

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

DEFINING OUR PROFESSION AND OURSELVES

MURRAY EDELMAN

I thought my term as president would be an opportunity to give back to the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) for all that it has given me over the years. Instead it has been a time in which I received much from our community. On November 7, 2000, election day, sitting in the middle of the Voter News Service decision center, I watched the statistical models that I have used for 30 years blow up in front of the world as everyone declared Gore the winner in Florida. Then after retracting that projection, I saw networks, using our data and models, prematurely project Bush the winner, only to issue another retraction an hour and a half later. The next day the web of networks, local stations, and newspapers that devoured our projections and couldn't get enough of our exit polls suddenly turned against us. They were either distancing themselves from us or blaming us.

About a week after the election as I was deep into the fallout, Nancy Belden, a friend and colleague from AAPOR Council, sent me an e-mail of support telling me to "stick with it" and then adding, "this could lead to an exciting presidential address." I thought to myself, she sure knows how to spin. It was the first reminder that I had a life outside of covering elections. But then I descended back into the problems. Over the next few months, which included restrictions on publicly speaking about what happened and a command performance before Congress, I imagined that this address would be a great public podium to say what was really on my mind. And I am going to do that; but I am also going to speak what is in my heart. It was an unusual year, and this will be an unusual address. I want to first present some theoretical distinctions that have served me well in my life and then apply them to the work we do, how we define that work, and then to AAPOR itself.

MURRAY EDELMAN is editorial director, Voter News Service. This is a slightly revised version of his presidential address given in Montreal, May 19, 2001. The author thanks George Bishop, Kevin Burke, Don Dillman, Kathleen Frankovic, George Gallup, Jr., Steven Hornberger, Warren Mitofsky, James Phelan, Stanley Presser, and Mark Schulman for helpful comments on an earlier draft.

Socialization through the Use of Language

When I was in graduate school at the University of Chicago, I was introduced to the philosophy of George Herbert Mead. According to Mead (1964), language is a key step in the evolution toward humanness. Our experience of the world is continuous, and through language we selectively extract from that experience and bring it into consciousness. For example, the first time that one tastes wine there is not much differentiation, only a strong, strange taste lacking subtlety. With more experience, perhaps over years and in dialogue with others, one learns—with the help of language—to appreciate wine's body or finesse, its elegance or robustness, the tannins of a youthful wine, and the balance and complexity of a fine old one.

It is through language that we understand our own experience, learn the shared meanings of the culture, and apply these meanings to ourselves. We can “take the role of the other” and take on others' expectations toward ourselves. This is the process of socialization. It is most obvious when watching a child trying on new kinds of behavior, but it applies to us even now.

For example, I have assumed the role of president, and have been given certain privileges such as this speech. But to get this far, I have had to show that I had internalized the expectations and values of AAPOR. So even though I have the freedom to talk about an inappropriate topic, you can be pretty sure that I won't. Similarly, most of you have had experience as conference attendees, so I can expect that you will sit through this speech.

Much of Mead's theory has been taken up by sociologists in what is called social role theory, though the sociologists' theories tend toward determinism, suggesting that society and social roles cause everything. In Mead's model, we are always actively searching to interact with our environment and to find meaning.

Mead made a lot of sense to me because he explained a defining period in my life. In early 1965, after much soul searching, I realized that I was homosexual. How, you may ask, can someone live for 21 years without realizing what turns him on? In those days, I didn't know any homosexuals. There was no *Ellen* or *Will and Grace* on TV; there were few role models; and none were positive. There was no one in my life who in any visible way either expressed these personal and private feelings or helped me understand them with language. So in effect, these feelings didn't exist. At least they weren't apparent in how I thought of myself or in my expectations to get married and have 2.2 children.

Today, the gay liberation movement has made things very different. It has led to a collective self-redefinition of what it is to be homosexual along with a change in terminology from the clinical word “homosexual” to “gay.” It has succeeded by giving a voice to these hidden feelings and by providing role models in how to express them. It used to be the love that dare not speak its name; now it is the voice that won't shut up.

But in 1962, when I was an undergraduate, there was no social support at all for my sexual identity. One time I touched a male friend in an affectionate kind of way. His response was “Are you queer?” My body froze at that word, and I quickly answered, “Of course not.” And with that freezing I denied the feeling to myself. Such is the power of a word.

