

From 10 Steps to 10 Themes: Consequential Contributions in the Collective Compositions of Ray C. Rist

Michael Quinn Patton
Utilization-Focused Evaluation

Background: This article is part of a collection recognizing, appreciating, and celebrating the substantial lifetime evaluation contributions of Ray C. Rist.

Purpose: This article presents 10 overarching themes from the impressive body of Ray Rist's published works.

Setting: I write as a long-time colleague of and collaborator with Ray C. Rist.

Intervention: Not applicable.

Research Design: Not applicable.

Data Collection and Analysis: In the introductory article, the authors offered an inventory of Ray Rist's published works, some 34 books and 159 articles and chapters. I undertook a systematic qualitative thematic analysis of those publications as an experienced qualitative analyst. I brought to the

identification of themes, and their importance, my own knowledge of evaluation as an experienced evaluation practitioner, theorist, and author.

Findings: Ten overarching themes from the impressive body of Ray Rist's published works: (1) focusing evaluation on results, not just activities; (2) taking a systems perspective on M&E; (3) engaging in comparative analysis; (4) valuing methodological diversity and rigor; (5) policy evaluation as a distinct and important focus of evaluation; (6) evaluation capacity building; (7) evaluation serving and advancing social justice; (8) editing prowess as a contribution to sharpen communications and enhance evaluation use; (9) working collaboratively; and (10) addressing and synthesizing leading-edge issues. This overview concludes with the challenge of transforming evaluation to evaluate transformation. Ray Rist has long been in the forefront with prescient writings spotting, identifying, and naming transformational trends with implications for evaluation.

Keywords: *thematic analysis; evaluation results; M&E systems; comparative analysis; methodology; policy; capacity building; social justice; collaboration; synthesis; transformation.*

Focus on Results

Ray Rist was an early thought leader on and advocate for results-based monitoring and evaluation (M&E). With Jody Zall Kusek he wrote the influential book *Ten Steps to a Results-Based Monitoring and Evaluation System: A Handbook for Development Practitioners* (Kusek & Rist, 2004). The 10 steps emphasize and reinforce the focus on results throughout the M&E process, beginning with designing M&E systems to be results-focused. Subsequent steps maintain that focus,

The *Ten Steps* book became the core of the 2-week course on fundamentals of M&E for the International Program for Development Evaluation Training (IPDET), which Ray co-founded in 2000. Hundreds of aspiring development evaluators took that course from Ray and his fellow IPDET instructors. The book title and contents spotlight the importance of being results-focused.

The *Ten Steps* book was followed by an article Ray co-authored in the prestigious international scholarly journal *Evaluation*, entitled, “How Will We Know the Millennium Development Goal Results When We See Them?: Building a Results-Based Monitoring and Evaluation System to Give Us The Answers” (Kusek et al., 2005).

In a chapter Ray wrote in the book he co-edited with Nicoletta Stame entitled *From Studies to Streams*, he elaborated the “E” in monitoring and evaluation, emphasizing the importance of focusing monitoring on results:

One important lesson learned from reform initiatives is that when a government switches its focus from measuring whether a program is “on track” to whether the program is achieving its desired objectives or goals (results), its overall performance improves... It is this linking of implementation progress (performance) with progress in achieving the desired objectives or goals (results) of government policies and programs that makes results-based M&E most useful as a tool for public management. (Rist, 2006, pp. 4–5)

This was followed by publication with Linda Morra Imas of *The Road to Results* (Morra Imas & Rist, 2009), a comprehensive guide for designing and conducting effective development evaluations. That book grew out of and became the new centerpiece of the IPDET core course experienced by hundreds of evaluators from around the world, keeping them focused on *evaluating results*.

M&E Systems

Throughout the distinguished career and extensive writings of Ray Rist, he has led the way in conceptualizing, establishing, and maintaining M&E SYSTEMS. Most evaluation books provide guidance in how to conduct an evaluation. But Ray always took a systems perspective:

The focus of the [*Ten Steps*] handbook is on a comprehensive 10-step model that will help guide you through the process of designing and building a results-based M&E SYSTEM. (Kusek & Rist, 2004, p. xii; emphasis added)

The bookends of the *Ten Steps* are systems-focused:

Step 1. Conduct a Readiness Assessment for implementing an M&E SYSTEM.

