
From Perpetuation to Disruption of Disadvantages: Learning from a Young Ray Rist and Implications for the Future of the Field of Evaluation

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Background: Given the amplification of vulnerabilities created by the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for evaluation to more intentionally explore the intended and unintended consequences of interventions in contemporary society has increased. In this paper, we analyze one of Ray Rist's earliest papers, "Student Social Class and Teacher Expectations: The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy in Ghetto Education," to explore whether it has lessons for contemporary evaluators

Purpose: This paper seeks to learn lessons for evaluation (in identifying themes important to addressing inequities) from a seminal paper published more than 50 years ago. We explore lessons that a research study conducted in a classroom in the United States might have for contemporary evaluators.

Setting: Not applicable.

Intervention: Not applicable.

Research Design: Not applicable.

Data Collection and Analysis: Not applicable.

Findings: The following four implications of Rist's ideas are discussed: (1) the need to pay close attention to the architecture of interventions; (2) the need to explore how the implementation of some interventions can lead to exclusion of individuals; (3) the need for evaluation as a field to move from verdicts to explanations; and (4) evaluators' need to pay attention to the dynamics of mutually reinforcing processes that exacerbate disadvantages over time.

Keywords: *realist evaluation; longitudinal studies; equity-focused evaluation; mutually reinforcing processes; inclusion; multiple disadvantages.*

We are two evaluators with interests in the dynamics of social change and the potential of evaluation approaches and evaluative thinking to contribute to meaningful social change. We are based in Hawai'i and have an interest in Indigenous approaches to evaluation (Nakaima & Sridharan, 2023). We are interested in the question: How can evaluations help contribute to inclusion and promote equities?

We have also been influenced by Ray Rist. One of us is a member of INTEVAL; perhaps more relevantly, we were neighbors of Ray in Virginia, and this paper was a result of multiple dialogues we've had with Ray in a neighborhood coffee shop. Our conversations focused on the need for evaluation to rise to the challenges of inequities, sustainability, and the pandemic-driven discontinuities that contemporary society faces.

We have known Ray for the past 4 years. Our common link was John Mayne, and we met during a memorial tribute to John Mayne in January 2021. Our time together has been limited, but the discussions in our neighborhood coffee shop have been profound. The central feature of our discussions was evaluation as a young discipline: a discipline that has the potential of making a difference to problems of human suffering and environmental damage, but in reality, often falls short of its potential. The impact of COVID-19 in exacerbating inequities provided the backdrop of our discussions.

Our Focus on the Young Ray

In this paper we seek to better understand Ray through his early work. As we assess and celebrate his contributions, we seek out what we call the "young Ray." We focus on one of his earliest publications—in *Harvard Educational Review*. The paper is titled "Student Social Class and Teacher Expectations: The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy in Ghetto Education." Remarkably, the paper was published in 1970, 55 years ago, when Ray was still in his early 20s. It is his most cited publication, as noted in the introduction to this volume.

We take great enthusiasm in reviewing and learning from one of Ray's earliest publications. All learning requires memory, and, in this spirit, we need to remember (and celebrate) the longevity of the ideas, observations, and insights. This paper is a testament to the powers of observation. In Hawaiian, the word for observation (*'ike*) means knowledge. As the Hawaiian epistemologist Manulani Aluli Meyer notes, "The fact that *'ike* means 'to see' and also 'to know' shows how vision educates, how looking teaches, how watching

informs. The importance of how we see the world cannot be understated" (2001, p. 131).

Ray's paper is a testament to the importance of seeing the perpetuation of exclusion in society within a classroom of young children. The bold question that this paper raises is: What are lessons for evaluation's role in 2025 from classroom research more than 50 years ago? Learning is about memory, and we think there is value in returning to his 1970 paper and asking what lessons it has for the evaluation field in 2025.

Our Positionality

Our interests have been in evaluation approaches that promote sustainability and equity. We are realist evaluators (Pawson, 2024; Pawson & Tilley, 1997) who care deeply about understanding the contexts and mechanisms underlying interventions. We care about how knowledge of contexts and mechanisms can inform planning for responses to inequities (Sridharan et al., 2017; Sridharan & Nakaima, 2019).

