Using systems thinking for programme theory and evaluation in ECD:
A feasibility study

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14 May 2025

SOME VULNERABLE CAVEATS & QUESTIONS FOR *YOU*

- I'm not a systems thinking expert.
- This will not be a how-to-use-systems-thinking in MEL webinar.
- Rather, this research is highly exploratory - I'm here to tell you about what worked for me and what fell apart.
- This is fresh! No publications...yet

How can this research apply to your work?

What, if anything, resonates with your MEL experience?

**What would you suggest my next steps be?**

RESEARCH OVERVIEW

- The development and testing of a systems thinking toolkit for evaluators to use with their clients to develop their MEL (monitoring, evaluation & learning) frameworks.
- RQ: **How feasible is a systems thinking approach to MEL development?**
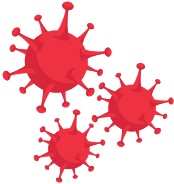
My personal questions:
- *Could I do it as a systems thinking beginner?*
- *Would it be useful?*
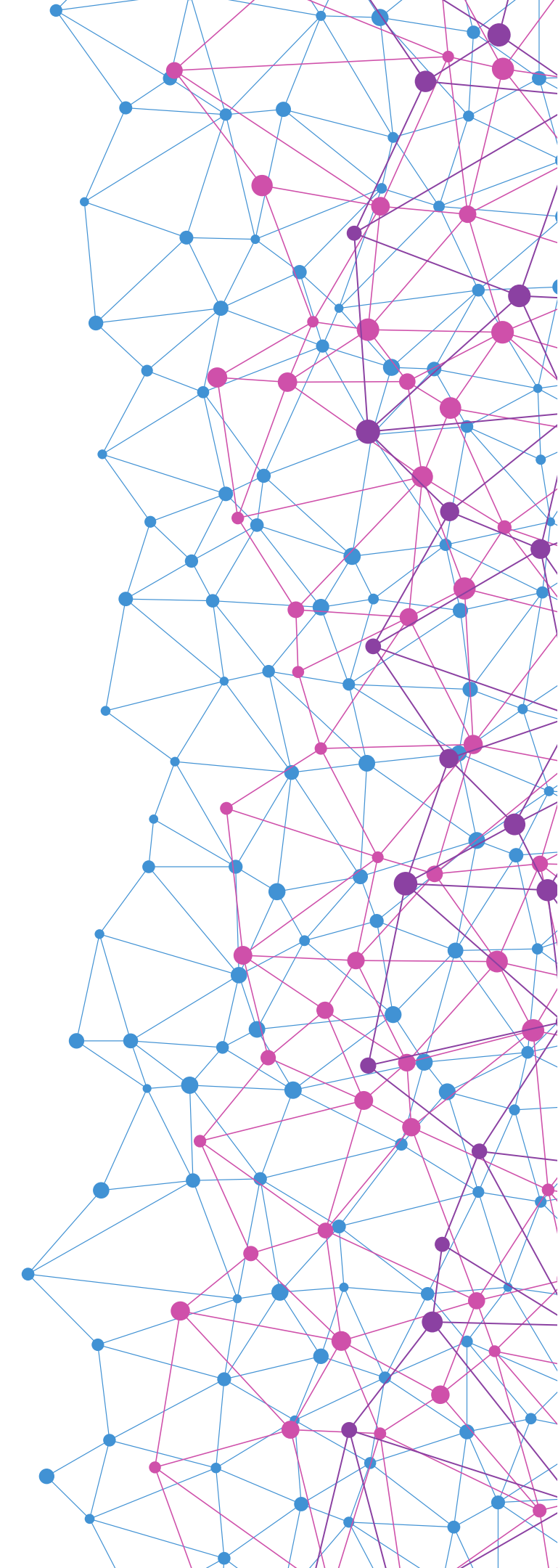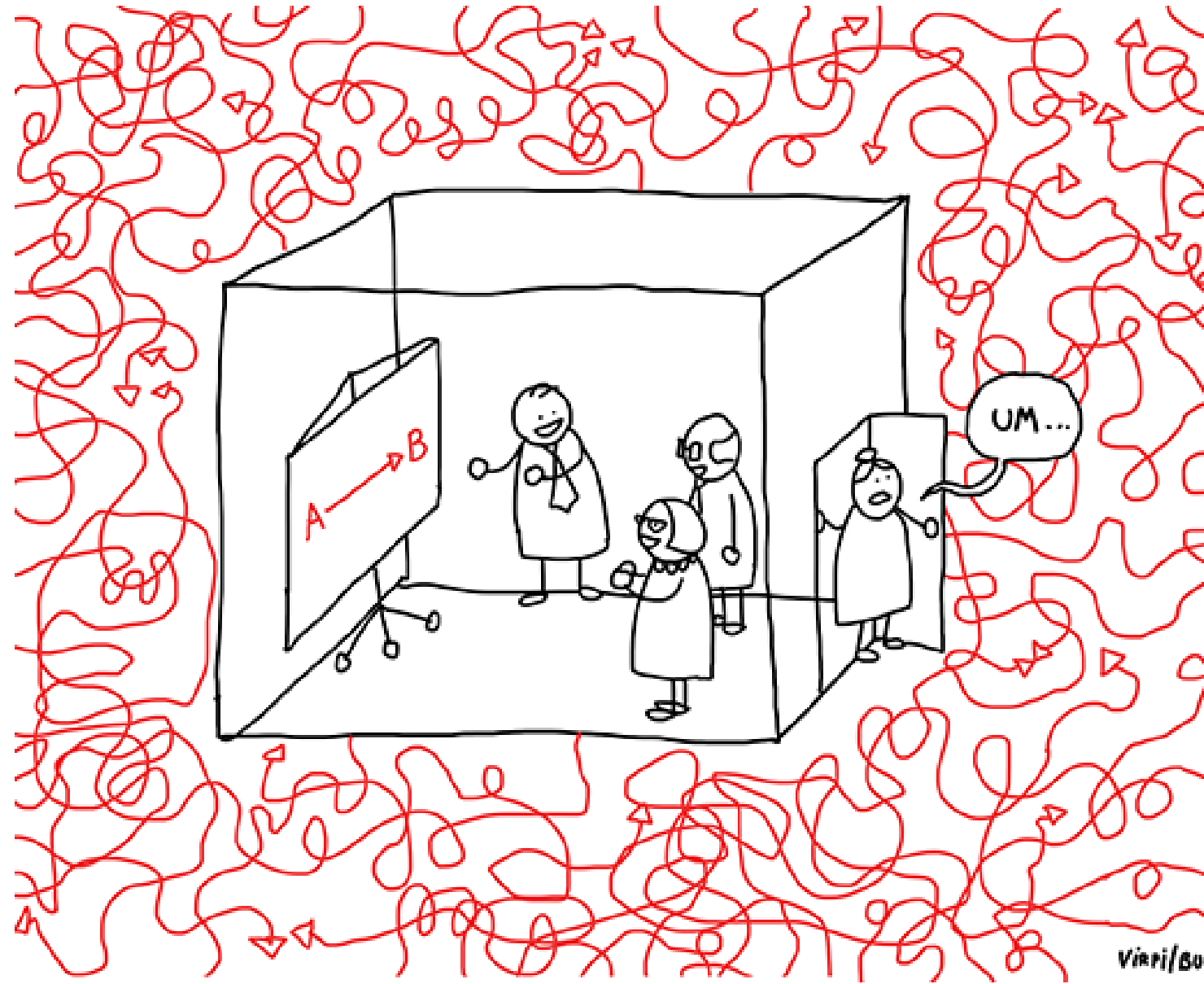
WHY THIS RESEARCH?

