Repurposing substantive theories in evaluation:

Opportunities and risks in transferring formal theories into new domains

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Disclaimer: the views expressed are those of the authors

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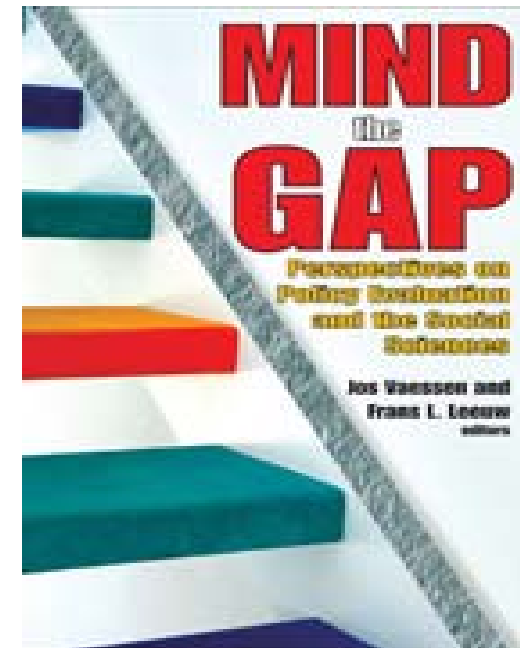
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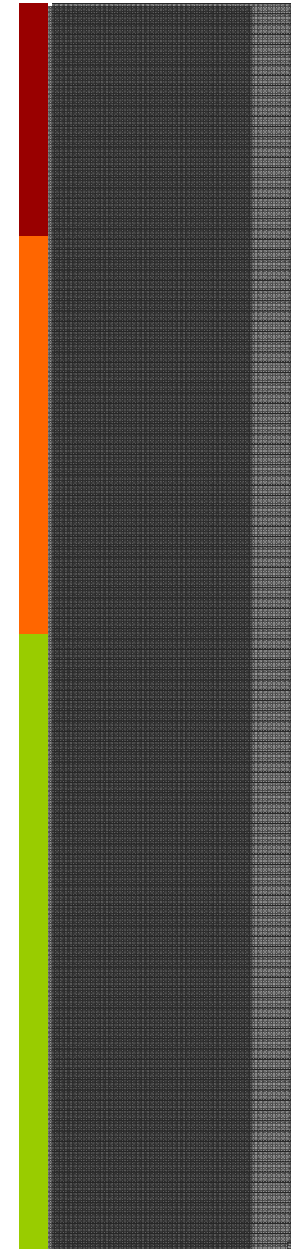
Explicitly sharing experience in transferring theories and evidence

obtained about the extension of a
formal theory to a new context

has potential to advance the field
of social policy evaluation.

- From *Mind the Gap*, by Vaessen & Leeuw (2010)

That is what we'll do today

Questions arising from this practice :

Do underlying evidence based theories about human behaviour **automatically transfer** to new areas of behaviour or new levels of systems?

Is borrowing theories valid?

Mitchie and Abrahams (2004) describe interventions which repurpose theory without validity checks as evidence inspired rather than evidence based.

What do evaluators mean by 'theory'?

"what is meant by 'theory' encompasses a confusing mix of concepts related to …

↗ how <u>evaluation</u> should be practiced,

↗ *explanatory frameworks for social phenomena drawn from <u>social science</u>, and*

↗ assumptions about how <u>programs</u> function and are supposed to function."

(Donaldson and Lipsey, 2006, p. 57).

Theory

Defining theory...

