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Australian Government
Australian Taxation Office

What's your problem?

Navigating the impact of problematisation on evaluation

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Australian Taxation Office

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Acknowledgment of Country

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners and Custodians of Country throughout Australia and their continuing connection to land, waters and community. We pay our respects to them, their cultures, and Elders past and present.

We recognise the unique relationship Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have to Country, culture, community and the important role this plays in us all walking together as Australians.

We value the contribution Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples make to our organisation and the broader tax, superannuation and registry systems.

Australian Taxation Office

Australia's principal revenue authority

- Purpose: We collect tax so government can deliver services for the Australian community
  1. Collect the right amount of tax in the most efficient way for government and the taxpayer.
  2. Deliver fair, secure and transparent taxpayer interactions to make it easy to comply and hard not to.
  3. Manage our responsibilities in the superannuation system to support the future retirement savings of the community.
  4. Administer a range of payments and transfers on behalf of government.
- The ATO design and deliver a broad range of interventions
- We recognise that evaluation provides us the power to be more efficient and effective in our role

Presentation content:

1. What is problematisation?
2. Defining your problem
3. Check your problem thinking
    - Representation
    - Ethics
    - Group theory



Learning objectives

Learners should be able to:

- **Understand the basic components of a problem**
- **Understand how to verify desired outcomes**
- **Check the logic and ethics of your problem**

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01

What is problematisation

Creating a problem logic

15 min



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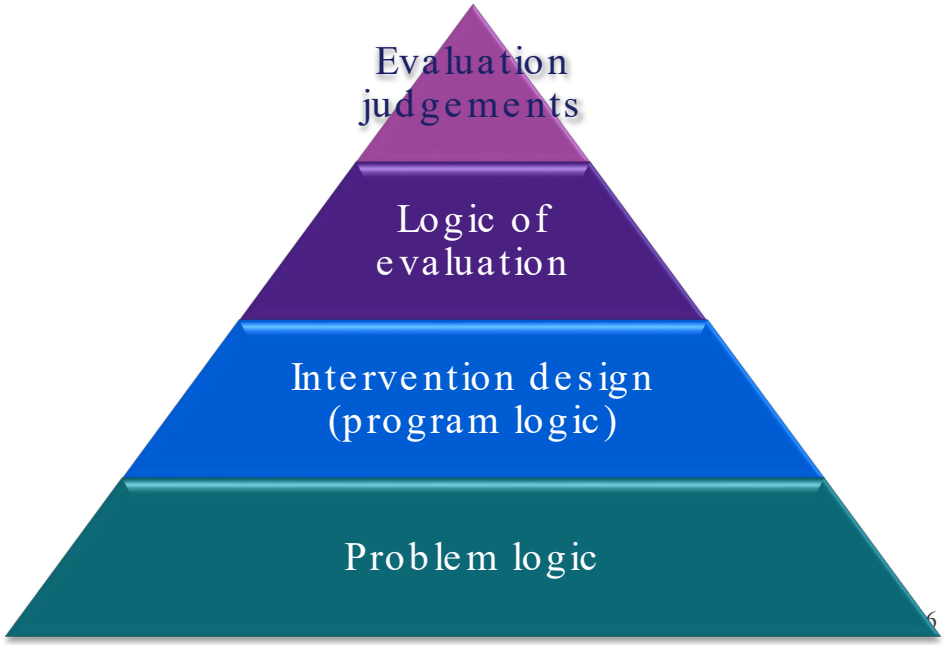
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Problematisation

- Is a study of problems and how to define them
- Work of Foucault, Bacchi, Bourdieu, Hacking and Latour, specifically:
  - Recognising that problems are dynamic
  - Tracing the genealogy of a problem can uncover hidden information
  - Problems can be classified and measured
  - Recognising wicked problems are difficult
  - Power influences the defining of the problem

