
Linking Evaluation Theory and Practice: Exploring Ray Rist's Enduring Legacy

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Background: Evaluation theory and practice have interacted in many ways, leading to mutual benefits, over the past 40 years. Over the course of his career, Ray C. Rist made substantial contributions to advancing evaluation theory and practice globally. This includes leading the International Research Group for Policy and Program Evaluation (INTEVAL), a multidisciplinary, multicultural, and multinational group of evaluation practitioners, researchers, and auditors writing on theoretical and practical issues and their interaction, overseeing the publication of approximately 40 books in the Comparative Policy Evaluation series.

Purpose: This special edition explores the linkages between theory and practice in evaluation on the basis of Ray Rist's influence and legacy over his career, and specifically through INTEVAL, examining how his achievements have impacted the domains of evaluation, audit, and learning. The aim is to identify enduring lessons for evaluators, auditors, and policy makers regarding issues addressed by Ray and INTEVAL.

Setting: The special edition encompasses the interaction of theory and practice of evaluation, focusing on the influence and legacy of Ray throughout his career spanning academia, government, international institutions, and voluntary service.

Intervention: Not applicable.

Research Design: Not applicable.

Data Collection and Analysis: Contributors analyze Ray's publication record, citation impacts, leadership approach, and collaborative methodologies. They also examine the influence of some of INTEVAL's publications under the leadership of Ray, and their influence on evaluative thinking and practice. The special edition draws on historical analysis, case studies, and theoretical frameworks to examine Ray's contributions to evaluation theory and practice, with particular focus on his collaborative work within INTEVAL and other organizations.

Findings: Ray Rist's 190 publications have been cited almost 13,000 times, with significant impact on the part of both his early academic work and his later evaluation publications. His leadership style created a productive voluntary network of evaluation professionals that has sustained itself for 4 decades. Key contributions include pioneering work on policy instruments, results-based monitoring and evaluation systems, evaluation in accountability structures, and global evaluation capacity development. This special edition documents how Ray's collaborative approach advanced evaluation theory while maintaining strong connections to practice, including accountability, across diverse global contexts.

Keywords: *Ray Rist; INTEVAL; evaluation theory; policy evaluation; evaluation capacity development; accountability; institutionalization; collaborative networks*

Motivation for the Special Edition

The purpose of this special edition is to explore aspects of the development of theory and practice of evaluation in the past 40 years. Within the broader context of this ongoing interaction, we specifically look at the influence and legacy of Ray C. Rist at the helm of the International Research Group for Policy and Program Evaluation (better known as INTEVAL). INTEVAL is a multidisciplinary, multicultural, and multinational group of evaluation practitioners, researchers, and auditors. The group comes together annually to discuss emerging and important topics in the field of evaluation. For almost 40 years Ray was the chairperson and final editor of the INTEVAL series *Comparative Policy Evaluation*. During this time nearly 40 books were published, first by Transaction Publishers and currently by Taylor & Francis through their Routledge imprint. This special JMDE edition has been written by INTEVAL members to look back on the history of Ray's inspiring influence on the series and on how his achievements (and those of the group) have impacted evaluation, audit, and learning in the international evaluation and audit communities.

The aim is to focus on the relevance and impact of some of the main ideas that were developed within INTEVAL under the guidance of Ray, as well as how this has led Ray to develop initiatives elsewhere, mainly in capacity development and advising on setting up monitoring and evaluation systems in the Global South. Through his rich career, he has made substantial contributions to linking evaluation theory to practice across multiple settings and disciplines and inspired the careers of many evaluators and auditors across the globe.

Much of this was unpaid, voluntary work. INTEVAL has received some financial support, but its writing of thought-provoking publications crucially depended on the voluntary contributions of its members, stimulated and orchestrated by Ray Rist as the voluntary chair and editor of the series. We honor Ray's dedication to continuously contributing to the improvement of the evaluation profession and its expression in evaluative work.

In this edition the reader will find many examples of how Ray's life in INTEVAL overlapped and combined with his life in other institutions and organizations, and in direct contact with governments that aimed to improve their monitoring and evaluation systems. Although told through the lens of Ray's career and his contributions to the field, readers who are unfamiliar with Ray or INTEVAL will also draw

important lessons from reading this special issue. Some of the key themes that emerge from this special issue as particularly relevant to current and future evaluators include learnings on growing the evaluation field through personal development and professional development; examples of using evaluation as a means to fight social injustice; cases of what the institutionalization of evaluation systems look like in real-world settings; and models of how principles of open collaboration lead to generative evaluation practices.