A broad definition

'Theory' refers to how knowledge –

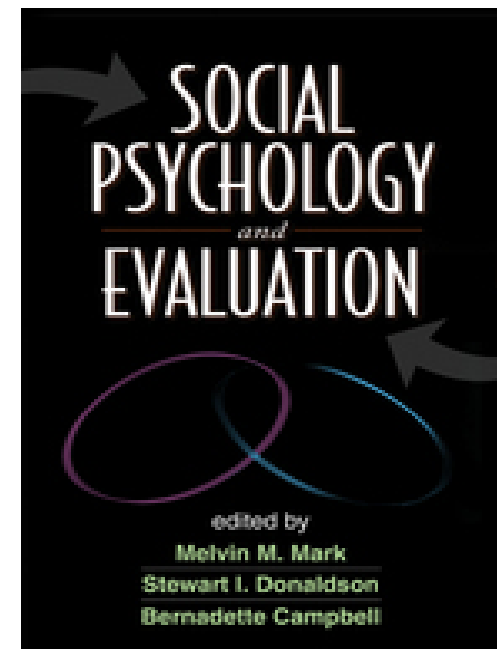**"organizes, categorizes, describes,**

predicts, explains,

and otherwise aids in understanding <u>and</u> controlling a topic."

(Shadish, Cook & Leviton, 1991, p. 30).

Defining theory...

↗ Formal or substantive theories relevant to evaluation of social programs arise in many fields

↗ Such as behavioural or social science, organisational theory, political economy and others.

Formal theory

↗ Theory ranges in meaning

↗ One definition of theory is that –

"a theory is a statement of the suspected relationship between and among variables"

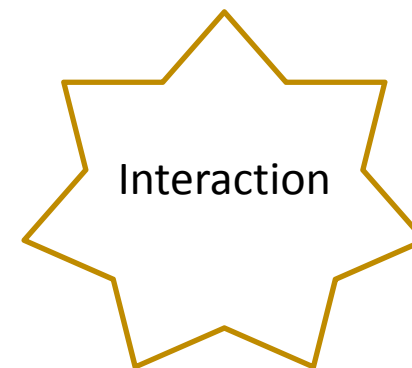(Gelso (2006), p. 2), in Gay & Weaver, 2011).

↗ In general, theory involves statements that make overt the relationships between concepts

Domains:

Mind ...cognitive, beliefs, thinking, emotion	Action ... choice, decision making, behaviour	Interaction ...engagement between partners in a system

