What is … Realist Evaluation?

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Summary

- Theory-driven evaluations
- Programme theory
- 6 key principles in realist evaluation
- Q&A

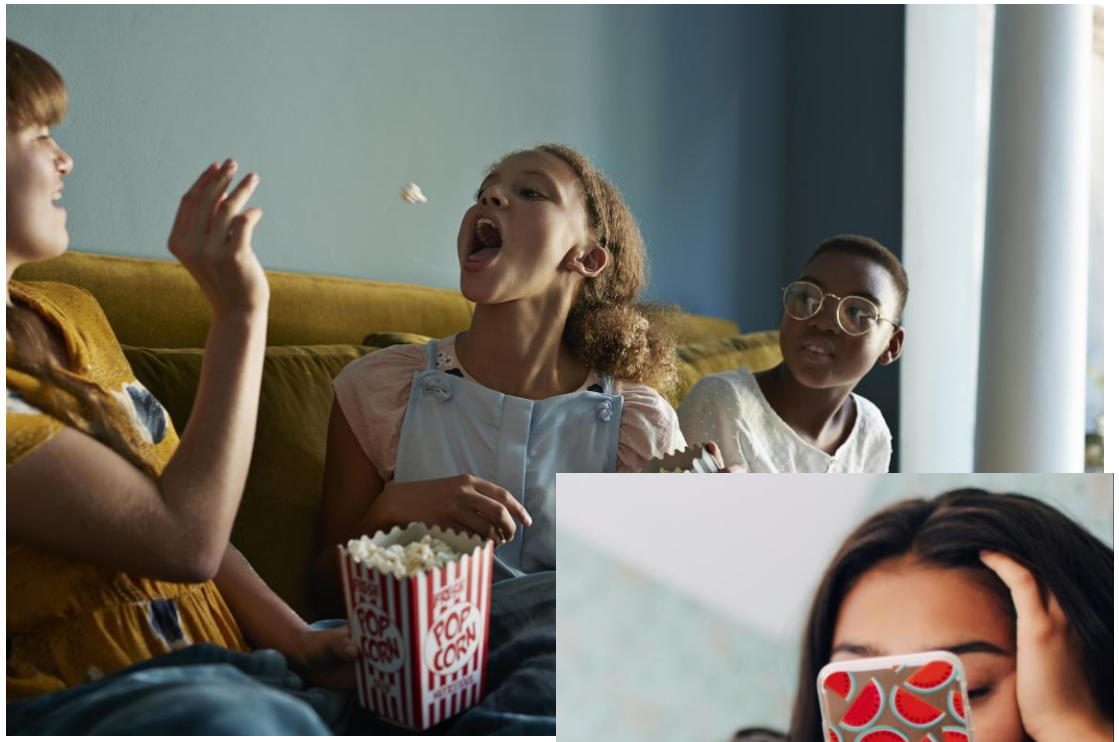
Theory-driven evaluation in a nutshell

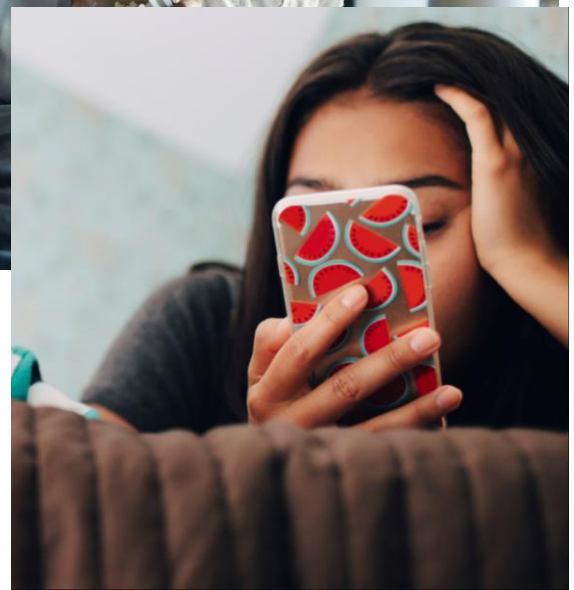
~ Policies, programmes, interventions are theories …