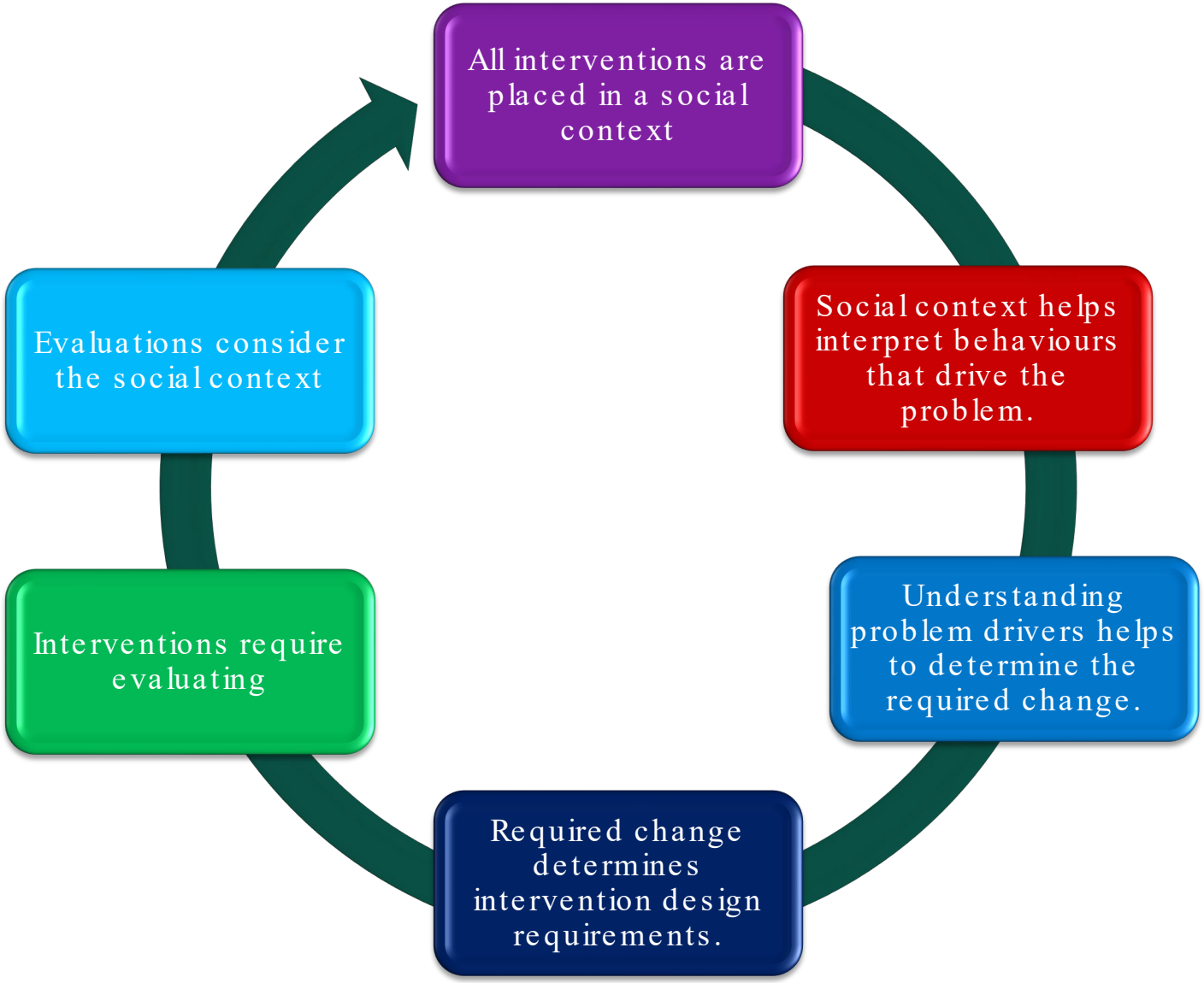
- Need to look for evidence of interactions with other interventions.

Engaging with stakeholders, other interventions and decision makers on a shared understanding of the problem is worth the effort.



Why do we need to understand the problem?