- I registered for my Phd in February, **2020**
- The world became very unpredictable, uncertain and volatile.
- Ramping up of *complexity* speak.
- Personal consulting experience: linear programme models are frustrating and out-of-touch.
    - Lack of attention to context.

- Systems thinking offers a different way:
    - Instead of concentrating on optimizing the parts of systems, look to the relationships between parts and systems
    - And the influence of context.
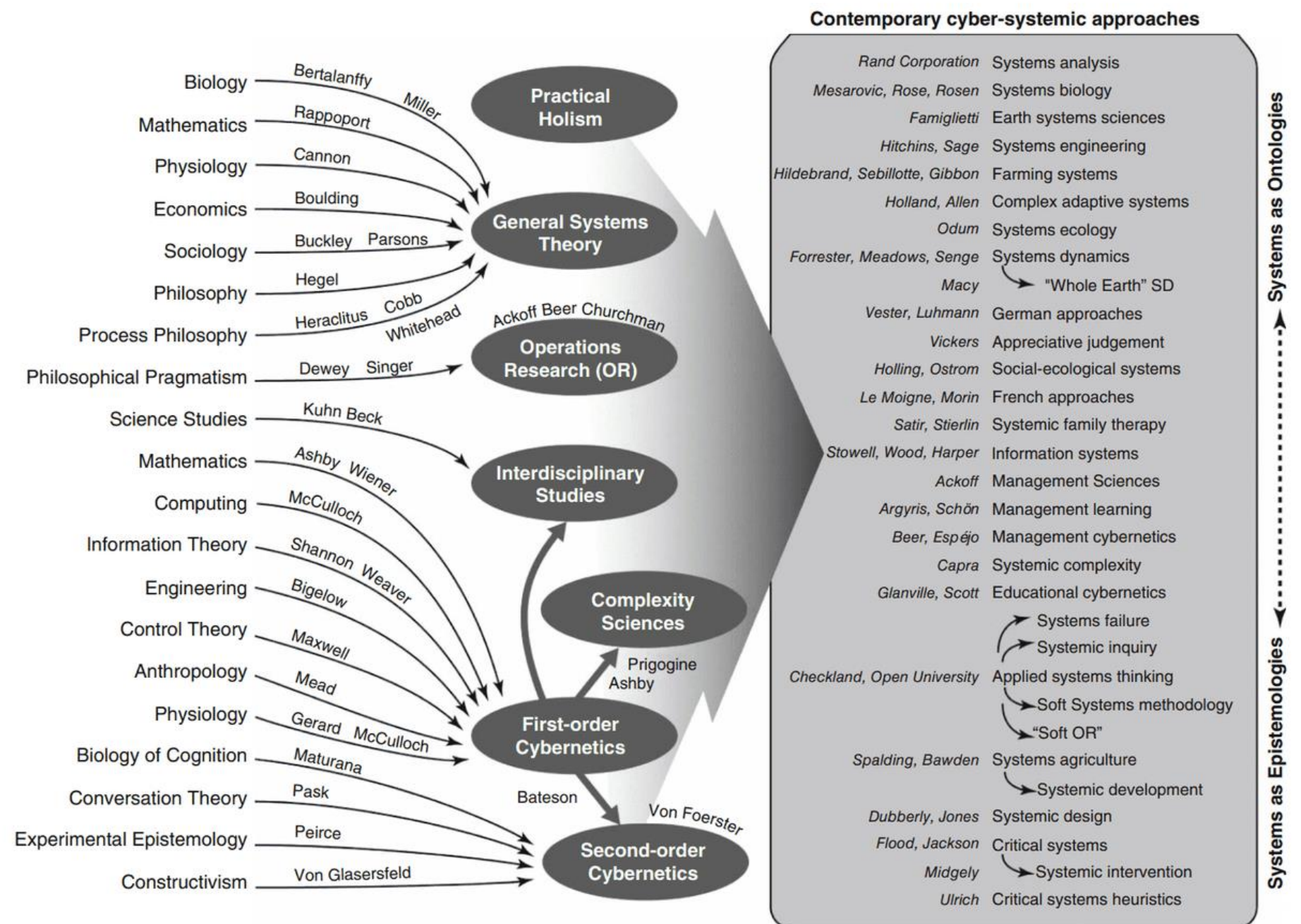
BUT! (THE PROBLEM) *at the time*

Evaluators lack access to **easy-to-understand**, practical guidelines on using systems thinking in MEL.

