

CREATING MEANINGFUL IMPACT

*Julie Bayley's book, **Creating Meaningful Impact**, is an enlightening romp through the excitement, the pressures, the demands of doing impact well, both in terms of institutional success and in terms of a researcher's personal and professional development. As book blurbs often suggest, the book is a rollercoaster, but one very much aimed at the fainthearted, who stand to learn a lot from Julie's immense expertise, warmth, wit and superlative use of imagery. So, if you are tickled by the idea of becoming a more mindfully impactful researcher, swipe right on 'Impact Tinder' and read this book!*

–**Professor Ele Belfiore**, Professor in Cultural Policy & Director of the Interdisciplinary Centre for Social Inclusion and Cultural Diversity, University of Aberdeen, UK

Julie Bayley never fails to achieve impact on impact. If you are already on your journey to impact literacy this book will help you grow roots into impact healthy practices. And if you are just starting out, this book will help you sow the seeds that will grow into those roots to sustain your career of research with an impact on society. 'Creating meaningful impact' isn't just the title, it is the goal that Julie achieves in this important book.

–**Dr David Phipps**, Assistant VP Research Strategy & Impact, York University, Canada, and Director of Research Impact Canada

There are many books available to advise researcher how to 'do' impact but none as accessible as this. The sheer joy and enthusiasm that Julie brings to the field shines through every word which, along with insights from other researchers and partners in the field, ensures that every reader will emerge from this book enlightened, and excited about the prospect of pursuing their own 'societal impact'.

–**Dr Gemma Derrick**, Associate Professor, Research Policy & Culture, University of Bristol, UK

CREATING MEANINGFUL IMPACT: THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO DEVELOPING AN IMPACT-LITERATE MINDSET

BY

JULIE BAYLEY

University of Lincoln, UK



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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Julie once got lost in a bathroom. She spends her spare time belting out 80s tunes, watching cosy murder mysteries and documentaries about Alaskan Bush people. She once ordered fake designer underwear whilst on a lot of post-surgery medication.

She is also a world expert on impact.

Vicky Williams, CEO, Emerald Group

Dr Julie Bayley is an international expert on research impact and has been immersed in the world of impact as an academic and research manager for many years. She is currently the Director of Research Impact Development at the University of Lincoln (UK) and founder and Director of the Lincoln Impact Literacy Institute – the University’s strategic unit for impact – leading impact capacity building and strategy across the institution and wider university sector. She is passionate about equality and diversity within research, and is Director of Impact for the Eleanor Glanville Institute, the University of Lincoln’s Strategic Unit for Equality and Diversity.

She is a regular contributor to conferences, consultations and round tables and, since 2017, she has been commissioned as Emerald Publishing’s *Impact Literacy Advisor* to support their ‘Real World Impact’ programme. She sits on a number of Committees and Advisory Boards, including as Policy Lead on the British Psychology Society Division of Health Psychology Committee, and previously as both Director of Qualifications for the Association of Research Managers and Administrations (ARMA) UK, and Co-chair of the International Network of Research Management Societies (INORMS) Research Impact and Stakeholder

Engagement (RISE) Working Group. She collaborates nationally and internationally on knowledge mobilisation and impact, and in 2022 was awarded the *Advancing Research Impact in Society* (ARIS) Impact Innovators Award in recognition of her impact literacy work.

As well as an impact expert, she is a Chartered Health Psychologist, registered with the Health and Care Professions Council, and has been an applied researcher in behaviour change since 2003. Much of this time was spent researching sexual health, as well as healthcare staff development, public health interventions and evaluations of health and care services. Recent research has focused on improving patient-centred research, developing patient outcome measures, delivering public health evaluations and creating novel ways to review impact in funding applications and in health innovation research. Having had far too many blood clots since 2008, she is an advocate for vascular health and is a patient representative on the International Consortium for Health Outcomes Measurement (ICHOM) Central Advisory Board.

Outside of work she is a semi-lapsed double bassist, cosy mystery fan and cheese lover, and her kids describe her as having an ‘adequate’ face.

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This book is for those we bumble along with, those we love and those we want to throw pies at. It's a fascinating world isn't it?

And now, tea.

CONTRIBUTORS

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Professor Ele Belfiore is the inaugural Interdisciplinary Director for Social Inclusion and Cultural Diversity at the University of Aberdeen. She has published extensively on cultural politics and policy, cultural value and the 'social impacts' of the arts. For Palgrave, she edits the book series *New Directions in Cultural Policy Research* and she is Co-Editor-in-Chief of the journal *Cultural Trends*. She has been committed to the promotion of equality, diversity and inclusion in higher education, and a Founding Member of the Women In Academia Support Network, a trans-inclusive and intersectional charity that brings together over 13,500 members worldwide with lived experience of misogyny to facilitate gender parity and more equitable working conditions in higher education.