and

~ Evaluation is the process of testing those theories

A health education programme from the 90s





- Girls spent too much time mooching around in bedroom culture …
- Here and via the influence of "girls' magazines" they come under a range of unwholesome, unhealthy influences … Nowadays: smartphones
- Their role models being film stars, soap starts, rock stars etc. … Nowadays: social media influencers
- What if we can persuade the editors of these magazines to pursue a 'fitness agenda' and use fit young sport stars (i.e. David Beckham) as the role models …

Evaluation is theory testing

'***Interviewer*:** But do you think the fact that these good-looking blokes are footballers has any effect on girls' attitude to playing football?

***Girl*:** No, I think it has more effect on them *watching* football, well not the football - the guys (general laughter and agreement)'.

Mitchell K (1997) 'Encouraging young women to exercise: can teenage magazines play a role?' Health Education Journal 56(2) pp. 264-273

Audience Participation

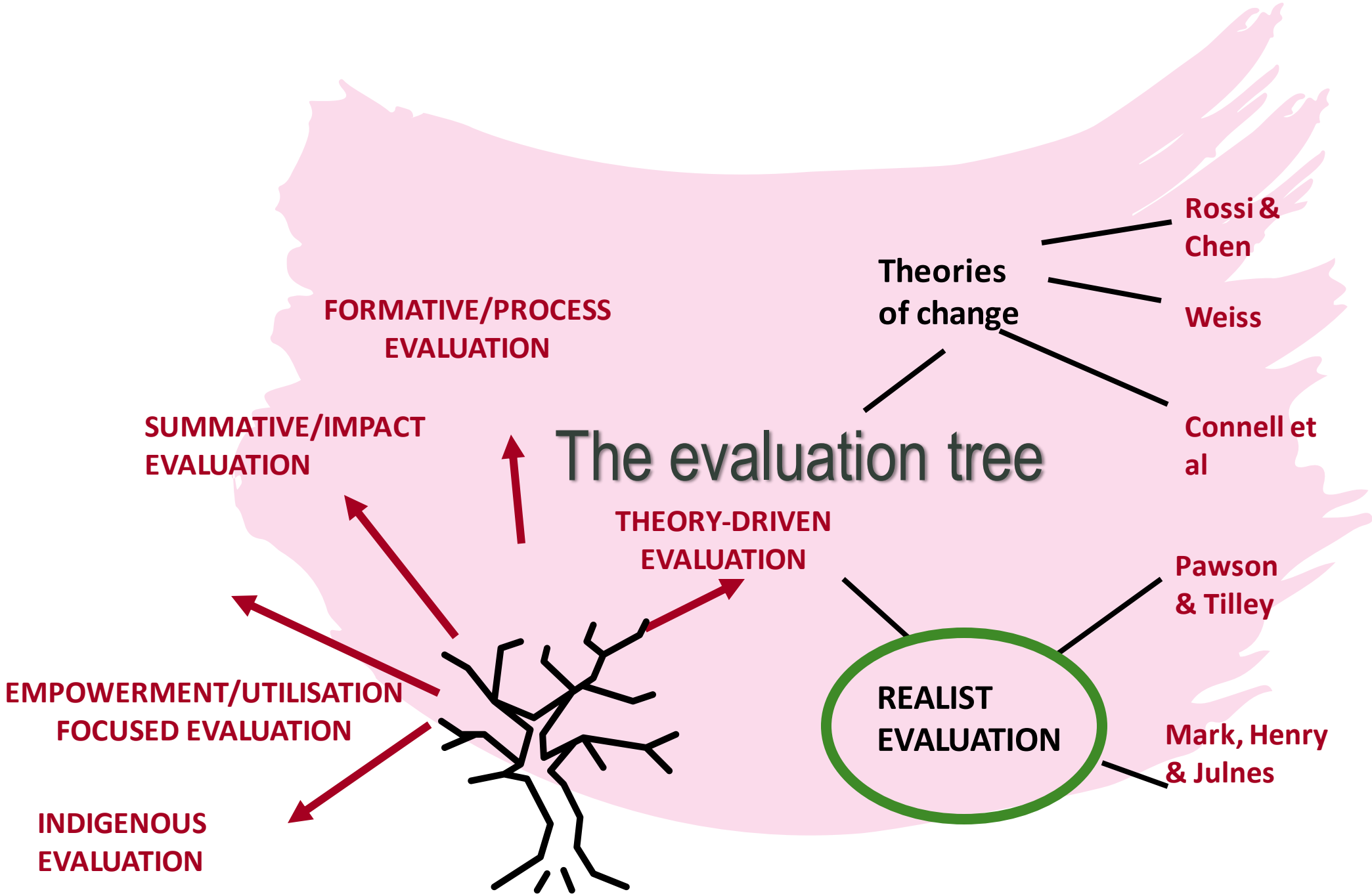
Try to improve ‘role model theory’