Ray's Career as an Editor/Writer, with INTEVAL and Through Other Organizations

Ray's professional career began in academia, where he quickly established himself as one of the bright young researchers in social science, starting at Portland State University. One of his first research papers, in 1970, was on the self-fulfilling prophecy in education in underserved communities (at the time identified as ghetto communities); it still ranks as his most-cited peer-reviewed journal article, with 3,509 citations and a celebratory reprint after 30 years. His involvement with evaluation started in the years that he was appointed a Senior Fulbright Fellow (1976–1977) at the Max Planck Institute in Germany, where he looked into German policies and their effects on housing, education, and employment, and on the marginalized position of guestworkers. Back in the United States, Ray was invited to lead a major evaluation of the youth employment program of the Labor Department (R. Rist, personal communication, March 4, 2024). While this initiated and confirmed his interest in evaluation, it did not yet lead to publications at the time.

Ray's next academic position was at Cornell University; from there he moved over to the United States General Accounting Office (GAO) in 1981, where he eventually became the Director of the General Government Division (1987–1993). While his work consisted mainly of high-level evaluations on issues like youth unemployment, welfare policy, and confidential subjects like nuclear submarines, and the development of evaluation methodology, he did not yet publish his views or his expectations for the future of the evaluation profession (R. Rist, personal communication, March 4, 2024). Following this, Rist spent 4 years back in academia as professor and director of the Center for Policy Studies of George Washington University (1993–1997).

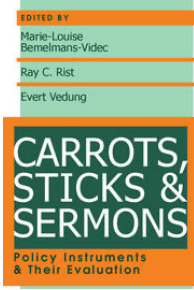
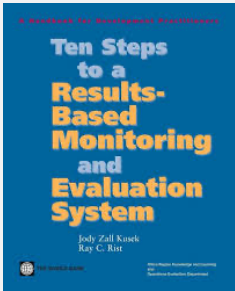
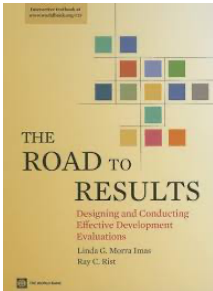
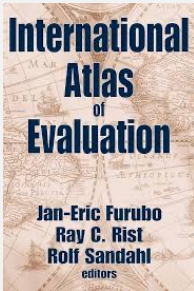
He then took up employment at the World Bank as an evaluation adviser (1997–2000) and subsequently senior evaluation advisor at the Independent Evaluation Group of the World Bank (2000–2006). After 2006 he continued as codirector of the International Program for Development Evaluation Training (IPDET)—a position he had held since 2001—until 2016. In these years he also was president of the International Development Evaluation Association (IDEAS; 2008–2014), acted as an evaluation consultant to many national and international organizations, advised senior government officials across the globe, and was a visiting professor at several universities nationally and internationally.


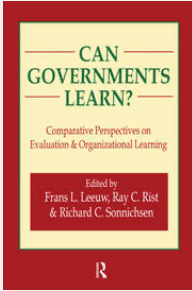
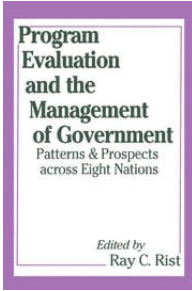
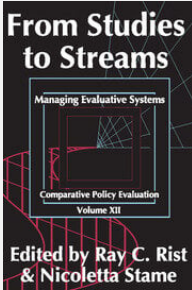
While being involved with many different organizations and working on many initiatives, Ray managed to write and be involved in an impressive number of publications. About three-quarters of his early journal articles were published in the field of education research from 1970 to approximately 1982. The second wave of publications focused on public policy evaluation and methodological issues related to evaluation and accountability. The focus shifted from peer-reviewed journals to peer-reviewed books. He has had a particular interest in policy evaluation, evaluation capacity building, and institutionalization. Most of the books (60%) and book chapters (70%) are in the field of policy evaluation.

A common metric for measuring the impact of publications is the number times a given publication has been cited by others. We used Google Scholar data to assess the total number of citations across Ray's publications, as Google Scholar includes citations from gray literature, where a number of Ray's publications can be found. As of late 2024, his 190 publications had been cited 12,896 times. His most-cited publications were on social science research in his early academic career. Of his twenty most cited publications, no less than 12 were in this category, with a total of 6,936 citations.

In comparison, Ray's later publications with INTEVAL were aimed at a smaller public: professional evaluators and auditors, as well as their commissioners, and the recipients of their products. Nevertheless, five INTEVAL publications which Ray co-edited and co-wrote reached into his top twenty and achieved a combined 2,380 citations. Two publications through the World Bank and one through IPDET complete the list, with a total of 2,068 citations. If we take out the university publications as less relevant for Ray's work in INTEVAL on evaluation and audit, we come to Table 1—the top eight cited publications in which Rist was involved as co-writer and co-editor.

