOR members on the proposed revisions to the Code of Professional Ethics and Practices. The Standards Committee and Council thank all members who offered comments, whether critical or complementary. The revised Code is improved as a result of those members' efforts.

On April 16, 2010, Council agreed to the revisions of the AAPOR Code of Professional Ethics and Practice. The membership will now have the opportunity to vote on the Code revisions. Approval requires a majority of those voting, and at least 25% of eligible voters must cast a ballot.

The Code revision ballot will be open until 11:59 p.m. on Friday, May 14. Results will be announced at the 65th Annual Conference during the AAPOR annual business meeting Saturday, May 15 at 4:00 p.m.

Your vote is very important. Please take the opportunity to cast your vote today!

Summary of Major Revisions and Rationale

The obligations of integrity and transparency extend not just to AAPOR members. The applicability of these principles to all research professionals has been made clearer in the preamble (3rd paragraph).

The Code is a set of principles. The preamble (4th paragraph) now specifies that judgments on the merits of specific research methods will be communicated elsewhere.

Some sections of the Code were reordered into a more logical organization. To emphasize the importance of our professional responsibility toward respondents and prospective respondents those principles now come first. Disclosure standards immediately follow the principle calling for accurate and detailed disclosure.

Respect for respondents' concerns about privacy was expanded to clarify the definition of privacy as the desire not to provide personal information. The principle of integrity also calls for full disclosure when potential respondents ask how their contact information was obtained (I-A3).

New technologies and existing databases increase the risk of disclosure of identities from otherwise deidentified survey data. The principles regarding respondents' confidentiality were expanded to include the need to protect against deductive disclosure (I-A5).

The revised Code makes clear that nondisclosure agreements with private clients should not be used to prevent disclosure of the conduct and findings of the research if the private client makes factual misrepresentations or distortions of the data in a public forum, or if the work becomes the subject of a formal confidential investigation of an alleged violation of the Code (I-B1).

Transparency regarding errors, factual misrepresentations, and distortions is given added emphasis in the revised Code (I-C3).

AAPOR has an ongoing interest in expanding the number of researchers and research organizations that agree to the principles of integrity and transparency, but like membership in the organization, adherence to the Code should not be cited as evidence of professional competence (I-D2).

Inappropriate use of statistics such as margin of sampling error is one way that interpretations of data can be accorded greater confidence than is warranted. The Code was modified to specifically note that such claims of precision should take into account the methods used (II-A4).

Prohibitions on fabrication and falsification are now included in the Code (II-A5), consistent with standards codes from other social science associations.

One of AAPOR's goals is to ensure proper use of public opinion and survey research. This goal calls on us to accurately describe public opinion and survey research conducted not only by ourselves, but also by others (II-A6).

A renewed commitment to transparency calls on us to maximize disclosure regarding how research was conducted rather than limit disclosure to the minimum necessary. With that interest in mind, the Code no longer refers to “minimal disclosure.” The list of items that compose full and complete disclosure of essential information was expanded to include: who funded the survey (III-A1), the geographic location of the population under study (III-A3), visual or sensory exhibits (III-B2), estimates of the sampling frame’s coverage of the target population (III-B3), compensation or incentives offered (III-B5), details regarding the design effects and the development of sampling weights (III-B7), procedures to verify data (III-B8), and methods of interviewer training and monitoring (III-B8). Response rates are not part of required disclosure (III-C), but disclosure of summaries of the disposition of sample records remains essential.

The list of items that compose full and complete disclosure has also been expanded to account for issues that have accompanied the growth of online survey research, especially with pre-recruited panels or pools of respondents. Regardless of how data were collected, researchers should disclose the names of any sampling frame suppliers (III-A4), the methods used to recruit the panel if a panel was used (III-B4), and sufficient detail to determine whether the data were obtained from a probability or nonprobability sample (III-A4).

The survey research field has seen increased use of multiple frames and multiple methods within the same project. Transparency regarding each frame and each method is required (III-D).

The items that compose full and complete disclosure were divided into two tiers. Ideally, full disclosure of all required information would occur at the same time as the release of findings. Yet, some required disclosure elements may not be available (or available in an accessible form) at the time that the research results are released. The use of tiers permits different timeliness standards regarding how quickly disclosure must occur. Different timeliness standards for each tier are consistent with the Principles of Disclosure from the National Council on Public Polls, though the specific elements in each tier differ slightly between the Code and those Principles.