There is nothing specifically on ECD.

Barriers identified in the literature:

01 It's overwhelming

With this many fields/disciplines and approaches -
where do you start?
where do you end?
how do you know what's relevant for your work?

Fig. 2.3 A model of some of the different influences that have shaped contemporary systems approaches and the lineages from which they have emerged (Adapted from Ison 2008, 2017).

Most available guidelines for evaluators are designed for summative or project-end evaluation, as opposed to ongoing MEL or programme theory.

THE SOLUTION *maybe?*

A user-friendly toolkit for evaluators that simplifies systems thinking and applies it to MEL.

Workshop-based: Guides evaluators through the facilitation of five workshops to arrive at a MEL framework.
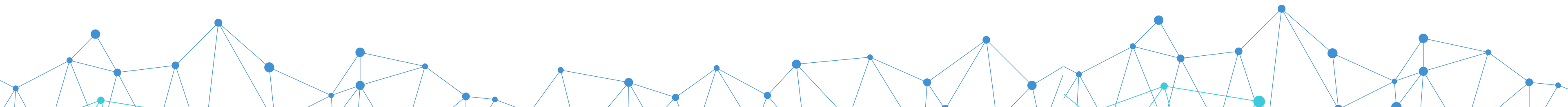
Designed in the context of ECD.
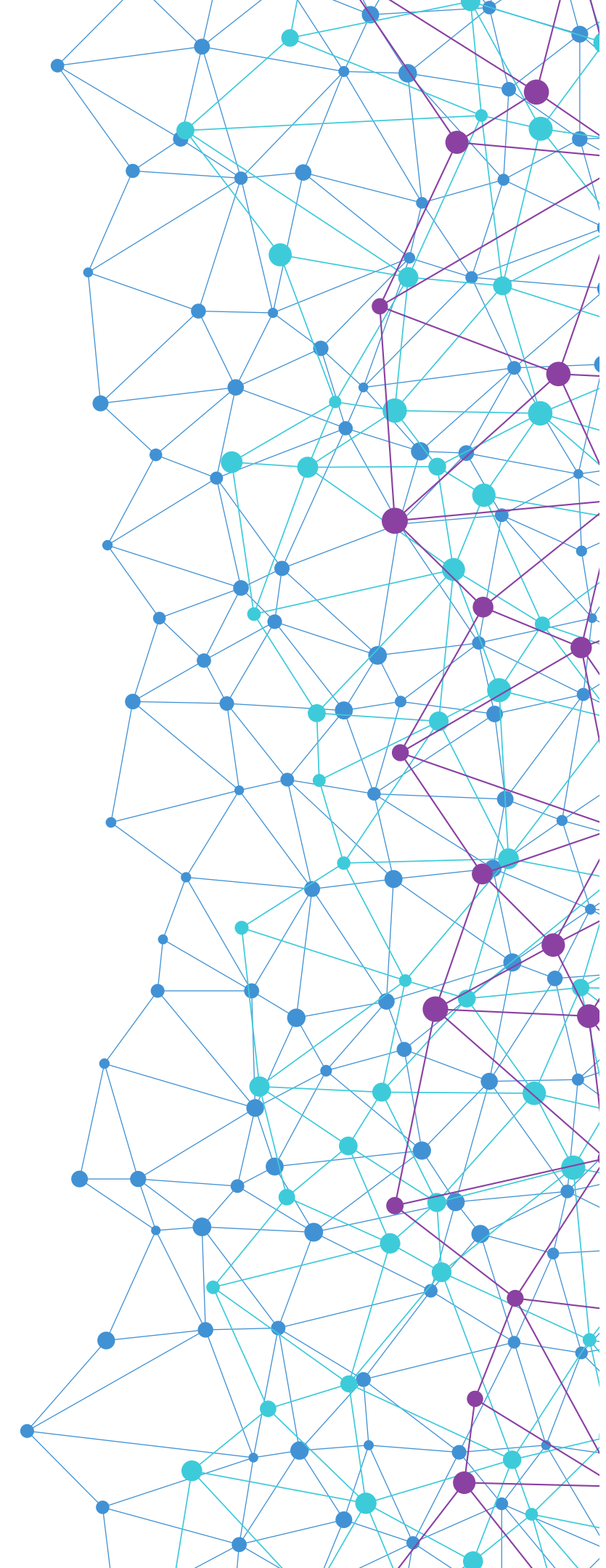
DESIGNING THE TOOLKIT

was really hard

- It's been around a long time and has a substantially huge and varied literature.
- There are as many tools and approaches as there are fields (many).
- It's full of lots of very smart people with some very strong opinions about how to do systems thinking.

WHAT MADE IT EASIER

- Remember my discipline (evaluation) and stand on the shoulders of giant evaluators!
- Evaluators have been grappling with systems thinking for decades.
- Some (Williams, Patton, Cabrera et al.) looked for a cumulative definition of systems thinking for evaluation, by looking at commonalities across different fields and disciplines.

