Longitudinal and Life Course Studies

A reply to 'Re-considering "impact" for longitudinal social science research...' by Staatz CB et al

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Question	Response
Key Messages Please enter 2-4 bullet points summarising the key messages of the paper. The contribution made by the paper to the field should be clear from these key messages. Each bullet point must be less than 100 characters. These points may be used to promote your article.	- Research impact must be assessed beyond short-term, quantitatively measurable outcomes - Longitudinal studies faces challenges due to delayed and indirect impact - Impact occurs through multiple pathways and needs broader assessment methods -A holistic approach is key to capturing research influence at individual, institutional, and societal domains
Conflicts of Interest Please declare any possible conflicts of interest, or state 'The Author(s) declare(s) that there is no conflict of interest' if there are none. Further information about conflicts of interest can be found in the [Bristol University Press Ethical Guidelines](#).	The authors and Dylan Kneale are working at the same research department.
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Title: A reply to 'Re-considering "impact" for longitudinal social science research: Towards more scientific approaches to theorising and measuring the influence of cohort studies' by Staatz CB et al

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The discussion on research impact has never been more pressing. At a time when governments, funding bodies, and institutions increasingly demand returns on investment and accountability, the question of how we assess the impact of research, particularly from longitudinal and life-course research, becomes ever more critical. We were particularly excited to read the paper by Bridger et al., (2025), which makes an insightful contribution to ongoing discussions on how the concept of impact has been conceptualised and measured. More importantly, it challenges the notion that impact should be tangible, quantitatively measurable, and demonstrably causal between research, outputs, outcomes, and impacts. This urges us to think more broadly to recognise the plurality of research paradigms and the diversity of research ecosystems that contribute to sustained societal change.

Longitudinal and life-course studies play a crucial role in informing policymaking and should be valued alongside other research methodologies, such as randomised trials. This is especially pertinent in contexts where randomisation is neither feasible nor socially or politically acceptable. However, as the paper rightly highlights, assessing the impact of longitudinal data and subsequent research presents several challenges, including the temporality of impact, particularly in evaluating benefits for future generations, the involvement of stakeholder engagement, and contributions to theoretical advancements. These shortcomings arise from extended timelines required for longitudinal and life-course research to observe and document policy or behavioural changes, making their contributions appear less immediate in addressing complex policy challenges.

Given today's evolving policy landscapes and social transformations, it is imperative to adopt a more inclusive and expansive conceptualisation of impact and impact pathways. This broader perspective acknowledges the complexities and ongoing debates surrounding impact assessment (Cruz Rivera et al., 2017, Dotti and Walczyk, 2022, Greenhalgh et al., 2016, Raftery et al., 2016, Searles et al., 2016). Impact can be achieved through multiple pathways and, therefore, must be measured through a wide range of indicators, timescales and methods. From our experience at the Evidence for Policy and Practice Information Centre (EPPI-Centre) [1], our work is centred around substantive policy-relevant evidence synthesis, methodological research in evidence synthesis and evidence use, and capacity building and knowledge exchange (See Figure A). The EPPI-Centre's continued history of working at the research-policy interface has enabled us to reflect on how sustained engagement with key stakeholders has gradually influenced policy attitudes, practice shifts, and organisational culture over time (Oliver et al., 2023). Similar to longitudinal research methods and subsequential research, evidence synthesis and research methodological work, such as co-produced evidence synthesis, rely not only on rigorous research methods, but sustained engagement and collaboration over extended periods (Oliver et al., 2020). Assessing the relatively intangible and transformative impact of co-produced research, for example, social learning, requires capturing research influences across multiple levels, including individual, organisational, societal dimensions (Beckett et al., 2018, Wagner et al., 2023). In addition, there have been discussions emphasising the importance of contextual understanding especially, the political and economic interests of key stakeholders in research[2]. As such, it is critical to understand social values and interests of key actors in order to foster meaningful connections and illustrate how policymakers or the public interpret and respond to research outcomes.

Figure A HERE: Impact pathway adapted from REF 2021 impact case study: Better Evidence for Better policymaking: responsive reviews to improve public health and global development by Sandy Oliver Katy Sutcliffe James Thomas David Gough

Traditional impact assessment tools and frameworks, such as citation scores, may not effectively measure the gradual influence of research on social changes (Dougherty and Horne, 2022). Impact, including longitudinal research, life-course studies and evidence synthesis, can be slow and gradual and is accumulated over time[3] . Indicators, such as research partnerships, networking, and data-sharing practices, provide some insights. However, incorporating these indicators into an impact narrative can enhance methods for capturing the

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[1] https://eppi.ioe.ac.uk/cms/

[2] https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/2024/11/26/applying-a-political-economy-lens-to-evidence-informed-policymaking/

[3] https://www.ox.ac.uk/research/using-research-engage/policy-engagement/oxfords-experience-policy-engagement/research-policy-impact-strategies-translating-findings-policy-messages

subtle, incremental and meaningful changes that research such as longitudinal studies often produce. For example, collecting personal narratives from study participants can provide a deep understanding of research impact on individuals' lives (Maurer et al., 2022), whist expert interviews with policymakers could provide valuable insights into their experiences in utilising longitudinal research evidence.

As discussed above, many existing impact evaluation frameworks face challenges to recognise the transformative nature of research that unfolds over time. The impact should be understood as a dynamic, multidimensional, and staged process encompassing societal, behavioural, and policy changes occurring at various scales and timeframes. We advocate for more holistic and adaptive impact evaluation methodologies that capture the complex contributions of longitudinal research and life-course studies. Funding bodies can provide support to projects that demonstrate sustained stakeholder engagement and the capacity to track and capture nuanced, cumulative impacts over an extended period. By doing so, we can ensure that the full value of such research is acknowledged, appreciated, and effectively translated to inform policymaking.

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Figure

Figure A: : Impact pathway adapted from REF 2021 impact case study: Better Evidence for better policy-making: responsive reviews to improve public health and global development by Sandy Oliver Katy Sutcliffe James Thomas David Gough