- Who might have been better used as a role model to promote the fitness agenda for this group?
- What about different programmes? Who, in particular or in general terms, might act a role model for smoking cessation, healthy eating/drinking?
- In general terms – what makes a good role model?

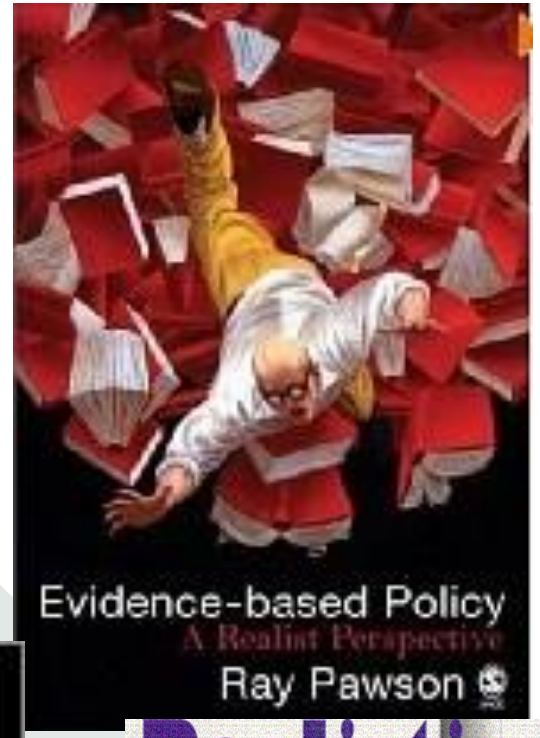
A programme theory is a hypothesis about how the intervention works that can be tested and refined

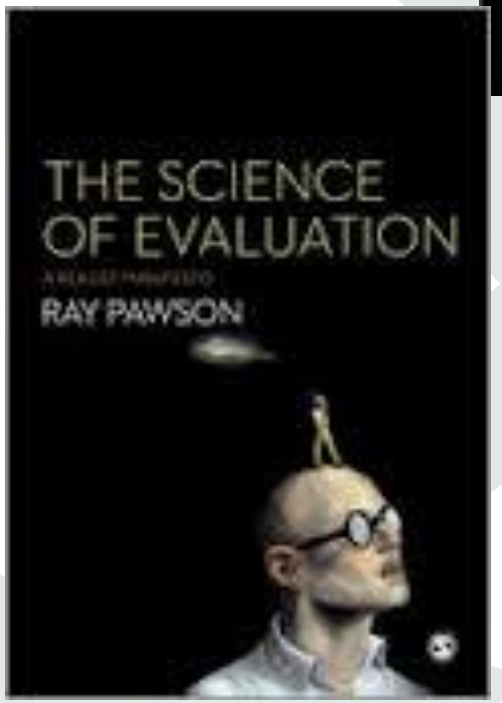
Several programme theories about different parts of the programme