Something as powerful as sexuality, which can take over our entire body and produce intense pleasure—yet, we don’t recognize it. This is the power of culture to limit our experience. There was a lot of personal discomfort during that period. There was an accumulation of feelings and experiences that just didn’t fit my concept of who I was. It was like being on an edge of a cliff. Eventually my concept of who I was had to change.

We are always selectively extracting from our experience in the world, and this process is guided by how we are socialized by the culture we live in. This is in the nature of being human. But to the extent that we can be open to experience that doesn’t fit our preconceptions, tolerate the discomfort of being on an edge, and face the unknown side, there is great power and potential insight.

Survey Research as the Language of the People

This perspective of how language and social roles can straitjacket our thinking has a direct application to us as public opinion researchers as we articulate the voice of the people, *vox populi* (Gollin 1985). Clearly, our surveys do give voice to the people. One of the primary satisfactions of my work has been seeing how the Voter News Service election day exit poll has become the record of the election. Michael Kagay (1999, p. 449), in his presidential address a couple of years ago, presented a good example of the power of surveys when he discussed how “public sentiment against removal of the president from office was one of the major factors in Bill Clinton’s survival.”

Before survey research, the public’s voice had to be interpreted by the politicians and the pundits. Often it was not interpreted well. Now there is a counterbalance to pundit comments such as this one from Sam Donaldson when the Clinton-Lewinsky sex scandal broke: “If these reports are true, President Clinton will be gone within a week” (Kagay 1999, p. 450).

But if our surveys give voice to the people, the answers to survey questions are the language through which that voice speaks, and this language is conditioned by our worldview as the researchers. This language can highlight certain aspects of the public’s experience with many types of questions. It can also ignore aspects of our collective experience by not asking certain questions or by not including certain response options.

A good example is the question we ask about a respondent’s race. The answers are distinct categories that are used everywhere for analysis. The Census Bureau has recently allowed multiple answers to this question and

has found that many Americans think of themselves as multiracial. As these new data are used, and the complexity of racial identity is explored, the way we view race will change. That could eventually affect racial tensions.

The standard question on marital status does not capture many of the new distinctions of family that are developing today. We design questionnaires as if we had the stock market slogan “the trend is your friend” in mind; if nothing else a trend question can be compared to the past. But the danger is in missing something new that applies more directly to people’s experience today.

Our selectivity shows up not just in the way we ask questions, but also in what questions we choose to use. While we have many sessions on question wording at AAPOR conferences, we could benefit from much more study of question selection. If a group is not included in our surveys, it is as though it doesn’t exist. An organization representing the disabled brought this home to me last year. They claimed that their group is at least 15 percent of the population, but their members don’t exist for politicians because they aren’t identified in exit polls. We listened to their argument and considered including a question, but it lost out to other priorities.

The selectivity in questions not only shapes reality at a political level, but it can also affect the personal one as well. The survey that most impacted my early life was the Kinsey study (Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin 1948). I first read about it in an out-of-the-way bookstore in Washington, DC. (Homosexuality was not something you asked a librarian about.) Even then I could evaluate surveys, and I knew the Kinsey study had many limitations. Yet, 6 percent of the men in the study were like me. And 6 percent—plus or minus whatever—was still much larger than just me. I wasn’t the only one.

In deciding what questions to ask and how to ask them, we researchers have to be selective. This is in the nature of conducting a survey. But let us also recognize the power we have in defining political and personal realities and be more aware of the limitations of our worldviews and be more open to experiences and lives that don’t fit in so easily. This can only increase the impact of our surveys.

Selectivity across Topics: Politics and Religion

The effect of this kind of selectivity is particularly pronounced when viewed across question topics. With the proliferation of media polls, there is a most articulated voice of the people in the political sphere. Every nuance is expressed and commented on. For example, the polls measure the president’s approval rating almost daily in an election season, and the public is heard as well in their answers to questions asking the “most important issues” and “favorable-unfavorable opinions of candidates.” This articulation also comes in the form of the answers to many new questions and new distinctions.

While there is a lot of public dialogue in the political sphere, religion is a

relatively private matter. And when something is kept private and personal, as was homosexuality, there is less room for support, expression, and growth.

Individuals grow within the context of particular religious/spiritual beliefs and use the language of those beliefs to understand and interpret their experience. For example, a mystical experience could be described as “born again,” “taken by spirit,” or “psychotic,” depending on whether it happened in the context of one’s belief system or someone else’s. There is little or no encouragement to seek meaning in other belief systems since most religious/spiritual systems are certain that they have the answers. In fact, many religions teach that they have the only way to Heaven or Nirvana or the Promised Land. In effect, each religion has built its own closet around the experience. There is little or no communication among them.