For the past few years, we have explored these questions in a Hawaiian setting. Consider Nakaima and Sridharan (2023):

Our observation is that remnants of the mindset that made colonization possible several hundred years ago are still embedded in our society today, even in our own thinking. We contend that much of our thinking and values are influenced by colonizers, and even Indigenous people who were made to feel like second-class citizens by colonizers have unwittingly adopted some of the colonial mindset and practices that were used to justify taking control of Indigenous land and resources....in our experience, many evaluations continue to take a mechanical approach to bean-counting the 'value' of interventions. There is often a limited understanding of the mechanisms by which programs work and often a very mechanical perspective on those mechanisms. In our experience, sometimes evaluations neither explore nor interrogate the assumptions of how programs work. (p. 185)

In this light the question we ask is: What can we learn about mechanisms of the *perpetuation* of exclusion and disadvantages from Ray's early work? While this paper is intended to be a tribute, it also assesses the relevance of Ray's ideas for evaluation's approach to enhancing equities. We have a sense that evaluation itself as a field has to

clarify how it can contribute to reducing disadvantage. As practicing evaluators, we think evaluation as a field suffers from lack of role clarity on how it can contribute to enhancing equities. In this light, this paper is more than a tribute—it explores lessons from Rist’s (1970) paper on how evaluations can contribute to embracing inclusion in society.

Learnings from Ray’s Paper

Here we briefly describe some of the key relevant lessons from Rist’s (1970) paper.

Interventions Themselves Can Perpetuate the Problem of Exclusion and Inequities

One key insight from the paper is that the actions of key actors, such as teachers, can contribute to perpetuating the problems of inequities and exclusion. These actions do not need to intentionally seek to cause harm; negative impacts on some students can still occur if the teacher is acting on a value system that fails to recognize the heterogeneous needs of the students:

A very serious and, I believe, justifiable consequence of this assumption of student uninterest related to the frequency of the teacher’s control-oriented behavior is that the teachers themselves contribute significantly to the creation of the “slow learners” within their classrooms. Over time, this may help to account for the phenomenon noted in the Coleman Report (1966) that the gap between the academic performance of the disadvantaged students and the national norms increased the longer the students remained in the school system. (p. 441)

Values Precede the Creation of Metrics

In Ray’s analysis there is a recognition that the values of the key actors precede the metrics that are used to justify exclusion in the classroom:

The single most important data utilized by the teacher in devising seating groups were the reading scores indicating the performance of the students at the end of the first grade. The second-grade teacher indicated that she attempted to divide the groups primarily on the basis of these scores. (p. 434)

The Perpetuation of Poverty Can Occur Through Multiple Mechanisms

Ray’s analysis doesn’t just focus on educational behavior and outcomes within the classroom; one of the reasons his paper was so influential was a recognition that even an educational setting like a school can contribute to the perpetuation of poverty. Given that institutions like schools are meant to address inequities over time, Ray’s insights are relevant even today. The mechanisms by which schools can ameliorate or exacerbate inequities in different contexts need greater explanation:

The public school system, I believe, is justifiably responsible for contributing to the present structure of the society, but the responsibility is not its alone. The picture that emerges from this study is that the school strongly shares in the complicity of maintaining the organizational perpetuation of poverty and unequal opportunity. (p. 447)

The Dynamics of Mutually Reinforcing Processes

There is also a recognition of the dynamics of mutually reinforcing processes. In his analysis there is a recognition of the mechanisms by which a bad reality can become worse through bad implementation. Here are a few sentences on the insight on a strong relationship between the control-oriented behavior of teachers and the dynamics of disinterest among a group of students:

The interactional pattern between the uninterested student and the teacher literally becomes a “vicious circle” in which control-oriented behavior is followed by further manifestations of uninterest, followed by further control behavior and so on. The stronger the reciprocity of this pattern of interaction, the greater one may anticipate the strengthening of the teacher’s expectation of the “slow learner” as being either unable or unwilling to learn. (p. 442)

Challenging the Rationale for Exclusion

Even when Rist is critical of the exclusionary practices he observes in the classroom, he attempts to understand the rationale (and the contexts) of such exclusion. It is the role of evaluators (and in

the realm of evaluative thinking) to challenge such rationale:

As an alternative explanation, however, the teacher may have developed the system of caste segregation within the classroom, not because the groups of children were so dissimilar they had to be handled in an entirely different manner, but because they were, in fact, so very close to one another. The teacher may have believed quite strongly that the ghetto community inhibited the development of middle-class success models. Thus, it was her duty to “save” at least one group of children from the “streets.” (p. 446)

