

# Reviewing Michael Scriven's Contributions to *JMDE*

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Michael Scriven helped found the *Journal of MultiDisciplinary Evaluation (JMDE)* and, alongside Jane Davidson, served as the first coeditor, with support from doctoral students at Western Michigan University's Evaluation Center. His commitment to the journal continued after his departure from Western Michigan University; he authored multiple articles and provided direction as a *JMDE* editorial board member. In *JMDE*'s inaugural issue, Scriven (2004) outlined his vision for an open-access, internationally focused journal that would appeal to a diverse readership and serve as a dynamic platform for the evaluation community. The title, which he abbreviated as "Jim Dee" (Scriven, 2004, p. 6), was chosen to reflect the multidisciplinary nature of evaluation and its subject matters, as well as the inherent collaboration with experts in those fields. Striking a tone both aspirational and inviting, Scriven extended an open call to the global evaluation community that offered a place for diverse and developing voices.

Over the past 20 years, *JMDE* has worked hard to fulfill many of those early ideals. The journal remains free to users and authors alike, publishing manuscripts from evaluation scholars and practitioners worldwide. Additionally, its newly reconstituted board is comprised of experts from the Global North and South who bring a diverse array of real-world and academic experiences to the editorial team. The collective expertise and insightful participation of these authors, editors,

and readers remain essential to furthering *JMDE*'s mission. The journal has also stayed true to its multidisciplinary and international focus, accepting and reviewing submissions on evaluation and its intersections with traditional disciplines, original research, innovative methods, and emerging concepts. *JMDE* will continue providing an open and accepting space for any scholars, students, practitioners, or policy makers committed to enhancing or informing evaluation methods, theory, and practice.

## Scriven's Substantive *JMDE* Publications

Not only was Scriven a founding member and editor, but he was also a prolific contributor to *JMDE*. Excluding introductory remarks and notes as editor, Scriven authored just over two dozen substantive pieces that were published in *JMDE* and ranks among the journal's most-downloaded authors. Unfortunately, *JMDE* has changed hosting services since it was first established and data on downloads is limited to the last 8 years. Despite this, it is clear that Scriven's work continues to be useful and has been downloaded by thousands of readers since 2016 (Table 1).

Table 1. All Substantive Manuscripts Published in JMDE and Number of Downloads<sup>1</sup> (2016–2023)

	Title	Downloads
1.	<a href="#">A Summative Evaluation of RCT Methodology: &amp; an Alternative Approach to Causal Research</a> (Vol. 5 No. 9, 2008)	8,468
2.	<a href="#">Meta-Evaluation Revisited</a> (Vol. 6 No. 11, 2009)	2,620
3.	<a href="#">The Concept of a Transdiscipline: And of Evaluation as a Transdiscipline</a> (Vol. 5 No. 10, 2008)	1,579
4.	<a href="#">Asymmetrical Tests</a> (Vol. 3 No. 4, 2006)	1,476
5.	<a href="#">Formative, Preformative, and Proformative Evaluation</a> (Vol. 8 No. 18, 2012)	1,192
6.	<a href="#">Evaluation Bias and its Control*</a> (Vol. 7 No. 15, 2011)	1,113
7.	<a href="#">Evaluation Revolutions</a> (Vol. 11 No. 25, 2015)	850
8.	<a href="#">Evaluation as a Cognitive Process</a> (Vol. 4 No. 8, 2007)	578
9.	<a href="#">Rethinking Evaluation Methodology</a> (Vol. 6 No. 13, 2010)	433
10.	<a href="#">Mission for the Journal of MultiDisciplinary Evaluation</a> (Vol. 1 No. 1, 2004)	328
11.	<a href="#">Zen and the Art of Everyday Evaluation</a> (Vol. 1 No. 1, 2004)	273
12.	<a href="#">The Economist's Fallacy</a> (Vol. 5 No. 9, 2008)	252
13.	<a href="#">The Fiefdom Problem</a> (Vol. 1 No. 1, 2004)	229
14.	<a href="#">A Possible New Role in the Evaluation Process</a> (Vol. 7 No. 16, 2011)	210
15.	<a href="#">The Calorie Count of Evaluation</a> (Vol. 6 No. 14, 2010)	195
16.	<a href="#">The Problem of Free Will in Program Evaluation</a> (Vol. 2 No. 2, 2005)	170
17.	<a href="#">Predictive Evaluation</a> (Vol. 4 No. 7, 2007)	168
18.	<a href="#">The Faster Forward Fund</a> (Vol. 7 No. 15, 2011)	148
19.	<a href="#">The Evaluation of Research Merit versus the Evaluation of Research Funding</a> (Vol. 3 No. 5, 2006)	131
20.	<a href="#">Cost Analysis in Evaluation</a> (Vol. 5 No. 9, 2008)	130
21.	<a href="#">Converting Perspective to Practice</a> (Vol. 3 No. 6, 2006)	124
22.	<a href="#">Activist Evaluation</a> (Vol. 4 No. 7, 2007)	120
23.	<a href="#">A Scale for Describing Levels of Confirmation/Replication in Evaluation</a> (Vol. 3 No. 6, 2006)	96
24.	<a href="#">The Evaluation of Disasters</a> (Vol. 2 No. 3, 2005)	86
25.	<a href="#">Why Does Running an Electronic Journal Need Any Money?</a> (Vol. 4 No. 8, 2007)	72