Mind
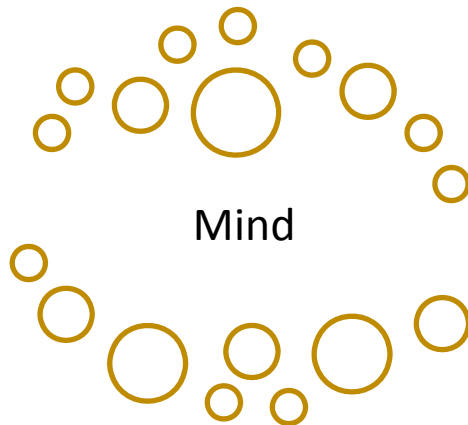
Action

Interaction

Domains – from Elster "Explaining social behaviour"
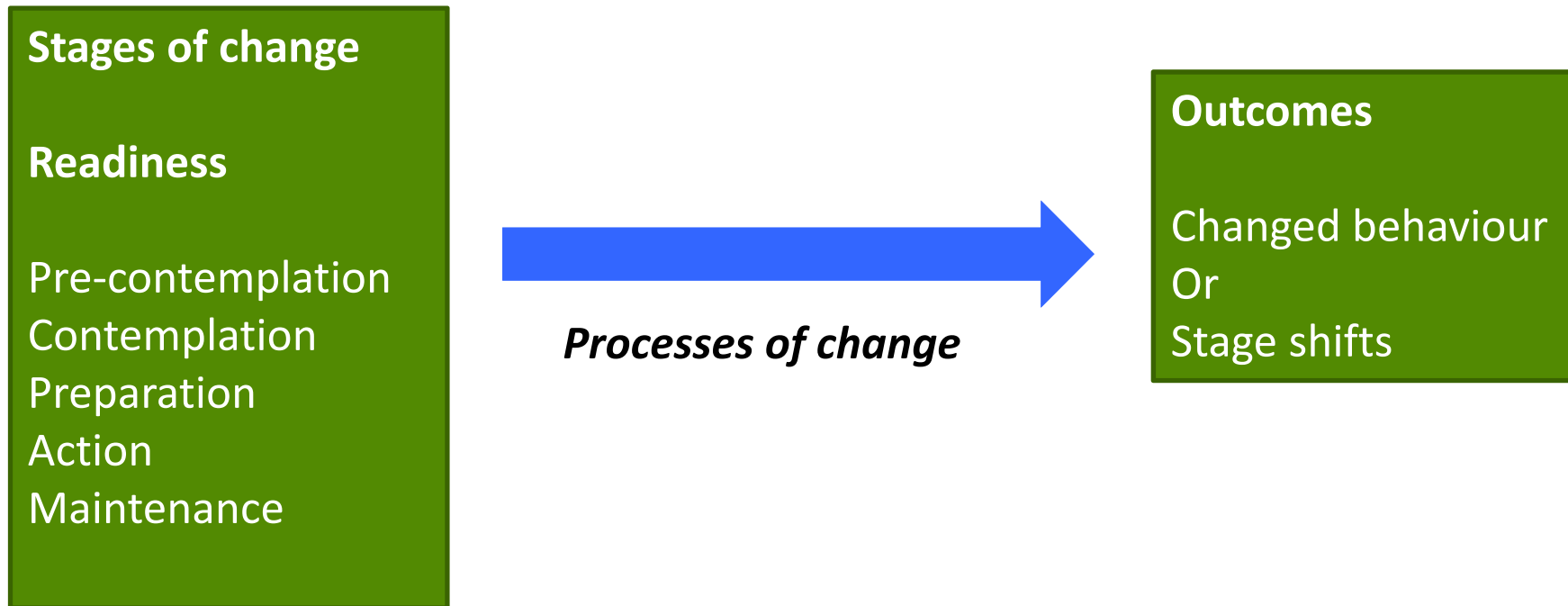
Examples

Theories spanning individuals, communities and service systems:

