

'Data, Science and Policy', 50 years of the 1970 British Cohort Study, 09.11.20, Transcript

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[Alice Sullivan introduction](#)

John Bynner is Emeritus Professor of Social Sciences in Education at the London Institute of Education and until retirement in 2004 he was director of the Centre for Longitudinal Studies, with responsibility for the 1958, 1970 and Millennium Cohort Studies. He has done a huge amount of policy work, including on basic skills and the Skill for Life programme. You have Leon Feinstein, who is Professor of Education and Children's social care at the University of Oxford, and has carried out work on the 1970 Cohort that helped influence government pre-school provision and social mobility initiatives. Praveetha Patalay, who is an Associate Professor here at UCL, and has done a lot of work on mental health through the life course, including some work on the Millennium Cohort Study that's had a lot of impact and is the basis for an impact case study. Jenny Dibden, who is Head of the Government Social Research Service, and Co Director of the Cities and Local Growth Unit. And she's involved in helping to ensure that the government is informed by robust, relevant and high quality research and advice. And that it is appropriately interpreted for people who are involved in policy. And then finally, our chair, Lee Elliot Major who is the country's first Professor of Social Mobility at the University of Exeter. And his work is dedicated to improving the prospects of disadvantaged young people. And of course, before he came into academia, he was very much in the policy world as Chief Executive of the

Sutton Trust, and a trustee of the Education Endowment Foundation. So without further ado, I will hand you over to Lee who is chairing this session.

[Lee Elliot Major introduction](#)

Thank you very much, Alice for that introduction. So just to explain what this particular session is focused on, this is really trying to get to a debate about what the impact of the BCS70 cohort study and indeed cohort studies more generally, and may be social science more generally, what has been the impact on policy and practice. So this was meant to be part of the celebratory conference, to celebrate 50 years of BCS70. But we're, of course having to do this online.

Just one quote before I sort of talk about how we're going to organise this that I thought was interesting. This was just in the paper this weekend. This is from Theresa May, previous Prime Minister saying about lockdown policy "It looks as though the figures are being chosen to support the policy, rather than the policy being based on the figures." And this is one of the challenges I think that we have in terms of influencing government policy, that it can be almost policy based evidence rather than evidence informed policy. So it'd be interesting to see what the panel makes of that.

But yes, this session is really focused on impact. And I think it's fair to say that we've made some progress in terms of social science in terms of having an impact an ensuring that there are some incentives in the system to do that. And I think I can mention this that Professor Alice Sullivan, Professor Emla Fitzsimons and Dr Praveetha Patalay, are all finalists in the ESRC Celebrating Impact Prize. I think that the winners are due to be announced this week.

So in terms of this session, what we're going to do is we're going to have three to five minutes from each of the illustrious panel members. And they're really going to focus on these sort of three questions. What impact has the BCS70 study had on policy and practice? What challenges have there been in terms of interacting with policymakers? And what lessons there are for the future?

So we're going to have five minutes each and then we're going to open up to questions on the chat function, which I can then relay back to the panel members. So John Bynner, I can hand over to you to have the first speech then for five minutes.

[John Bynner introductory remarks](#)

Well, I wanted to do this by pointing out, just drawing attention to a couple of major projects we did with BCS70. And trying to use that as an example of where the policy framework comes very much in contact with what the studies themselves were doing. And then look at some options in that area. What I want to talk about first is what we call the trajectory of disadvantage, which is a major theme drawing on the whole of the data set from birth to (age) 37, at the time.

And this work was done for the Social Exclusion Unit at the time, because they were particularly keen to learn about the way this trajectory of disadvantage was actually shaped through time. And one of their main interests, there turned out to be the staging posts that (age) 16 when young people were, of course, leaving education, and moving to the various tracks that followed. And this is what we set out to look at with them, and come up with what would be useful in policy terms. They themselves were trying to rewrite a lot of the sort of approaches to this kind of issue. And this was therefore young people aged 16 to 18, who were not engaged in education, training or employment, commonly referred to as NEET. The NEET characterisation is a very common one even now, but it grew out of this work that we undertook for the Social Exclusion Unit. And this is, again, this came out of this whole programme of analysis that we were doing in and around these issues at various stages, which is what

the Social Exclusion Unit was particularly interested in finding out. What were the causes and effects in these areas? And the key document that came out of this was Bridging the Gap.

Having established very much what the NEET characteristic was about and how policy might be moved to reduce the number of young people in this category. In parallel to this was another project this time last thing or more of a programme, you might say, 15 years of research on the origins of poor adult basic skills, literacy and numeracy. (The) research was commissioned by the Basic Skills Agency, and produced a series of very popular reports culminating in the establishment of the Moser committee, the brief of which was to eliminate adult basic skills problems and difficulties.

A particular feature that became very clear in this, well, I should have actually mentioned first, that one of the main policy results arising from this work. The Basic Skills Agency itself, were in effect a policy organisation, but I mean the Moser committee aroused out of this work as the body that would then take through a programme that government could implement, again, around this idea of social exclusion, but very much in this case focused on literacy and numeracy. And a particular feature that became unexpectedly central to the report was the significant disadvantage young women with poor numeracy had in gaining the kind of office work they wanted to do.

Another key feature which applied to both men and women, was the fact that if the skill wasn't used, it would deteriorate and this was very much more important for numeracy than for literacy. Anyway, the long and short of it was that this particular finding led to a very strong development of what became the Skills for Life programme, which was then implemented for many years to actually put a whole government investment into bringing about the changes in skills that clearly were sorely needed. A very challenging exercise as you can imagine.

Let's move on then now to the issues of influencing policy makers, which comes second in the list you indicated to me. The main one of these is matching research interests with policymaker interest, including the mutually acceptable timetables and scheduling for the work that is needed. It also takes time for new ideas to settle and be absorbed, citing academic papers needs to be used sparingly if at all. It is particularly important for policymakers to be fully engaged with this process in a way that they can find mutually acceptable, where their own timetables/agendas are really very similar from those of the academic world. So you've got this kind of tension between two kinds of communities, the policymaking community, and the community of academics. And there are different reference points and somehow one is trying to bring about a combination in making a successful policy project work. And one of the most effective ways of this this happening is in fact, one of the government ministries of Department of Education at the time, that went in for an annual conference where people were invited to come and talk about work in its early stages and the possibilities of new projects being developed. And these annual conferences turned out to be invaluable for introducing both new research and new policy to each other, particularly such developments, say as the digital divide, which was beginning to show at that time, and very much became central now to the work we're currently doing.

