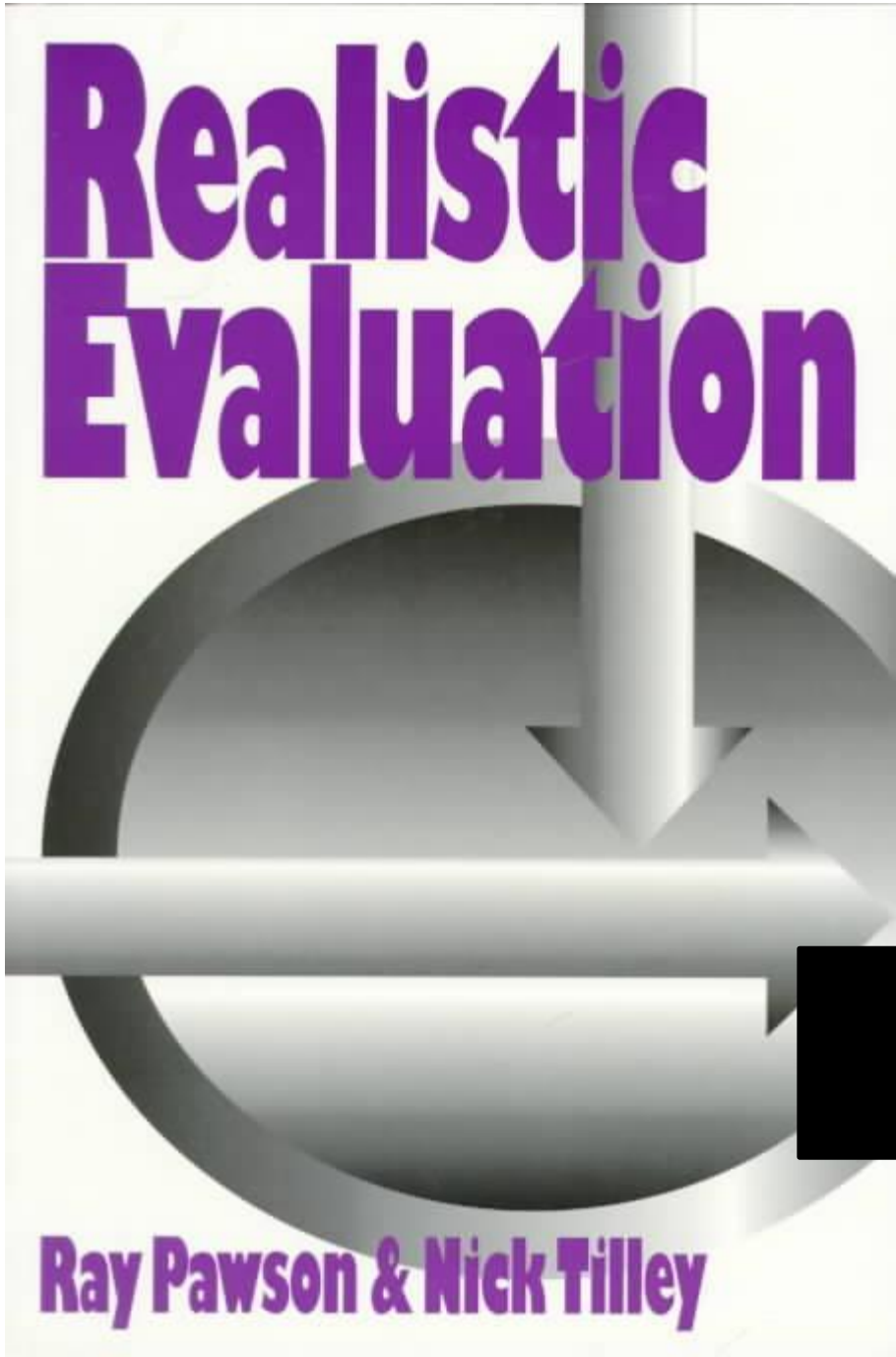# Realist evaluation for health policy research

