

A User's Guide to a Short Course on Professional Ethics and the Work of a National Statistical Office*

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1. Background

There is growing recognition of the important role that ethics can play in many aspects of the work of a National Statistical Office (NSO). This implies that the leadership and staff of NSOs should be aware of the common ethical concerns that arise in the course of their work and the ethical guidance provided by applicable national, regional, and international norms. (Although the term NSO is used here, in countries where the national statistical system is less centralized, the term “statistical agency” can be substituted without altering the meaning of what is being said.)

In response to this interest the International Statistical Institute (ISI) organized a short course on Professional Ethics at the 57th session of the International Statistical Institute, held in Durban, South Africa, 16-22 August 2009. The course was divided into three sections: Part I of the course dealt with general issues, part II with professional ethics and the work of a national statistical office, and part III with research ethics in biomedical applications, presented by Ron Wasserstein, William Seltzer, and Norbert Victor, respectively.

Subsequently, the author revised and expanded part II of the course to be a stand-alone course. The revised course, “Professional Ethics and the Work of a National Statistical Office,” is available as a 70-slide PowerPoint presentation at <https://pantherfile.uwm.edu/margo/www/govstat/integrity.htm>. It may be copied and used for any non-commercial purpose.

The primary purpose of this user's guide is to serve as an aid for those thinking about presenting the course to a group of participants. With this in mind, the guide describes the course and offers some suggestions on its presentation, with a view to encouraging relevant training in ethics for persons involved in the work of national statistical offices (NSOs).

Alternatively, the PowerPoint presentation can be used as the basis of a self-study course and this guide will then serve as a student's guide. However, there are distinct advantages in taking part in this course as part of a group exercise. The group discussion of the issues raised, whether on ethical priorities and trade-offs or on the sometimes-

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complex interactions among legal, technical, and ethical considerations, is an important element of ethics orientation or education. Some specific guidance for using the presentation for self-study, including ways of introducing valuable group discussion and using the reading list included on slides 60-69, will be found in section 5 below.

Whether a group or self-study format is used, potential participants in such training or orientation activities include:

- Exiting and new NSO staff, at all levels
- Administrators and managers of the NSO (technical and non-technical)
- Persons dealing with NSO outputs in major user ministries, departments, and agencies
- Journalists and others in the news media
- Members of professional associations of major data users and data providers
- Students in programs aimed at those thinking about a career in official statistics
- Those with a general interest in applied or professional ethics

2. Structure and content of the course

In broadest outline, the course and the underlying PowerPoint presentation is divided into four parts: preliminaries (slides 1-6¹), a quick review of general ethical principles and professional values that relate to all forms of statistical work or professional ethics generally (slides 7-14), a systematic review of ethical issues, challenges, and responses explicitly related to the work of a NSO (slides 15-59), and a bibliography of further relevant readings (slides 60-69).

The slides related to preliminaries provide an overview of the course (slides 2 and 3) and information about the mechanics of the course and an opportunity for participants to identify themselves and say a few words about their interest in the subject of the course (slides 4-6).

The slides dealing with the quick review of general ethical principles and professional values that relate to statistical work generally, cover the following topics:

- (1) the need to balance conflicting ethical principles (slide 10),
- (2) different approaches to setting ethical norms (slide 11),
- (3) the importance of perspective when thinking about and responding to possible ethical concerns (slide 12),
- (4) plagiarism (slide 13), and
- (5) responsibility to cite sources and to describe methods used and provide information about data quality (slide 13). This group of slides ends with a final slide (#14) designed to encourage discussion of the issues addressed.

¹ All references to slide numbers are to the version of the PowerPoint presentation dated 2 April 2010 on the bottom right of the first slide.

The core of the course is presented in slides 15 to 59 dealing with ethical issues and challenges that many NSO's have had to face as well as a series of safeguards and responses designed to avoid or minimize the impact of these challenges. The issues and challenges covered are:

- (1) Law, policy, and ethics: overlaps, differences, and sources of authority (slides 16-21).
- (2) Threats to the integrity of the statistical agency and its outputs (slides 22-27), explicitly addressing,
 - (a) the role of agency policies (slide 23),
 - (b) staffing issues (slide 24),
 - (c) the importance of establishing a tradition of fixed release dates for politically sensitive series (slide 25), and
 - (d) the importance of avoiding or at least documenting the suppression of results (slide 26). This group of slides ends with a final slide (#27) designed to encourage discussion of the issues addressed.
- (3) The use of very out-of-date methods (slide 28).
- (4) Issues related to statistical confidentiality and disclosure threats (slides 29-43). This topic is covered extensively because of the serious harms that have sometimes occurred when disclosures of respondent information obtained in a statistical operation have been used to target vulnerable populations and because the perception of possible harm is widespread and very often seems to depress response rates in a wide range of statistical enquiries. The group of slides dealing with confidentiality issues ends with a final slide (#43) designed to encourage discussion of the topic.
- (5) Issues arising in the course of administering a statistical agency (slides 44-45).

