



COMMENT



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Mainstream psychological and behavioural science meets anthropology: a study of behavioural transformation

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Transformative behavioural change refers to a profound and often radical shift in individuals' actions and values. Mainstream WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic) psychological and behavioural science, which is the dominant research tradition in Euro-American contexts, has increasingly recognized such change as critical to tackling global challenges such as the climate crisis and widening social inequalities. However, transformative behavioural change is relatively rare and highly context-dependent, which poses substantial challenges for this research tradition due to its reliance on large samples and standardized measures. This comment argues that anthropological methods, particularly ethnography, can help overcome these obstacles. By immersing researchers in participants' everyday lives, ethnography captures the nuanced, evolving, and culturally embedded processes underlying transformative shifts. Drawing on participant observation and long-term engagement, it offers a deeper understanding of the triggers, social dynamics, and structural influences involved. The article outlines why established quantitative and qualitative methods in mainstream psychology struggle to accommodate complex, uncommon phenomena like transformative change and demonstrates how anthropological approaches address these limitations. It concludes by offering practical strategies for incorporating ethnographic techniques into mainstream psychological and behavioural science, underscoring the need for cross-disciplinary collaboration. If adopted more widely, these integrations could yield richer, more actionable insights into how and why individuals enact profound behaviour change, ultimately strengthening interventions aimed at solving pressing societal and environmental challenges.

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The urgency of studying transformative behavioural change

Researchers working within mainstream psychological and behavioural science are increasingly recognizing that addressing the world's most pressing issues, from the climate crisis to socioeconomic inequalities, will require studying transformative behavioural change (Basso and Krpan, 2022; Krpan, 2024; Whitmarsh and Hampton, 2024). Throughout this comment, “mainstream psychological and behavioural science” refers to the dominant research tradition developed in largely Euro-American contexts that focuses on WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic) populations and relies heavily on large samples, standardized measures, reductionism, and related characteristics (Henrich et al. 2010b, a; Cumming and Calin-Jageman, 2016; Shrout and Rodgers, 2018; Sassenberg and Ditrich, 2019; Scholtz et al. 2020; Uher, 2020; Apicella et al. 2020; Speelman et al. 2024). Transformative behavioural change can be defined as a significant and radical shift in someone's actions that is highly challenging to achieve and involves a profound transformation of their way of living (Krpan, 2024). An example is adopting a lifestyle of minimal consumption and environmental sustainability, such as living in a smaller home, repairing items instead of replacing them, avoiding environmentally harmful travel, and adhering to a plant-based diet (Hickel et al. 2022a; Krpan, 2024; Whitmarsh and Hampton, 2024). Nevertheless, transformative behavioural change is not confined to sustainability and can occur across any domain of life (Krpan, 2024). It may involve significant career transitions that reshape personal and professional identity in response to economic or social upheavals, profound lifestyle adaptations for health or spiritual awakening to address growing healthcare challenges, or radical personal adjustments to the technological revolution to mitigate potential negative impacts of rapid digital change (e.g., embracing digital minimalism by drastically reducing screen time and social media use).

Deepening scientific understanding of transformative behavioural change is urgent because it underpins efforts to address these crises. However, studying it with contemporary methods in mainstream psychological and behavioural science is challenging. For example, while mainstream psychological research typically requires large sample sizes and focuses on averages, transformative behavioural change is infrequent, thus making large samples implausible (Shrout and Rodgers, 2018; Sassenberg and Ditrich, 2019; Krpan, 2024; Whitmarsh and Hampton, 2024). Moreover, such change is often unique to each individual, rendering averages less informative and potentially misleading in capturing its complexity (Krpan, 2024; Speelman et al. 2024).

In this comment, we focus on mainstream psychological and behavioural science (Henrich et al. 2010b, a; Apicella et al. 2020) and argue that researchers working in this tradition could adopt methods from anthropology to study transformative behavioural change. The ethnographic methodology, first developed in anthropology, is particularly well equipped to developing an understanding of unique micro-level behaviours and radical value change, in the context of broader cultural and structural processes. Against this background, we structure the comment in three parts. First, we briefly acknowledge well-established ethnographic, participatory, and indigenous psychologies outside the WEIRD mainstream to clarify that our critique targets only hegemonic methods. Second, we provide a comprehensive examination of the challenges in quantitative and qualitative methods practised inside mainstream psychological and behavioural science that limit the study of transformative behavioural change. Third, we show how core anthropological approaches, especially ethnography, can overcome these limitations and outline practical strategies for integrating them into mainstream research programmes. We conclude with a call to action for psychological and behavioural science researchers.