Step 10. Sustaining the M&E System: Ensure ongoing commitment and sustainability of the SYSTEM. (emphasis added)

He understood and articulated the challenges of building and maintaining an M&E system. He explained that M&E is a political process with technical dimensions, so that when introducing technical tools, models, and approaches into these systems, they are often superimposed onto existing systems and, if not carefully positioned, nurtured, and used, can become tangential and largely symbolic (Kusek & Rist, 2004).

The book *From Studies to Streams* is subtitled *Managing Evaluative Systems* (Rist & Stame, 2006). He cautioned in his chapter in that edited volume:

The challenge is how governments can begin to build results-based monitoring and evaluation systems so as to provide credible and trustworthy information for their own use and to share with their citizens. (Rist, 2006, p. 4; emphasis added)

Comparative Analysis

Comparative analysis across countries and systems constitutes a significant theme in the publications of Ray Rist. He edited the Comparative Policy Evaluation series that is described throughout this volume. The specific titles are listed in the annex of the Gray & Lindkvist article (this volume), which sets out the history and importance of that series. Also of note is the volume Rist edited featuring the contributions of Irving Louis Horowitz, founder of

Transaction Publishers, entitled *The Democratic Imagination* (Rist, 1994a). Ray Rist and I share the affliction of being sociologists, and we were both in graduate school in the late 60s/early 70s, he at Washington University in Saint Louis and me at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Horowitz was a leading international sociologist, credited with conceptualizing “Third World” to describe developing countries. My sociology theory course in graduate school featured the contributions of Irving Louis Horowitz. Ray Rist studied with him directly, as Horowitz was a professor at the time at Washington University. It is a tribute to the intellectual brilliance and editing skills of Ray Rist that Horowitz trusted him with creating and editing the Comparative Policy Evaluation series.

The comparison-driven analytical thinking of Ray Rist is illuminated by his role chairing the Working Group on Policy and Program Evaluation formed in 1986 by the International Institute on Administrative Sciences (IIAS), located in Brussels. Featuring eight completed papers comparing eight nations, Rist edited the group’s first book in the Comparative Policy Evaluation series, *Program Evaluation and the Management of Government* (Rist, 1990). The book made a unique contribution to the evaluation literature in that it presented rich organizational descriptions of evaluation systems through a comparative framework. He had established the value of international comparative analysis in an earlier book, *Finding Work: Cross National Perspectives on Employment and Training* (Rist, 1986).

Further focus on comparative analysis of evaluation utilization led to his editing a special issue of *Knowledge in Society*, “Cross-National Perspectives on the Policy Uses (and Abuses) of Evaluation” (Rist, 1989a). The volume examined national information systems, comparing how organizations digest the information generated by evaluation and policy analysis. A second utilization inquiry compared uses of information generated internally versus externally. Reflecting on that work in an interview published in *Evaluation Practice*, the predecessor of the *American Journal of Evaluation*, Rist said, “We wanted to know how evaluation finds its way into the learning system (Rist & Johnson, 1991, p. 50).

Methodological Diversity and Rigor

Ray Rist served as director of operations in the General Government division of the United States General Accounting Office (GAO) and was a senior staff member of GAO’s Program Evaluation and Methodology Division (PEMD), directed by

Eleanor Chelimsky. In addition to conducting specific evaluations of government policies and programs, PEMD published methodological guides (see Barrados this volume for more details). Ray co-authored with Carl Wisler an influential volume, *Designing Evaluations* (Rist & Wisler, 1984). That publication contains a succinct and powerful statement on methodological rigor that I have long cited in my own writings and include as a PowerPoint slide in the trainings I conduct and speeches I give on evaluation. *Savor this:*

Strong evaluations employ methods of analysis that are appropriate to the question, support the answer with evidence, document the assumptions procedures, and modes of analysis, and rule out the competing evidence. Strong studies pose questions clearly, address them appropriately, and draw inferences commensurate with the power of the design and the availability, validity, and reliability of the data. Strength should not be equated with complexity. Nor should strength be equated with the degree of statistical manipulation of data. Neither infatuation with complexity nor statistical incantation makes an evaluation stronger. The strength of an evaluation is not defined by a particular method. Longitudinal, experimental, quasi-experimental, before-and-after, and case study evaluations can be either strong or weak. A case study design will always be weaker than a sample survey design in terms of its external validity. A simple before-and-after design without controls will always present problems of internal validity. Yet sample surveys and control groups can be impossible for a variety of reasons. That is, the strength of an evaluation has to be judged within the context of the question, the time and cost constraints, the design, the technical adequacy of the data collection and analysis, and the presentation of the findings. A strong study is technically adequate and useful—in short, it is high in quality (GAO/PEMD, 1991, pp. 16–17; inspired by Chelimsky, 1983)

Ray Rist developed particular expertise in qualitative methods and published several articles on using qualitative data in policy research and evaluation, including in the influential *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Rist, 1994a; 2003; for other qualitative methods contributions see also Rist, 1978, 1982, 2011; Rist & Joyce, 1995; Hall & Rist, 1999).