Turning then finally, there's a final issue of what are the things that affect policy in the future or might do? Well, the study's great value lies in its huge range, the coverage from birth to maturity, and old age enables updating the individual records back to birth as each new sweep is conducted. The other major opportunity that needs promoting to policymakers is the facility to move forward and backwards from the 70 cohort to the other cohorts.

This is an exceptional means that we're addressing secular change in a society and of course, it gives you this cross checking capability to see whether something is distinctively unique to one cohort or

the other. And having that capability means that the two cohort study project is particularly valuable. And of course, was used extensively in in the book we produce sometime back called 'Changing Britain Changing Lives', which immediately pinpoints the issue of one of seeing, what is changing and what is stable within the society. And in this case, obviously the 70 cohort, represented as the most recent of the three cohorts, we compared from that point of view.

Finally, the biggest advance is the release of administrative data from government departments, which have transformed the scientific and policy value of the studies. And BCS70 is a major beneficiary of this development. Anyway, the short papers of the kind produced by the Basic Skills Agency, I think one of the ways of attracting both practitioners and policy makers, to the work that is capable and can be done. And through building this relationship of strength between the use of data and the development of it for academic purposes, is I think, one of the most challenging and most important and interesting aspects of the work we do. I think that's where I come to the end of my first 5 minutes, so I'll leave it at that. Okay.

Lee Elliot Major

Thanks John that was brilliant. I've already got a number of questions that I'm going to leave until the end of the panel contributions, and then we'll open it up to questions. So next, we've got Leon, who, again is going to speak for up to five minutes. Leon, over to you.

Leon Feinstein introductory remarks

Lee thanks very much. A great pleasure to be on this panel. It's a shame we can't be there in person. I do want to thank John. It's a pleasure to go after John. Never easy, he makes a lot of key points. But we all go after John in the sense that so much was established in the in the foundation of these cohort studies. And we have to remember Neville Butler and Heather Joshi. And many people involved, Jean Golding and others who created these tremendous resources. And I was lucky enough to come along and start using the data. But the strength of the impact, I think, comes from the quality of the data and the foundations that were set. And I think there are challenges in that as well.

So I wanted to pick up the issue of the nature of the impact that cohort studies generally have had on policy and practice and some of the challenges that, follow from that. There are many examples of specific studies or specific analyses, from cohort studies that have answered specific questions of interest. How much particular components and variants might contribute? Some of the nature of developmental pathways and so on, but I tend to think that the big influence is a long term change in policy thinking that has come about because, through the cohort studies, researchers have been able to make visible and apparent to policymakers and indeed, the wider public, the nature of development and the importance of development. And so in a sense, some of the biggest impact isn't at all from specific studies, but from the way that the cohort studies have come to frame an understanding of human development as emergent, as affected by it by multiple layers and characteristics of context, as diverse. And that has really shaped policy in this country until recently. I would say even up to Theresa May we had a prime minister, who would in her thinking about social mobility, if not on every question, did take a developmental frame that recognised the importance of early experience or mid childhood experience or transitions to adulthood. And that there are both stabilities and instabilities, continuity and discontinuity through development that really matter. And that that that helps focus policy in a developmental framework.

And we see in a number of policy domains, even after the end of 'Every Child Matters' in 2010, as we move into a coalition government in this country, the Social Mobility Strategy or the 'Troubled Families Programme', whatever we think about the quality of the analysis that inform the specifics of 'Troubled

Families', or the nature of the evaluation, the thinking was very much a developmental risk, resilience, emergent development model that recognises that children live in complex multi-level contexts, and that we need to engage those contexts and children, and that the services that government has that interact with children and families need to respond to the very broad, holistic developmental framework.

So I think, without saying much more about that the framework of policy thinking has been really changed by the cohort studies because they've made this nature of development, very apparent to people. And I think that's a tremendous strength and has been a change in our policy thinking, I can't really comment on what policy thinking is at the moment in this country, because there is really just a great absence of policy in relation to children and people. But I think there is a challenge for the cohort studies in thinking about the future.

Because, from that developmental framework, and thinking about how policy affects lives and experiences, the weakness, it seems to me of a narrow cohort study model, of a narrow individual longitudinal model, is the loss of the context. And I find increasingly that in policy work, place really matters. I think we lost some of the importance of place because the focus became on the sort of the average. Alright longitudinally and developmentally but the average rather than understanding how different development might be in different contexts. And I think that's a real challenge for the cohort studies is place and similarly networks, kith and kin, and really reaching beyond the immediate child level to those wider context it's difficult. And I think that's a challenge we have to address. Thank you.

[Lee Elliot Major](#)

Thank you very much, Leon. That was great. And by the way, for those who haven't listened to it, there is an amazing podcast that I helped to contribute to, on the cohort study BCS70 that is available, that we spoke to both John and Leon for. Praveetha, if I could hand over to you for five minutes. Yeah, over to you.

[Praveetha Patalay introductory remarks](#)

My name is Praveetha Patalay. I'm going to briefly sort of talk about another aspect of the cohort that is really valuable for policy research in the UK. And that is the fact that these cohorts are curated across multiple disciplines, and across the life course, but the curator has been a resource for the entire research and policy community. And the fact that it's sort of made available at no cost to our researchers, I think, is really, really valuable, because you can be a researcher, like me, fairly early career, not have great resources, but you still can access really, really high quality data to answer your research questions. And you might think this is always the case. But as most of us will know, this is not even the case in this country for other birth cohort studies. So I think the national birth cohort studies that is a really, really special in sort of being available at no cost. And this is something we really need to protect, because it makes lots of very valuable research possible.

So I'm going to move focus a little bit also onto health, which is my area of research. And I'm thinking about the cohorts together. So as previous speakers have mentioned, the BCS70 is a really valuable cohort but I think its value is amplified by being part of a suite of national cohorts. So we have the 46 and 58 before it, and we have the Millennium Cohort after. And just to highlight really important research that has happened when we put the cohorts together. So for example, in the area of BMI and obesity development colleagues, Will Johnson and David Bann have done really good research looking at the sort of development of BMI across the life course across cohorts, but also how the experience of unhealthy weights has not been evenly distributed in the population. So for example, widening inequalities over time.