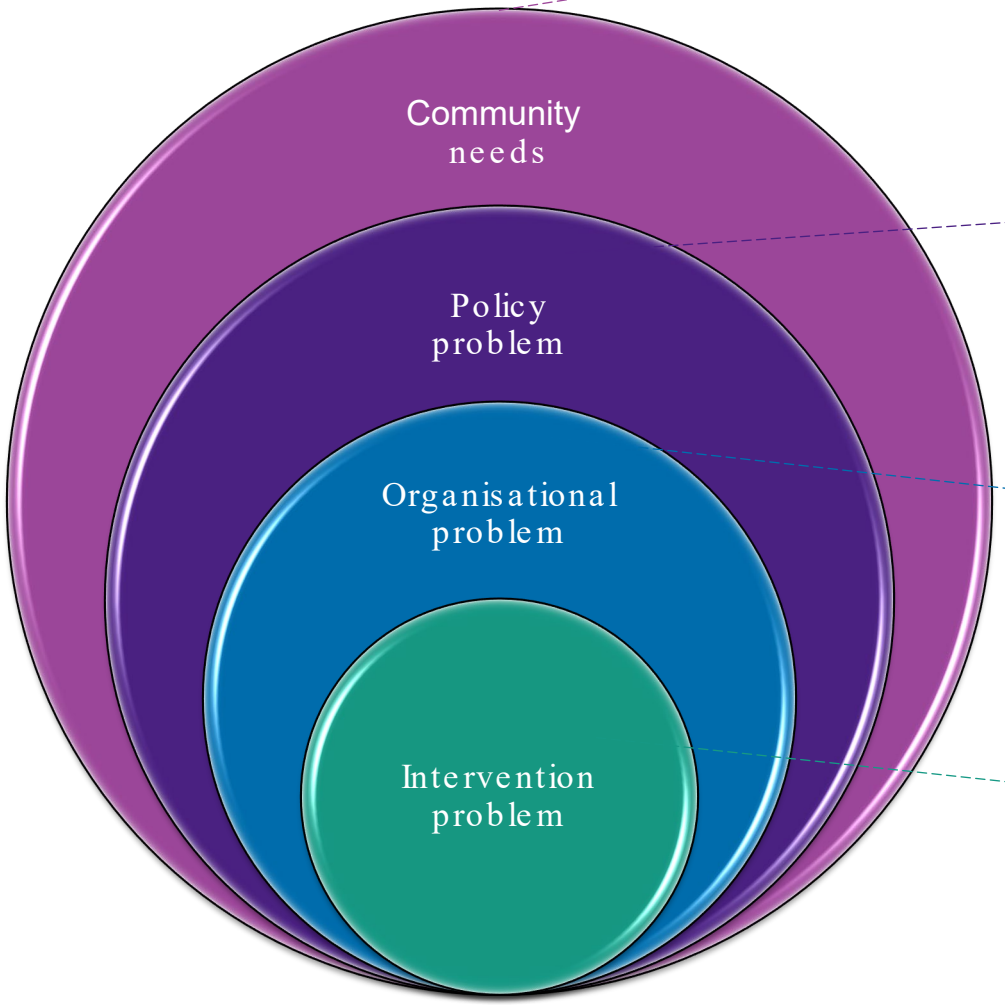
- Evaluations should include an assessment of the need
- Problems are built on the foundation of needs
- Problems underpin program logics and theory of change.
- Alignment of the intervention and the problem is a determinant of success
- Program outcomes are a reflection of the problem



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Problem landscape in a Government context

Problems are not discrete



Community needs focus on society or the community – usually equality, discrimination, fairness, other needs. They trigger policies. Key stakeholders: Community

Policy problems are the specific community problem that requires a policy response. NPPs include policy problems. They inform government programs. Key stakeholders: Elected representatives

Organisational problems relate to specific long term behavioural change that is the basis of a specific group of programs. They inform interventions. Key stakeholders: Organisational leaders

Intervention problems are the specific variables that are being targeted by the intervention. They are usually measured by sentinel indicators. They inform intervention design and success factors. Key stakeholders: Intervention staff

Assessing needs in evaluation (Davidson, 2005)

Start with the need:

* Conscious and unconscious needs
* Met and unmet.

Define the problem (performance need)

* How do you know a need is a problem?
* Who is it a problem for?
* How does the problem present?