- Individual agency, e.g. self-efficacy

- Social change theories, e.g. collective efficacy

- Behaviour change theories, e.g. stages of readiness for change

- Service delivery, e.g. Normalisation theory

Stages of change theory

Prochaska & DiClemente

Stages of change

Readiness

Pre-contemplation
Contemplation
Preparation
Action
Maintenance

Processes of change

Outcomes

Changed behaviour
Or
Stage shifts

Stages of change theory – Trans-theoretical model
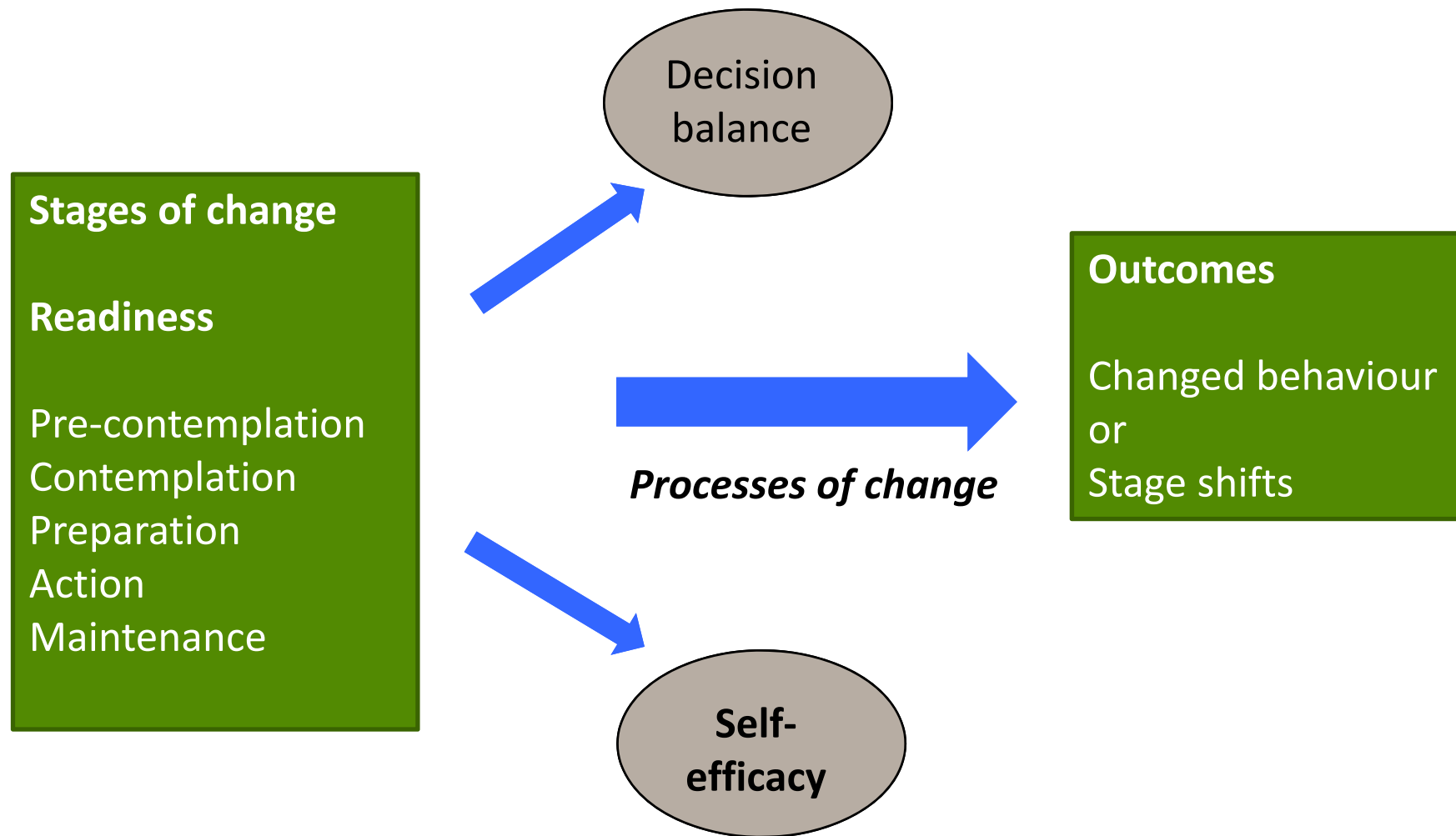
Normalisation theory
Wolfensberger and Tullman 1982

Processes by which society devalues groups, treats them as deviant, and excludes them

→

Devalued group members internalise expectations and 'live down' to them

Normalisation theory

Processes by which society devalues groups, treats them as deviant, and excludes them ➡ Devalued group members internalise expectations and 'live down' to them

Strategies through which social services can reverse this process ➡ New internalised expectations of and for self ⇨ different decisions and behaviours ➡ New behaviours ⇨ Changed outcomes ⇨ Changed expectations by others ⇨ new feedback loop