My own research area is the area of mental ill-health. And, as Alex mentioned, briefly, in our introduction, I've done lots of work looking at adolescent mental ill-health in the Millennium Cohort, but then working backwards I've never used BCS on its own. All the studies I've done with BCS have been multi cohort studies. I think this is really important, because when you think about how mental health is changing over time, we see a cross cohort picture, yes, mental health is getting worse over cohorts. But lots of data sets can tell you this. So the Health Service for England, ONS data can tell you that mental health difficulties are getting worse for young people. And at the same time, smoking and alcohol and substance use is sort of decreasing over time, weight and BMI is increasing over time. So all these trends you can see from lots of other data sources. The place where the cohorts are really special is once you know that trend and lots of repeated cross sectional studies, like the Health Service for England, you really want to know why like what happened before in these people's lives and how that's going to have an impact on people's lives for the rest of their life course. So the antecedents and consequences. And I think that is where a series of successive birth cohorts becomes invaluable, because not only do you see what's changing, you can see how what might have caused things to change in people's lives, how inequalities are widening or narrowing, but also the impacts of this on people's lives as they age. And as Leon mentioned, like this, there is an importance of thinking about development. But think it's also important to think about context. And obviously, these cohorts represent very different social contexts. So not only understanding the context within the cohorts to the place, they come from, I think the context of the generations the cohorts represent, and what was happening in the wider sort of social contexts at that time. So in terms of generational inequality, inequality, more broadly, inequality in Britain has not been the same since World War Two. So I think sort of just to highlight that the cohorts together, and open access are a really, really special resource and have contributed a lot already but will continue contributing to understanding things like what is the impact of increasing mental health problems in teenagers?

In terms of the second question, we were asked to comment on, which is the sort of challenges around engaging or sort of policy impact. I just wanted to highlight what John already highlighted really well, which was the sort of contrast between a timescales and priorities like often government wants things fast. And research, good research, unfortunately, is usually slow and takes time. And COVID has been a really good example of how when we need important research, lots of fast research can happen, but it's not necessarily always really good research that's useful.

But another thing I've just wants to flag is what we do as researchers, I think academic incentives are not structured to value, policy impact or wider impact. Most academics or academic institutions, or the funders of people care about your publications, your journal article, publications, which often times are not very easily understood by policymakers and the wider community. So I think there's an onus on us to do more to make what we research important to policymakers, but also communicating the findings of what we find to policymakers and their relevance with the caveats and the limitations that come with any research. I think this is quite difficult to do, it takes time. Nobody appreciates that it takes time, in fact, it just doesn't happen. You have to have conversations, both before you do the research while you're doing the research, and then to communicate the findings of the research. So I think there's sort of an important thing there around thinking about how we value impact beyond journal articles, in academic incentive structures and why that is important if we want more of the research we do to have wider impact. I will stop there.

[Lee Elliot Major](#)

Thank you so much on that. I totally agree on the incentives point. And I hope we can get some discussion on that. Because I do think we speak a lot about promoting impact, but I don't think we've

got quite got it right as a system. So our final speaker, then Jenny, if you could speak for five minutes, and then I'm going to open up to questions. I'm going to ask you a question anyway to begin with, by the way, because I've got lots to list. But please, for those who want to ask questions, do list them on the chat function, and I can relay them back to the panel. Over to you, Jenny.

Jenny Dibden introductory remarks

Thank you. Thank you Lee. Thank you very much for inviting me to speak today. In preparation for the event, I asked colleagues across government for examples of how they've used the 1970 British Cohort Study, the wider importance of longitudinal evidence and the value of this type of study in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. So how have government departments use the data and evidence from the 1970s study? And what impact has this made on policy and practice. The Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government Homelessness analysts have used the 1970 study to analyse the background to people becoming rough sleepers. The analysis was for internal policy development, but the findings were shared with Professor Bramley and Professor Fitzpatrick, fed into their 2018 paper on the risk factors for homelessness. BCS also featured in the Hills review of social housing. What this added was a more in depth and longer term perspective of the type of factors which contribute to longer term tenure choices and housing outcomes. It didn't have an impact on its own, but as part of a wider set of analyses adding to our depth of understanding. Now turned into the question of what is the wider importance of longitudinal evidence.

MHELG integration analysts have supported some analysis by Antony Heath and ONS using Understanding Society data, a large longitudinal study which covers everyone in the household from children to adults, allowing us to understand the experience of the whole population and census data. It looked at intergenerational outcomes for BME groups. That kind of intergenerational analysis of socio economic changes in circumstances, especially among different population groups in different locations is exceptionally useful. And the Avon Longitudinal Study of Pregnancy and Childbirth, an English longitudinal study of ageing, looked at the correlation between household circumstances, housing and health outcomes over time. DFT monitors long term trends in travel behaviour through the National Travel Survey, while the NTS provides accurate measures of travel behaviour, for example, how often people travel for what purposes and mode used. Longitudinal surveys collect travel data behaviour which allows DFT to understand specific individuals travel behaviour, and access to transport change over time, and how this relates to economic, social and health outcomes such as attitudes towards the environment, loneliness and well-being measures. Studies include capability, health and travel behaviour of older people, and access to transport and life opportunities. Some longitudinal studies have also developed data linkage capabilities, allowing for their data to be linked to admin datasets such as NHS or DVLA records.

Finally how can studies such as BCS70, and other birth cohort studies provide valuable data to policymakers in the short term in the context of the pandemic? English Housing Survey colleagues from MHCLG have highlighted that the team are currently collecting longitudinal data to monitor the impact of the pandemic. NATCEN are conducting two follow up surveys with respondents to the 2019 20 EHS. The HS Household Resilience Study is following up with over 5000 households, asking them a range of questions about their finances and housing costs, as well as their well-being and experience of lockdown. Because the same households responded to the EHS pre pandemic, the Household Resilience Study will enable us to track the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on a representative sample of the English population. DFT has commissioned a bespoke longitudinal study 'All Change' to track travel behaviour, attitudes and social impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The longitudinal data

provides a better understanding of behaviour at individual level, enabling us to track how people adapt and respond to policies and how their intentions and behaviours change.