Design the solution (instrumental need)

* How will we solve the problem?

- Problem logics helps us order and measure the problem.
- Problem logics use the same causal reasoning as a program logic.
- Problems have drivers and symptoms rather than activities and outcomes

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02

Defining the problem

Creating a problem logic

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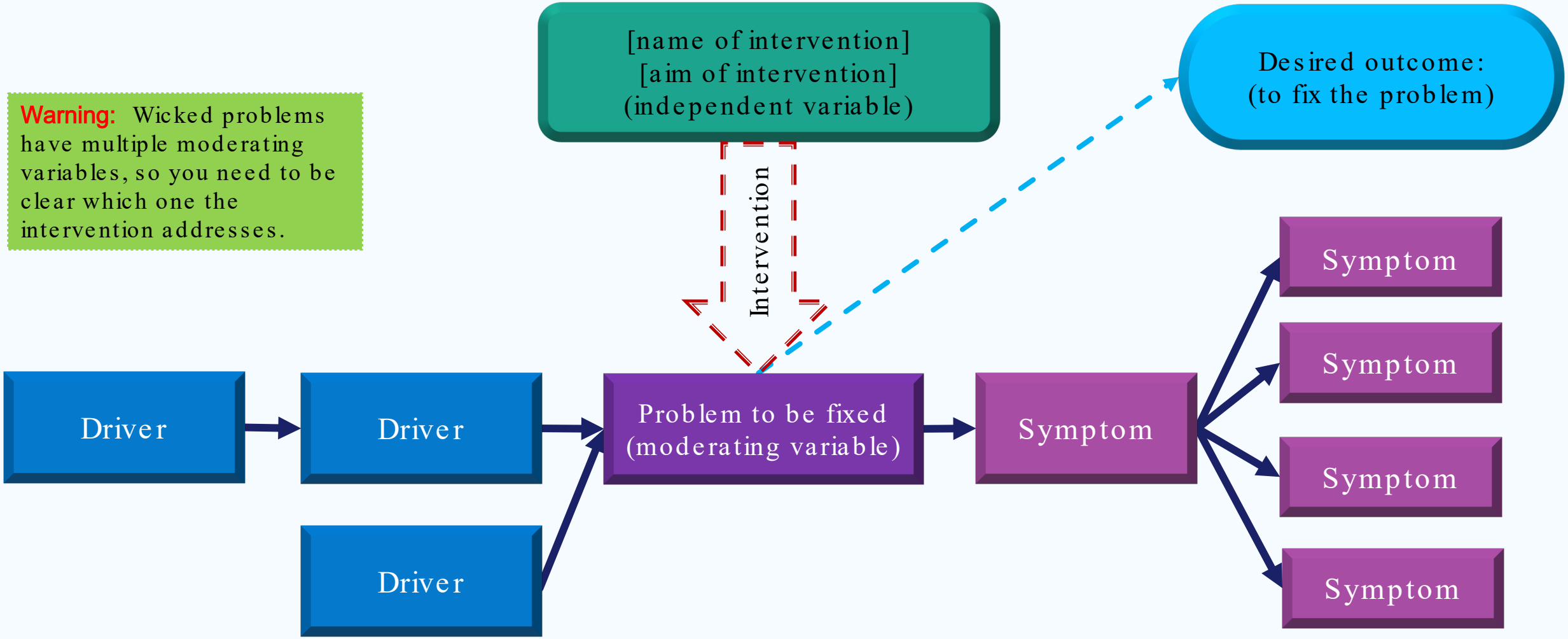


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Problem logic example

Warning: Wicked problems have multiple moderating variables, so you need to be clear which one the intervention addresses.