Table 1 – Top 8 most cited evaluation publications involving Ray Rist after his university career

	Publication	Year	Citations	Organization
1	 <p><i>Carrots, Sticks and Sermons: Policy Instruments and Their Evaluation</i></p>	1998	1,358	INTEVAL
2	 <p><i>Ten Steps to a Results-Based Monitoring and Evaluation System: A Handbook for Development Practitioners</i></p>	2004	1,311	World Bank
3	 <p><i>The Road to Results: Designing and Conducting Effective Development Evaluations</i></p>	2009	437	IPDET
4	 <p><i>International Atlas of Evaluation</i></p>	2002	426	INTEVAL

		Publication	Year	Citations	Organization
5		<i>Integrating Multiple Qualitative Research Methods (or Avoiding the Precariousness of a One-Legged Stool)</i>	1999	320	World Bank
6		<i>Can Governments Learn?</i>	1994	225	INTEVAL
7		<i>Program Evaluation and the Management of Government</i>	1990	210	INTEVAL
8		<i>From Studies to Streams: Managing Evaluative Systems</i>	2006	161	INTEVAL

Note. Adapted from “The chronological bibliography of Ray C. Rist” in “A Global Tribute to a Lifelong Dedication: Ray C. Rist,” by R. Boyle & R de Winter, 2025 [unpublished manuscript].

Much of the good work of INTEVAL was spread in other circles that Ray was active in. He was codirector of IPDET from 2001 to 2016 and president of IDEAS from 2008 to 2014. Both positions led to additional publications co-written and co-edited by Ray. Especially his co-editing

work for IDEAS focused on providing opportunities and a voice for evaluators from the Global South in publications that included writers from the Global West. The IPDET handbook, *The Road to Results*, co-written with Linda Morra Imas, published in 2009, is in Ray’s top 10 most-cited publications and

is often described as the definitive handbook for evaluation professionals.

Ray as writer and editor worked in a collaborative way throughout his networks to inspire others and be inspired by others. His modus operandi thus makes it difficult to fully detail his unique contribution. One could say that *without Ray*, INTEVAL would not have been so productive, and *without INTEVAL*, Ray would not have been so productive. Much of Ray's writing thus expresses the joy, mastery, and inspiration of collaborative work. INTEVAL was initially set up as a modestly funded initiative to start a book series on policy evaluation. After 8 years, the funds stopped, and the assembled group faced the question of whether and how it would proceed. In the words of Ray himself:

So, after the IAS funding had stopped, we went on our own and just started this book series ourselves and everything was accepted by Transaction. That's where it began. And the extraordinary thing, of course, is that everybody participated without being paid. Ever since, all has been voluntary work. Can you imagine, all these sessions over the years! It really is remarkable. It's outstanding. The vitality of this group for so many years is extraordinary. (R. Rist, personal communication, March 4, 2024)

As described above, Ray's career spanned a number of formal and informal institutions and made substantial contributions to the field of evaluation in diverse ways. These various contributions throughout his career provide the structure for the five sections of this special edition, which we describe in the remainder of this introductory article. Each section includes a number of short contributions by previous or current INTEVAL members. The special edition is not intended to be read sequentially, and readers are invited to dip in and out of the short contributions in each section depending on their time and interest. Indeed, we hope that you will return to these articles over time as your own interest in these topics emerges, and that you may continue to draw inspiration from Ray's contributions for years to come.

First Section: Ray's Productivity as a Writer and Editor

Ray's first effort to publish was also his most cited: the exploration of self-fulfilling prophecies in underserved communities education (Rist, 1970).

This article is the subject of the first contribution to this special edition, by **Sanjeev Sridharan and April Nakaima**, who reach into the early academic career of Ray. They see this first research as a strong indication that Ray was interested in issues of inclusion and equity, which continue to be highly relevant for evaluators today—and will continue to be in the future. The second article, by **Andrew Gray and Ida Lindkvist**, documents and analyzes the history and development of INTEVAL, drawing on the psychological safety theory of organizational leadership to examine Ray's contribution. Finally in this section, **Michael Quinn Patton** conducts a systematic thematic qualitative analysis of Ray's publications record and draws out 10 themes with implications for evaluation practice.