Policy Evaluation

Much of the evaluation literature focuses on program evaluation. Ray Rist was more focused on policy evaluation, about which he developed deep expertise. As noted above, he edited and contributed writings to the Comparative Policy Evaluation series (see Boyle et al. and Gray & Lindkvist, this volume).

He edited Volume 8 of *Policy Studies Review Annual* (Rist, 1987), reflecting the shifting nature of policy debates. The volume introduced seven entirely new substantive areas for policy evaluation, including the viability of the “safety net,” information policy, work and labor policy, immigration policy, and environmental policy. The volume is also characterized by explicit attention to two critical aspects of the policy analysis craft—the strengths and weaknesses of various methodological approaches and the role that noneconomic factors should play in economic policy analysis. The volume also provided a policy evaluation framework for such widely disparate arenas as national security and health care. His publications on policy evaluation span 5 decades.

Rist emphasized that methodology should not be given prominence when judging the field of policy evaluation. Instead, he suggested a perspective that accounts for methods, use, and valuing. Judgments of policy evaluation, he wrote,

... should be made on the degree to which policy evaluation has demonstrated the consequences of present and past policy initiatives, clarified present policy choices, informed decision makers as to the costs and benefits of different options, and re-framed the debates on pressing national problems, be they housing, education, or health care, to name but three. (Rist, 1995, p. xiii)

Evaluation Capacity Building

A consistent and dominant theme in Ray Rist’s professional contributions and writings has been evaluation capacity building (ECB). His visionary work in co-creating the International Development Evaluation Association (IDEAS) and the International Program for Development Evaluation Training (IPDET) has been founded on a deep commitment to evaluation capacity building. I had the privilege of teaching for IPDET every year in Ottawa during the co-directorship of Ray and Linda Morra Imas. It was always a highlight of my summer, and I never ceased to marvel at the enthusiasm, commitment, and support Ray gave to

the hundreds of aspiring evaluation professionals from around the world. The program was designed not just to build competence and enhance capacity but to build community. Ray Rist has contributed as much as anyone to the global evaluation community, the details of which are described throughout this volume. I have been a part of countless meals at IPDET with participants seeking guidance on theses and dissertations. Ray was adept at helping them find appropriate literature. He served on many of those thesis and dissertation committees.

The 10 steps to a results-based M&E system begin and end with ECB. The first step is assessing capacity to undertake evaluation. The 10th step is nurturing and sustaining capacity.

The book *Influencing Change: Building Evaluation Capacity to Strengthen Governance* (Rist et al., 2011) opens with this framing of ECB: “The term [ECB] is knocked about and used as if its meaning were recognized by all. The reality is quite different” (p. xiii).

Ever attentive to the cumulative nature of knowledge, the book built on “the groundbreaking volume” by Boyle & Lemaire (1999), *Building Effective Evaluation Capacity: Lessons from Practice* from the Comparative Policy Evaluation series. That new book aimed to unpack the ECB concept, offer concrete strategies for application, and report updated learnings from experience.

Ray Rist also emphasized the importance of building capacity at the local level to enhance participatory evaluation. “Local people, traditionally thought of as the targets of development efforts, need to be co-participants in designing, implementing, and, indeed, evaluating these same projects and programs” (Rist, 1995, pp. 171–172). This meant empowering local people through capacity development.

His writings, then, address multiple levels of ECB: individuals (both evaluators and local people participating in evaluations); building program, project, and organizational evaluation capacity; establishing, nurturing, and sustaining the capacity of national evaluation systems (e.g., Houqi & Rist, 2002); and building international development agency capacity to do credible and useful evaluations.