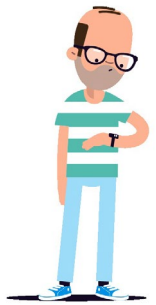


1. Drivers and symptoms

Activity: Use your program logic or mind mapping skills to map the drivers and symptoms of the problem



- A problem driver is a cause of the problem
- A problem symptom is the result or consequences of the problem
- Specifically look for the relationships between drivers and symptoms
- Use syllogisms (If -then- statements) to check relationships.
- In a separate document note explanations, reasoning and potential solutions (not for this exercise)
- If you use other assumptions in your example, identify them as assumptions



The problem scenario:

- **Context:** A Government agency has 10k staff
- IT are upgrading a software program everyone uses every day.
- There are increased calls to the IT service desk about this upgrade.
- The IT service desk has an up to 2h wait time (on hold).
- IT staff are working long hours.
- IT staff are tired so go slow.
- Staff are getting frustrated.

2. Determine which part of the problem the intervention will address

3. Determine desired outcomes

- *How can you change the problem?*
- *How do you know it will work?*

At the end of this stage, you should have a completed problem logic with desired outcomes and have a general idea of intervention design.

Note: Problem – intervention placeholder - outcome

You now only need to figure out the inputs, activities and output to produce a program logic.

4. Note down some preliminary activities and outputs

Outcome types:

1. Outcomes that solve the problem
2. Outcomes that adjust the problem
3. Outcomes that maintain the problem
4. Outcomes that have no effect on the problem (avoid)



With a problem logic you can:



Look out:

Measure the problem using sentinel indicators because you have isolated the moderating variable.

- Sentinel indicators warn us that something needs investigating or is changing – monitoring

Look up:

- Map the variables other interventions are targeting
- Collaborate to schedule a coordinated attack on the problem.

Look into:

Isolating the independent variable helps design an impact evaluation.

(How did the intervention solve the problem?)

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Checking your problem thinking



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What's the problem represented to be?

Problem representation: How do we represent the problem in the context?

Carol Bacchi's What's the problem represented to be approach

- Policy analysis technique using guiding questions.
- The solution indicates how you defined the problem.

Can be used to check the causal link between the problem and the intervention.

- Is the intervention consistent with the moderating variable?
- Is the intervention consistent with stakeholder values?

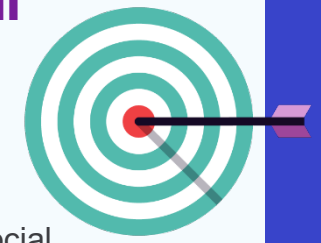


If you received an electricity bill that was double what you expected. What do you do?

- Ring the electricity provider to check accuracy
- Ring electricity provider to complain about the cost
- Turn off all the lights
- Lecture housemates about the length of their showers
- Do nothing

Checking the existence of unethical behavior in the problem and intervention

Grossman's theory on the psychology of unethical behavior



There are five factors that lead to unethical behaviour. They are:

1. The Demands of Authority – absolute obedience to superior's orders through social compliance, understanding of role and expectations of people in authority.
2. Group Absolution – group influence can shift responsibility, change behaviour and provide justification for actions – peer pressure.
3. The Predisposition of the Actor – the psychological make up of an individual is composed of their training, experience, and temperament which can then develop heuristics that influence their ethics.
4. The Distance to the Victim – the proximity of emotional and physical distance has a direct relationship with guilt. The further away we are, the more likely we are to dehumanise the victim because they cannot be seen. Physical, cultural, emotional, social and moral distance.
5. The Attractiveness of the Target – the depiction of the victim by the perpetrator. Describes situations that have a 'kill or be killed' outcome or where a decision to achieve a particular outcome justifies any means to get it.

Can be used to unpack the positioning of ourselves, stakeholders, actors, culture and interest groups in the intervention and to detect systemic bias.

- Where have we positioned ourselves (etc) in the problem?
- Is this an appropriate position?
- How can we reduce unethical behaviour?