Visions of a Good Society

One of the central questions that Ray’s paper raises is a vision of a good society. We believe that underlying most evaluations focused on inclusion and equity is a vision of the type of society we are building. Evaluations can be seen as a bridge from the realities of today to an imagined future. Evaluation needs to pay attention to the values of the desired future:

It should be apparent, of course, that if one desires this society to retain its present social class configuration and the disproportional access to wealth, power, social and economic mobility, medical care, and choice of life styles, one should not disturb the methods of education as presented in this study. This contention is made because what develops a “caste” within the classrooms appears to emerge in the larger society as “class.”... Thus the system of public education in reality perpetuates what it is ideologically committed to eradicate—class barriers which result in inequality in the social and economic life of the citizenry. (p. 448)

This paper also raises questions on how evaluations can provide a mirror to society. Do interventions have the power to change the classes and castes within a social structure?

The social distance between the groups within the classrooms was manifested in its extreme form by the maintenance of patterns of caste segregation whereby those of lower positions were not allowed to become a part of the peer group at the highest level. The value system of the teachers appeared to necessitate that a

certain group be ostracized due to “unworthiness” or inherent inferiority. The very beliefs which legitimated exclusion were maintained among those of the higher social group which then contributed to the continuation of the pattern of social organization itself. (p. 447)

Moving Beyond “Heterogeneity Blindness” (Davidoff, 2017)

Ray’s paper can be seen as a call for an intervention to be planned to respect the heterogeneities of needs of the population being served. At a time in which there’s a greater recognition that one size does not fit all, there’s a need to consider how interventions can be implemented to address the heterogeneous needs of the population. In this light, Ray’s work gathers importance given the growing focus of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals of leaving no one behind. How can we judge the performance of interventions based on how well the least-advantaged individuals are doing?

The differential amounts of control-oriented behavior, the lack of interaction with the teacher, the ridicule from one’s peers, and the caste aspects of being placed in lower reading groups all have implications for the future life style and value of education for the child. Though it may be argued from the above that the solution to the existence of differential treatment for students is the establishment of schools catering to only a single segment of the population, I regard this as being antithetical to the goals of education—if one views the ultimate value of an education as providing insights and experience with thoughts and persons different from oneself. The thrust of the educational experience should be towards diversity, not homogeneity. It may be Utopian to suggest that education should seek to encompass as wide a variety of individuals as possible within the same setting, but it is no mean goal to pursue. The success of an educational institution and any individual teacher should not be measured by the treatment of the high-achieving students, but rather by the treatment of those not achieving. As is the case with a chain, ultimate value is based on the weakest member. So long as the lower-status students are treated differently in both quality and quantity of education, there will exist an imperative for change. (p. 448)

In summary, Ray's 1970 paper has very far-reaching implications for how we think of evaluation's role in enhancing equities and inclusion in 2025. Space considerations only allow us to build on few of these points.

Implications of Ray's Paper to Evaluation as a Field in 2025

We argue that many of Ray's ideas mentioned in his paper 55 years ago foreshadow some of the challenges that our field faces in evaluating inclusion and equity in 2025. As we work on issues of decolonization in Indigenous settings like Hawai'i, we believe that a focus on mechanisms and contexts will serve us well.

The lessons we learn from Rist (1970) that overlap with our experiences evaluating interventions include:

- Pay attention to the structural configurations (and the social construction) of an intervention. The "architecture" of the intervention can lead to continuing the status quo or, at some other times, lead to a disruption of inequities, depending on both the architecture and the contexts of the intervention.
- The architecture of interventions is driven by the values of the program implementers and, in some cases, driven by powerful actors to further their own interests. Pay attention to power structures that might drive interventions
- The values of key implementers and the architecture of the intervention can conspire to maintain and exacerbate differences between groups over time. Paradoxically, instead of disruption and reduction, this can lead to the amplification of disadvantage over time. Paying attention to the dynamics of the process (as well as its mutually reinforcing nature) is important.
- Interventions are constructed in this way both due to bad planning and sometimes with "motivated unawareness" as a self-fulfilling failure.
- Evaluators need to pay attention to the intended consequences of what might look like unintended consequences.

At a time in which evaluation continues to be primarily at the project level, what we find refreshing about Ray's paper from over 50 years ago is how he used a research/evaluation project about a single intervention to raise such profoundly deep questions that challenged the status quo of the

existing social order. The fact that he did it with a focus on the values of the key actors of a multilevel system, as well as paid attention to the dynamics of exclusion, makes his contribution especially relevant, even today.