They consider systems thinking a "**pattern of thought**", or lens, that frames our understanding of the world.
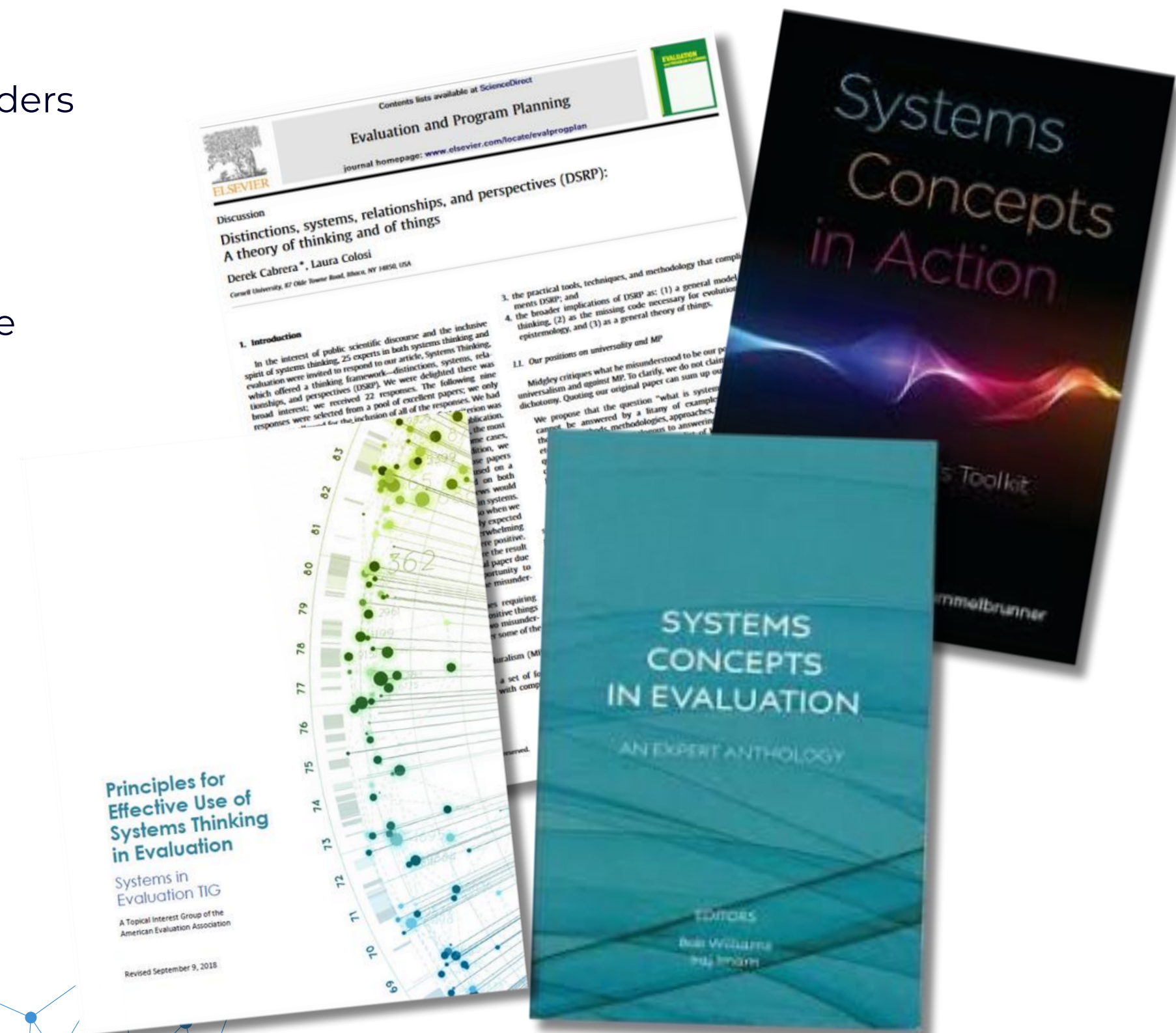
THE LENS

- A system = a set of interconnected elements organised in such a way as to achieve a particular purpose.
- Three core principles or concepts that stretch across branches of systems thinking:

01 Systems & boundaries

All systems consist of identifiable parts that are organised into a meaningful whole. Boundaries define what is in and what is out.

02 Relationships

There are meaningful relationships between and among systems and parts, that influence emergent and dynamic outcomes.

03 Perspectives

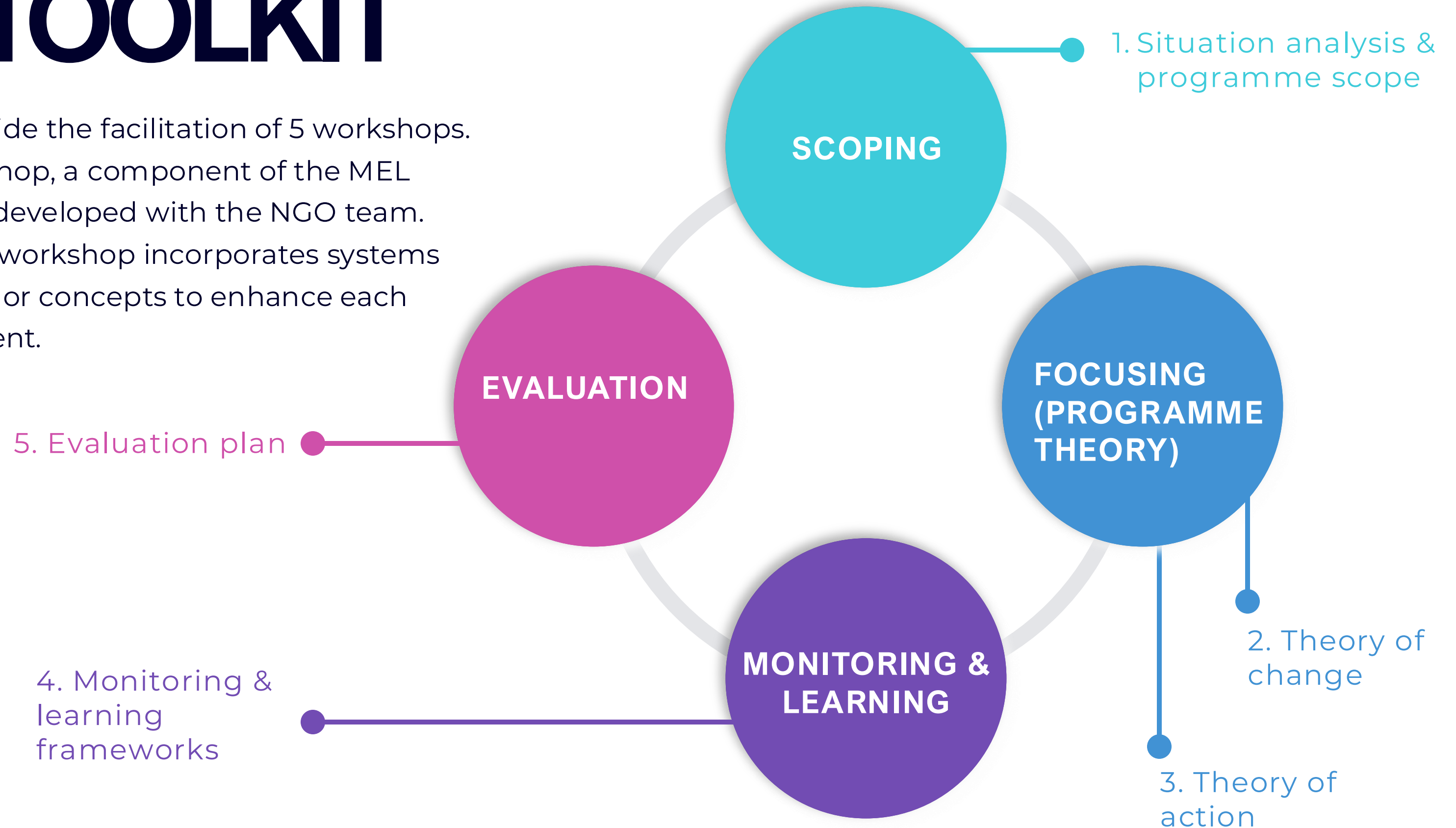Different people have different perspectives that inform how the meanings of system parts and wholes are constructed.

