

The Importance of Conceptualizing Evaluation as a Transdiscipline: Honoring Michael Scriven's Legacy

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It was a great honor to be asked by the editors of the *American Journal of Evaluation* to write a personal and professional tribute to Michael Scriven. That article was titled "I Will See You on the Other Side My Friend: A Tribute to Michael Scriven" and was published in December 2023 (Donaldson, 2023). This brief reflection is intended to extend that tribute by elaborating on the importance of Scriven's contributions to the conceptualization of evaluation as a transdiscipline.

Evaluation is "the cognitive process or act of evaluation, that is, the determining or asserting of a claim about the merit (a.k.a., roughly speaking, quality), worth (a.k.a., in one sense, value), or significance (a.k.a., approximately, importance) of some entity (we here refer to that entity as the 'evaluand')" (Scriven, 2013, p. 13). Further:

First, I hope—and, in this case, expect—that the essential nature of evaluation itself will crystallize in our minds into a clear and essentially universal recognition of it as a discipline, a discipline with a clear definition, subject matter, logical structure, and multiple fields of applications. In particular it will, I think, become recognized as one of that elite group of disciplines which I call transdisciplines. These disciplines are notable because they supply essential tools for other disciplines, while retaining an autonomous structure and research effort of their own. (Scriven, 2003, p. 19)

Supplying Essential Tools for Other Disciplines

Just as Michael highlighted the significance of other transdisciplinary fields, such as statistics, he argued that professional evaluation 20 years after his quote above clearly provides essential tools to advance the theory and practice of a wide range of other substantive disciplines and professions. Some of the most common examples he used were education, public health, applied psychology and sociology, policy studies, public administration, economics, political science, public administration, human resources, management, and the like (see Donaldson, 2013, 2023). His logic of evaluation and his many related contributions often provide the foundation for scholars and practitioners in these fields to determine whether or not projects, programs, interventions, policies, technologies, and other evaluands often informed by basic research in these fields are effective (summative evaluation), as well as how to make them effective or more effective (formative evaluation).

It was important to Michael to help people understand the field of evaluation had its own unique knowledge base that could be applied across the various fields and types of evaluations (projects, programs, polices, personnel, etc.). He theorized evaluation was much more than a tool or just the application of social science research methods. Michael provided us with an evaluation thesaurus (1991), emphasized the importance of evaluation-specific knowledge and tools (e.g., *Something More than Research List*; Scriven, 2003, pp. 30–41), and provided the field with

much of the lexicon that we use to discuss evaluation theory and practice today (Christie, 2013). His many evaluation-specific contributions have been essential for the transdiscipline of evaluation to advance theory and practice in so many other fields.

An Autonomous Structure and Research Effort

Michael was an evaluation pioneer from the '60s whose cumulative contributions were instrumental to the development of the autonomous structure and evaluation-specific knowledge base that we have today (see Donaldson, 2013, 2023). For example, he provided leadership and enormous support over many years to the growing number of voluntary organizations for professional evaluation (VOPEs) and to the development and management of evaluation-specific journals, including this one, *Journal of Multidisciplinary Evaluation*, which he founded in 2004. He was an influential advocate for research on evaluation (RoE) and used his personal estate to support the Faster Forward Fund (FFF; <https://comm.eval.org/researchonevaluation/viwdocument/the-faster-forward-fund-3f-fundi>), focused on RoE and evaluation projects that promise to rapidly advance the transdiscipline, practice, and profession of evaluation.

Many of Michael's former students and colleagues careers have been influenced by his conceptualization of evaluation as a transdiscipline, and we are deeply grateful for his teaching and mentoring, which you will read about in the other articles in this special issue. For more than 60 years across many different prestigious universities, he mentored and taught thousands of students and workshop participants about the transdiscipline of evaluation and how to apply the "logic of evaluation" to numerous types of evaluands across a wide variety of professional and personal settings. He and I would often discuss how many professional evaluators we encountered over the years who did not have evaluation-specific training or did not realize evaluation was more than the application of social science research methods. This inspired Michael to continue to lead and help with the development of new university degree and professional development evaluation programs up to the final years of career. For example, Michael was an active contributor to the Interdisciplinary PhD in Evaluation (IDPE) program at Western Michigan University and the

PhD and professional development programs in evaluation at Claremont Graduate University into his late 80s.

Conclusion

When I met Michael in the late 1990s he was passionate about working with me to develop university-based evaluation courses and degree programs based on his vision of evaluation as a transdiscipline. He was also determined to disabuse critics, colleagues, and students of the limits being imposed on them by what he often referred to as the "value-free doctrine":

The belief that science, and in particular the social sciences, should not—or cannot properly—draw evaluative conclusions 'within science', that is from premises that are either scientifically verified or definitionally true. (Scriven, 1991, pp. 373–374).

Michael strongly believed that high-quality evaluation practice informed by his transdisciplinary vision was essential to the survival of our species and the noble pursuits of social betterment. He was also seriously concerned that evaluation would severely underperform if it were limited to the application of descriptive (instead of evaluative) social science research methods and program evaluation, and if it remained embedded within other fields such as education, public health, social sciences, and the like. He gave the field of evaluation, over many years, his professional time, attention, and enormous intellectual talents and passion to ensure that evaluation continued to thrive as a transdiscipline. It is now up to our present-day evaluation community, including our many passionate new and emerging evaluators, to honor his legacy and help the transdiscipline of evaluation reach its full potential in the years ahead.

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