Normalisation theory
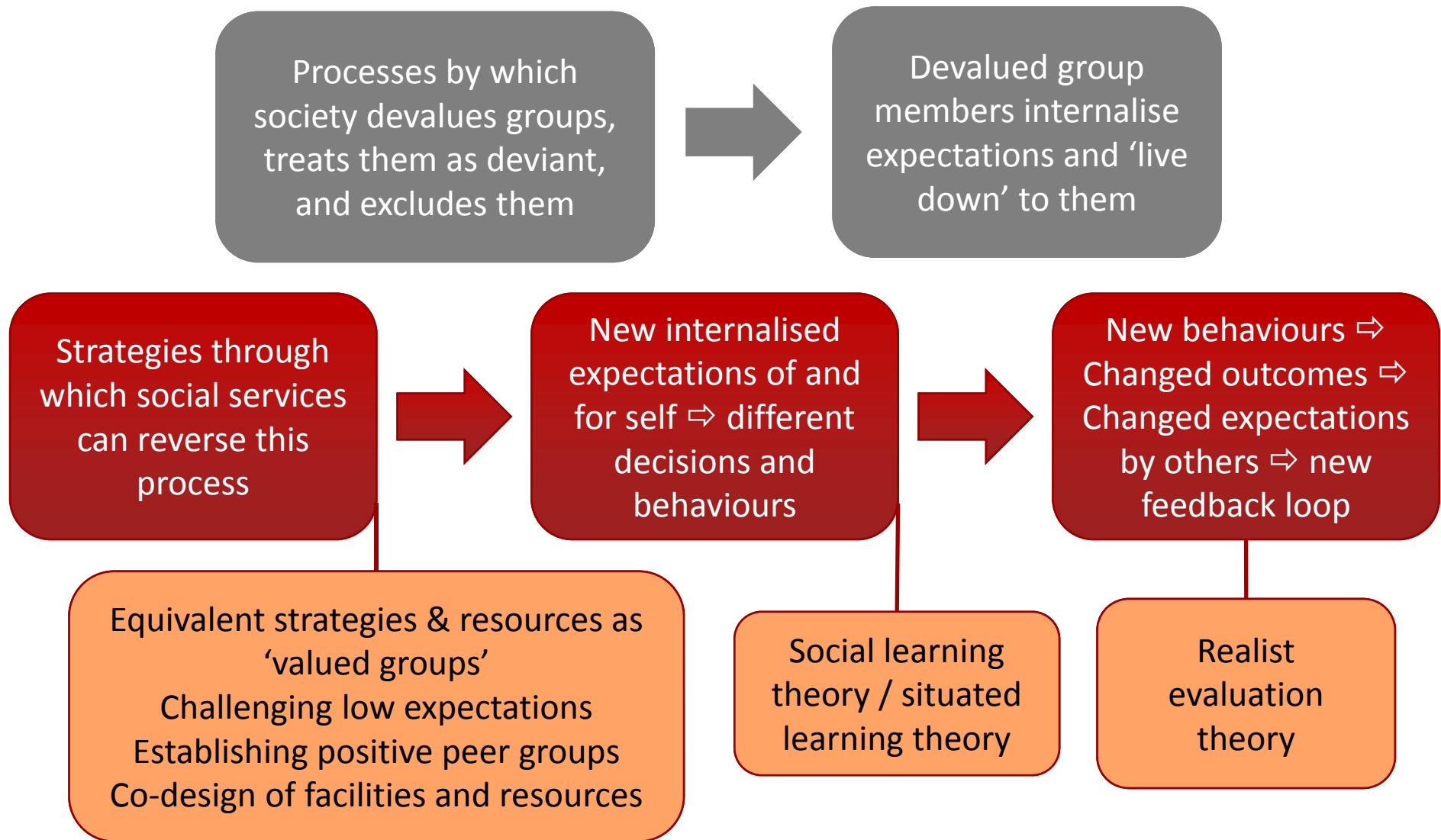
Processes by which society devalues groups, treats them as deviant, and excludes them

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Devalued group members internalise expectations and 'live down' to them

Strategies through which social services can reverse this process

→

New internalised expectations of and for self ⇨ different decisions and behaviours

→

New behaviours ⇨ Changed outcomes ⇨ Changed expectations by others ⇨ new feedback loop

Equivalent strategies & resources as 'valued groups'
Challenging low expectations
Establishing positive peer groups
Co-design of facilities and resources

Social learning theory / situated learning theory

Realist evaluation theory

Group breakout

Aim: to discuss the relevance of theories developed and tested in one sector, and their application in others

Prompt questions...

↗ What formal theories have you used?
   Any you have decided not to use?

↗ What concerns have you had?
   Pitfalls or risks?

↗ What benefits have you seen?
   Any lessons?

Opportunities and risks

Summary of potential

Views from the room

Stocktake

↗ Are all theories transferable – all of the time?

↗ What does this say about the utility of a theory?

↗ How can we know if we get it right? What happens if we mess it up?

↗ Should we engage in validity checks to build our evaluation capital?