In summary, cohort studies are invaluable when considering changes to policy, allowing GSR today to take an evidence based review of previous approaches and how they impacted on society. This is evident through the use of them in government today. The value of these types of study over the longer term for policymaking is that they're neutral enough to show trends and impacts that sit outside the more short term focus of individual administrations and ministers priorities. Long term studies are valuable during a crisis period to demonstrate the impacts that major events have had, and how those have influenced changes in policy. The value of these studies is in understanding changes into society over time, thanks to the multidisciplinary nature of longitudinal studies. Before I close one suggestion from MHCLG analysts, as well as including questions on homelessness and rough sleeping, in future waves of the BCS70, it would also be useful to include the same questions in the Millennium Cohort Study, in order to see how risk factors have changed between the two cohorts. And that approach is applicable to a whole range of important questions. Thank you, Lee.

Lee Elliot Major

Thank you very much indeed, Jenny for that. I am going to abuse my position as chair and start off with one question for each of you. And I'll just do you one at a time. And then and then I've got already some other questions coming up. But John, if I could start with you. There was a question that came up, which was basically how did you manage to influence? I'll just read the question here. How were you able to take the findings about numeracy and literacy and help create the Skills for Life programme? And I think it is a good question, because, you know, we've heard from others about how difficult it is to be an academic and have all the pressures of publishing, you know, erudite academic papers in journals. And I know, John, you wrestled with this, yourself and your career. But how did you manage to make that work in terms of influencing policy, when you also were juggling the sort of demands of academia?

John Bynner

Well, it's a good question. I mean, it indicates one of the things that hasn't been picked up yet and that's the fact that you have to be prepared to write a lot of reports. I picked up the fact I'd written about 30, whether, you know, in the period when most of this work was going on, and those enabled a dialogue to be kept going with policy over what is happening and where to go next. And the more those personal connections can be established, the better. It's also very important, though, to link to somebody on the other side, who you're actually helping to get information from, for them to actually play a major role in that kind of promotional work, which can only what is described and actually ensure that what is coming out of it in terms of information for practitioners, particularly, is accessible and usable. You've got to think of a number of layers of communication in all of this. One of them is clearly the academic one, which is the source of so much. The other is much more in terms of how what has been discovered can be best communicated. And with practitioners, it will be very basic information, barely touching academic indications or indicators at all. So I think this is really the point it's really building this kind of universal community almost of activity which is what will then emerge from the research that's been done and feed into policy most effectively.

Lee Elliot Major

Yeah, I'll come back to Jenny on this John. Because what was interesting to me was often in academic discourse, there's a set of sort of linear model of policy influence that you do your academic research, you publish that paper, you go through all that process, and then you impact on policy and what comes across from your experience was you were already sharing initial results and talking to the key

policymakers before the publication. So I think it would be a challenge to that sort of, like linear model of policymaking. I just want to bring Leon in at this point, though. So Leon, just giving at what John was saying. You sort of hinted that it's, it's more difficult now than perhaps it was, say 20 years ago or 30 years ago, to influence policy or to have evidence informed policy? I don't I don't put words in your mouth on this. But that you seem to be hinting that. And I want to ask Jenny, this as well as she has been in these circles for many years now. But Leon, would you say that, would you think that actually, we have a less evidence informed policy or practice now than, say 30 years ago?

Leon Feinstein

Well, it depends what area of policy we're talking about. So obviously, huge debates at the moment about the degree to which epidemiology and other aspects of medical and behavioural science are influencing government policy on the pandemic. And at the very least, it is clear that statisticians and analysts are at the table. And they have a huge amount of profile. Whether they're being listened to and when they're being listened to, I'll let others comment. My comment was more about social policy in general. And I would say, we, you know, between 97 and 2010, had a government that certainly initially was very interested in in an open way about what the cohort studies were saying to inform and shape policy. That stopped quite quickly within that era because once policy was established, it then became less interesting to policymakers to hear the more basic thinking and questions became more specific. So they're very different sorts of questions that policymakers have but certainly there was a period and John referred to a number of studies in the early New Labour days in which there was a great openness to research, I would say, under the coalition to a degree that continued, but social policy had perhaps I would say, a more ideological frame in that era than an evidence frame. The coalition was an interesting time, because of the debates within government, evidence continued to play quite an important role because things needed to be resolved and the evidence was helpful to that. I'd say after 2015, we had much less interest really in evidence in government and, Jenny, I'm sure can tell us, you know, thousands of examples where evidence is front and centre within government evidence, data research is hugely important to government. But I mean, in the terrain of children's policy, we've lost the Children's Minister as a senior post, we've lost the voice of the Children's Minister. And there is very little activity now in relation to children. Other than the question of whether schools stay open, there's very little active policy. So there's very little capacity for research in the area that I'm interested in of children's social policy, really to find an interlocutor. So there are still things going on around education, but it's very narrow. But that's politics rather than the nature of the evidence. But it's important to remember that that, there are two sides to this conversation. And so what may be true in one era might be completely untrue in another era, there are no general, well there are probably very few universals here.

Lee Elliot Major

Okay, thank you for that. I'm just going to ask Praveetha now an initial question. I will - there's lots of questions coming through, so we'll come back to those. Okay, thank you for that. I'm just going to ask Praveetha now an initial question. I will - there's lots of questions coming through, so we'll come back to those. One question I had for you was, and it relates to some of the questions starting to come through on the feed, is how confident do we have to be in our research findings before we go to try and influence policy and the reason I say this is because of course, you know, we don't have causal inferences in many of the cohorts. I mean we can, it's almost impossible to have that for many of the things we talk about. And I just wondered whether you thought about that, or whether there's a point where some people would it would be very purist about this and would say you shouldn't influence policy until it is all peer reviewed and it's been published. The problem with that, as you were saying, was timing and John was alluding to this, that if you wait for that process, and that is a long process,

you're going to miss the boat on policy. So I just wondered whether you thought about, you know, where, what is the quality threshold for you in terms of how you engage with policymakers on evidence?