A simple thought experiment on how his ideas would have ramifications for evaluations of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals with their focus on no one left behind will suffice to understand the deep relevance of his work. Consider his observation that the evaluation of a school should be based on how it treats the most disadvantaged students.

We have found very few contemporary evaluations that articulate as clearly a focus on the treatment of the most disadvantaged individuals as a measure of the performance of the system. For example, the hesitancy of several international organizations, including the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), to accept inequity as an evaluation criterion in their 2019 update of evaluation criteria is problematic.

We also find Ray's ideas relevant to contemporary evaluation with its greater focus on mechanisms (Pawson, 2024). The paper is a rich reflection on the mechanisms by which actors in a multilevel system who could do better are unfortunately conditioned to perpetuate the dynamics of inequities. The very deep aspect of this paper is its recognition that the mechanisms of action often follow the values of the system and the values of the key actors. An important question that emerges that is especially relevant in the contemporary world is: How can evaluative approaches help move us beyond the values of existing social arrangements that constrain our imaginations and actions?

Much of the evaluation in Ray's paper is a summative evaluation. It would be interesting to imagine how this evaluation would have been restructured as a developmental evaluation (Patton, 2010) intended to challenge the power of entrenched habits and values. Would the teachers and the school administrators have been responsive to the feedback that Ray would have provided if the feedback had been delivered in a more dynamic, developmental sense? Much of the colonist history of Hawai'i is a story of sometimes well-intentioned (and sometimes ill-intentioned) interventions that have ended up hurting the very communities that such interventions intended to serve. In our own reading of Ray's paper, we are struck by his insights on the architecture of interventions, how such architectures reflect the values of the system, and the implications of such architectures of interventions on how they continue to perpetuate inequities. In our own work in Hawai'i where we

seek to raise questions around the types of evaluations that can challenge 130+ years of colonized practices, we are struck by the importance of paying attention to language that can continue to engage with participants in multilevel systems of interventions. As evaluation seeks to find its own role to promote inclusion, some of the questions that we tussle with in our own work include:

- Is inclusion in evaluation systems just a matter of representation, or does it also require a fundamental shift in how knowledge is valued and produced?
- What are the unique methodological or other challenges of inclusive evaluations or evaluation systems, and how do we overcome them?
- What are the key uncertainties in promoting an inclusive approach (in Indigenous or other contexts) that evaluators (and those who are building the systems that produce evaluations) need to address?
- How can we ensure that inclusion in evaluation systems is not merely symbolic but leads to meaningful change for marginalized communities?

Conclusions

Multiple lessons from Ray's paper are relevant for contemporary evaluators. Four key lessons include:

1. Pay close attention to the “architecture” of interventions. By “architecture,” we simply mean how the different elements of a complex intervention are connected and implemented. Be especially sensitive to the power of the architecture of the program to exclude. Given the complexity of some of our settings (e.g., a drop-in/shelter for the unhoused), such exclusions can happen without an intention to exclude. These insights are especially relevant for programs that focus on inequities. This implies that we recognize that programs need to be flexible and respond to the heterogeneous needs of clients—for example, in a housing project, the evaluation needs to explore how the intervention prioritizes safety for vulnerable groups.
2. A commitment to inclusion. Promoting equities in society might require a firm commitment to issues of inclusion. A key point stressed by Rist is that a society should be judged by how it treats its most disadvantaged citizens. As evaluators, we need to ask: What are the systemic barriers to addressing inequities?

What changes in contexts are needed to address the diverse needs of the clients? This focus aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals focus of “leaving no one behind” and its emphasis on equity, inclusion, and human rights as prerequisites for global progress. Evaluators continue to grapple with challenges in conceptualizing and operationalizing “leaving no one behind.” Some of the challenges include failures to operationalize the highly intersectional nature of disadvantages and the tendency of most initiatives to prioritize short-term wins over structural changes.

3. From verdicts to explanations. The evaluators' focus might be not just to promote verdicts but to provide contextually informed explanations. Evaluations need to explain why things are going wrong and link those reasons to clear actions, driven by an understanding of the intervention contexts.
4. Dynamics of mutually reinforcing disadvantages. Evaluators need to pay close attention to how actions in fragile settings can amplify disadvantage over time. Evaluators might need to move the analytical gaze from solely addressing questions on the effectiveness of single projects and recognize dynamic mutually reinforcing processes that compound exclusion and inequities in society.

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