Dr Rebecca Brunk is a Michigander living across the pond. She is a mixed methodologist and has a background in Neuroscience and Organisational Psychology. She aims to approach every problem in academics from the angle of, how do we leverage knowledge to enact real substantial change?

Dr Gemma Derrick is an Associate Professor (Research Policy & Culture) at the Centre for Higher Education Transformations (CHET) at the University of Bristol. She relentlessly twitter-stalked

Julie and her jazz hands until she was thrilled to receive an invitation to speak at one of her seminars, and did so whilst trying to look cool. What resulted was a mutual respect and love for all things impact in an embarrassing kind of you-hang-up-no-you-hang-up kind of way. Her research focusing on the dynamics of research culture in response to external and internal reward and assessment structures. She published ‘The Evaluators’ Eye: Impact Assessment and Academic Peer Review’ in 2018, and has been a Leading Commentator on assessment frameworks and peer review practices where she campaigns for more reflective processes of evaluation for a kinder research future. She is a Visiting Professor with OSIRIS at the University of Oslo, is on the Board for the HiddenREF, and has worked with funders, such as at the Research Council of Norway, The Academy of Finland and the Wellcome Trust about building better assessment practices for impact. She also hates writing her own bio.

Esther De Smet is a Senior Policy Advisor at the Research Department of Ghent University (BE), where she develops strategy and support on societal impact of research and research communication. She is also the Business Project lead for the Institutional Research Information System. She regularly leads workshops on communication strategy, impact, digital presence and social media. By now, she has become a valued member of the worldwide impact tribe, participating in working groups and projects, and presenting at conferences (e.g. INORMS, EARMA, AESIS, etc.).

Dr Kieran Fenby-Hulse is an Experienced Lecturer, Facilitator and Researcher with over 15 years of experience in research, strategy development and organisation development. He takes an interdisciplinary approach to both research and teaching, drawing on artistic techniques and practices to explore, challenge and interrogate notions of responsible and shared leadership, continuing professional development, and communication and engagement. He is the Co-founder and Managing Editor for the *Journal of Research Management and Administration*, a Reviewer for the *International Journal of Doctoral Studies* and Member of Association for Research Managers’ EDI Advisory Group.

Dr Elizabeth Gadd is a Research Policy Manager at Loughborough University. She chairs the International Network of Research Management Societies (INORMS) Research Evaluation Group and Co-champions the UK Association of Research Managers and Administrators (ARMA) Research Evaluation Special Interest Group. She founded the LIS-Bibliometrics Forum and The Bibliomagician Blog which provides bibliometric advice and guidance ‘by practitioners, for practitioners’. She was the recipient of the 2020 INORMS Award for Excellence in Research Management Leadership.

Dr Tamika Heiden is the Founder and Head Inspirer of the *Research Impact Academy*. She previously worked in Health Research and Research Coordination for more than 15 years and for the last eight years has been Consulting to researchers, funders and research organisations across the globe. Her background in knowledge translation and research impact, along with her dedication to improving social outcomes from research, led her to develop the Research Impact Academy. Her goal and purpose is to ensure that research is relevant and accessible to the people who need it (www.researchimpactacademy.com).

Dr Chris Hewson studied Social and Political Sciences at Cambridge, and took his PhD in Sociology at Lancaster University. His PhD examined the development of community radio and television services in the face of social and regulatory change. He stepped into the newly created role of Social Sciences Research Impact Manager in March 2017, having previously worked in impact support roles at the Universities of Manchester and Salford. He provides Expert Assistance to York’s Social Sciences Departments regarding all aspects of research impact, including but not limited to funding, policy engagement and the Research Excellence Framework (REF). He manages York’s Economic and Social Research Council Impact Accelerator Account. He is always keen to hear from organisations and groups interested in collaborating with the University’s social science researchers.