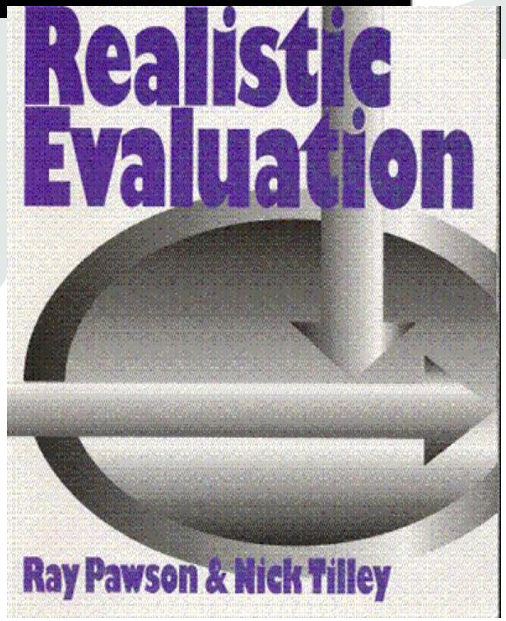
They are often **implicit** set of assumptions


The evaluation tree
FORMATIVE/PROCESS EVALUATION
SUMMATIVE/IMPACT EVALUATION
THEORY-DRIVEN EVALUATION
EMPOWERMENT/UTILISATION FOCUSED EVALUATION
INDIGENOUS EVALUATION
Theories of change
Rossi & Chen
Weiss
Connell et al
REALIST EVALUATION
Pawson & Tilley
Mark, Henry & Julnes

- Popularised at the end of the 20th century
- Started in criminology… then moved on to public health and many others
- **'How does it work, for whom, under what circumstances and why?" (Pawson and Tilley, 1997)**
- Realist evaluation is **method neutral** (specific methods are not hierarchised). However, it is often a **multi- or mixed methods** approach.
- In 2016, **quality and publication standards** were published for realist evaluation and these are now widely used (Wong et al., 2016).
- In 2020: Dedicated section in the **Magenta Book** (guidance for government evaluators)
- In 2021, key recommended evaluation approach in the updated **Medical Research Council guidance** framework for developing and evaluating complex interventions

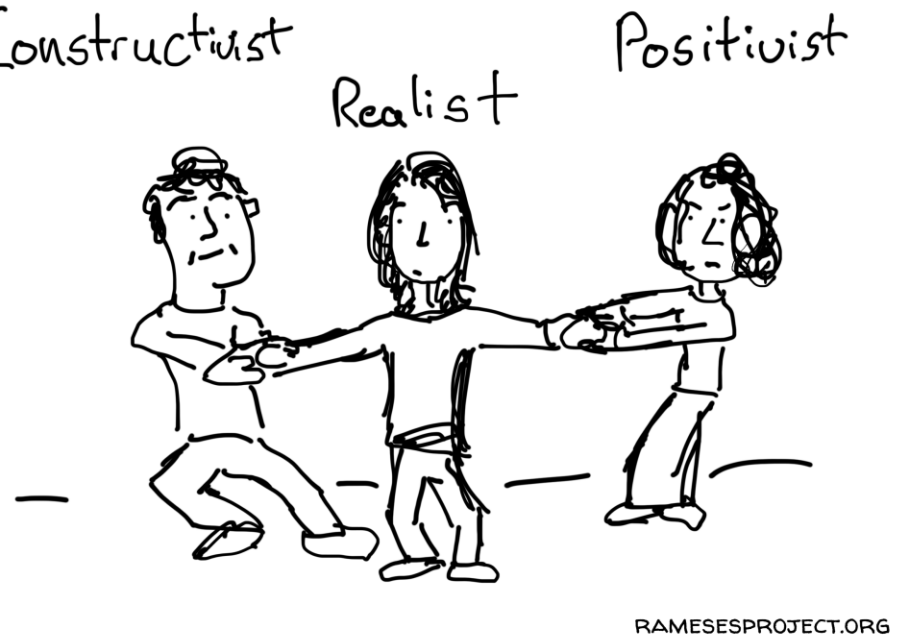






Realism… realist evaluation on 'active programmes'

