

Chance (Summer 1991)

Going Ape O'er Parties

My friends in AAPOR (pronounced APE-or) really know how to throw a party. They do so every year and call it an annual conference. It's the only professional society meeting I've been to where booze is included in the conference registration fee. To hold expenses down (so there's more money for booze) they choose slightly out-of-the-way places. This year the party, er conference, was in Squaw Peak, Arizona, a resort hotel nestled between the Navajo Indian Reservation and the Barry M. Goldwater Artillery Gunnery Range.

AAPOR members get two brochures announcing the conference. One is a xeroxed pamphlet that describes the theme of the conference and the list of boring topics to be discussed ("Respondent bias from cognitive misinterpretation in telephone surveys.") That brochure is for your department head or spouse. The other brochure, for you, is a four-color glossy foldout filled with pictures of scantily clad conferees running along side of a lavish pool toward the cabana bar. Everyone in the pictures are either guzzling, gorging, groping, or engaged in some other type of academic behavior.

For the non-cognitivescente, AAPOR is not the Association for Annual Parties and Other Regalia, it's the American Association for Public Opinion Research. Now, there's the big giveaway. Can you imagine anyone doing research on *your* opinion? (*Householder/respondent*: "George Bush is doing a fine job." *Interviewer/researcher*: "Well, that's your opinion!") The association is even a bit defensive about it's purpose, as reflected in its motto: "If we want your opinion, we'll ask for it!"

I had always suspected that my colleagues in commercial polling organizations came to AAPOR meetings to gain an aura of academic respectability. Now I realize that these guys are not so crass. They come to AAPOR meetings for the same reason as the academics do--to enjoy the parties. There are parties to welcome newcomers, to congratulate the new president, and to plan next year's parties. In addition, there are a host of specialized parties. My favorite is the Michigan party. You are invited to this party if you (1) have ever attended the University of Michigan as a student, faculty member, or research personnel; or (2) know someone who attended Michigan; or (3) know someone who knows someone who attended Michigan; or (4) can spell Michigan.

Some people do take AAPOR meetings seriously--bartenders, waitresses, and rental agents for X-rated videos. The parties are great for really getting to know your colleagues. At one, I asked a couple who had been coming to AAPOR meetings for years how they met. The wife replied: "Random digit dialing."

But AAPOR is not all parties. The membership includes social scientists who are seriously concerned about accurate responses to opinion surveys. At last count, this cadre of hard core professionals numbered (1) Norman, (2) Seymour, (3) Howard.

The papers presented at AAPOR meetings are very different from those presented at American Statistical Association meetings. At ASA, you might see a paper like "Statistical analysis with missing data." At AAPOR, you might see "Statistical analysis with no data." My favorite AAPOR paper was "Estimating the bias in the misclassification of 'up yours' as a nonresponse."

One of the sessions was entitled "Coping with nonresponse." My wife said that her going to that session should help our marriage. The most popular session on the program was on the RAND survey of prostitutes. There were lines coming out of the doorway. What were they expecting? Free samples?

The program even lists some of the parties under clever disguises. For example, there's a "Symposium on five-card probability." But you can't fool me. I know a canasta game when I see one.

I am writing this column on the last day of an AAPOR meeting, so I must close now to catch the last session. Now let's see . . . , where did I put my swimsuit?