
Ray Rist: An Evaluator at the Government Accountability Office (GAO)

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Background: Program evaluation and performance audit are distinct professional practices. Performance audit draws heavily on its financial accounting and auditing roots, while evaluators have much more multidisciplinary backgrounds. Performance audit practice and development is associated with audit institutions such as national audit offices and internal audits, while program evaluation is more associated with government departments and agencies in the public sector. The two practices are often working in the same group or organization but not necessarily together, which could be mutually beneficial.

Purpose: The paper examines the contribution that Ray Rist made, early in his career at the GAO, to resolving the methodological challenge of performance auditors and program evaluators working together.

Setting: Independent national audit offices and government departments and agencies in the United States and Canada.

Intervention: Not applicable.

Setting: The analysis of two early approaches to program evaluation to assess how they facilitated performance auditors and evaluators to work together.

Data Collection and Analysis: Data were collected through an analysis of documents, publications, and discussions with colleagues and associates of Ray Rist.

Findings: Ray Rist worked in the group at the GAO that did evaluations and training of the multidisciplinary staff in evaluation methodology and procedures. The approach, led by Ray, was a methodology that used multidisciplinary teams to answer specific questions. It encompassed a broader set of questions, one that could more easily be used by performance auditors and program evaluators. It generally was less restricted in its application and use than were definitions of program evaluation based on an evaluation of a unit of analysis of a program or subprogram. Ray's early methodology transfer paper, written while he was at the GAO, was in use for some time after he left, with numerous updates continuing with the same themes developed in the first iteration. These themes were foundational and carried into Ray's future work; they still have a strong resonance today.

Keywords: *Ray Rist; program evaluation; evaluation; GAO; OAG; audit; performance audit; PEMD (Program Evaluation and Methodology Division)*

The GAO and Program Evaluation

Independent national audit offices like the GAO have unique traditions and culture, a special institutional status, and close ties to professional financial accounting and audit. The GAO was created in 1921 to support Congress to check legality and financial transactions with a large clerical staff. After World War II the GAO moved from checking individual transactions to broader-based audits examining economy and efficiency through audits of financial management and controls. As the work changed, staff changed from large numbers of clerks to largely accountants, and new methodology for performance audit was developed (GAO, 2019).

The GAO moved into program evaluation in the late 1960s and early 1970s to provide Congress more information on how well government programs were meeting their objectives. The agency's staff of mostly accountants became more multidisciplinary to fit the changing work requirements. In the early 1980s the Program Evaluation and Methodology Division (PEMD) was created and headed by Eleanor Chelimsky. About that time most of the agency's auditors and management analysts were reclassified as evaluators (to be later reclassified again in 2008 as analysts; Krusten, 2018).

In my experience, a non-accountant coming into a national audit office needed to get to know the language of audit and audit standards, understand the mandate of the office and its role with elected officials and government managers, and adapt to the style and protocol of giving testimony at hearings and writing reports. None of this presented an insurmountable challenge for Ray, who provides an illustrative example of how non-accountants can adjust to the world of national audit offices. He adapted quickly and led or made important contributions to the work of the GAO for about 10 years. He represented the GAO not only in Congress but in other professional forums in the United States and internationally (Johnson, 1991).

Ray joined the GAO and PEMD to do evaluations and be part of the training of the multidisciplinary staff in evaluation methodology and procedures. The comptroller general at the time wanted reporting to be less based on an individual's professional experiences and more based on the facts related to the problem. The objective was to make the work more evidence based and focused on results through a shared methodological approach (GAO, 1991).

GAO was required to cut its budget by 25% from 1996 to 1997. PEMD was dispersed throughout the

organization in 1996. With various reforms, the division, which once had 100 people, was cut to 59 and no longer merited separate support staff.