The **philosophical basis of realist evaluations is realism**
There is **an external reality** that can be assessed through configurations of contexts, mechanisms and outcomes
Theoretical claims obtained through these evaluations are expected to represent knowledge of the real world.
The research process will start by **theorizing, then will test those theories; these will be refined and tested again** and, in this iterative process, our understanding of the real world is also refined



It is not programmes that 'work'. Programmes offer resources to subjects. *And it is the subjects choosing to act on these resources that determine whether the programme works.* Their choices, of course, are always constrained by wider social circumstances surrounding the programme.

6 Key Principles of Realist Evaluation

- Theories
- Embeddedness
- Contexts
- Mechanisms
- Outcomes
- Configurations

Embeddedness

Programmes never operate in a social vacuum - they are always inserted into an existing flow of social conduct. Programmes are thus, without exception and without equivocation, *embedded* in existing social processes.

Programmes are like ONIONS

The 4 Is of Evaluation reflecting a stratified nature of social reality: Idea, Individuals, Institution, Infrastructure

Inside the black box: Mechanisms

Mechanisms (M) describe what it is about programmes and interventions that bring about any effects.

Mechanisms are often hidden, rather as the workings of a clock cannot be seen but drive the patterned movements of the hands.

Programmes offer (and sometimes take away) resources. These resources may be material, social, emotional etc. **This *process* of how subjects interpret and act upon the intervention resources is known as the programme 'mechanism'.**

Surrounding the black box: Contexts

Programmes try to activate change mechanisms - but whether they do so depends on context (C). **Context describes those pre-existing features of the localities and situations in which programmes are introduced that are relevant to the operation the programme mechanisms.**

Contexts are always multiple: Time, Place, Individuals Teams, Institutions, Economies, Cultures, Society

Certain contexts **will be supportive to the programme theory** and some will not. And this gives realist evaluation the crucial task of sorting the one from the other.

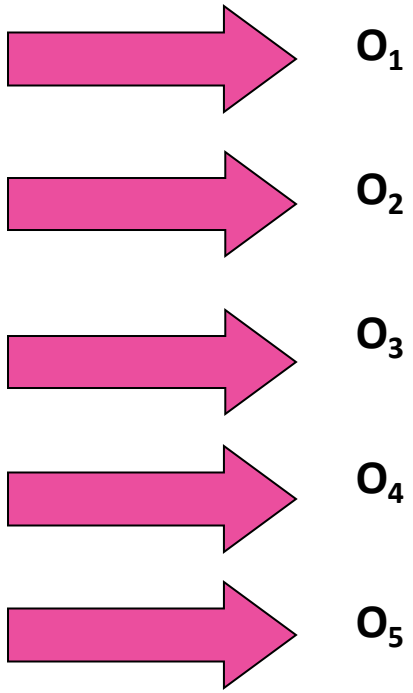
Pawson, 2013: "**What works in Wigan on a wet Wednesday will not necessarily work in Truro on a thunderous Thursday**"

Out of the black box: Outcomes (which are also always multiple)

Because of variations in context in which they are introduced and mechanisms activated, any programme is liable to have mixed outcome patterns (O).

Outcome-patterns comprise the intended and unintended consequences of programmes. Programmes will work for some - fail for others, work here but not there, bloom and fade etc.