Beyond the mainstream: established ethnographic traditions in psychology

Although this comment critiques mainstream psychological and behavioural science, it is important to acknowledge long-standing psychological traditions that already integrate ethnographic, participatory, and emancipatory approaches. Community, liberation, and indigenous psychologies, as well as critical and feminist strands, have employed embedded participant-observation, action research, and autoethnography for decades, often positioning researchers as insider-partners rather than neutral observers (Parker, 1999; Cornish et al. 2023). Seminal examples range from Marie Jahoda's mixed-method study of the 1930s Great Depression community (Jahoda et al. 2017) to recent Kaupapa Māori projects that locate knowledge production within relational world-views and collective action (King et al. 2015; Rua et al. 2017, 2023).

These scholar-activist traditions demonstrate how ethnography has been used to co-create knowledge for transformative social change (Cornish et al. 2023). Participatory Action Research, for instance, iterates through cycles of research, reflection, and community-led action to confront structural inequities across the Global South and Global North (Cornish et al. 2023). Critical psychologists have likewise exposed the individualising biases of behaviourist “nudge” models (Rose, 1979; Cromby, 2022) and advanced relational theories of the self (Gergen, 2009). Our focus, however, remains on hegemonic mainstream traditions, where large-sample quantification and short-burst interviews still dominate. By highlighting anthropology's immersive tools, we complement (rather than replicate) community, liberation, and indigenous psychologies, offering concrete strategies for researchers who operate inside mainstream disciplinary settings yet wish to engage with behaviour change in culturally grounded, relationally informed ways.

Finally, we note that the most urgent cases of transformative behavioural change are concentrated in WEIRD, high-income nations themselves (Hickel et al. 2022a; Krpan et al. 2025). Ecological-economics and post-growth research shows that these countries are overwhelmingly responsible for resource overshoot and for the bulk of historical greenhouse-gas emissions (Wiedmann et al. 2020; Hickel, 2020; Jackson, 2021; Hickel et al. 2022b, a; Kallis et al. 2025). Degrowth and post-growth scholars therefore call on rich societies to reduce excessive production and consumption, particularly in carbon-intensive sectors, while safeguarding wellbeing through public provisioning and just transitions (Hickel and Kallis, 2020; Jackson, 2021; Hickel et al. 2022a; Kallis et al. 2025). Positioning transformative behavioural change within this macro-structural context helps avoid an individualising “nudge” logic and aligns the agenda with collective, system-level responsibility.

Challenges in mainstream psychological methods for understanding transformative behaviour

In Table 1, we summarize key challenges in studying transformative behavioural change using the methods that dominate mainstream psychological and behavioural science. This table does not suggest that there is one method or that all methods are similar. Indeed, we use the term “mainstream psychological methods” in reference to research designs and analytic techniques that are commonly employed by researchers working in this tradition (Scholtz et al. 2020; Krpan, 2020). The aspects covered in the table broadly apply across all these methods. We classify the methods into quantitative and qualitative categories, a standard distinction in psychology (Willig, 2019). Notably, quantitative methods dominate the field, utilized by 80–90% of researchers (Scholtz et al. 2020).

Table 1 Aspects of mainstream psychological methods hindering the study of transformative behavioural change and how anthropological approaches can overcome them.