Accountability, Audit, and Evaluation

Accountability is defined as "the fact of being responsible for what you do and able to give a satisfactory reason for it, or the degree to which this happens" (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). Accountability information can be developed and used in different ways. Financial audit has a strong tradition of verifying financial accounts prepared by managers, with the auditors providing assurance on their reliability. Performance auditors depend on the reports of management, which they verify through direct examination for economy, efficiency, and effectiveness of operations. This can include some or all of the accountability questions of who is responsible, what have they done, and (for more than one person) who has done what and how well it has happened.

Performance audit results and evaluation can both be used for accountability purposes, although auditors tend to examine operation results and evaluators tend to examine program effectiveness. The issues addressed by performance auditors can often use many of the same techniques and methods of evaluation. In this respect there is commonality between undertakings. However, performance audit and evaluation are distinct professional practices with different traditions and types of certifications (Barrados and Lonsdale, 2020).

The challenge of the GAO, which was initially the General Auditing Office and later became the General Accountability Office, was how to define the practice of performance audit and evaluation with common approaches. One of Ray's early contributions at the GAO was setting out a methodology that both auditors and evaluators could use. This methodology was in use for some time after he left, with numerous updates continuing with the same themes developed in the first iteration. These themes were foundational and carried into Ray's future work and still have strong resonance today.

Evaluation Methodology and Design in the GAO

One of the ways that GAO staff was provided basic information about commonly used methodologies was through methodology transfer papers. In 1984 Ray, with Carl Wisler (Rist & Wisler, 1984),

released a paper on designing evaluations. The original transfer paper on evaluation methodology captured the essence of evaluation design and showed how evaluation methodology could support both performance audit and evaluation. A testimony to the longevity of the original paper was that it was reissued in 1991 and again in 2012 (GAO, 2012).

As is noted in the preface of the study, the focus of the paper is the logic of program evaluation and underlying evaluation design:

It provides a systematic approach to designing evaluations that takes into account the questions guiding a study, the constraints evaluators face in conducting it, and the information needs of its intended user (Rist & Wisler, 1984, p. iii).

By using an approach that focuses on the question to be answered, Rist and Wisler's approach avoids the challenge of defining the program and its rationale, which is often faced in other jurisdictions. For example, in Canada the term "program evaluation" is used both in government policy and the work of the National Audit Office (Office of the Auditor General of Canada [OAG], 1993, pp. 217–280).

The mandates for Canadian managers and auditors alike were to deal with the issue of the efficiency and effectiveness of government programs. The practice and methodology of "program evaluation" developed as a discipline and focused on program units in government or sub-units. With the emphasis on program operations in departments and agencies with the purpose linked to identifying findings for management purposes including accountability,

[Program evaluation purpose] should be to periodically produce credible, timely, useful and objective findings on programs appropriate for resource allocation, program improvement and accountability. (Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, 1981, p. 3)

The GAO methodology and terminology was more general and did not specify evaluation of programs. Nor did it discuss program evaluation as a discipline or separate practice. It was developed based on answering questions, particularly those posed by Congress. As the methodology lays out in the paper, time needs to be taken to make sure the question is clear and is answerable in the time available. The question may or may not relate to a specific program or directly to accountability, however; accountability is indirect, since it is the

Congress that uses the information in their oversight of government. The Canadian purpose of evaluation was directly linked to programs, what was done, and accountability. The distinction arising from the GAO's purpose in answering questions and the Canadian purpose of providing a management tool resulted in greater streamlining of the GAO approach; the GAO dealt more directly with what the Congress wanted to know.

In his methodology transfer paper on evaluation, Ray captured the approach at the GAO of using multidisciplinary teams to answer specific questions for the Congress. The definition given is as follows:

Evaluation pertains to the systematic examination of events or conditions that have (or are presumed to have) occurred at an earlier time or that are unfolding as the evaluation takes place. (Rist & Wisler, 1984, p. 7)

While evaluation, as defined, is mostly retrospective, it is noted that evaluation results could be useful in forecasting.

