



Ethics as Basis for Confidence in Statistics

Joachim Lamel

OeSG - Austrian Statistical Society

“There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies and statistics”

Distrust towards statistics

- During centuries data were collected for government purposes only, treated as secret wisdom and the disclosure of statistics to the public was prohibited. Even in our democratic societies many people still regard statistics as a means of wielding power and an instrument of governments and private employers to prove whatever they want.
- Unfortunately these prejudices are confirmed by events in our times in the public and private realms of statistics. People don't distinguish between official statistics and other producers of varying reliability. Therefore every incorrectness harms the whole profession.

What are the reasons?

- Failed relevance
- Improper use of methods
- No disclosure of methods
- Predetermined outcomes
- Selective presentation of results
- Manipulation of results
- Incorrect interpretation of statistical results

Professional Integrity

- As far as releases are concerned, usually statistics and statisticians are held responsible for the incorrect use of correct statistical information and not the institution or person who used it incorrectly. So the responsibility for all shortcomings is shifted to statisticians.
- To improve trust and confidence in the credibility and quality of statistics and to strengthen the professional integrity of statisticians, renewed emphasis is put on ethical guidelines and Codes of Practice.

Ethics and Codes of Practice

- Ethics is a notion that applies to individuals and not to institutions
- Ethical principles apply to all statistical activities and cover the whole statistical profession
- A Code of Practice obligates an institution whose members are responsible to accomplish it
- Ethics and ethical guidelines constitute the core and overall umbrella for the in details usually more technical and operational oriented Codes of Practice



Ethics and Codes of Practice are closely interconnected:

ETHICS GUIDES US TO DO THE RIGHT THING, CODES OF PRACTICE HELP US TO DO THE RIGHT THINGS CORRECTLY

Examples

- Ethical Guidelines:
 - ISI Declaration on Professional Ethics (1985, 2010)
 - RSS Code of Conduct (Royal Statistical Society)
 - Ethical Guidelines for Statistical Practice (American Statistical Association)
- Codes of Practice:
 - Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics (UN)
 - European Statistics Code of Practice
- Swiss Public Statistics Charter
(including an Ethics Board)



ISI Declaration on Professional Ethics 2010

- The ISI council has adopted the new ISI Declaration on Professional Ethics. It will be presented during a special session on 20 October 2010, the first World Statistics Day at the IAOS* Conference in Santiago de Chile. It will be published on the ISI website in English and French and soon after become available in other languages.

*IAOS = International Association for Official Statistics

ISI Declaration on Professional Ethics 2010

- **Shared Professional Values**
 1. Respect
 2. Professionalism
 3. Truthfulness and Integrity
- **ISI Ethical Principles**
 1. Pursuing Objectivity
 2. Clarifying Obligations and Roles
 3. Assessing Alternatives Impartially
 4. Conflicting Interests

ISI Declaration on Professional Ethics 2010

- **ISI Ethical Principles**

5. Avoiding Preempted Outcomes
6. Guarding Privileged Information
7. Exhibiting Professional Competence
8. Maintaining Confidence in Statistics
9. Exposing and Reviewing Methods and Findings
10. Communicating Ethical Principles
11. Bearing Responsibility for the Integrity of the Discipline
12. Protecting the Interests of Subjects

The crucial questions

- Are ethical guidelines or Codes of Practice intended for guidance or mandatory?
- Are they enforceable or not?
- How are inadequate actions or violations dealt with?

Only the Code of Conduct of the RSS obliges individuals, is “mandatory on all qualified fellows” and enforceable.

The need of compliance of the National Statistical Institutes of EU-Member States with the EU Code of Practice is founded in the Statistical Law of 2009. Compliance is evaluated in an extensive procedure and has to be reported to the EU Council and the EU Parliament.

The Position of the Users

- For users of statistics it is vital to be able to judge the quality of statistical information
- The legal foundations of official statistics are expected to secure the accomplishment with highest professional standards and quality (the USP* of official statistics)
- Other producers of statistics operate within the limits of other regulations, especially privacy
- These producers should proclaim publicly their adoption of one of the existing ethical declarations or professional codes

* Unique selling proposition

What about complaints?

- The affirmation of observance of such a code, if it is meant to be taken seriously by the public, needs to be supplemented by the adoption of a framework within which the general public can file complaints, and an explicit policy determining how these complaints are handled (e.g. by an independent board).
- **Statistical Societies should establish such (Ethics) Boards to deal with complaints from the public.**

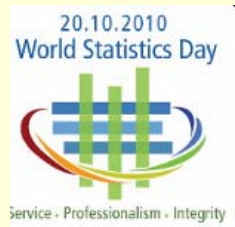
A board to build confidence

- Most complaints are due to deliberate or accidental misuse/misinterpretation of inherently correct data.
- The reputation of the statistical profession and the credibility of statistics are improved by making these misuses public.
- In this way an (Ethics) Board of a Statistical Society could contribute to a better image and higher acceptance of Statistics and Statisticians.

Trust and confidence

- The business of statistics is not only the production and interpretation of data and information, it needs to be augmented by the production of trust and confidence, especially in official statistics.
- Ethics forms the basis for these intangible goods.
- With the building of trust and confidence we can contribute to overcome Mark Twain's dictum. The vision is to turn it to: There are three kinds of facts:

facts, genuine facts and statistics



THANK YOU !

The views expressed in this presentation are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the positions of the Austrian Statistical Society (OeSG)