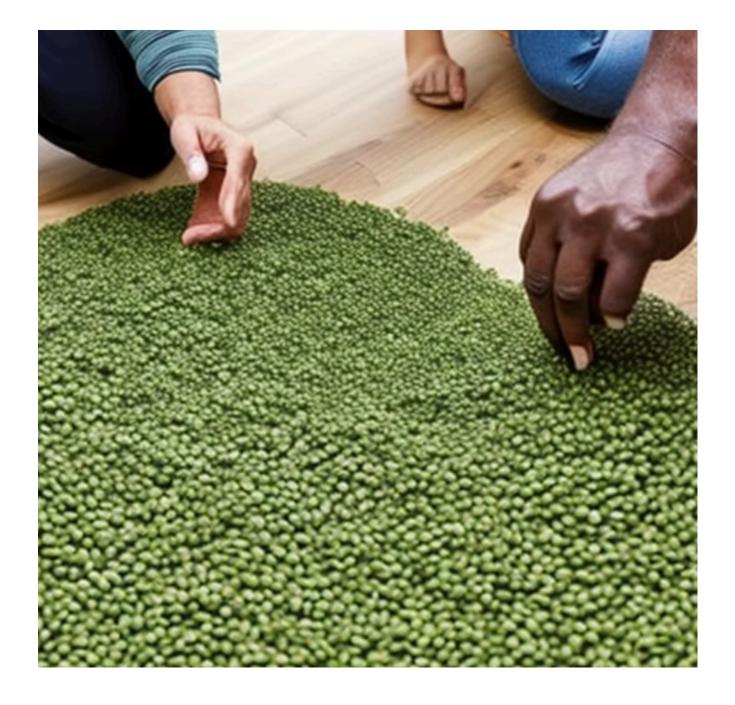# 🌻 Qualitative impact evaluation is less interested in the strength of effects

Weird image of people counting beans generated by Canva's AI

Soft versus hard impact evaluation approaches? Quant versus Qual? Is there an essential difference?

Summary: quant and qual impact evaluation approaches are different ballparks because quant approaches attempt to estimate the *strength* of causal effects. Whereas qual approaches either don't use numbers at all or only do calculations about the *evidence for the effects*, not about the effects themselves and in particular we don't estimate strength of effects.

Here's the question: how can we distinguish "soft" approaches to impact evaluation like Outcome Harvesting, QCA, causal mapping, Process Tracing, Most Significant Change, Realist Evaluation and so on from statistics-based causal inference (SEM, DAGs, RCTs etc)?

Here are two bad answers:

- We can't distinguish our "soft" approach(es) by saying that we attempt to assess causal contribution and answer questions about for whom and in what contexts etc, because quantitative approaches attempt all of that too.
- We can say that we are focused on complex contexts, but there's nothing to stop someone using say OH in a non-complex context either is there? In any case whether a context is complex or not is also a matter of how you frame it, no? And there's in fact no shortage of examples where quant approaches have been used in complex contexts.

Here's a better answer: these "soft" methods are qualitative, in the sense that where we involve numbers at all, our arithmetic is essentially an arithmetic of *evidence for* causal effects: is there any evidence for one pathway, how much, how much compared with another? For example, Process Tracing sometimes does calculations about the relative certainty of different causal hypotheses. QCA counts up configurations.

Whereas quant causal analysis involves estimating the *strength* of causal effects (as well as having clever ways to reduce the bias of those estimates).

As far as I know, qualitative approaches never attempt this (calculating the strength of a causal effect). We might conclude that the evidence suggests a particular effect is *strong*, for example because we have collected and verified *evidence for a strong connection*. But we don't, say, combine this with another set of evidence for a very weak connection and conclude that the strength of the effect was only moderate (we don't do maths on the strengths).

It's true that qual approaches also do causal inference in the sense of making the jump from evidence for a causal effect to judging that the effect is real. Quant approaches (and, to be fair, some qual approaches) suggest that using their special method gives you a **free ticket** to make this leap. And indeed different methods include different ways to reduce different kinds of bias

which mean you can be more confident in making the leap. But I'd say there are no free tickets. No way of an evaluator getting out of the responsibility of making the final evaluative judgement, however clever and appropriate your method.

(You could argue that FCM and Systems Dynamics do arithmetic on the strengths of connections. Perhaps that makes them quant methods.)

Seen this way, in essence qual and quant impact evaluation are not alternatives or competitors. They are different ways to do different things.

A second limitation of causal mapping is the difficulty it has in systematically capturing the strength or type of causal influence. It is relatively rare in open conversation for people to indicate in a consistent way the magnitude of the effect of C on E, or whether C was a necessary or sufficient condition for E or precisely how certain they are about the connection. There is of course scope for framing questions to encourage people to ascribe weights to their answers, which can then be incorporated into the way maps are constructed. But imposed precision risks turning into spurious precision, and stronger framing of questions may distract from other issues and nuances that more open-ended questioning might otherwise have elicited.