Social Justice

From the very beginning of his career, Ray Rist’s own research and evaluation, and subsequent publications, have been guided by strong values of social justice. “Although public schools are free and open to all children,” he wrote in a 1970 analysis

(“Student Social Class and Teachers’ Expectations: The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy of Ghetto Education”) “there are still educational setbacks for children of a lower social class.” In observing a kindergarten classroom, he documented that after only 8 days in the new school year, the teacher felt that she knew her students’ abilities well enough to assign them to separate worktables. The three groups she created were clearly based on social class rather than student ability. He concluded that the way children of different socioeconomic classes were tracked and treated by their kindergarten teachers could possibly affect the rest of their lives (Rist, 1973).

Throughout his writings there is evidence of his commitment to social justice across systems, whether education, health, leadership development, capacity building, or the evaluation profession itself. (See Sridharan & Nakaima in this volume, connecting Ray’s work on addressing inequities in education in the United States in the 1970s to his more recent work and ideas on how learning systems can address problems of inequities and multiple functions of learning systems more generally.)

Editing Prowess

I am in awe of Ray Rist’s editorial prowess. For those who have not ever edited a book, it may seem on the surface like a simple process. You pick a topic, identify authors who have knowledge or research to contribute, collect their papers, and put them in a book. Would that it were that easy! I have edited three volumes of *New Directions for Evaluation* and have contributed to a number of edited volumes, including some of those edited by Ray. We have discussed the job of editing. It can be grueling.

It begins not just by identifying a topic but conceptualizing it in a way that will constitute a significant contribution to the field—and will interest a publisher and the targeted reading audience. That means writing a proposal that outlines the book, its importance, the qualifications and contributions of chapter authors, and a timeline for the manuscript. Chapter abstracts must be solicited from potential authors and made coherent for the full book proposal. Then begins the arduous process of getting contributors to actually write and submit their manuscripts on time. Those draft manuscripts have to be reviewed with feedback for revision. Writers for whom English is not their first language will need additional writing support and copyediting help. Eventually, when the manuscripts are submitted, they must be put together coherently. The editor writes a preface or

introduction and sometimes a concluding chapter or afterword.

That’s but a condensed overview of the process—when it goes well. Some authors never get their chapters written—or write them so badly that they have to be rejected. Rejections and requests for major revisions must be handled with delicacy and diplomacy.

Ray Rist has gone through this process, by my count, at least 27 times, generating an accumulated body of work that stands as the pinnacle of international evaluation scholarship. Indeed, this current volume is testimony to and evidence of the merit, worth, and significance of Ray Rist’s editorial prowess.

But the editing process begins with and depends on identifying a potential topic. Ray was especially astute at spotting the value of and pulling together presentations from conferences like IDEAS and international meetings. For example, Robert Picciotto and Ray Rist (1995) edited and published a volume, *Evaluation and Development*, based on proceedings of a World Bank conference. Papers from the 2011 Global Assembly of IDEAS were the basis for the forward-looking volume *Development Evaluation in Times of Turbulence: Dealing with Crises That Endanger Our Future* (Rist et al., 2013). That led to Comparative Policy Evaluation Volume 20, retitled *Evaluation and Turbulent Times: Reflections on a Discipline in Disarray* (Furubo et al., 2013), featuring an afterword by Ray Rist (2013) called “Evaluation and Turbulence: Beyond an Incremental View of the World.” Rist selected papers presented at the 2009 IDEAS biannual global assembly in Johannesburg, South Africa, on the conference theme of “Getting to Results: Evaluation Capacity Building and Development” and co-edited them into the publication *Influencing Change: Building Evaluation Capacity to Strengthen Governance* (Rist et al., 2011).

Collaboration

Ray Rist’s publications exemplify professional collaboration. By my count, Ray has either coauthored articles and chapters, or co-edited entire volumes, *with 42 different colleagues*—and

I expect that's an undercount.¹ That is an amazing record of professional collaboration. In the previous section I described the challenges of editing. Using an Olympian judging framework, compared to working alone, I would suggest that collaborative editing doubles the degree of difficulty and co-writing triples it. Successful collaborative writing and editing requires deep mutual respect, shared values, and sophisticated interpersonal skills, including astute negotiation, compromise, and conflict resolution capabilities. The increased quality of collaborative endeavors is what makes the effort worthwhile and rewarding, as evidenced by Ray's body of work.