The separation of church and state has served an important purpose in protecting people who were persecuted for their religious belief (or lack thereof), but today it also means that the religious or spiritual experience does not exist in public discussions. Religion is rarely a topic at AAPOR meetings. This weekend there is only one session on religious issues, and the papers are mostly about creationism and pseudoscience.

Yet, in one of the few papers in *Public Opinion Quarterly* on religion, George Bishop (1999) pointed out that it has been consistently found that 95 percent of the public believes in God or a universal spirit, although “there may not be wide agreement what they mean by ‘God’ nor in how certain they are of what they believe.” Psychologists are finding that religion has great power in helping individuals adapt to stressful situations (Koenig, McCullough, and Larson 2001). And religions can have a powerful hold on people. In the Middle East we find people willing to fight to the death for a few acres of land because of its religious significance.

In an examination of the categories assigned to the archived questions at the Roper Center, we found that a question was over 20 times more likely to fit a politically related category than a religious one.¹ While there certainly are important sources of survey work on religion, there are few on spirituality. Gallup (Gallup and Lindsay 1999), the General Social Survey (GSS), and most recently the Pew Center (Kohut et al. 2000) have contributed to our understanding of religion.² However, very little of this work has seeped over into our national media polls.

I was struck by how our national understanding of Clinton’s continuing high approval rating during the Lewinsky matter was advanced by the addition of questions that made a distinction between approval of Clinton as president

1. Thanks to Lois-Timms-Ferrara of the Roper Center for providing the number of survey questions assigned to each topic category. We ignored standard demographic categories, such as party identification, political philosophy, and religion. Questions could be assigned to more than one category.

2. The GSS regularly asks questions about religious issues. The surveys can be found at www.icpsr.umich.edu/gss.

and approval of him as a person. I can only wonder what we could learn in the religious area if there were enough resources for polling and discussion to make these kinds of subtle but important distinctions.

The GSS has asked for many years if you “felt as though you were very close to a powerful, spiritual force that seemed to lift you out of yourself?”³ Consistently over these years, 28 percent or more of the public has answered: once or more. Some might doubt the validity of such experience and suggest that the reports are an artifact of question wording or another feature of the measurement situation. This would make for an interesting discussion. But we don’t usually have that kind of dialogue about religious and spiritual experience here at AAPOR. I would welcome that discussion because mystical experiences have been a most meaningful, exciting, ecstatic part of my life. For me, it has never been about faith or a belief in a supreme being. It has been about openness to experience and a willingness to go beyond what the culture says is true.

I believe that survey research on religious experience could make an important contribution. Can we develop questions that articulate the nuances of what is a very personal experience? Is it possible that one reason some religious groups do not trust science is that science does not validate their personal religious experiences? Could that lead to a better understanding about religious groups? Would we find that the experience of transcending our individuality and relating to a larger community has something to offer us in the public sphere?

These are certainly big questions. I don’t expect any answers soon. But I have used my waning power as AAPOR president to plan ahead to reserve a session for this topic at the next AAPOR conference. If your curiosity is piqued, and you like being on the edges, plan on attending or even preparing a presentation.

Redefining ‘Poll’

I can’t leave a discussion of the power of language without discussing the words “survey” and “poll.” While we at AAPOR can distinguish between a properly conducted sample survey and a convenience poll, many in the media and the public cannot. Some organizations profit by blurring these lines. We have adopted epithets like “FRUGing” and “SUGing” to apply to these forms of deception, but they haven’t been adopted much beyond our small group of survey researchers.

I am proposing that we start using the term “scientific sample survey” or

3. This question was asked in 1972, 1983, 1984, 1988, 1989, and 1991: “How often have you had any of the following experiences? . . . Felt as though you were very close to a powerful, spiritual force that seemed to lift you out of yourself?” The answers were never in my life, once or twice, several times, often, and I cannot answer this question.

“scientific poll” to distinguish what we do from all of the pseudosurveys. This is a distinction only occasionally made by the media. I suggest that we take the initiative, put out a clear definition of what we do, and then promote its use. We have the power to promote this distinction—just by using the terms in press releases and through our media contacts. If we can get this use of language widely accepted, it will make it clearer to clients and consumers of polls what they are paying for and what they are actually using.

A problem arises in trying to define the term “scientific poll or survey.” AAPOR doesn’t have any agreed performance standards, but there is common agreement on the main aspects of good survey practice. AAPOR Council has tried to incorporate this into a definition.