Yodi Mahendradhata

Realistic Evaluation

Ray Pawson & Nick Tilley
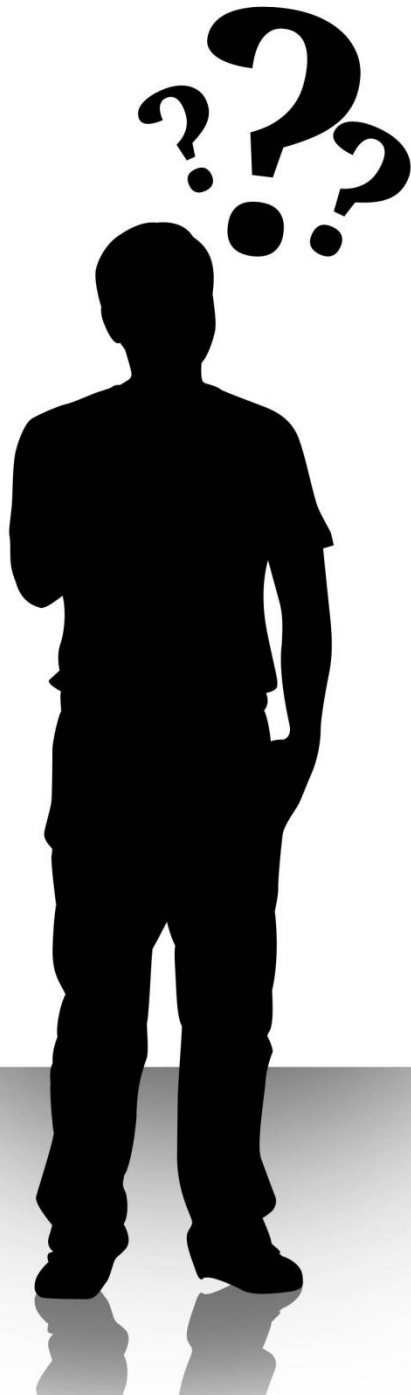
Key Reference

Megan's Law
All states develop notification protocols that allow public access to information about sex offenders in the community.

Connecticut's version of Megan's Law (1)

- The Department of Public Safety mandated (PA 98-111) to establish and maintain a centralized sex offender registry in the State of Connecticut available to the public.

- The Sex Offender Registry Unit came into existence in October of 1998 and registry information was published on a web site as of December 30, 1998.

Connecticut's version of Megan's Law (2)

- The addresses of all sex offenders are updated on a ninety day or annual basis depending on conviction and conditions of release.

- Law enforcement officials throughout the state are notified when a registered sex offender resides in their town
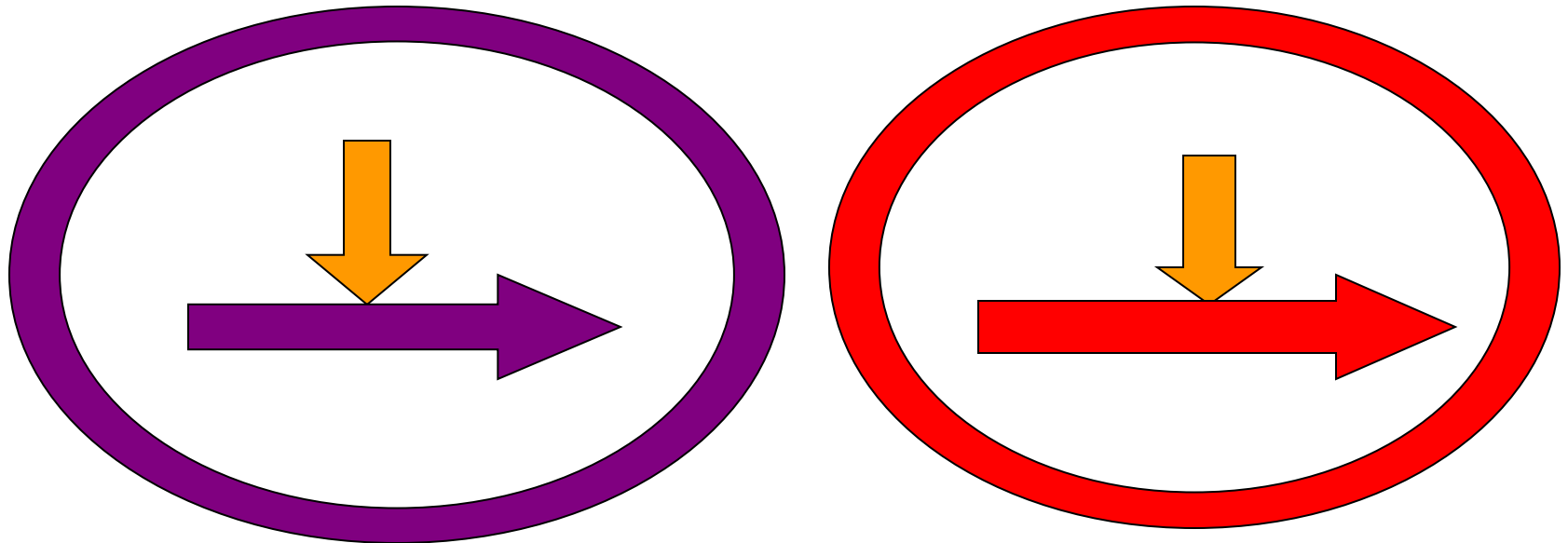
How would you evaluate Megan's Law?