"ok, so this is systems thinking"

THE TOOLKIT

- 4 chapters guide the facilitation of 5 workshops.
- In each workshop, a component of the MEL framework is developed with the NGO team.
- Each chapter/workshop incorporates systems thinking tools or concepts to enhance each MEL component.

SCOPING

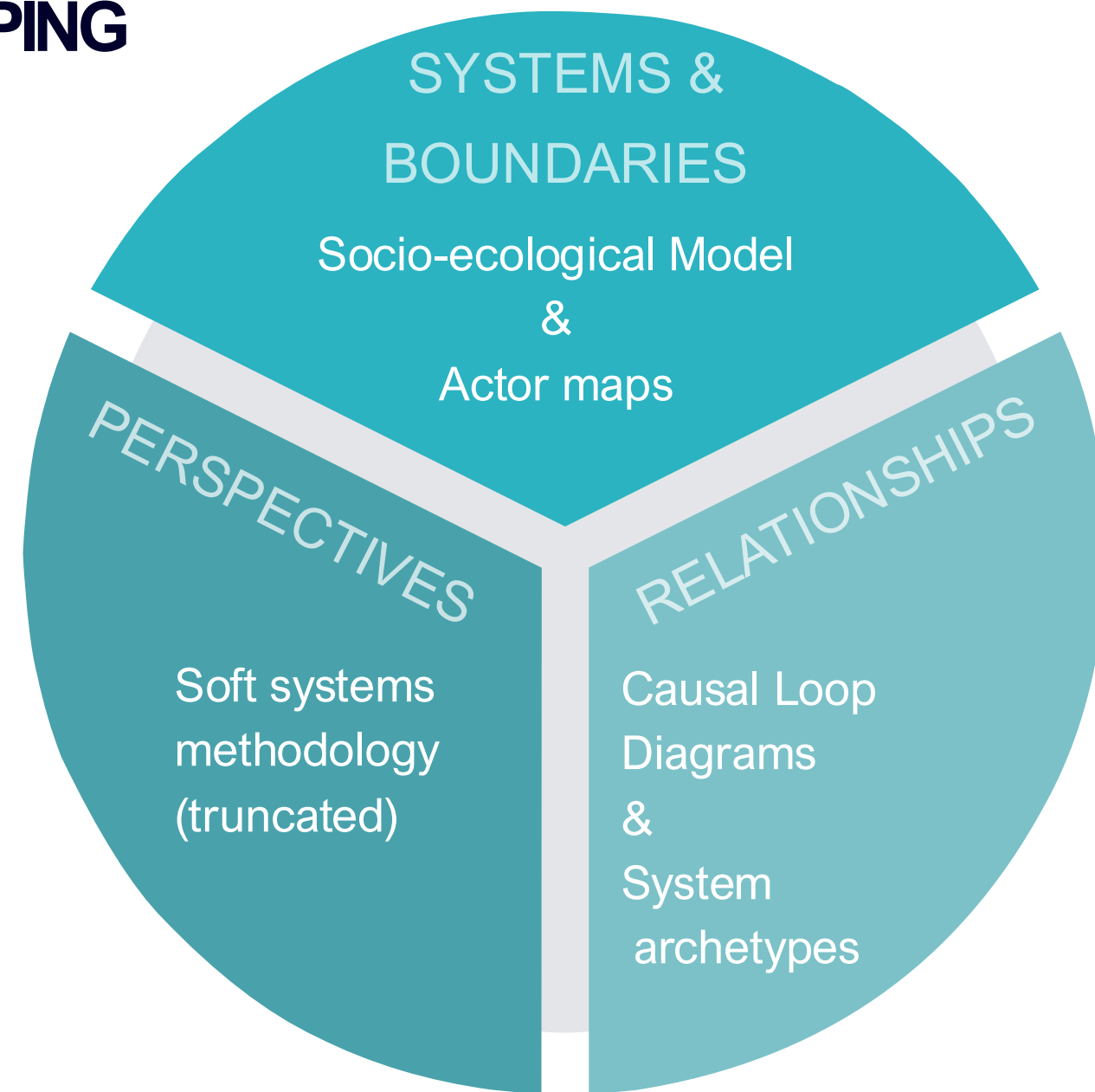1. Situation analysis & programme scope

FOCUSING (PROGRAMME THEORY)