Praveetha Patalay

So in a non-COVID world, I think that answer was very straightforward. I think you waited until it was peer reviewed and passed thresholds of good quality evidence, and then it was published, and then you spoke to people, policymakers. I think COVID has slightly put that all into a bit of a mess, because obviously, policymakers need evidence very fast, much faster than we can even generate it. So I will ignore COVID for two minutes, just because I think it's easier to ignore COVID, and answer this question. I think that's a tough question. It depends on what the evidence is, as well, obviously, like all science, one paper or one piece of evidence does not constitute an evidence base. So any science you're doing any research you're publishing is just adding to an already existing evidence base usually. And I think, in this sense, it is important. And the reason why we want to communicate this to policymakers, when it's published, or whenever we communicate is, if we don't, we're waiting for policymakers to find the evidence. And so it's not about, so it's more about communicating it because it's our responsibility to communicate it and then we get the opportunity to communicate with the caveats around causality, or causal inference, or where that sort of limitations are of any piece of research. I think if you leave it, you published in an academic journal, and you leave it and you say, policymakers should find this, this is part of the evidence. One, that we know there's a massive time gap in terms of when academic research gets published, and when it affects policy, so there's usually years, maybe even decades. So one, you're trying to sort of narrow that gap. Yeah, so I think in the non-COVID setting, I would say, you wait, you do research the way we do research and then you know, we use that to inform policy when we're sure it's good quality research has been peer reviewed and published. And obviously COVID is very different, I'm not sure about how you do this in a COVID world. There's obviously lots of examples. I'm not sure, I mean, there's examples on either side. There are examples showing you why it's a bad idea to base policy on very quick modelling and so I think, yeah, COVID has sort of thrown this whole thing about how research influences policy into the air a bit.

Lee Elliot Major

Okay, thank you very much. I do wonder if we can get Johns to come back at some point on this, because I do wonder whether all the stuff that he did on numeracy and literacy was peer reviewed when he was I mean, eventually it probably was, but whether he was releasing initial results before that, but I want to first go back to Jenny, just for an initial question. Jenny, a very simple question for you. Have you ever had examples where evidence has contradicted the predominant policy, you know, in the government and has turned around that policy?

Jenny Dibden

That's a tricky question because I don't actually know all the evidence across 24 central government departments. I do you know, from my time in DWP, I do remember evidence where we were in particular looking at the regimes in job centres and the expectation that if we made certain changes, that would be beneficial. And actually, we did research that showed that those changes, in fact, the existing regime was better in terms of the outcomes we were seeking. I've certainly seen again, in my DWP days, where a body of monitoring evaluation was expected to lead to certain outcomes, but actually they weren't being seen and policies were adjusted as a result. So that was, so that was good. I mean, I think all of this leads me back to the sort of points that have been sort of touched on already around you know, is policymaking a linear process? Well, no, of course it's not. I mean, you know, when was anything really a linear process and I love, many of you will have come across Romesh, and

I love Romesh. I love the discipline of setting out my rationality, my, you know, appraisal, being clear about my objectives, etc, etc. but life is not neat and nor is policymaking, so there is an awful lot of parallel processing, and the judgments you've been talking about in terms of, you know, when do you share your findings, to me that is a risk based judgement, very much so. So if you're if you're going to share some research where actually your conclusions could be completely wrong, or send people off in completely the wrong direction, then no, you shouldn't share. But actually, if you're pretty confident the risk is reasonable, then you should share. And that goes back to the point of having ongoing relationships. So ongoing professional relationships are absolutely critical in terms of getting evidence used in the policymaking process. You know, I do a different job to academics, academics do a different job, to me, but the key thing is we have beneficial professional relationships, and we have a huge amount of mutual respect. There's no point in me thinking, you know, you're sort of tangential, and vice versa. We certainly within Government Social Research Service put a huge onus on our researchers of all grades to be on top of a wide body of evidence. So not just the stuff that's commissioned by government departments, but actually to understand whatever ever they're working on, and they understand fully what is out there and what is accessible. I do think there is something about speed and flags, but a bit like when I was doing the science job, when I did the science job, you know, Zika came up as an issue. And the reason there could be a quick response to Zika was because of the underlying body of work that had already been undertaken. And it's the same with the cohort studies. And, you know, what's been really interesting for me going out across government to look at what the response has been on the pandemic, using the cohort studies, is the fact that they have often been the first resort, because you just know already so much about the people in these in these studies. And, I think just you know, that there is a sort of raging debate about, you know, should academics, you know, re-orientate themselves to focus on policy, and all of that sort of stuff. And, I mean, much as I've talked about, we do different jobs that's absolutely true and there's a job that academics need to do, but often, you know, influencing policy can be a by-product or a parallel product to what else you're trying to achieve. So I just don't think any of this is particularly mutually exclusive.

Lee Elliot Major

Okay. I do think, Jenny, there's lack there, there's only so much time that academics have and we might get back to that. Because I do I do think that it's underestimated the time needed to communicate accessibly and interact with policymakers. I just want to go to some of the questions that have come into the feed here. And this one is a challenge. I guess there's a couple here actually. I'll read this out and perhaps John might answer this this to begin with, but others can come in on this. This is from David. I'd like to ask the panel about risks to having policy impact as a primary goal of scientific endeavour, given academics have finite mental bandwidth. It might be distracting, at worst, it might distort the direction of science. Have we gone too far in pursuing policy? And should policymakers not engage more with evidence instead? John, do you want to have a go answering that?

John Bynner

No, I think we've got to remember that a lot of research is commissioned as such, and what I was talking about typically was work, that obviously what's going to happen as it does within government all the time, without the necessity in a sense to, to actually justify it and authenticate it through academic justice and judgement, which, ultimately, is what happens. And this is the whole idea in that kind of work or what it actually involved was, of course, looking for opportunities to turn the research you've been doing into what was an academically developed possibility. And therefore, you know looking at the theory that's being involved and developing, contributing to that. Fitting into that framework, which sometimes would be quite connected to, but quite distinct in terms of what its goals were and its judgments were in terms of what came out of it and as research. And then of course, the

peer review would determine whether it was adequate to meet the challenge. But at the same time, so much more had been going on beforehand, which again, was subject to quite rigorous controls, but they would come largely from the people who commissioned it. And that would be typically the people in government, for example, or the Basic Skills Agency, whoever it was, who wanted this information, urgently and actively of a rather simplistic, often kind, but nevertheless, very, very appealing to policy and practitioners in the way it was framed and used. But never think of that meme, we were losing sight of the higher goal, which was, of course, to get academic publications, because that's what our careers depend on. And the ideal was able to combine both, but doing the reverse way, was very difficult to achieve for the reasons I tried to give at the beginning of what I said. But you know that it isn't there that you can dictate almost to what policy people are going to do in use. If they are lucky, they may come across it. But fundamentally, they were commissioning if they wanted. And then there are other means by which you can get that research across to the research that has gone through the whole works, out rather than scientists would manage it, not the natural scientists, then that's all to the, to the benefit of all of you.