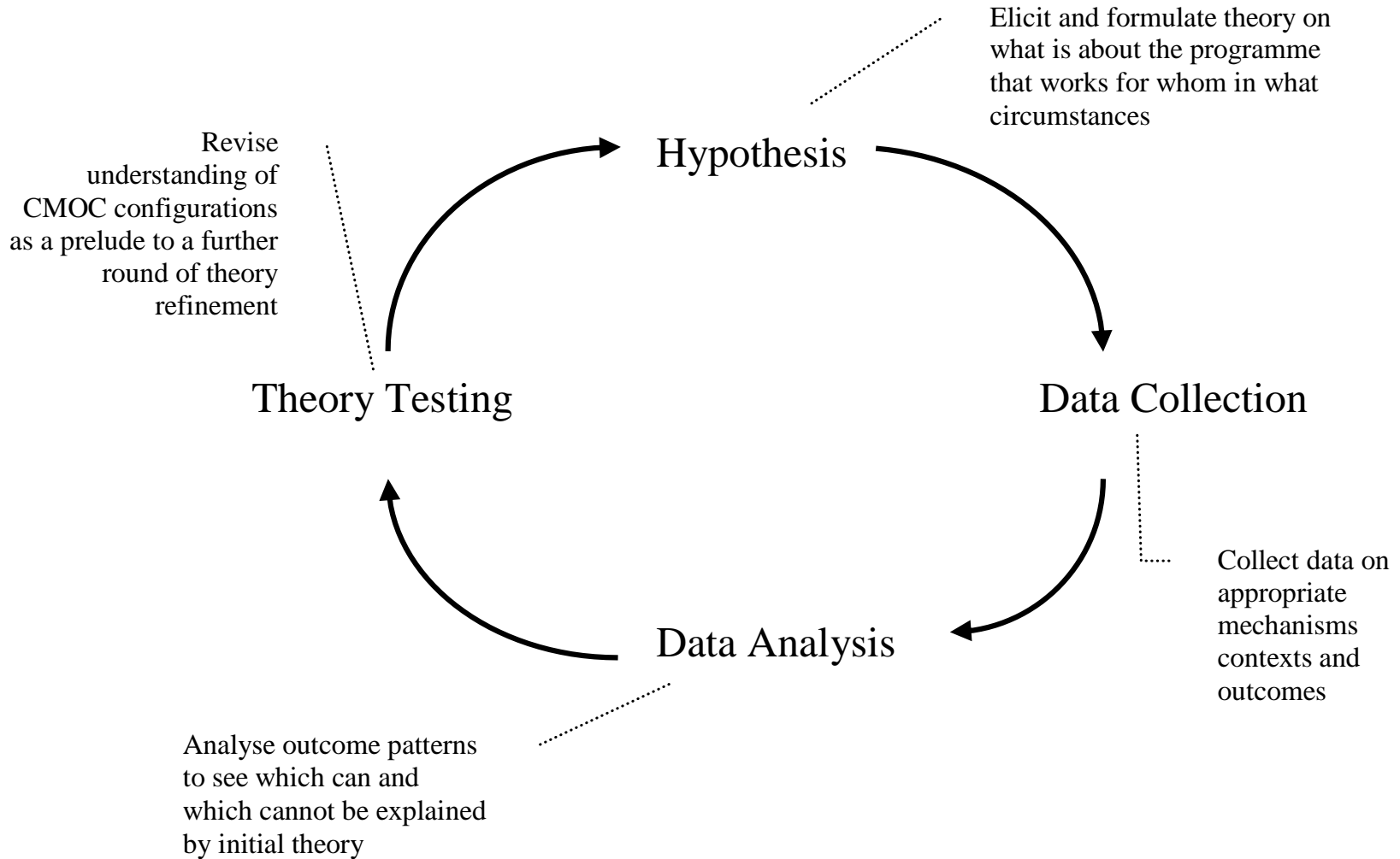# Realist Evaluation: Mechanisms, Contexts and Outcomes