2. Theory of change

3. Theory of action

MONITORING & LEARNING

4. Monitoring & learning frameworks

EVALUATION

5. Evaluation plan

Bricolage

systems, boundaries, relationships, perspectives

TOOLKIT EXAMPLES

SCOPING

SYSTEMS & BOUNDARIES

Socio-ecological Model
&
Actor maps

PERSPECTIVES

Soft systems methodology (truncated)

RELATIONSHIPS

Causal Loop Diagrams
&
System archetypes

THEORY OF CHANGE

SYSTEMS & BOUNDARIES

Programme scope

PERSPECTIVES

Stakeholder survey

RELATIONSHIPS

Realist evaluation
Life Spaces (Gestalt psychology)
Feedback loops

TESTING THE TOOLKIT

- Two ECD NGOs in the Western Cape - one process led by me, one by another evaluator (with no systems thinking experience).
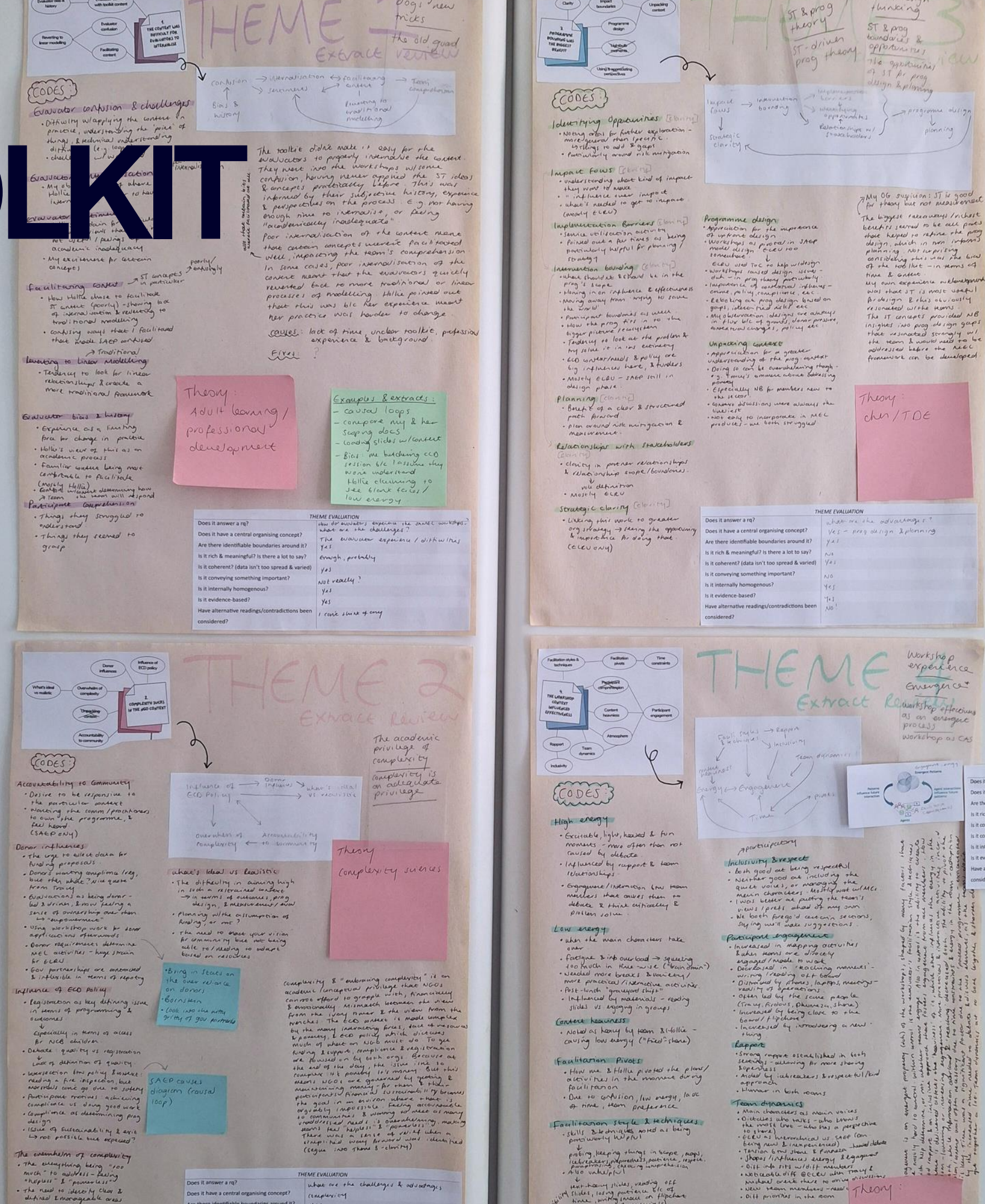- 5 x in-person workshops each.
- 1 x completed MEL framework each.