Addressing and Synthesizing Leading Edge Issues

The career publications of Ray Rist manifest an astute prescience for identifying and addressing emerging trends and issues that would affect both development and evaluation—and their intersection. He was an early advocate for pushing M&E to measure results, not just monitor inputs and activities. He understood that evaluation use would ultimately depend on building and sustaining M&E systems that could produce streams of information for ongoing decision-making, pushing the field beyond the dominant practice of conducting one-off evaluations that produced long reports. The Comparative Policy Evaluation series was always on the leading edge. Examples include

- Asking “can government learn”?
- Integrating budgeting, auditing, and evaluation.
- From studies to streams.
- Evaluating the complex.

The series balanced focusing on positives (“Successes in Evaluation”) with inquiry into negatives (“A Critical View of the Evaluation Enterprise”).

Ray's international experiences, consultations, perspectives, and contacts allowed him to discern contextual and cultural variations that undergirded his sophisticated cross-national comparisons and emergent trends, like evaluation capacity-building in the People's Republic of China (Houqi & Rist, 2002).

A consistent and significant contribution of Ray's editing has been his insightful syntheses as editor, whether writing an introductory overview for a book and/or writing a concluding chapter with thematic integration and reflections. Indeed, as a consummate participant in and observer of evaluation's development, his reflections offered astute insights into the past that formed the foundation for generating visionary possibilities and recommendations for the future. An illuminative example is his reflections with Linda Morra Imas on what could be learned about ECB from IPDET. They reflected that IPDET took pride in not only building evaluator capacity among participants but modeling M&E, what they called “walking the talk”:

IPDET walked the talk. Every year ... extensive evaluations were conducted on faculty and curricula for the core course and each workshop. Impact evaluations were done by external evaluators every 5 years. Quality standards were high....Workshops with low evaluation ratings were not renewed (below 85% participant satisfaction) and workshops were changed frequently to reflect new developments in evaluation methods. (Morra Imas & Rist, 2023, p. 63)

For example, they introduced new workshops addressing complexity and systems thinking. IPDET was the first place I developed and taught workshops on *Developmental Evaluation* (Patton, 2011) and *Blue Marble Evaluation* (Patton, 2020). IPDET, with support from Ray and Linda, was where those approaches were incubated, developed, tested, and eventually published.

The leading edge includes an in-depth examination of *Policy Evaluation in the Era of COVID-19* (Eliadis et al., 2023). The editors, including Ray, set the context in their introductory chapter:

In a world where the inter-related priorities of public health, the environment, human security, democracy, and human rights were in rapid flux, evaluation professionals became engaged in a larger battle about and for truth and evidence in ... a post-truth, anti-science political world. That is the context we should consider as we extract lessons about transforming evaluation to deal with these challenges. (Eliadis et al., 2023, pp. 2–3).

¹ Based on an unpublished bibliography of the publications of Ray Rist assembled by René de Winter and Richard Boyle.

Which brings us to the challenge of transforming evaluation to evaluate transformation. Transformation has become the clarion call of our times. IDEAS supported the publication of *Transformational Evaluation for the Global Crises of Our Times* (van den Berg et al., 2021). It is beyond the scope of this review to cite the growing literature on transforming evaluation to address the polycrisis we face, incorporating complex dynamic systems understandings in the hope that evaluation can contribute to a more equitable and sustainable world. But Ray Rist has long been in the forefront with prescient writings spotting, identifying, and naming transformational trends with implications for evaluation.

Conclusion: 10 Themes

This review opened spotlighting the importance of *Ten Steps to a Results-Based Monitoring and Evaluation System: A Handbook for Development Practitioners* (Kusek & Rist, 2004). We now have a companion framework:

Ten Transformational Themes Manifest in the Published Works on Evaluation by Ray C. Rist.

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1. FOCUS on RESULTS
2. TAKING a SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE on M&E
3. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS
4. METHODOLOGICAL DIVERSITY and RIGOR
5. POLICY EVALUATION
6. EVALUATION CAPACITY BUILDING
7. SOCIAL JUSTICE
8. EDITING PROWESS
9. COLLABORATION
10. ADDRESSING and SYNTHESIZING LEADING-EDGE ISSUES

You'll find additional evidence in the rest of this volume for the themes I've spotlighted here, as well as other themes identified by these distinguished colleagues and friends of Ray. Let me conclude by inviting you to participate in a Word Cloud exercise in which you must enter one word to describe the

CONSEQUENTIAL CONTRIBUTIONS in the COLLECTIVE COMPOSITIONS of RAY C. RIST.

My one-word entry:
TRANSFORMATIVE.

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