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

Realist evaluation as hypothesis testing

Elicit and formulate theory on what is about the programme that works for whom in what circumstances

Revise understanding of CMOC configurations as a prelude to a further round of theory refinement

Hypothesis

Theory Testing

Data Collection

Data Analysis

Collect data on appropriate mechanisms contexts and outcomes

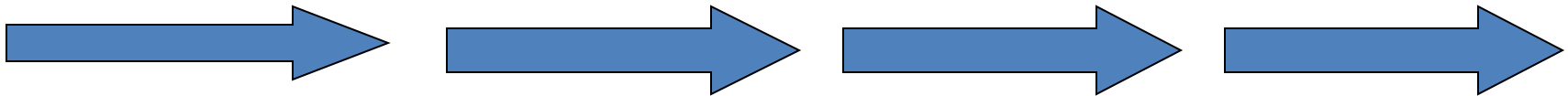Analyse outcome patterns to see which can and which cannot be explained by initial theory

Public notification – basic theory

i) Identification: in which the performance or behaviour in question is observed and then classified, measured, rated, ranked, verified, etc.

ii) Naming: in which information on, and the identity of, the failing or deviant party is disclosed, publicized, disseminated, notified, published, broadcast, registered etc.

iii) Public sanction: in which the broader community acts on the disclosure in order to shame, reprimand, reproach, censure, control, influence, supervise the named party.

iv) Recipient response: in which behavioural change follows the sanction, with the subjects being shamed, regretful, penitent, contrite, restrained, re-integrated etc.

Megan's Law – Basic 'Theory'

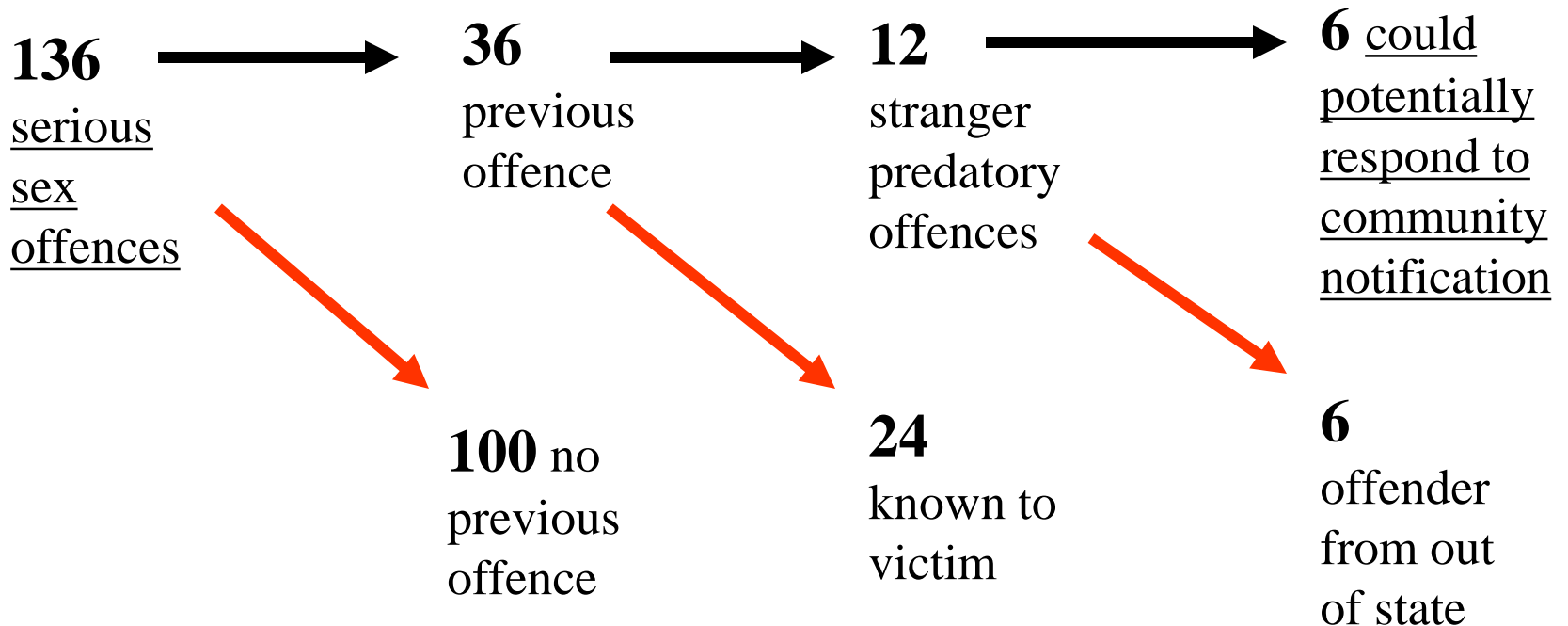| STEP ONE	STEP TWO	STEP THREE	STEP FOUR
Problem Identification	Public disclosure	Sanction Instigation	Offender response
Identify high-risk released sex offenders and create valid and reliable registers	Issue bulletins, press releases, call meeting to identify released offenders to their community	Community joins with police and probation to increase surveillance of suspicious behaviour	Community actions shame offenders and decrease opportunity of further offence