THE DATA

- Observations of each workshop
- Focus groups after each workshop
- Evaluator notes and reflections
- Follow-up interviews 3 months after the workshops concluded
- Analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke)

FEASIBILITY ISSUES

- We both struggled to practically facilitate complicated concepts - like system feedback and causal loop diagrams
  - Moments of panic and pivot!
  - Consultant workload
- Workshop atmosphere heavily influences engagement.
- Facilitator/team rapport is crucial for healthy, safe discussion.
- Team and power dynamics shapes discussions.
- Time is a constant battle.
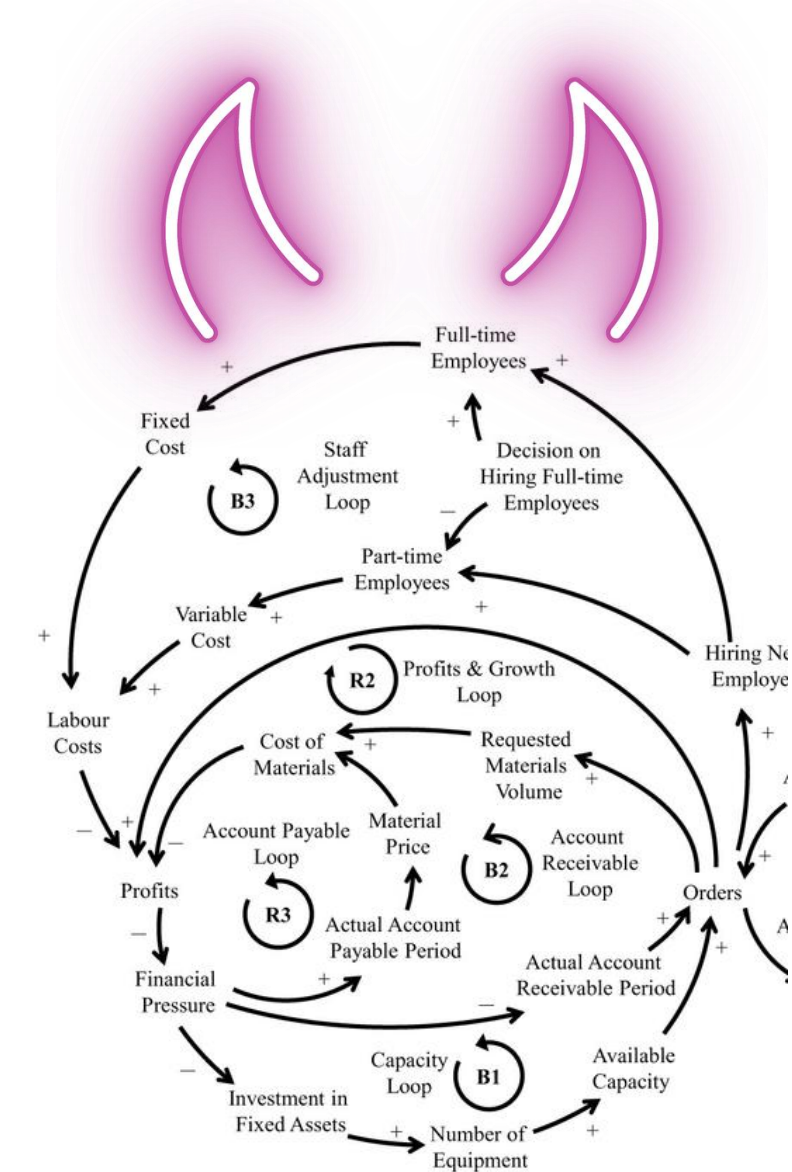
THEMATIC ANALYSIS FINDINGS

1. "STRATEGIC CLARITY"

- The first three workshops were the most valuable (Scoping, Theory of Change, Theory of Action).
- Structured opportunity to come together and strategise > clarity around programme goals and intervention design.
  - Fostered collective ownership over programme models.

"Just to say that it's created clarity... And sometimes it's hard to let go. But it's also made me realise that, actually, you need to. It's necessary."

"We can't do everything. We want to; we wish we could. We'd want to fix the whole world and wrap it in a bow."

Socioecological model
Understanding where the programme fits into the larger ECD ecosystem

Actor maps + Soft systems methodology
Understanding the role of other actors in addressing the problem and identifying opportunities for partnership and gaps in service delivery

Life Spaces (Context mapping)
Understanding the environmental context and its role in the programme's design and implementation

Boundary critique
Reflecting critically on values of inclusivity and the implications of exclusivity in determining the programme population
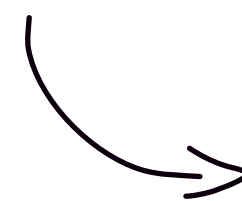
2. "CONTEXTUAL DISCONNECT"

- Tension between a theoretical/academic toolkit and the real-life messiness of application.
- NGOs work in complex and fragile environments, juggling resource constraints, huge demand for services.
  - Surfacing and dealing with contextual complexity can be overwhelming for NPO teams who are accountable for service delivery under these conditions.

"It's extremely daunting. It's extremely overwhelming. It almost feels like, you know, 'I don't think it's gonna work. Let's just throw in the towel. Let's just run away'. Because that's quite often how you get to feel. It's too much."

do we really want to overwhelm each other?

is it fair to those on the ground?

2. "CONTEXTUAL DISCONNECT"

The data indicated two major sources of complexity that repeatedly stoked contentious debate and *lengthy* discussion (that we didn't have enough time for).

01 ECD policy / registration

- Boundary critique: what about home-based programmes?

"We can register better than we did ten years ago, but so what? [laughs] ... we're not going deep in terms of what's really going to change or shift what we need to shift."

02 Grantmaking & funder requirements for intervention design

"We've been implementing a very haphazard ECD model that was very much wide stretch and actually donor-led."

- Can we deviate from our grant to meet a real need?

3. "ORGANISATIONAL DISCONNECT"

- An inescapable reality of non-profit work is how external and contextual complexities seep into NPOs' organisational structure and culture.
  - Both organisations were characterised by organisational features that their contexts had shaped, which constrained the organisations' readiness for MEL development.
- The data indicated a number of organisational barriers to MEL readiness.

01   Operational burden

- Lack of time to get together and institutionalise learning.
- Operating in silos to try be more efficient.

**02**   Funder accountability

- Poor internal motivation for MEL.
- Disjointed MEL structures to account for differing requirements.