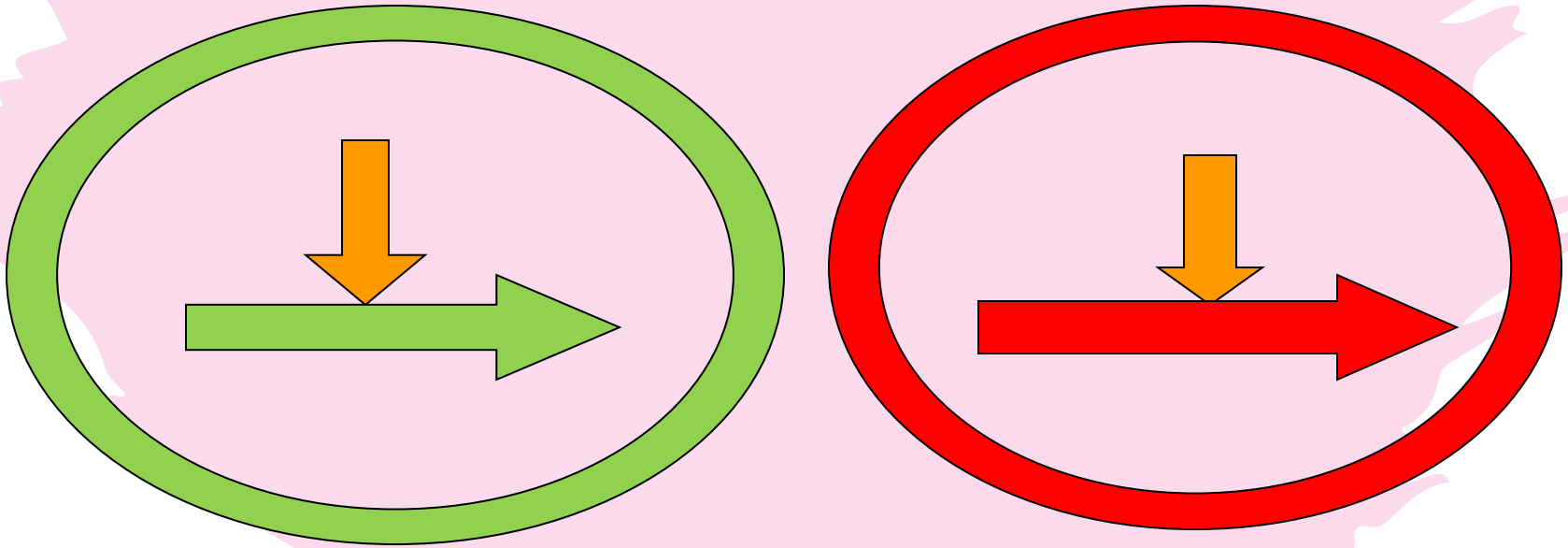
Realist evaluation does not rely on a single outcome measure to deliver a pass/fail verdict on a programme. It tries to explain the whole footprint of outcomes.



Putting it all together in CONFIGURATIONS: Mechanisms, Contexts and Outcomes

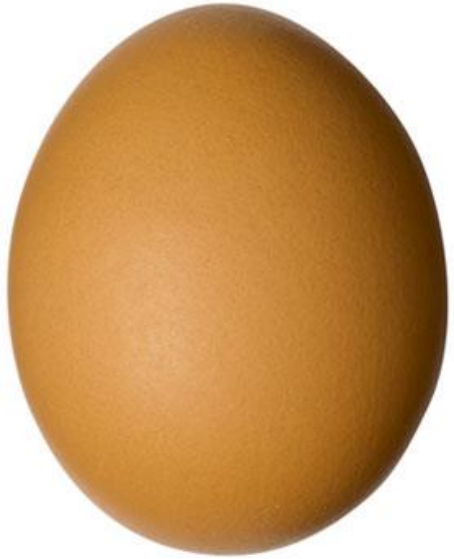
Don't ask 'what works?'

Rather, investigate: 'what works for whom in what circumstances?'