Second Section: INTEVAL's Legacy Illustrated Through Two Influential Books

The second section starts with a thorough discussion of one of the influential books of INTEVAL: *From Studies to Streams* (Stame & Rist, 2006). This book was revolutionary in its time, as it promoted a look at evaluation as a permanent stream of evidence to policy makers, governments, and the public, to ensure that evaluation would not just focus on whether interventions were done right, but also raise the question of whether the right interventions were promoted, focusing on the context in which these take place. **Nicoletta Stame's** article provides the history of this important shift in focus. She reveals that Ray was instrumental in focusing on streams of evidence as key to making evaluation relevant for learning organizations, institutions, and countries. The following papers—by **Rob D. van den Berg** and **Juha I. Uitto**—show that the Global Environment Facility (GEF) offers an interesting case of how streams of evidence can be created and delivered. The system, set up and tested by Van den Berg (2004–2014), was turned into a mature machinery by Uitto (2014–2024). They indicate that the GEF partnership was open to this because of the need to incorporate learning and new knowledge about the nexus between development and environment into evaluation practice and into decision-making. The article of **Tom Ling** poses the question of how organizations and partnerships smaller than the GEF could potentially move toward the streaming of evidence. Ling identifies the willingness to learn and understand, especially at the management level, as a key ingredient. If smaller organizations

would move toward streams rather than studies, many options and solutions would be possible.

Two articles follow regarding the book *Carrots, Sticks and Sermons* (Bemelmans-Videc et al., 1998). **Evert Vedung** recalls how the concepts and the title were created, and how the three concepts quickly became accepted in academia and in evaluation circles. While Vedung himself played a key role in this, he acknowledges Ray's leadership in thinking up the title of the book and the main thrust of its contributions. A second paper follows by **Karol Olejniczak**, **Tomasz Kupiec**, and **Dominica Wojtowicz**, focusing on the impact of the book as revealed in citations and references. Their focus is not only on evaluation but mainly on public policy literature. Their research confirms the influence of the book.

Third Section: Ray's Contributions to the Field of Audit and Accountability

In Part 3 we examine Ray's contributions to the field of audit and accountability. The first two papers focus on the period when Ray was working at the GAO. **Frans L. Leeuw** examines Ray's intellectual, research-focused work in the very early years of INTEVAL and his time at the GAO, and draws comparisons with his own work in the Netherlands Court of Audit. **Maria Barrados** examines Ray's approach to resolving the methodological challenge of performance auditors and program evaluators working together.

The other two papers in this section examine the relationship between evaluation and accountability, prompted by the work of INTEVAL supported by Ray in this domain. **Jan-Eric Furubo** looks at the final step in the accountability chain in democratic societies—the one between the people and their elected representatives. He looks at how evaluation can strengthen this relationship. **Kim Forss** and **Jens Andersson** analyze the evaluation of the Swedish national response to the COVID-19 pandemic and assess whether the evaluation provided for accountability regarding the policy measures that were put in place. They pay particular attention to the role of a commission established to evaluate the national response to the pandemic.

Fourth Section: Ray's Contributions to Evaluation Capacity Building and Institutionalization

In this section we explore Ray's contributions to the fields of evaluation capacity development and institutionalizing evaluation more widely. **Per Øyvind Bastøe** and **Anita Haslie** describe INTEVAL as a positively charged social network, examining how network features like centrality and density help explain the enduring success of the group. **Robert Lahey** traces Ray's many contributions to evaluation capacity development through the 2000s, highlighting how his leadership approach helped countries institutionalize evaluation through programs like IPDET and global networks. **Jos Vaessen** dives deeper into this subject, examining IPDET's role in developing evaluation capacity globally, showing how the program cofounded by Ray has trained thousands of participants from over 80 countries while continuously adapting to evolving evaluation practices and technological changes. **Mita Marra** reflects on her long collaboration with Ray Rist and her own evaluation capacity development experience, emphasizing how his mentorship taught her to balance tangible metrics with intangible factors like trust and equity in evaluation across diverse global contexts, and what this means for emerging evaluators. **Maria Bustelo** and **Steve Jacob** highlight the substantial contributions of INTEVAL to the understanding of effective evaluation systems, emphasizing the importance of balancing institutionalization with flexibility to ensure evaluations remain meaningful rather than becoming bureaucratic exercises.

Fifth Section: Conclusions and Follow-Up

Finally, the concluding article draws some general lessons emerging from the contributions to this special edition. While some specific lessons learned and pointers for the future are included, the main point of this journal edition is further proof of the creativity and thoughtfulness exhibited by a group of volunteers when guided toward collaborative work at the frontier of evaluation and audit.

Contributors to this special edition have all been involved in INTEVAL in one way or another over the course of its history. They have all also been inspired by Ray in his role as chair of the group, as a collaborator, as a mentor, and as a friend. Authors from a wide range of countries illustrate Ray's international influence. We hope that these contributions build on the legacy provided by Ray and offer helpful insights to evaluators grappling with linking theory and practice now and in the future.

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