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Scriven's Goal-Free Evaluation

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I enjoy telling people that I'm one of two of the world's preeminent scholars on goal-free evaluation (GFE). Then I usually feel compelled to follow up with my reason for saying so—because Michael Scriven and I are the only ones with multiple English-language publications on the topic.

I met Dr. Scriven as we simultaneously arrived at Western Michigan University; Scriven to direct the Interdisciplinary PhD in Evaluation program and me to begin my doctoral studies under his guidance. I'll admit that I initially found him abrasive and unempathetic, yet over time we bonded regarding one of his big ideas: goal-free evaluation, an idea that I know he considered one of his seminal contributions to evaluation. According to Scriven (1991), GFE is any evaluation in which the evaluator is blinded from the program's stated goals and objectives to find out "what the program is actually *doing* without being cued as to what it is *trying* to do" (p. 180).

In 1972, Scriven introduced goal-free evaluation to the program evaluation community in his article "Pros and Cons About Goal-Free Evaluation." However, Scriven had begun formulating GFE decades earlier while examining product evaluations conducted by Consumers Union and published in *Consumer Reports* magazine (Miller et al., 2005). Scriven noticed that product evaluators don't ask the product designers, engineers, or manufacturers what they're trying to do. Rather, the evaluator develops criteria and performance standards, tests the product, and compares the results to the standards, all while ignoring the product creators' goals. Although this process was well-established in product evaluation, "several [program] evaluators have testified that Scriven's suggestion in 1972 about the goal-free model was greeted by stunned disbelief. Completely ignoring objectives was shocking indeed" (Vedung, 1997/2017, p. 59). GFE was viewed as being in direct contrast to the dominant program evaluation zeitgeist, which said the yardstick of success is whether the program's predetermined goals and objectives were achieved. Describing GFE's impact on the scholarly evaluation community upon Scriven's unveiling, House (1974) said that GFE "rocks the train of goal-determined evaluation, which has lulled us to sleep" (p. 5).

Ever since the early 1970s, there have been dozens of known GFE practitioners and a consistent trickle of scholarly publications and reports on GFE (Youker, 2019), yet GFE has failed to garner the respect I believe it deserves. Most evaluators likely agree with GFE's questioning of goals (the relevance of any predetermined goal, whose goals should count, and how goals should be weighted). Some recognize the value of casting the outcome net widely to capture unintended and negative outcomes. However, in my experience, most evaluators consider GFE as just rhetoric, or a reminder to establish quality goals; they don't consider GFE a feasible approach for conducting an evaluation. In this article, I want to build on Scriven's legacy and make the case that GFE exists as a legitimate evaluation approach with a promising future.

Here, I should mention that the version of GFE that I personally subscribe to deviates from Scriven's, as mine more closely reflects Vedung's (1997/2017) adaptation of GFE. Vedung's GFE forgoes Scriven's investigation of consumer needs. Vedung writes:

> In Scriven's own version of the goal-free model, program effects are compared to the needs of the clients, or rather the impacted population. At this point, I have diverted

> myself from Scriven and ventured a rendition of my own, excluding also needs from the model. In my consciously idiosyncratic reinterpretation, the goal-free model pays attention to neither pre-stated goals nor client needs.... In bypassing the rhetorical bog of goals and needs the evaluator will save precious time that can be expended on more pressing tasks. (pp. 60–61)

I, like Vedung, see Scriven's focus on needs assessment as an unnecessary step for conducting a GFE. In fact, the very first GFE I ever conducted was under Scriven's supervision in 2005, and it did not include a separate needs analysis or assessment. However, based on Scriven's suggestion, I did report on what I perceived to be the needs that the organization was trying to address according to my examination of the program's actions and outcomes. Then in 2013, I laid out the principles governing GFE:

1. Identify relevant effects to examine without referencing goals and objectives.
2. Identify what occurred without the prompting of goals and objectives.
3. Determine if what occurred can logically be attributed to the program or intervention.
4. Determine the degree to which the effects are positive, negative, or neutral. (p. 434)

If one accepts these four principles, then GFE has existed forever (hyperbole intended). Somewhat educated speculation leads to the conclusion that the earliest people were most certainly evaluating their products and their processes, likely relying on cultural and oral traditions for passing down their methods and techniques. Furthermore, the dispersion of humanmade items, as well as building and agricultural techniques throughout geographic regions and across clans, is evidence of trade among diverse cultures—people who exchanged objects without the use of a common language, instead communicating via gesture and demonstration. During such an exchange, the recipient would determine the merit or quality of the tool without knowing the maker's specific—or at least articulated—intentions or goals, whether the goal was a lighter arrowhead, a vessel for holding offerings to the gods, a larger ear of maize, or hardier livestock. The point here is that for *Homo sapiens*, GFE has always existed in the same way that evaluation has always existed. Sometimes the evaluator doesn't know the goals or intentions.