Lee Elliot Major

Thanks John. Leon, can I just push you on this a little bit? Because there's also a danger is there not that if we don't engage with policy and indeed practice that our results can be misinterpreted? And you know, I'm thinking of the famous I call it the Feinsein graph, which has been interpreted in many different ways, which is obviously on the early development of children from the 70 cohort. But do you want to say something about the dangers of not interacting with policymakers?

Leon Feinstein

Well, I think David asks a really key question. And ultimately, people have to make their own judgments about the extent to which influence on policy and your right to say practice as well, is what they want to do. And I think as academics, you can have major impact without engaging in relationships and specific policy formation. You might over a long period have enormous impact, if something you have understood comes to shape how other people think. You don't have to be at the table necessarily. But I agree, I think it's very dangerous for academics to withdraw entirely from the policy and practice fray. But I think the key issue that we all have to think about is the balance that we want to strike between rigour and impact. To be at the table, you have to be relevant, you have to be prepared to drop your caveats. It is pointless to sit in a policy conversation, and talk about caveats to your research. This is why we have experts like Jenny. We need the interlocutors, the mediators between the academics and the policy thinking, because in a budget discussion, where it's been agreed there's a billion pounds to spend on a particular programme, people have to make the decision. The issue with COVID makes it very prevalent at the moment, very apparent at the moment, we need the evidence now. But that's always true in government, we need the evidence now, the decision is today. And if you're weighing up on uncertainty and certainty and talking about caveats, thank you very much, we're going to go somewhere else. And that's the skill of the policy analyst, of people like Jenny is to be able to sift the evidence and know what is safe to share when. But I do think we have to be part of that conversation. But I just want to emphasise two things. One, people don't need to weigh up for themselves, the balance that they wish to adopt between what they might think of as the rigour of their methods, and their desire to be engaged in that conversation. And if you go too far away, you're not at the table, you get bad policy. If you go too close, you sacrifice too much, you give bad advice. And that's the skill of the policy analyst is to make that balance. And we all have to think about where we're comfortable with that. I just wanted to pick up one other comment, which I thought was very important, which is about engaging the public in this because ultimately the politicians are only listening to the extent that their political interest depends on it. And if we get more

of the public understanding the issues around the data and the theory of developmental science and so on, that's where that's where the real influence comes from. So I think we have to think long term, we have to think about the public.

Lee Elliot Major

Okay, thanks. Praveetha, I want to ask you, some question as well coming through here, indeed all of you could probably answer this one. I'm a PhD student, I would like to have an impact on the real world. I think that probably alludes to the general public as well as government here, depending what the real world is how we define that. How do I get started? How do I make sure that my research findings will not just disappear, but will actually inform policy? Is this a competence that develops naturally over time or can I take proactive steps? And I get this question a lot from younger academics. My view is that, and I've got no evidence to back this up, is that in general younger academics do want to have a policy impact and they want their findings, not just in top academic journals, but they want them to have real impact elsewhere. But anyway, probably, what's your response to that? That question from the PhD student?

Praveetha Patalay

I think I mainly do research, and answer questions that I think are interesting, and then some of them have just happened to have policy impact. And that was how it started. But now, with more recent projects, we are more proactively engaging policymakers from the beginning. So it doesn't necessarily change the questions we ask but it helps you get an idea of why, which parts of the questions or the answers to those questions might be relevant to government or relevant to the wider context. So some of these conversations are helpful in that sense that they help you understand. But then, and then when you understand that, and you publish your high impact academic paper, having had those conversations with policymakers helps you write the three page summary of that paper that the policymakers can understand and you can communicate back with them, because you've spoke to them already and you know, what is of interest but also the language in which to communicate that, those findings. So I think there are things you can do if you really want your work to achieve policy impact, to increase the likelihood that people will read it outside of academia, because that's essentially the point. You can never ensure policy impact, and that something will happen on the basis of the findings. But if the main thing is you want other people to read it in government that are not just other academics, that I guess having conversations with, not just as Leon said, not just government, but also sort of the wider public and in many cases, so for our work, we do a lot of, have a lot of conversation with third sector organisations. So for example, in my work National Children's Bureau, Mental Health Foundation, so having conversations with people who do more work on the ground, and work more closely with policymakers. So yeah, more non-academic conversations, help you then understand your findings and which bits are important for the non-academic audiences.

Lee Elliot Major

I do wonder whether there should be more training. And I don't know what the ESRC does on this, to be honest with you, but whether there is some basic training that PhD students could do in terms of how you interact with policy, how you communicate with the wider world, if you like. Just Praveetha before you go, just another question to you specifically, there's another question about how the BCS70 study has been engaged in cross national contexts. You kind of mentioned earlier that you know that it is freely available in our country, but I just wondered, can you say anything about the cross national context that the studies have been involved in?

Praveetha Patalay

Yeah, I can, briefly. So the Millennial cohort is part of a court like range of cohorts, there was lots of turn of the century cohorts internationally. So there's Longitudinal Study of Australian Children, Growing up in Ireland, and so on. So those ones are quite good. You can work with all of them, they're all easy to access. BCS70, has another birth code that is sort of contemporaneous to it, which is the Dunedin study in New Zealand. But unlike BCS70, the Dunedin study isn't freely available to access to all researchers, you have to go through a very complex data access procedure. So I think we have, I've only tried once to access that data set to do some cross cohort work with BCS. And it was hard, and I gave up essentially, because this is what happens when you can't access data easily or you need money to access data. So there are some cohorts internationally that are contemporaneous with BCS70, but that's the only one I know of, and I haven't done any cross national research with it. I'm sure other people have. Maybe Alice wants to jump in and give some examples. But with MCS, there are a lot more cross national examples of contemporaneous birth cohort studies so that with the more recent generation it's easier.