Helen Lau is currently the Associate Director of Knowledge Exchange at Coventry University. Having worked in research

commercialisation, knowledge exchange and innovation for 17 years across roles at universities, regional development and SMEs. She is passionate about research and university innovation making a difference and changing people's lives for the better, essentially linking research impact and Knowledge Exchange (KE) together to try and make the world a better place for everyone. She is an Institute of Directors Ambassador for Inclusion and Diversity and an Active Non-executive Director with smaller companies, spin outs and charities. She's a full-time working Mum of two and loves sharing her passion for innovation, impact, KE and inclusivity with everyone and anyone

Dr Kellyn Lee is a BPS Chartered Psychologist, Academic and Founder of www.materialcitizenship.com and www.dementiacarehub.co.uk. She works with the social care sector to improve the lives of people living with a dementia and those who care for them. She also works as a Project Officer of the NIHR ENabling Research In Care Homes (ENRICH) project via the London School of Economics and Political Science. More details on her translation of research into practice is available at <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/jan/14/everyday-objects-people-with-dementia-quality-of-life-care-homes> and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1JAP_iYtHtQ

Dr Stephanie Maloney is Director of Research and Enterprise at the University of Lincoln and supports the institution in establishing a research and enterprise culture. She leads a department responsible for research grant support; consultancy and educational contracts, business start-up & growth; IP commercialisation; funding partnerships; research environment; ethics, governance & integrity; research data & systems; knowledge exchange and support for regional businesses. Prior to joining the University of Lincoln, she worked at the University of Birmingham and was responsible for facilitating projects between the University and industry, especially with public funding. She holds PhD in Oncology from the Cancer Research UK Centre at the University of Birmingham. External to the University, she is a Member of UKRI's Research Organisation Consultation Group advising UKRI on all aspects of research policy, process and

procedure from the research organisation perspective. She is engaged in driving forward regional innovation and growth through, for example, South Lincolnshire Food Enterprise Zone, Greater Lincolnshire LEP (GLLEP), Lincolnshire Growth Hub, GLLEP Innovation Council and Lincoln Science & Innovation Park.

Wilfred Mijnhardt is Policy Director at Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University. He brings over 25 years of experience in Research Policy Development and Institutional Advancement. He is passionate for universities, business schools, responsible research and education, excellence and impact. As Executive Director of Erasmus Research Institute of Management (ERIM) (till 2014), he has been a Pioneer in organising for academic development and the impact support organisation, with special expertise on quality assurance, productivity, academic and societal impact of research and the renewal of faculty management. In his current role, his energy focuses on the strategic transition of universities and business schools towards an impact-driven mindset. Internationally, he is an Active Member in networks like RRBM, PRME, AACSB, EFMD, amongst others. He holds a bachelor degree in Economics, a master's degree in Public Administration and a post-graduate diploma in Management of Change,

Dr David Phipps is the Administrative Lead for all research programmes and their impacts on local and global communities at York University (Toronto, Canada). He has received honours and awards from the Canadian Association of Research Administrators, Society for Research Administration International, Institute for Knowledge Mobilization, International Network of Research Management Societies and the EU-based Knowledge Economy Network. He received the Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal for his work in knowledge mobilisation and research impact and was named the most influential knowledge mobiliser in Canada. He sits on knowledge mobilisation committees around the world and is Network Director for Research Impact Canada.

Derek Stewart is a Former Teacher treated successfully for throat cancer in 1995 by clinicians who were active in research meant he

didn't necessarily receive the 'best evidenced based treatment' but he still has a voice. He is a Strategic Advisor with the HRB Trials Methodology Research Network, Ireland and Hon Professor at the University of Galway.

Dr Mark Taylor, according to his last consultant's letter, has 'relapsing remitting multiple sclerosis, a sacral nerve sheath tumour, hips tendinitis and labral tear, knee meniscal injury, shoulder adhesive capsulitis and now tentative degenerative arthritis'. He currently works part time at the National Institute for Health and Social Care (NIHR) but is a patient advocate for multiple sclerosis (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=823gl0-74-o>) and other broader health issues (<https://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2018/09/13/mark-taylor-does-it-matter-that-letters-between-consultants-and-gps-are-not-addressed-to-patients/>).

Vicky Williams is Chief Executive Officer of the Emerald Group, which comprises Emerald Publishing and Emerald Works. She has held a variety of senior roles during her 20+ years in the publishing sector, across editorial, business development, product development, marketing, digital and HR. She is an International Advisory Board Member for the University of Bradford, and an Advisory Board Member for the University of Lincoln's Impact Literacy Institute. She also works within the local community on Bradford's Economic Recovery Board and is a Trustee of the Keith Howard Foundation. Both in and out of work, she is a Keen Advocate for gender diversity, having launched Emerald's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion programme in 2016, and speaks widely on this topic at global forums and events.

Lorna Wilson has worked in Higher Education for just over 10 years and is currently Co-Director of Research and Innovation Services at Durham University, and Chair Elect of the Association of Research Managers and Administrators (ARMA). She is a HUGE Research Geek, with a background mainly in research development and funding. Her current role involves her leading on various areas for her institution including research development, operations,

culture and strategic projects. When she's not cheerleading research she's a mum of two black Labradors in the Toon with her husband.