The paper took the methodology out of a specific subject area (such as education, which had been Ray's doctoral specialization) to concepts of importance for all evaluators in the GAO, who were not only accountants and financial auditors but were drawn from different professional groups. The broader definition of evaluation encompassed the more restricted "program evaluation" developed by others at that time by not requiring the definition of a unit of analysis. As a result, it encompasses a broader set of questions and can more easily be used by other disciplines. It generally was less restricted in its application and use. This approach to evaluation became Ray's approach and practice both at the GAO and in other positions he has held subsequently.

The paper stresses the necessity of planning and developing a design and plan for an evaluation:

[F]ront-end planning is necessary to designing and implementing an evaluation successfully. Systematic attention to evaluation design is a safeguard against using time and resources ineffectively. It is also a safeguard against performing an evaluation of poor quality and limited usefulness. (Rist & Wisler, 1984, p. 1)

The development of the evaluation questions provides the basis for the design. The evaluation questions are described as the "most fundamental aspect of an evaluation." The paper goes through a number of considerations to determine that the questions are the right ones that would lead to a

project that is doable and provides a meaningful and useful answer (Rist & Wisler, 1984, p. 5). Again, this is a theme that we see in Ray's later writing—for example, the World Bank publication on designing and conducting effective development evaluation (Imas & Rist, 2009).

Following the development of the evaluation questions the methodology for conducting the evaluation is developed. Together they are set out in the framework of the elements of design laid out in the paper:

- Kind of information to be acquired
- Sources of information (e.g., types of respondents)
- Methods to be used for sampling sources (e.g., random sampling)
- Methods of collecting information (e.g., self-administered questionnaires)
- Timing and frequency of information collection
- Basis for comparing outcomes with and without a program (for cause- and-effect questions). (Rist & Wisler, 1984, p. 2)

An important element in the design is to determine what questions can reasonably be expected to be answered in a reasonable amount of time. The type of question—descriptive or normative (what is or what should be) or attribution of an effect—will be the basis for setting out a reasonable and appropriate methodology. The paper provides illustrative examples:

The answers to descriptive questions, for example ... the number of people who receive Medicaid benefits in 1980 ... (the answers to) normative questions, for example, the comparison between airline safety violations and the standard that has been set for them. The answers to cause- and-effect questions ... for example, if we observe changes in the weight of newborns, what part of those changes is the effect of a federal nutrition program? (Rist & Wisler, 1984, pp. 7–8)

As is pointed out, the audit model uses a form of criteria-referenced design to answer normative questions, which is consistent with the methodology. However, the criteria-referenced design does not generally permit inferences about whether a program has caused the outcomes that have been observed. Evaluators with an audit background will often use the outcome and objectives/criteria to draw conclusions about the effectiveness of a program. However, as is pointed out in the paper, without including an analysis of

the other factors that may have had an impact on the result, the relationship cannot be assumed to be causal, although that term is often used. As is pointed out in a footnote, analysts using an audit approach would be more accurate in using the description “purported cause” (Rist & Wisler, 1984, p. 24).

Conclusion

Most of Ray's career in the 1980s was at the GAO. He contributed to many studies and different products at the GAO. The leadership he took on methodology is particularly illustrative of the work he did and how he did it. Unlike program evaluation, audit has a strong tradition backed by professional certification. Many of Ray's strong personal attributes—strong analytic skills, working with colleagues, highly persuasive manner, and good humour—resulted in his successfully framing an evaluation methodology that encompassed the work of many disciplines, including audit, and set out a common approach to practice at the GAO. Even the difference of view in auditors' and evaluators' definition of causality was not ignored but was dealt with both forthrightly and diplomatically.

While his work did not specifically deal with accountability, the results achieved from an evaluation using Ray's approach would form an important element in a discussion of accountability in Congress and provide government a useful tool to hold managers to account, particularly with the increasing emphasis on managing for results and being accountable for those results.

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