In order to help participants become more involved in some of the issues covered in slides 16 to 45, two small group problem-solving exercises are presented in slides 46 to 49. The first is based on an effort to intimidate an NSO to delay the release price data for political reasons (slides 46, 47, and 49) and the second an effort to obtain confidential census information to target an "enemy" population (slides 46, 48, and 49).

In part these two scenarios are useful in their own right because the issues each raises have been encountered in a number of countries. They are also designed to encourage presenters to develop alternative or additional scenarios drawing on problems and issues of particular concern to their own country or region. Such alternative scenarios can be created simply by rewriting slide 47 or 48.

The course then moves to a review of prevention and coping strategies and tools, that is, methods that can be used to prevent or deter threats or respond to those that emerge (slides 50-58). A number of prevention strategies and safeguards are presented in slides 50 to 53, followed by a set of increasingly strong coping mechanisms in slides 54 to 58.

A brief conclusion is offered in slide 59, followed by a bibliography in slides 60 to 69. A number of the references shown in the bibliography can be found at <https://pantherfile.uwm.edu/margo/www/govstat/integrity.htm>

3. Opportunities for local adaptation

Although the course was designed to be rather robust to variations in national and regional concerns, the course will be more useful and interesting if some effort is made to adapt it to local and regional conditions. Several places are provided in the PowerPoint to introduce such adaptations. They include various points in the course where participants are invited to raise issues and incidents related to their own country's NSO (slides 14, 27, 43, 45, 53, and 58).

Another important place where national and regional adaptations should be introduced is at slides 18 and 19 where reference is made to the ethics declarations of national professional societies of statisticians. Slide 19 can be easily modified to add a reference to one or more additional or alternative national ethics documents. When this course is given in a specific country, copies of the local ethics declaration, if it exists, should be provided to participants along with the most recent edition of the ISI ethics declaration. In countries where the statistical community has not yet developed an ethics document, copies of ethics documents developed by allied professionals may be helpful.

Another approach would be to leave the basic structure of the PowerPoint presentation untouched, but to add the bulk of any new material specifically related to the local situation as a new and final section 7 of the presentation, inserted just before slide 59.

Also, as noted earlier, the small group exercises are another place where local issues can be easily introduced. If participants do not themselves bring up a relevant issue, the course presenter can bring up the issue and the related history after the reports of the small-group exercises are presented and discussed by participants.

Finally, the course presenter may wish to supplement the bibliography given in slides 60 to 69, with a bibliography of papers and reports that focus explicitly on the country and region in which the course is given as well as on issues of special concern.

4. Notes for the presenter

There are four major issues the presenter will need to decide upon before offering this short course: (a) the time allotted to present the course, including time for discussion, small group exercises, and responding to questions; (b) the number of participants to be included and the arrangement of the room, (c) the language the course should be given in, and (d) the extent of local adaptations to be introduced. In addition, some consideration about the experience and qualifications of both the presenter and the participants may be helpful. Each of these topics is addressed in turn, although it is obvious that they are inter-related. For example, as one increases the extent of local adaptations or adds to the

number of participants, other things being equal, the time needed to present the course will lengthen.

4.1 Duration of short course

The basic short course requires a minimum of 90 minutes to two hours, including some time for introductions, questions and answers, one small group exercise (about 15 minutes), and no breaks. This assumes a presenter very familiar with the course and quite knowledgeable about the subject matter. One should be careful not to rush the course, so that the time allotted should be scheduled generously.

Moreover, the course is sufficiently rich that it can easily be extended to four to six hours or more. The longer format could allow for considerable new additional material allowing for local adaptation (see section 3 above), multiple and more extended small group exercises, and one or more breaks. Indeed, if the session is planned to run more than four hours, it would be useful to have a meal break. Ideally, any meal, coffee, or tea breaks would be so organized so that the food and beverages would be brought, at the appropriate time, to the room where the course was being given. Such an arrangement would facilitate both useful discussions among participants during the break and facilitate timely resumption of the course at the end of each break.