Did the law effect recidivism?

Pre-intervention sample   ⟶   sex recidivism 22%

Post-intervention sample   ⟶   sex recidivism 19%

Pre-intervention sample   ⟶   arrest slow

Post- intervention sample   ⟶   arrest significantly quicker

Schram & Milloy

Does Megan's Law work?

136
<u>serious</u>
<u>sex</u>
<u>offences</u>

36
previous
offence

12
stranger
predatory
offences

6 <u>could</u>
<u>potentially</u>
<u>respond to</u>
<u>community</u>
<u>notification</u>

100 no
previous
offence

24
known to
victim

6
offender
from out
of state

Petrosino & Petrosino

Who is shamed?

- Sex offenders under community notification
- Tax evaders named in the local newspapers
- Under-performing schools identified in league tables
- Unsafe hospitals identiified in clinical indicators database

How did practitioners respond?

"The Law is an unfunded mandate"

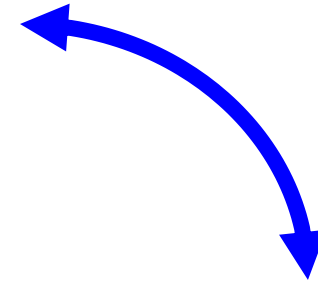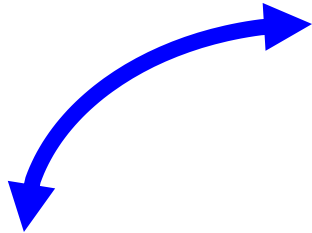"Special Bulletin Notification added more work to already over-worked agents"

"There is more pressure to baby sit with SBN cases simply because they are SBN cases"

Zevitz and Farkas

Key findings synthesised

Following The introduction of the law, detection increase more sharply than deterrence.

The chances of community surveillance of stranger predatory offences remain low and offender may lie low

Practitioner attention becomes increasingly focused on SBN cases because of community harassment

Forms of realist evaluation

- Realist formative evaluation
- Realist summative evaluation
- Realist synthesis

Examples of realist evaluation in health

- Dunn *et al* (2012) Improving health equity through theory-informed evaluations: a looking at housing first strategies, cross-sectoral health programs and prostitution policy. Evaluations and program planning (in press)

- Greenhalgh *et al* (2009) How do you modernize a health service? A realist evaluation of while scale transformation in London. *Milbank Quarterly* 87: 391–416

- Marchal *et al* (2012) Is realist evaluation keeping its promise? A review of published empirical studies in the field of health systems research. *Evaluation* 18:192

The problems of conducting realist evaluations

- It departs from experimental orthodoxies
- It is easy to misunderstand
- It involves hard thinking
- It can be technically demanding
- It can be expensive
- It refuses to provide (meaningless) simple (minded) answers that are sometimes wanted

Why realist research could frustrate policy makers...

Policy questions	Realist reponse
Did that policy work?	It depends...
Did that program work?	Parts only, in some places and at some times
Will it have a lasting effect?	Unlikely, but you'd have to wait and see
The pilot was great, should we go large?	No, play only to its strengths
Can you let us known before the next Budget cycle?	Sorry, honestly no..

Policy questions for realist research

- What do we need to know in formulating policies in this area?
- What are likely to be the key decisions in implementing it?
- What pointers can you give us in making these decisions?
- Would it work here?*
- Should the policy be targeted and if so how?
- Should the intervention be adapted to local needs?
- Are we likely to need to adapt the policy over time?
- How can we track the policy and keep it on track?

Key references

- Pawson, R., and N. Tilley (1997) *Realistic Evaluation*. London: SAGE

- Pawson R (2011) Evidence-based policy: a realist perpsective. London: SAGE