Lee Elliot Major

Alice, do you want to say anything?

Alice Sullivan

Just, I mean, to concur with what Praveetha was saying. It's actually and just to emphasise that in Britain, what we have is really unique in terms of having this long series of birth cohort study. So they really aren't the international comparators. Whereas now, of course, partly being influenced by the British birth cohorts around the millennium, lots of other countries did set up their own studies. That's why we don't have those kind of international comparisons for the older birth cohorts is really because what we have in Britain is this amazing, unique resource.

Lee Elliot Major

Thanks for that. Now, Jenny, there's a question specifically for you here. There's a few coming up for you. How can we ensure longitudinal studies are as sensitive as possible toward categorising lived experiences and features of BAME communities? And there's another one that sort of relates to this, others could probably contribute this as well, it was about data protection that I'm just going to roll into this. Is there a worry about the studies being, I guess, constrained by data protection? The rules.

Jenny Dibden

Okay, I'll pick up on those two. And in terms of the lived experience, for BAME, I mean, I am a great fan of, of co-design. So in terms of input to the way in which modules or questions are put together for longitudinal surveys, the way in which they change over time, the way in which they're administered, I'm very keen that the subjects of research are represented in that design process. And in terms of data protection, I mean, from time to time, there are concerns that a, you know, a particular framing of data protection will bring to the end, as we know it, a particular type of research, I think the important thing is to understand what developments there are in in data protection, and to be to be planning for those, but more importantly, to understand the risks that do exist. So you know, we do not live in a benign world. Therefore, it's really important that we think very carefully about data protection. That we follow the data protection rules, absolutely. But to make sure we do it in such a way that we can still do the work that we need to do. And that goes in large part back to that ongoing dialogue with the public about the value of research and the value of science. And I just wanted to pick up on a couple of other things, if I may. I mean, certainly UKRI has a range of training programmes and the Research Council's within it for PhD students and how to engage with

policymakers, as does the British Academy. I think other way is, I mean, at the moment conferences are obviously done in different ways but you know that ongoing dialogue with conferences, not just in the academic world, but with conferences that cross to charities, to pressure groups to you know, other bodies are really important. I think, as a PhD student, thinking about Select Committee. Select Committees are very interested in evidence. You can submit, they will publish everything they receive, you may get asked to speak about your work. So I do think you should sort of look at the parliamentary process as well. I also think it's really important that both government researchers and academics are anticipating what's coming. So there was a whole body of work that DSS commissioned on lone parents, you know, before the really the policy attention, turned to lone parents, so when the policy focus did come on to lone parents, in the sense of lone parents don't want to work, they want to stay on benefits etc. What that body of evidence could do was to challenge that and say, actually, that's not the case, there's a number of barriers to lone parents being able to work, but it's not the case that they do not want to work. And again, academics anticipating I think, you know what are the questions of the future? In many ways you are, you know, within government, we're constantly trying to think about what's the question we need to answer, you know, next week, six months, a year, 10 years, 25 years, but I think academics are particularly good at thinking that long term. So again, there's a really important contribution to make there.

[Lee Elliot Major](#)

Yeah, and that actually, this nicely sort of goes into some of the other questions, Jenny, thanks for that. And maybe John can have another go at this. How can cohort studies future proof survey design to meet emerging or yet to emerge policy issues, so they can respond more quickly to policy needs? So that's one question. There was also another question I think about whether there is a need for another cohort study and I'm sure you're all agreed with that. So is there a need for another cohort study as well. But John, can you have a first go that?

[John Bynner](#)

Yeah, I'll deal with the second one first. I mean, is there a case for a new birth cohort study? Yes an absolutely unanswerable case, we have sitting on us here a scientific opportunity that is quite unique in the world. And that is to trace cohorts over the periods of the life course and therefore see what's happening in society generally. And there are radical changes occurring, digitalization is one I keep coming back to. But all we're encountering now with the COVID thing is also an example of where you must have the up to date information that you can then follow through. So to break that whole sequencing up, and the value in has to policy and science is unbelievable. So yes, we definitely need one. What was the other part of the question?

[Lee Elliot Major](#)

Well, it was how do you future proof survey designs? Yeah, to meet emerging or yet to emerge policy issues, so they can respond more quickly to policy needs? I don't know if Alice, you want to come in on that as well. But John, have you got any other points in regards to that question?

[John Bynner](#)

Well only to reinforce what's been said very much. It depends on having an adequate dialogue that's been established between policy people and the academic community, to enable the kind of judgments to be made about what is happening that are beneficial to both. Some of them are scientific happenings, obviously, and that's the route back from them, but others, which are more in the social field. And I think this is terribly important to remember, a lot of what we're concerned with here in social science, in the sense of what you need to know is really what is shaping socially in a society in

order to actually anticipate what needs to be learned about it in a more formal sense, and testing hypotheses of various kinds, ultimately, through the academic route of getting the whole thing through peer review. And I think in fact, that relationship thing can be established well, and all the better. And I just feed in the other point it has been mentioned, one or two people have said. The general public a part of this. Absolutely, they must be. But that immediately brings in the question of communications. And we've got to think very, very hard about how to communicate with the public, but also different levels of action through government or practitioners, various kinds, who will be just lost or cut short, by the wrong kind of communication about the research that's being done, rather than all of them benefiting from it in one way or another. So I think those are the points I'd like to make and it's comes back to this idea of dialogue and using it effectively, to get what people want and need.

Lee Elliot Major

Okay, thanks for that. John. I'm cautious we're sort of coming to nearing the end of our session, we've got about five minutes left but I just wanted to, because I was going to ask you all to do sort of final comments, but I wanted before we do that, do you have any other questions for other panel members? You know, is there any questions you'd like to ask each other? Are you all agreed? Leon?

Leon Feinstein

I'm tempted to ask Jenny a question about the state of play in in government at the moment. I mean, this whole business of the relationship between research and policy, ultimately comes down to the fact that people are making decisions and they're receiving information to help shape those decisions. And has been said a number of times, relationships are a key to that, as is the nature of their understanding that the questions that they want answers to. And from outside government at this point, and seeing the statisticians and the epidemiologists, very senior policy, you know, directly with the Prime Minister at this moment in our history, it feels like quite an interesting time for the dynamic between research and policy. And there's some good things in there that science is at the table but it also feels very fraught and very difficult. I just wondered if Jenny might be able to comment on that at all and how that's going.