Professor Clare Wood is Professor of Psychology at Nottingham Trent University, and describes herself as a 'research mongrel' in as much as her work positions her across disciplines rather than within her own. She is also a 'research magpie', insofar as she is drawn to shiny things that bring her joy when it comes to particular projects and people. She is interested in children's literacy development, children's voice and rights, and the use of technology to support learning. She drinks more tea than any human bladder should actually be able to cope with and fondles yarn in her spare time. Her daughter is embarrassed by her.

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Introduction

Julie Bayley

Well hello.

Welcome to this book on developing an impact literate mindset. Its aim is to help you understand impact, think about how to 'be you' in impact, and develop a set of guiding principles for impact in practice. You might be starting from scratch, need a refresher or want to somehow reset your thinking as you approach impact further on in your career. Welcome all.

Impact is not new, nor is it – unless it actually is – rocket science. And at its heart, a very simple principle – to make a positive difference through research. That's it. Honestly. Impact is when people outside of academia benefit from the research we do within it. There are all sorts of national agendas and strategies that demand impact be delivered at scale, in accordance with certain rules and corroborated to a certain level of proof, but that doesn't detract from the gloriously simple premise that it's about making the world a bit better. Everything else pretty much is smoke and mirrors, and it can be easy to get lost in the haze. I don't mean that it doesn't take effort to understand, but rather it isn't something too niche or complicated to get a handle on.

This book aims to cut through any mists, giving you chance to understand what impact is and align your impact sat-nav. It's about celebrating the opportunity we have within the research world to make a difference, whilst also recognising the challenges of doing impact in already pressured environments. And it's about ensuring that research of any size and from any discipline has a fair line of sight to impact, whilst acknowledging that even the best laid plans can fall foul to the negative mood created by having no biscuits at a meeting. Impact literacy is simply the ability to understand what impact is, at a level

which allows you to not just do impact but get under its bonnet and see how its engine works. And an impact literate mindset is about building that understanding into your thinking, your judgements and your actions across your work and the environments in which you work.

Perhaps the biggest reason this book exists is that I hate how battered and bruised people can feel by impact. Impact can feel exhausting, because research can be exhausting, and because academia can be exhausting. If you add commuting, kids, health issues, caring responsibilities, job precarity, pandemics and all else into the mix, there's a less than healthy correlation between life and the need for a cash-and-carry sized bar of Dairy Milk. Sometimes the prospect of giving energy to something else when you've already put all available life force into the work-life-chocolate trinity can feel overwhelming. I'm certainly not going to patronisingly suggest that workload is simply overcome by a change in thinking, but I absolutely believe that getting to grips with what impact actually is – *impact literacy* – makes the whole thing feel less overwhelming, more under our control and far more resistant to unreasonable expectations. As someone who still believes strongly that research impact is a genuinely good thing, having been battered and bruised by some of the pressures to do it, I keep coming back to the simple point that the opportunity to help society with our research is the right thing to do. It matters. And it matters enough to keep pushing for better, healthier and fairer ways to do it. So this book is written from me to you, to help keep the faith when it all goes a bit pear shaped.

I want to be clear from the outset that it doesn't aim to provide a prescriptive reference-heavy framework or stepwise 'how to' for impact. In fact, if you're looking for unequivocal, data enforced arguments about which logic model is better, then you'll be a teensy bit (very) disappointed. There are already many fantastic resources out there providing models, frameworks, public engagement good practice and the many other facets of impact. I don't write this suggesting that this book overrides or replaces them – quite the opposite. The wealth of available insights is incredible, but particularly for those stepping newly into impact it can be daunting to know how to dive into something so vast. My aim is to help you bring values and principles to the start of your impact thinking to *then be able to* draw on these insights. If tools and frameworks are the recipe to help you make an impact cake, this book helps you think about why you need to make the cake, why *that* cake, for what occasion, who's going to want to eat it, who might be allergic and how you can avoid dropping it on the floor. My stance is this: you can't make full or effective use of the tools available if you don't have your impact head screwed on first.

The content comes from many years of experience being right in the middle of this thing called impact as an impact lead, applied researcher, research manager, psychologist, impact consultant, patient, mum, carer and general human. It comes from seeing people embrace/love/be suspicious of/hate impact and all else in between. Whilst much of my lens on impact is shaped by the UK context, it's not based on the UK experience alone. Nor is this book about the UK, about any specific agenda, or limited to my reflections. My aim is just to reflect the impact world I see, help you reflect on yours, give you some ways to get a mental foothold on the topic, and try to answer any stupid (but categorically aren't stupid) questions you might have. And its tone is, well, me, the same as if you were listening to me rattle on at a conference or in a workshop. Apologies, you may need wine.