> "M&E sections [are]fragmented, because that's what the donor wanted. But now you're sitting at something that … it's not coming together properly."

03   Low institutional capacity

- Low levels of personnel, resources and buy-in.
- Both teams felt overwhelmed at the idea of implementing a comprehensive MEL system (which systems thinking facilitates).
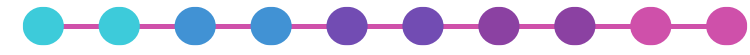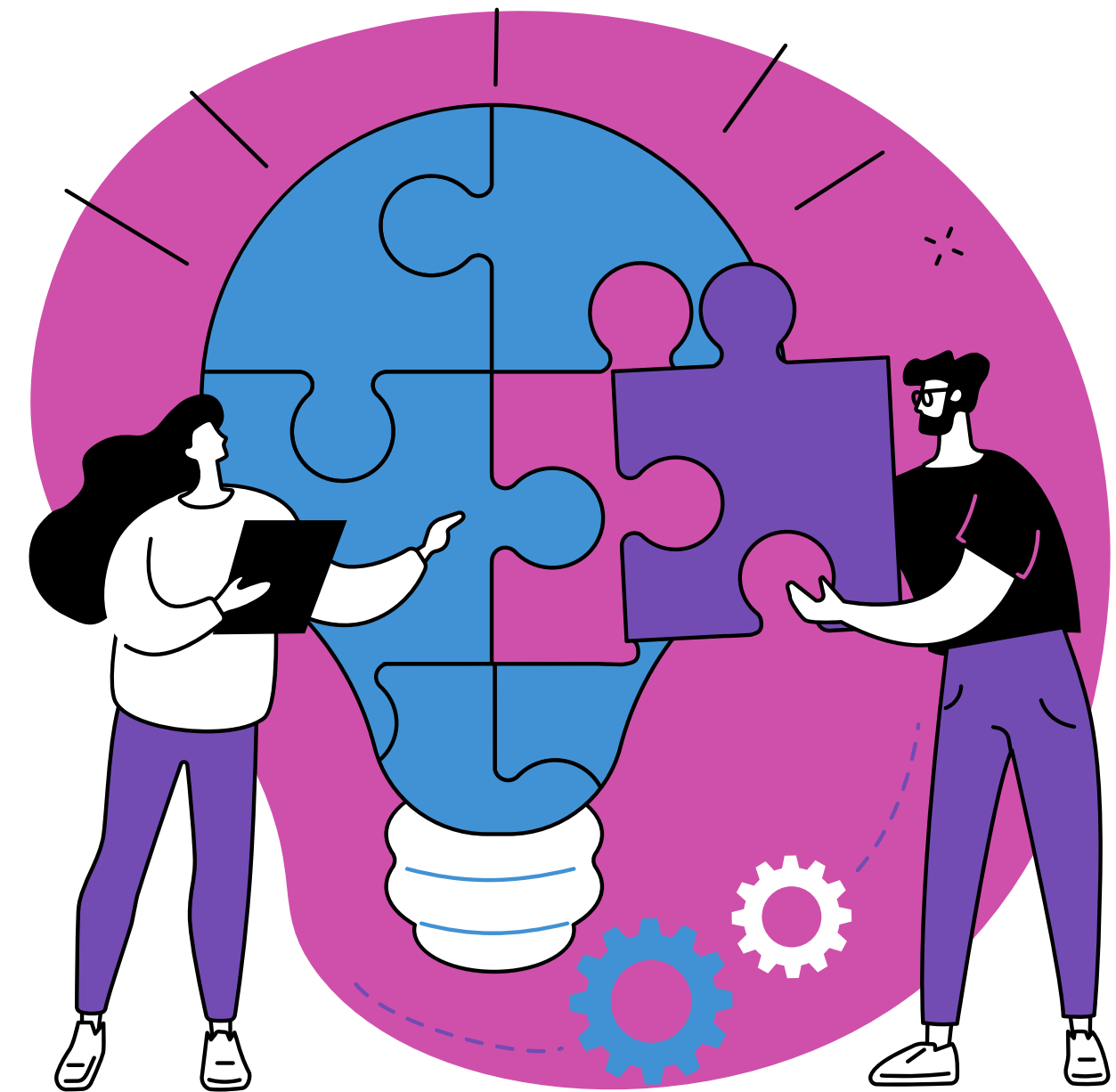
SO ,WHAT?

For evaluators

- Significant time is needed to absorb systems thinking content, particularly more complicated concepts such as causal loop diagrams, and develop procedural knowledge.
- The systems thinking concepts are a useful entry point in applying systems thinking principles generally.
  - We both developed an appreciation for the expanded lens that systems thinking can offer to MEL.
- Particularly intuitive and easy-to-facilitate tools that we both loved were:
  - **Socioecological model, boundary critique, actor mapping, partner analysis, and the service utilisation mapping.**

SO ,WHAT?

For NGOs

- Creating time for collective strategic work is critical for issues of programme design and planning.
- Systems thinking concepts have particular power to support this process.
  - However, hard decisions have to be made in light of what comes up.
- To action a MEL framework, the organisation has to be MEL-ready.
  - Leadership that's bought in and can champion the process (power to influence and direct budget)
  - Personnel
  - Training in evaluative thinking
  - Integration of MEL activities/data collection into programme implementation

SO ,WHAT?

For funders

- It is my belief, based on this research, that results-based management clashes with a systems thinking approach to programming.
  - Lack of flexibility in measurement and reporting makes emergent outcomes invisible.
  - Short-term funding inhibits focus on long-term change and incentivises 'quick fix' targets.
  - Rigid contracting prevents agile, responsive programming.
  - Compliance reporting pressures organisations to prioritise accountability over real learning.
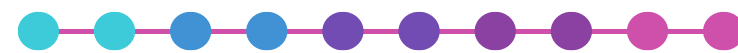
THANK YOU

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How can this research apply to your work?

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