Member Comments and Summary of Subsequent Major Revisions

One commenter noted that, although AAPOR believes that everyone in the survey and public opinion research profession has an obligation to conform to these standards, only members of AAPOR and its affiliated chapters subscribe to the Code. This language was corrected in the revision (1st paragraph), and the statement about the obligations of research professionals was strengthened (3rd paragraph).

Several commenters observed that respect for respondents’ desires not to provide information may conflict with the practice of refusal conversion (I-A2). The ethics of refusal conversion efforts are complex, and the Standards committee and Council agreed not to endorse or prohibit such efforts within this Code.

One commenter suggested that there may be good reasons not to disclose a survey’s sponsorship or purpose, and others were concerned that the prohibition on false claims would prevent experiments using deception. The Belmont Report permits deception only when disclosure of

some pertinent aspect of the research is likely to impair the validity of the research. In those cases, it is sufficient to indicate to subjects that they are being invited to participate in research of which some features will not be revealed until the research is concluded. Truthful answers must be given to direct questions about the research, and an adequate plan for debriefing subjects is required. The revised Code is now consistent with Belmont Report principles regarding disclosure when debriefing cannot be assured (I-A3).

AAPOR membership and code adherence should be a point of pride for members, as one commenter asserted. The prohibition on citing membership as evidence of professional competence is now preceded by a sentence encouraging proper bragging about membership and code adherence (I-D2).

One commenter requested that the revised Code be clear that sampling that has no basis in probability methods cannot be said to approximate population values within any calculable, theoretical margin of sampling error. “Reporting of a margin of sampling error based on an opt-in or self-selected volunteer sample” is now included as an example of a misleading claim of precision (II-A4).

In response to several commenters, the disclosure requirements for public polls are now distinguished from those for private surveys (III).

Conflicts of interest can exist, and identification of known sources of research funding is an important way to evaluate these conflicts. Yet the Standards Committee and Council agreed with several commenters that original funding sources may not be known and therefore would not create a conflict of interest (III-A1).

In response to comments received, the list of items that compose full and complete disclosure of essential information was further expanded to include the presentation of questions, the exact wording of responses, and the use of quotas or selection criteria (if any) within a survey (III-A2 and III-A4).

Requirements for specific calculations of sampling frame coverage rates and of design effects were removed. It is sufficient to describe the frame’s coverage (III-B3) and to “state whether or not the reported margins of sampling error or statistical analyses have been adjusted for the design effect due to clustering and weighting, if any” (III-A5).

Many other comments were received and considered, but did not result in changes to the proposed revised Code. The Standards Committee and Council offered the following responses:

- In response to a comment about confidentiality risks when answering questions about how contact information was secured, the Standards committee and Council noted that the principle relates to “how” information was obtained and not necessarily “from whom” (I-A2).

- The words “as practicable” are included to recognize that investigators conducting proprietary research have limitations on disseminating the ideas and findings from the research (I-D1).
- In response to comments about the specificity of the requirement to disclose certain information within 30 days of any request (III-B), Council noted that it has had to resolve questions of whether lengthy delays in disclosure should be considered as violations. Specific standards were included in this revised Code to encourage and enforce timely disclosure. Regarding a comment about the need for a statute of limitations, the AAPOR “Best Practices” document can be used to define appropriate timeframes for maintenance of data and materials.
- The Code does not include a requirement (requested by several commenters) to disclose the complete questionnaire. The full questionnaire may not be available to the researcher (e.g., if the researcher purchased questions on an omnibus survey) or may not be appropriate to release (e.g., if results from only a single question are publicly released).
- Differences in recruitment techniques can account for differences in results obtained from different online panels. Therefore, the revised Code includes a requirement to disclose the methods used to recruit the panel (III-B4), even though (as one commenter noted) the identification of the vendor is already required by III-A3 (“If the sampling frame was provided by a third party, the supplier shall be named.”)
- Required disclosure of the exact formulae for “likelihood of voting weights” (requested by several commenters) was not added, as such formulae are likely to be proprietary. “A description of the variables used in any weighting or estimating procedures” is required by III-A5. Together with the sources of weighting parameters and the method by which weights are applied (III-B7), differences in likely voter definitions should be identifiable without requiring release of proprietary formulae.
- The Standards Committee and Council agreed with one commenter that “response rates, margins of error, incentives and other disclosure elements are really sample specific,” but further recognized that rates of responding by different modes (even if from the same sample) are relevant to evaluating a survey (III-D).
- Required disclosure of the field house and its location (requested by one commenter) was not added. Identity of field houses is included in III-A1 (“who conducted it”).

These revisions to the AAPOR Code of Professional Ethics and Practice are now presented to the membership for their approval.