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Fair professional criticism in research and insights

Professional Standards Committee interpretation of the ICC/Esomar International Code on Market, Opinion and Social Research and Data Analytics

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Status: This document explains the Professional Standards Committee's interpretation of an existing requirement in the ICC/Esomar International Code on Market, Opinion and Social Research and Data Analytics.

Purpose

Article 10(e) of the ICC/Esomar International Code on Market, Opinion and Social Research and Data Analytics states: "Researchers must not unjustifiably criticise other researchers."

This note provides the Professional Standards Committee's interpretation of that requirement and is intended to help researchers understand how it should apply in practice.

This note should be read alongside the wider requirements of the Code, including that researchers should be honest, transparent, truthful and objective; that research should be fit for purpose; that findings and interpretations should be properly supported; and that researchers should follow principles of fair professional conduct and competition.

Robust criticism is legitimate

Researchers should have considerable freedom to criticise:

- methodologies and research approaches;
- research designs and individual studies;
- sampling, recruitment, measurement, analysis and quality controls;
- the interpretation and reporting of results;
- whether research is fit for its intended purpose; and
- the strengths and limitations of established or emerging approaches.

The Professional Standards Committee is not an arbiter of ordinary methodological disagreements. Debates about competing methods should remain open and vigorous unless the way in which they are conducted raises an issue under the Code.

The evidential threshold depends on the claim

Professional criticism should have an evidential basis and be conducted in a professional manner. For the purposes of this interpretation, evidence means information that can reasonably be used to support or test a claim.

Depending on the circumstances, evidence might include research data and analysis, published studies, methodological documentation, correspondence, records, direct observations, reproducible tests or other relevant information.

Where serious allegations are made, the person making the criticism should be capable of identifying the evidence on which they relied and, where appropriate, making it available to those assessing the claim.

The amount and strength of evidence required is contextual. In particular, the evidential threshold should rise in two directions:

1. **The seriousness of the claim**
   An allegation of incompetence, deliberate deception, fabrication or other misconduct requires a higher level of evidential support than criticism of a methodological limitation.
2. **The specificity of the claim**
   Criticism directed at the conduct of an identifiable individual or organisation requires a higher level of evidential support than general criticism of a method or class of methods.

Taken together, this means that the stronger and more specific the allegation, the stronger and more specific the evidence should be.

General concerns about a methodology do not, by themselves, establish that a particular individual or organisation has acted improperly. Evidence that something happened does not necessarily establish why it happened. Claims about motives, intentions, dishonesty or deliberate behaviour require evidence capable of supporting those additional assertions.

Serious criticism of identifiable people or organisations

The Code does not prevent serious criticism where the evidence justifies it.

However, before making serious allegations about an identifiable researcher or organisation, researchers should take particular care to:

- check the relevant facts;
- distinguish established facts from inference and opinion;
- take account of important uncertainty or missing information;
- avoid making claims broader than the evidence supports; and
- where appropriate, give the individual or organisation a reasonable opportunity to clarify the facts or respond.

For criticism to be considered justified, the seriousness and specificity of an allegation must not go beyond what the available evidence can reasonably support.

The manner in which criticism is expressed is also relevant. Strong or forceful language is not improper merely because it is uncomfortable or unwelcome. However, personal abuse, ridicule or gratuitously disparaging language is inconsistent with professional conduct and may raise a separate issue under the Code.

Applying this guidance to complaints

When considering a complaint about unjustifiable criticism, the Professional Standards Committee and Disciplinary Sub-Committee will consider:

- what was actually said or communicated;
- how serious the criticism or allegation was;
- how specifically it was directed at an identifiable individual or organisation;
- what evidence was available to the person making the criticism at the time;
- whether that evidence was capable of supporting the criticism made;
- whether facts, inference, interpretation and opinion were appropriately distinguished; and
- whether the criticism was expressed in a professional manner.

The central question is:

Did the seriousness and specificity of the criticism go beyond what the evidence reasonably available at the time could support?

Raising serious concerns through the complaints process

Someone who believes that the conduct of a researcher or research organisation may constitute a breach of the ICC/Esomar International Code on Market, Opinion and Social Research and Data Analytics does not need to make a public allegation in order to have the matter considered.

Concerns about a possible breach can be submitted through the Esomar Professional Standards Complaints Process.