It was this realization that led me to the understanding that Scriven *discovered* GFE; he did not invent it. GFE is what happens when the evaluators don't know the goals, as well as when they are intentionally shielded from them. Therefore, there is a robust history of evaluations where no one, including the evaluator, knows the initiative's intended goals. For example, in 2005, here in Kalamazoo, Michigan, the community received an incredibly large anonymous donation to make college free for all graduates of the city's public school district. The donors refused to publicly state their goals, so any research and evaluation on this initiative is, by default, goal-free. For better or for worse, anonymous donations to school districts, universities, churches, health foundations, and other nonprofits are on the rise (Russell, 2023), providing numerous other opportunities for evaluations that have no known or agreed-upon goals. In fact, my hunch is that, historically, most GFEs are of this type, reactionary rather than intentional, as Scriven prescribed.

There is a second type of GFE that I call goal-dismissive GFE (Youker et al., 2017) because the evaluators don't privilege goals, nor do they intentionally blind themselves from the goals; instead, they focus on identifying and measuring relevant outcomes. Most significant change, outcome harvesting, participatory assessment of development, and qualitative impact protocol are widely accepted goal-dismissive GFE approaches that have been used for decades across the globe to evaluate international development initiatives. For this reason, I suspect that goal-dismissive GFEs are probably the most common type of GFE used today. Moreover, I believe that the goal-dismissive GFE more accurately matches Scriven's product evaluation analogy. As far as I'm aware, Consumers Union's product evaluators don't take steps or precautions to blind themselves to the product designers' and manufacturers' goals and objectives. They don't ask about their goals; they ignore them. Goal-dismissive evaluators disregard the goals; they don't ask about or refer to them. With goal-dismissive approaches, if a situation arises where the evaluator inadvertently learns potential goals, they treat the goals no differently than they treat any other non-goal outcome possibility.

So, to those who balk at GFE, deeming it impractical and unrealistic, I say that despite any skepticism, GFE exists, and at times evaluations are goal-free by default. This fact alone warrants GFE's examination. I think evaluators sometimes

get hung up on Scriven's promulgation of a strict protocol for shielding evaluators from the program's goals, and they therefore reject GFE entirely. However, by spurning GFE, they neglect the many instances where there are no known goals, and they miss the evaluation models where the evaluators dismiss the stated goals without taking measures to blind themselves from the goals. As there are scholarly publications and guidebooks for the aforementioned goal-dismissive GFEs, a logical starting place may be to convince evaluation scholars and the philanthropic community to examine how evaluators evaluate programs and initiatives that lack stated goals.

I believe the future of GFE begins with ending the debate on *whether* to use GFE and accepting that it *is* used and sometimes *must* be used, thereby shifting the debate to when and how to conduct GFE. Let's investigate how evaluators design evaluations when the goals are absent or ambiguous. Let's explore goal-dismissive evaluation approaches, particularly those that, in recent years, evaluators have used in non-international development contexts: most significant change (e.g., Dinh et al., 2019; Fink Shapiro et al., 2021; Henry, 2022) and outcome harvesting (e.g., Abboud & Claussen, 2016; Chen et al., 2023; Railer et al., 2020).

Ernie House (1974) may be the first person to have conducted a modern GFE, and he describes his realization of the false sense of comfort that knowing the goals gives the evaluator:

> The goal-determined evaluator will forever underappreciate the warmth and security that his goal list provides him until someday he tries to do without it. It protects him from having to venture perilously into the nebulous and deeper ideas behind the program. (p. 2)

I think the three greatest impacts of GFE on evaluation are (1) questioning the relevance of program goals to the external evaluator; (2) serious consideration of evaluator independence from program funders, administrators, and staff; and (3) promotion of examining a broad range of potential program outcomes, regardless of whether the outcomes are intended or not. Vedung (1997/2017) concurs, saying that Scriven's GFE "had effects upon the theory and practice of American program evaluation" (p. 59).

In this special edition of *JMDE*, scholars and colleagues examine and reflect on Scriven, his life, and his legacy, an endeavor that I will argue is goal-free.

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