<sup>1</sup> Downloads are current as of April 25, 2024.

## The Three Most-Downloaded Articles

In the most widely read piece, Scriven (2008a) conducts an interdisciplinary evaluation of randomly controlled trials (RCTs) and refutes their primacy as a method for providing evidence of causation. He opens by arguing that RCTs are completely impractical for social affairs, are logically flawed, and face serious gaps between ideal designs and real-world applications. While he does concede that RCTs have special strengths, he nonetheless posits that they are not superior to alternative methods. Scriven contends that “The real ‘gold standard’ for causal claims is the same ultimate standard as for all scientific claims; it is critical observation” (2008a, p. 18). From this position, Scriven advocates reinstating case studies as a sound method for proving causation, criticizes overreliance on RCT-based evidence and methods, offers alternative methods for establishing causation, and concludes:

In sum, there is absolutely nothing imperative, and nothing in general superior, about the need for RCT designs, let alone the weak cousin of them that is all we are being offered in the areas currently being invaded by the demand that nothing less be accepted. (2008a, p. 23)

Scriven’s impact on debate over the primacy and role of RCTs has not been insignificant, as evidenced by the number of downloads of this article, and by the hundreds of authors citing his work (Google Scholar, 2024; ResearchGate, 2024).

The second-most-downloaded publication is unsurprising given the author’s body of work. Scriven (2009) revisits the topic of metaevaluation, a term he is credited with inventing, which he defined as “second-order evaluation, i.e., evaluation of evaluation” (1969, p. 36). In celebration of the term’s 40th anniversary, Scriven provides readers with an explanation of the topic, justification for its use, and utilization guidance. He concludes:

...meta-evaluation is alive and well—and getting better, as are the defenses for it. Since meta-evaluation includes all justification—as well as all criticism—of evaluation itself, the status and possibly the survival of evaluation depend on it. It is perhaps fair to say that meta-evaluation is the conscience of evaluation, just as evaluation is the conscience of society. Long may both continue to improve! (2009, pp. vii–viii)

Over half a century later, his argument still rings true: Metaevaluation has matured over the decades from a concept to a pillar among researchers, practitioners, and institutions that rely on the now-essential tool for improving practice and supporting decisions (Jacobs & Affodegon, 2015). It was added as a critical aspect of the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation’s program evaluation standards (Yarbrough et al., 2010) and remains a flexible method when examining the strengths, weaknesses, and utility of published evaluations (Qian-Khoo, 2022).

Scriven was also one of the first to advocate that evaluation was transdisciplinary (2003), as covered in his third-most-downloaded piece (2008b). He explains that a transdiscipline can be a theory with applications in several disciplines, such as feminism or Marxism. It can also refer to a stand-alone discipline, such as logic or statistics, that is also used as a tool in other disciplines. Scriven then makes the argument that

Evaluation is another candidate for the transdisciplinary crown since it is, first, an essential element in all other academic disciplines, as the tool that distinguishes them from pseudo-disciplines... Second (perhaps giving it an edge on logic), it is also an essential element in all physical disciplines such as tai chi, marathon running/training, dance, etc., since there are clearly standards of merit in these disciplines and judgments of it. (2008b, p. 65)

He goes on to say that evaluation is an independent discipline, with a large number of individuals working as evaluators, distinct professional associations, and its own logic and methods. The number of evaluation theories with broad applications that exist today, as well as the growing number of professional evaluators and associated organizations, offer further support for Scriven’s original argument.

## Conclusion

Scriven’s impact and legacy remain embedded down to the very bones of the journal he helped to found (to the point that words in the publishing template still occasionally default to British English), and his vision for the journal is still a guiding light in its mission. His contributions as an author are just as impressive, having been viewed by thousands even though *JMDE* is still not included in several major indexes and databases.

Links to all 25 of Scriven's substantive manuscripts published by *JMDE* are available above for those looking to dive further into his work. While reviewing more than the top three, readers are encouraged to reflect on how much of this highly influential scholar's work remains relevant today.

6(11), iii–viii.  
<https://doi.org/10.56645/jmde.v6i11.220>  
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