In group and out group theory:

- Social classification of individuals into groups – "Us" v "Them"
- Preferential treatment is given to your in group, unconsciously
- Bias and discrimination applied to the outgroup
- The in group will reinforce their status by socially blocking members of the out group
- These behaviours can reinforce inequalities
- Often silently embedded in interventions



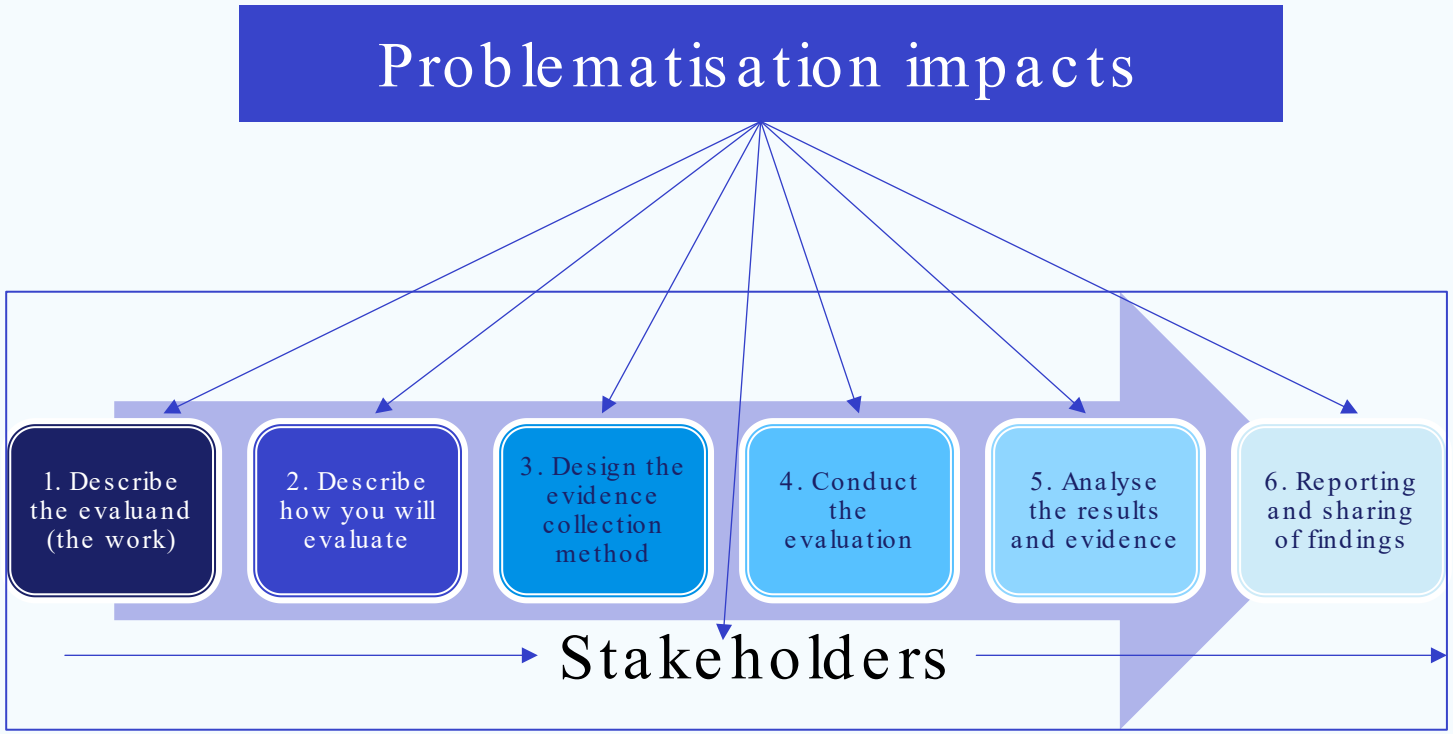
Why this matters?

In-group and out-group dynamics are important because they influence:

- How **problems are defined** (who is seen as the problem vs. who defines the problem)
- How **policies and interventions** are designed
- How **indicators and classifications** are constructed
- How people **respond to rules, messaging, or enforcement**

These dynamics often operate implicitly, making them difficult to detect without deliberate analysis.

Where to from here?



Needs analysis Intervention design Implementation	Criteria Key evaluation questions Standards Warranting	Evaluation approach Research methods Monitoring	Evidence determination	Analysis Interpretation of results	Evaluative judgements Evaluation use Modes of sharing

Stakeholder selection, engagement and management

Problems form the foundation for your evaluation

What's your problem?

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