At the broadest level this book is for anyone within academia interested in impact, but it will be most use to researchers, impact managers, those involved in knowledge brokerage or in institutional roles which support impact in some way. I also hope it's useful for those entering academia and needing to make sense of this odd impact shaped thing. I don't start with any assumption of where you are on the impact experience spectrum, but instead hope it helps you build healthy approaches to impact whatever your starting point. If you are one of those people who loves theory or gets excited about a significant statistical result (just so we're clear, that isn't me – in the same way that I don't understand nanotechnology or Love Island), then fabulous. We need you – your work forms the foundations of research and signals the spark of an impact possibility. But if you are one of those people who gets their joy from connecting with people or getting your hands dirty implementing things in practice, we need you too, to energise the work into life. There is a place for everybody and no template for what counts. Grab a coffee and pull up a chair.

Throughout this book I'll use phrases like 'your research' and 'your impact' as a semantic shortcut to avoid constantly repeating 'your impact, or that of the research you support, or you help communications on, or are brokering into society, or are commissioning ...'. The possible angles on impact are endless, so to simplify the narrative I will say 'your research', with the absolutely expressed wish that you translate this and the examples into the perspective that suits you.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

Impact is a difficult topic to cover generically to suit everyone, so by necessity I'll need to use a range of illustrative examples rather than cover every possible

permutation. And I'll very unprofessionally use a lot of analogies and references to film, TV and other random things. This is because I have a simple brain and analogies are how I make sense of the world, but also because I hope these give you some much clearer visual shortcuts for understanding what can feel an unmanageable beast. If some of my references don't land – entirely possible as the process of writing this book has made it clear to me how eclectic my internal library is – don't worry. They're used to illustrate, not explain, and the fuller text will explain what you need to know. And if you can't find your exact research represented, remember that much of what I'm using is examples to help you reflect on your own context.

Each chapter contains thoughts on what you can do next, with questions to help steer you in the right direction, and there are comments, tips and reflections running throughout from a range of fabulous people in and around research. These include impact experts, funders, publishers, academics, research managers, knowledge exchange experts and patients, each of whom has first-hand understanding of how impact intersects with other areas of life, and how we can do it well. You'll see their comments throughout the book, and I am indebted to them for their contributions.

The book is split into two parts:

Part 1 focuses on impact within the research landscape, and how an impact literacy approach can help.

Chapter 1 is the most 'textbook' part of the whole thing, covering the basics of impact, what it is and isn't, how it's defined, what drives the sector to pursue societal change and how it all works in practice. Chapter 2 delves more deeply into impact literacy, exploring what impact literacy is, what it means to be literate and why the ability to critically judge aspects of impact is so important. Chapter 3 then looks into some of the pressures and challenges of impact which bring values very much into the frame.

In *Part 2* we change focus and look at a set of principles for approaching impact in a meaningful, literate way:

- Principle 1 – Chase Meaning Not Unicorns – focuses on ensuring we base our activities on what matters, not what is most impressive.
- Principle 2 – Work Out What Your Research Powers Up – covers how research has a chance to create impact every time the 'baton is passed'.

- Principle 3 – Think Directionally Rather Than Linearly – looks at how impact can be best thought of as changes in various directions, rather than linear paths
- Principle 4 – Evidence? Think – What Would Jessica Fletcher Do? – focuses on how we can prove impact, either by finding the smoking gun or assembling a case.
- Principle 5 – Create a Healthy Space – shifts gear to think about how we, as individuals, can help build healthier approaches to impact in our institutions, departments or groups.
- Principle 6 – Own Your Expertise But Don't Be a Jerk – jointly covers how to overcome imposter syndrome and/or not be a complete pain in the backside.
- Principle 7 – Be an Impact Lighthouse – looks at how we can integrate impact literacy and healthy practices across the various aspects of academic life.
- Principle 8 – Be You – reminds you to be authentic as you navigate this world of research translation.

At the end of the book there is a 'Frequently Asked Questions' section, which tries to condense some of the points above into specific queries.

This book won't change your life, unless your main problem is a wonky table needing a book-sized wedge, but it will help you equip yourself with the thinking to approach impact well. You'll most definitely still learn far beyond this book, have wins, make mistakes, judge, misjudge, celebrate, feel sucker punched, feel elated and everything else, but knowing you're starting with healthy values has got to be the right way to embark on the journey.

My aim is to leave you with some principles to anchor yourself in this thing called impact.

My hope is that you find your impact mojo and feel empowered to do it. Happy reading

Julie x

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Part 1

IMPACT, IMPACT LITERACY AND VALUES