4.2 Number of participants and organization of the room where the course is given

The course was initially designed for from 8 to 15 or so participants seated around a table, seminar style. It can successfully be given if a smaller number of participants turn up. However, with fewer than four participants it is difficult to secure the extent and diversity of discussion and questions needed to keep the course reasonably lively. With more than 20 participants the course almost inevitably turns into a lecture style presentation. A few gifted lecturers can make a lecture-style presentation lively and encourage the give and take needed to enrich understanding of complex ethical issues. In the absence of someone who has such a gift combined with the substantive experience required, if more than 20 persons need to be trained it is recommended that the seminar style be maintained by organizing multiple sessions.

4.3 Language of instruction

The course in its present form is available only in English. This is fine for NSOs in English speaking countries or for trainees with a strong working knowledge of English. However, in other situations, versions of the course will need to be developed in other languages. This will involve not only translating this PowerPoint presentation into the participants' language, but probably restructuring and augmenting the list references in slides 60 to 69 as well to better reflect the cultural and intellectual traditions of participants.

4.4 Extent local adaptations are introduced

Assuming the time available permits it, a course such as this only benefits by the introduction of specific relevant examples drawn from local history. It is particularly useful to introduce stories about pertinent past ethical and policy dilemmas that the NSO faced and how they were dealt with at appropriate points in the course. Such stories help to make the course livelier and can be presented in a manner to promote discussion. This can be achieved by first presenting the dilemma, then opening the topic for discussion, and finally presenting the solution (good or bad, in retrospect) used to resolve it.

If some issue is of special relevance to the work of a given NSO, for example, responding to the needs and concerns of indigenous population groups, such issues should be addressed explicitly. This can be handled by providing participants with supplementary handout materials at appropriate points in the course or by inserting a few additional slides into the PowerPoint presentation. (If new slides are added, care should be taken about cross references to subsequent slides after the newly inserted material.)

4.5 Experience and qualifications of presenter

The presenter should be: (1) very well-experienced in the work of the NSO in question, (2) familiar with relevant national and international statistical policy and ethical norms, (3) knowledgeable about the experience of NSOs in other countries in dealing with ethics and policy issues, and (4) reasonably well-read in the related literatures of social science, data processing and statistical ethics. In addition, the presenter should have strong oral presentation and teaching skills coupled with an ability to lead discussions and the related ability to listen.

4.6 Experience and qualifications of participants

No one is too new on the staff of an NSO to receive ethics training. Equally true, no one is too long on the staff to benefit from such training. Indeed, a class that consists of both new and long-term staff is in many ways ideal. All can benefit from the exchange of ideas, questions, and experience during discussion periods.

The same point is generally valid for staff at different levels of managerial responsibility. Although some countries might consider that level of discussion among senior managers requires that they be trained separately, a case can be made that all, including senior managers, benefit from a discussion involving staff at all levels of responsibility. In any case, it is particularly important that ethics training involve all areas of work of the NSO (that is, statistical, subject matter, geography, data processing, and so on). At a certain

point, an agency may need to consider the need for refresher training for those who previously underwent ethics training. Such refresher training is beyond the scope of the present paper.

5. Use of the PowerPoint presentation as a self-study exercise

Ideally, the PowerPoint presentation will be experienced as part of a course involving other participants led by a suitable facilitator. The knowledge of the facilitator and the diverse experience and perspectives of the other students will both enrich the content of the PowerPoint slides and add to the learning experience. Unfortunately, it is not always possible to experience the course in such a group setting. In those circumstances, one may use the set of PowerPoint slides as the basis of a self-study program.

Two ways of raising the effectiveness of such a learning experience are suggested. First, if possible, see if you can encourage one or two others to use the PowerPoint slides for self-study separately from you. Then, when you have each finished going through the presentation, schedule a group discussion of the issues raised and the questions any of you may have. In any such discussion, remember that there is often no one “right” answer to complex ethical issues involving trade-offs between conflicting values, each important in its own right. The Group Problem-Solving exercises presented in slides 46-47 and slides 46-48 can also serve as the basis for a discussion among several persons using the presentation as a self-study exercise as well as the several slides (14, 21, 27, 43, 53, and 58) that ask participants to share experience, issues, or concerns.