Council has unanimously agreed to a working definition of “scientific poll or sample survey” and has asked the Standards Committee to get input from the membership before our meeting in the fall. It is a definition that is inclusive of our membership but also makes a real distinction between our work and that of others. This definition will be discussed at the business meeting later today.⁴

A Look at AAPOR

Finally, I want to apply this discussion of language and the way it shapes our experience to AAPOR itself. I think of AAPOR as a community of survey researchers. As we participate in it, we are influencing each other and being defined by each other in ways we may not be aware of.

My involvement with AAPOR after my election night difficulties demonstrated its power to me. About 10 days after that fateful night, I traveled to Chicago for an AAPOR Council meeting, which was at the annual conference of the Midwest Chapter of AAPOR (MAPOR). As president, I had to attend the council meeting, but I didn’t know what to expect.

What I found, however, was a lot of support and concern for me at the council meeting. Likewise, the next day at MAPOR, colleague after colleague came up with words of support. I was astounded at how good this support made me feel.

I have always looked toward and trusted the news media for my knowledge and understanding of what is going on in the world. So for days after the election, without realizing it, I was taking on the media’s negative attitude toward my own work. This cut me off from part of myself. The support I received in Chicago helped me redefine myself as the professional that I was. And in retrospect, that e-mail message from Nancy started this whole process.

We often take the kind of support I received for granted because it is so basic to AAPOR: valuing and understanding each other’s work, looking for

4. The definition and a summary of the discussion at the business meeting can be found in the minutes of the Annual Membership Meeting, on pp. 470–478.

answers, not pointing fingers, realizing that we all have limits from our employers but that we do the best work we can. AAPOR is a source of support for us, as professionals, that is independent of our institution or our clients. Maybe that support will be a little more conscious after today.

Many of you have told me that I have lived through your worst professional nightmare. Well, it is over now, and I am stronger for it.

AAPOR has been growing steadily; we have just set another conference attendance record. As we grow we have the potential to involve even more people in the profession and by doing so, spread our view of research.

But I believe that strength is not just in numbers; it is in community. It is not the size of the membership or number of papers submitted, it is also our ability to influence and be influenced by each other and in this way to define our profession.

As president I have tried to strengthen our community by expanding the number of members participating in the work of the organization through committees, so that AAPOR is in effect meeting at more times and in different ways. I hope you will come to the business meeting to learn about the blossoming of committees, our new mentor program, and the many, many opportunities to participate in AAPOR.

Earlier members of AAPOR understood the importance of community. Al Gollin, in accepting his AAPOR award (Edelman 1998, p. 438), pointed out that the social activities are just as important as the paper sessions because they both are important ways for members to connect.

As we have been growing, there have been changes in our annual conference. But we should keep in mind the importance of community and look for ways to strengthen it. So come to the sessions today and come to the dance tonight. And don't forget the banquet this evening. You are developing your professional self in all of these venues. It is all part of defining ourselves and defining our profession.

Closing

I have focused on how we use language to selectively extract and define our experience. We act as though what we are experiencing right now is reality. However, it is only a consensual reality, based on the meaning we give to our experiences and the expectations we have for ourselves and for each other. This is part of being human.

In our role as public opinion researchers, we have the power to influence the larger cultural context by giving words to the voice of the people and articulating their feelings and experiences. Individual questions and categories can either follow the trend and continue the cultural consensus, or, like the Kinsey study, give voice to personal experiences that just don't fit in.

In some areas such as the political sphere, our research sheds much light.

But even there, not identifying membership in a group on a survey can lessen that group's political influence. In an area such as religion, where there is relatively little light from survey research, there may be great potential in providing language that can describe a commonality of experience that goes beyond the closets of individual sects to one readily accessible by all.

I have given examples from my own life of how subtle the process of socialization can be. It can take a long time to discover one's own sexual feelings when the culture disapproves of them. Even to one who has studied the process, it can take a major event such as a professional crisis to appreciate the support and affirmation of a professional group like AAPOR. It is difficult to recognize how we all have been socialized into our communities, so it is no wonder that religious people can believe that their group is the only one with the "answer," or a people of science can deny or ignore the validity of the religious experience that profoundly affects so much of the population.

An awareness of this process points to ways that we can strengthen our professional community and thereby spread our values and understanding of what makes good research. This awareness also makes us aware of the limitations of our own worldviews and opens us to new experiences. As researchers it can help us better represent the many dimensions of the voice of the people.

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