Jenny Dibden

Okay, so, I mean, so COVID-19 is exceptional circumstances for everyone. And, you know, everybody, you know, whether you're in government or outside has had to respond to, to what nobody anticipated before the very end of last year, and pretty much broadly into this year, I mean, the analytical function still remains strong and government. So all the analytical functions, and it's an umbrella term for a number of the analytical services have absolutely worked together with each other to understand, you know, what's been needed for the effort to fight the pandemic, what's been needed to be commissioned internally, what questions can be answered from existing bodies of evidence, what needs to be commissioned externally, departments have been reaching out to a whole range of experts, researchers, so that, you know, the whole of that sort of government analytical function has been very focused on COVID-19. Other things do continue. It's not just all been about COVID-19. But clearly COVID-19 has required a reorientation of the service. So I think, I think the analytical community has remained very vibrant, it's remained very busy. I don't think there's any less appetite for evidence in government at the moment, there is a premium on being able to turn evidence around really quickly, but then that just goes back to my point about having that bedrock of evidence and that understanding of what evidence is available and how that can be applied to a particular problem, you know, is still the key thing, really. You don't go from a standing start. You go

from a start where you have understood where the work has taken you for the last, you know, 5, 10, 15 whatever years it is, and who are the right people to talk to.

[Lee Elliot Major](#)

Thanks Jenny. Okay, so we're coming towards the end of the session, and apologies if I've missed any questions on the chat. I guess the final question really is what you would do each of you to improve evidence? I keep using the term evidence informed rather than at its base because I think Jenny would probably say that there's lots of influences on these policies, and clearly evidence is one of those. But you know, how would you improve the system, I guess, in a sentence, or is it okay, I suppose, as it? But John, do you want to start with a recommendation? I guess?

[John Bynner final point](#)

Sure. Well, one recommendation I was taken actually, well, one of the things Leon said, about the issue of place, I think, what we want to be able to do is very much bring together the knowledge of communities and societies alongside the need to have national pictures of what's going on. And I wonder how well maybe Leon, could comment on that? How he would see the birth cohort studies, most effectively working in that mode, learning from without changing their tune, but actually benefiting from the possibility of that linkage.

[Lee Elliot Major](#)

Leon's do you want to come back on that?

[Leon Feinstein final point](#)

Thank and thanks John. And that relates very much to answer I was going to give Lee to your question, which is, I think the local. You know, people will have heard me say before, and I bang on about this, there's too much conversation between academics and central government. And there's not enough engagement with the local. And I find a lot of local authorities want their own cohort studies. They want to know how development looks in Wigan, which is different to Rochdale which is different to Trafford, which is different to Manchester, just to give some examples. It's not the same everywhere so that that people are really interested in the developmental but they want to go beyond the national average, to how it looks for the people in their communities. And I think we could do much more of that.

[Lee Elliot Major](#)

Okay, that's good. Praveetha, what would you say? One recommendation?

[Praveetha Patalay final point](#)

To carry on the theme. Just to build on the previous two points I think there is something to be said for triangulating evidence. across multiple sources, whether this is national, local, but also different kinds of data, because obviously all data including our cohorts, however, wonderful they are, have their flaws and limitations, I think more work, where we are more in a model of joined up way, answer questions in various different data sources and account for the local conversations and national, and then present that to the wider world would probably be more useful than doing what we do now. But it's hard, I'm not suggesting it's easy, but I'm just saying it might be a nice way of going forward or trying to at least.

[Lee Elliot Major](#)

And Jenny, final comments. Sorry, I keep on coming to you last Jenny. But anyway, one recommendation or suggestion or observation from you.

Jenny Dibden final point

So I will do this from the perspective of government. So what we can do to improve. So for me, running a government analytical service responsible for researchers across 24 central government departments, the key is consistency. And trying to make everybody as good as the best in terms of how they engage their policymakers and how they get evidence used in the policy process. And beyond that, how we can answer some truly difficult questions that cross government. There is even within an individual department, there is no question that can be answered pretty much solo by a single department. So there's always a need to go to other departments. But on some of the really difficult questions, finding better ways to make sure we join up that process is really important. And finally, I know this is a second one, but place, obviously, as I am a director in the city's local growth unit, so I spend all day every day actually doing place. And I have a huge respect for local authorities. I work very closely with them at the moment, and also the importance of sort of functional economic areas. So I think, you know, we would benefit from a separate discussion, I think about place.

Lee Elliot Major wrap up

Thank you very much, everyone. It's been really interesting, because I guess we started this conversation about national policy. But of course, we're getting into the nuances of more, well not just regional, I guess, Leon, but more local policy and how you generate evidence for that. I think that'd be an amazing thing if we could have another discussion, maybe in five years' time to see if we've progressed to see if we've managed to influence the debate on this. I'm going to just thank you all because I'm conscious of time now.

Alice Sullivan closing remarks

Okay, thank you. I just wanted to say something about cohort members, I saw in the meeting chat, and somebody said that she joined us a mother of a cohort member. And just to thank all the cohort members and their mothers, of course, because it was their mothers who got them into this study in the first place for a really long term commitment that they've made these studies. Jenny said something about the fact that these studies allow us to have a much longer view than the typical kind of short policy frame and I thought that was really important. And something else that relates to that, I think, is the frustration that's been expressed about why has it been 20 years since the Millennium Cohort Study and we, you know, we're still waiting for the next one. So I think that kind of long term view, the funders need to take that view as well and we need to have an expectation that we're going to build this resource and not have to argue for it every few years based on a particular set of hypotheses or a particular policy need. But to actually accept that we need these broad open studies to be responsive in the longer term way and actually as a whole, as Leon was talking about, not just inform policymakers, but inform us as a society about the society in which we live.

Lee Elliot Major closing remarks

I think we're at now the end of the session, I think we're scheduled to finish by 2.30, I think, yeah. Okay. Well, listen, I just want to thank everyone for their contributions. We've had lots of really interesting questions and lots of positive feedback. So thank you all for this. And I'll look forward to hopefully doing a session in person, perhaps next year. To follow this up. So thank you. Thank you very much.