OPINION

How do we take the long view on autism?

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Long-term studies that track people with autism throughout their lives offer promising hints about how the disorder manifests over time. They also affirm a growing concern among autism researchers — that we need more of them.

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Longitudinal studies provide an unparalleled amount of information about **the developmental and behavioral trajectories** of individuals with autism. Because these studies can reveal how early-life experiences affect outcomes, they may provide a useful window into the ways genes and the environment interact in the disorder.

But these studies are extremely expensive and difficult to execute compared with cross-sectional designs, which examine a group at one specific point in time and make up the overwhelming majority of autism studies. The resources required to track families, make recurring evaluations and collect data over a significant period of time typically render the approach cost-prohibitive.

How can we mitigate some of these issues to make longitudinal studies more viable?

- **What subgroups or cohorts are best suited for longitudinal study designs? Which factors related to autism need to be studied over time?**

- **How might longitudinal studies make use of existing patient registries or be combined with other projects to amplify the payoff?**

- **With emerging technological tools, such as online evaluations and rapid screens, how fast and cheap can we collect useful data from large populations over time?**

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