A further important aid to the use of the slides to assist in a self-study program is making active and extensive use of the bibliography presented in slides 60-69. To facilitate such use, Table 1 organizes these 41 bibliographic references under several broad topical headings. (Of course, several of these items address more than topical subject, so individual items may be listed under more than one heading in the table.)

Those interested in a particular topic can then do more extensive study by reading several of the references listed for that topic. In view of the divergent views in the field, it is usually wise to consult more than one reference under a given topic. It should also be understood that these 41 references are an incomplete selection from a far broader and richer literature that is available.

6. Conclusion

There is growing recognition of the importance of training in ethics for the staff and leadership of an NSO (Bodin, 2009; Habermann, 2006; Seltzer, 2001; 2005). Despite this need, most training materials available in the field of ethics do not focus on the specific needs and issues relevant to the work of a national statistical agency. Over time, it may be expected that more NSOs will develop their own ethics training programs and will share them with their colleagues in other NSOs. Until that time arrives, the present

course is offered as a starting point for interested NSOs who wish to launch an ethics training program that is designed for the needs of an NSO.

The importance of undertaking such training now, and on a continuing basis, for all levels of staff and management is twofold: first, ethics training is best done independently of

**Table 1. Ethics in the Work of an NSO, Bibliographic References
by Broad Topic**

Broad topic	References
Ethical theory	Annas and Grodin (1992), Habermann (2006), Kultgen (1988), Seltzer (2005), Vanderpool (1996)
Ethical norms in statistics	Association des Administrateurs de l'INSEE (1985), ASA (1999), Gardenier (1996), ISI (1986), Jowell (1981), RSS (1993), Seltzer (2001, 2005), United Nations Economic and Social Council (1994)
Ethical norms, other	Caplan (1992), DuMez (2000), Glantz (1992), Gorlin (1999), Kultgen (1988), Murphy and Lapp (1994), Reynolds (1979), Vanderpool (1996)
Legal issues	Gorlin (1999), Habermann (2006), Martín-Guzmán and Villán (2009), Murphy and Lapp (1994), Prewitt (2000), Seltzer (2009), Seltzer and Anderson (2000)
Statistical policy norms	Bailar (2009), Barabba (1975), Duncan, et al. (1993), Forbes, et al. (2009), Gardenier (2001), Jowell (1981), Martín-Guzmán and Villán (2009), National Research Council (2009), Seltzer (2001, 2005), United Nations Economic and Social Council (1994)
NSO integrity issues	Bailar (2009), Berumen and Beker (2009), Bodin (2009), Forbes, et al. (2009), Gardenier (2001), Habermann (2006), National Research Council (2009), Powers (2002), Seltzer (1994, 2001, 2005), United Nations Economic and Social Council (1994)
Privacy and confidentiality issues	Barabba (1975), Duncan, et al. (1993), FCSM (1999), Forbes, et al. (2009), Habermann (2006), Martín-Guzmán and Villán (2009), National Research Council (2009), Prewitt (2000), Reynolds (1979), Seltzer (2001), Seltzer and Anderson (2000), United Nations Economic and Social Council (1994), USGAO (2001)
Respondent harm issues	Annas and Grodin (1992), Caplan (1992), Glantz (1992), Lifton (1986), Murphy and Lapp (1994), Prewitt (2000), Rémond et al. (1996), Seltzer (1998, 1999, 2001, 2005, 2009), Seltzer and Anderson (2000)
Safeguards and responses	ASA (2001a, 2001b), Bodin (2009), DuMez (2000), Duncan, et al. (1993), FCSM (1999), Forbes, et al. (2009), Gardenier (2001), Glantz (1992), Habermann (2006), Jowell (1981), Martín-Guzmán and Villán (2009), National Research Council (2009), Prewitt (2000), Reynolds (1979), Seltzer (1994, 2001, 2005, 2009), United Nations Economic and Social Council (1994), USGAO (2001)

any specific threat and second, the main goal of ethics training is to sensitize the staff and leadership of an NSO to the possibility of ethical problems embedded in ongoing or new work or practices. Most of us engaged in statistical work believe in the beneficence of our profession and its outputs. As with other professions, sometimes our zeal for useful, timely, and cost-effective outputs can blind us to a major negative impact of our endeavors. Unfortunately, many of the most horrific ethical failures over the past 100 years were accompanied by the excuse, "I never realized that there was an ethical issue involved." Effective and timely training in ethics is one way we in official statistics can help to ensure that we ourselves do not contribute to future tragedies or otherwise embarrass ourselves, our agencies, or the statistical profession.

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