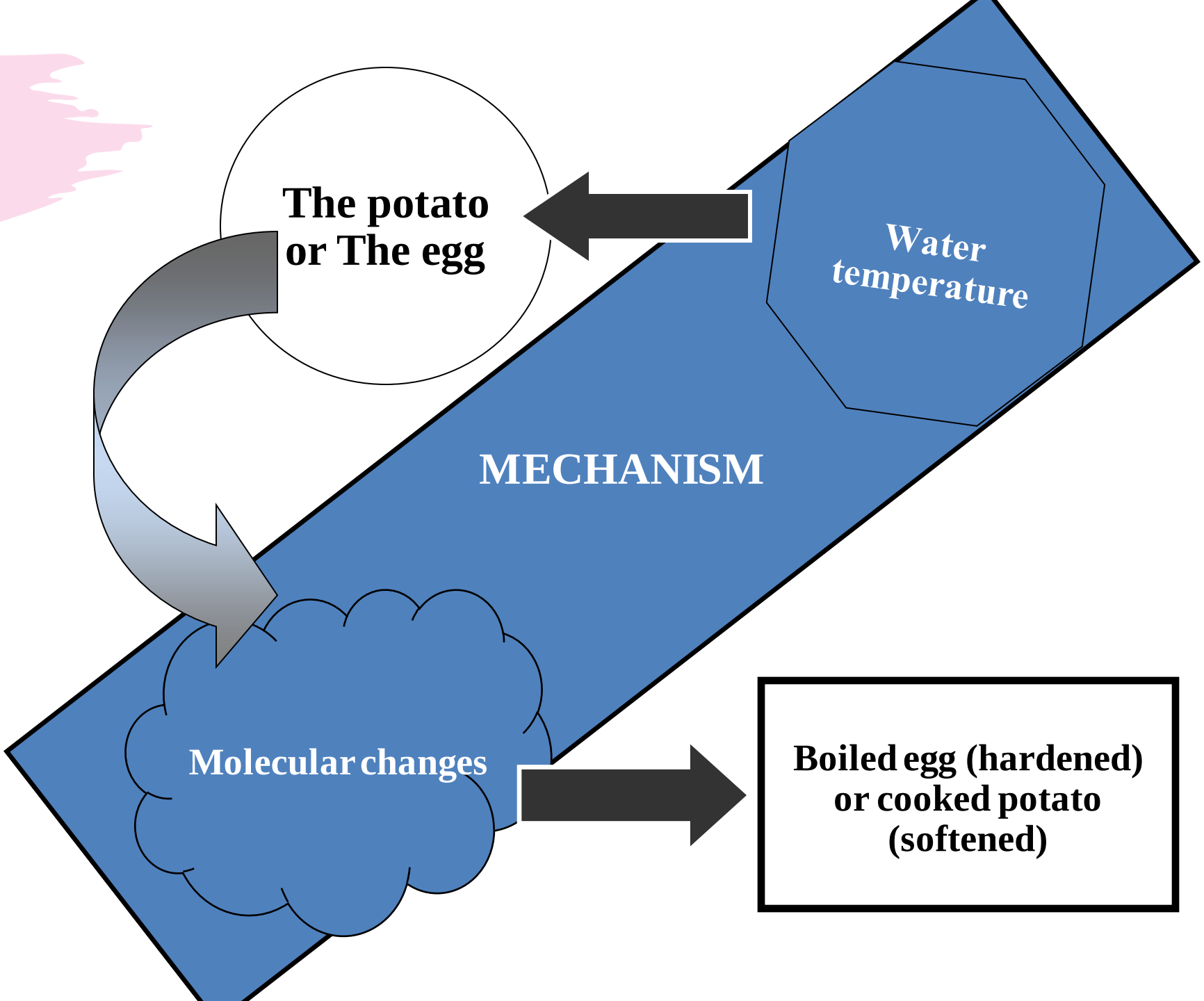
The same programme mechanism will have different outcomes in different contexts (CMOCs)

AUDIENCE Task



"The same boiling water that softens the potato hardens the egg"

Task: CMO the phrase!


The potato
or The egg
Water
temperature
MECHANISM
Molecular changes
Boiled egg (hardened)
or cooked potato
(softened)

When a realist evaluation is useful.

I need to evaluate a new initiative.

A pilot program for us.

I have a trial that needs an evaluation.

We have a program that works, but we don't know how or for whom.

We are trying to scale our program but need to figure out how.

RAMESESPROJECT.ORG

Further Resources

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- https://www.ramesesproject.org/

Q & A