Aspect of Psychological Methods	Aspect Description	Why This Aspect Hinders Studying Transformative Change	Advantages of Anthropological Approach
<i>Quantitative methods</i> Sample size.	Studies typically require large sample sizes (Shrout and Rodgers, 2018; Sassenberg and Ditrich, 2019) and/or repeated measurements of the dependent variable (Michiels and Onghena, 2019) to reduce the possibility of false positive findings.	Transformative behavioural change is rare, making large sample sizes difficult to achieve (Krpan, 2024; Nielsen et al. 2024; Whitmarsh and Hampton, 2024). Repeated measurements of the same variable are also problematic, as such changes can either occur unpredictably, may not align with the timing of the measurements, or may involve behaviours unsuited to repetition.	Anthropological methods, such as participant observation, allow for in-depth studies of rare phenomena like transformative behavioural change without relying on large sample sizes or repeated measures. By immersing in participants' daily lives, anthropologists capture rich, contextualized data, providing insights into the nuanced and situational nature of such changes.
Neutrality of the researcher.	In mainstream psychological research, it is expected that the researcher establishes basic rapport but remains neutral to avoid influencing research participants and their responses (Nichols and Maner, 2008; McCambridge et al. 2012).	Since transformative behavioural change is deeply personal, participants may need to trust the researcher to share nuanced experiences essential for understanding the change (Bauer and McAdams, 2004; Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, 2023; Krpan, 2024). In this context, neutrality can hinder trust-building and the discovery of deep insights.	Ethnography prioritizes immersion over intervention and building deep trust with participants over time. This enables profound insights into their lived experiences while minimizing the imposition of researcher's own biases, leading to a more authentic and detailed understanding.
Reductionism.	Research typically focuses on comparing group averages and/or understanding individual averages across repeated measures (Cumming and Calin-Jageman, 2016; Speelman et al. 2024). Therefore, unusual or extreme observations are typically classified as outliers or errors (Valentine et al. 2021). Another aspect of reductionism in this context involves operationalizing behaviours into measurable components, often employing standardized response scales (Uher, 2020).	Because transformative behavioural change is often a unique personal experience (Bauer and McAdams, 2004; Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, 2023; Krpan, 2024), its in-depth understanding can hardly be achieved through standardized measurement or comparison of average quantities between or within individuals. Moreover, unusual or extreme observations that are typically discarded in quantitative research frequently characterise transformative changes (Krpan, 2024).	Ethnographic research incorporates extreme events and outliers by analysing them both in relation to the repetitive everyday phenomena, and broader cultural and structural factors. It aims for a holistic perspective, avoiding the reduction of complex human behaviours into isolated variables. By situating personal and intimate experiences in broader contexts, this approach can capture the full complexity of transformative behavioural change.
Hypothesis-driven research.	Although quantitative research in mainstream psychology can be exploratory, most research is hypothesis-driven, and empirical papers often include hypothesis-based studies (Sanbonmatsu et al. 2015). These studies require predictions grounded in prior research and theory.	Since transformative behavioural change remains largely unexplored in mainstream psychological and behavioural science (Krpan, 2024), it would be challenging to study this change by making a priori predictions based on previous theorizing.	Ethnography prioritizes open-ended exploration over rigid hypothesis testing. This flexibility allows researchers to uncover unexpected patterns and generate new hypotheses grounded in the lived realities of participants.
Limited attention to and understanding of the context (e.g., country, culture, individuals' surroundings, etc.).	In quantitative research, gaining an in-depth understanding of the context in which behaviour occurs is often challenging or overlooked. The most common approach to assessing context involves designing specific questions about individuals' culture, socioeconomic environment, and other factors that can be measured quantitatively to control for them (Bollen and Bauldry, 2011).	Transformative behavioural change is often triggered and shaped by various contextual factors, including culture, socioeconomic conditions, family, and neighbourhood circumstances (Luhmann et al. 2021; Basso and Krpan, 2022; Whitmarsh and Hampton, 2024). Understanding these contexts is essential to comprehending the change.	Anthropological methods focus on deeply studying the context in which behaviour occurs. Anthropologists immerse themselves in participants' daily lives, examining influences ranging from global politics and cultural norms to neighbourhood dynamics and socioeconomic circumstances. This approach produces insights into how these interconnected factors shape behaviour.

Table 1 (continued)

Aspect of Psychological Methods	Aspect Description	Why This Aspect Hinders Studying Transformative Change	Advantages of Anthropological Approach
<i>Qualitative methods</i> Reliance on verbal articulations and self-reported experiences	Qualitative methods, such as interviews and thematic analysis, often rely on participants' verbal articulations and self-reported experiences (Willig, 2019).	Although verbal articulations provide richer insights than quantitative methods (Willig, 2019), they offer limited perspectives on the broader context of individuals' lives. They may also overlook implicit, embodied, or culturally ingrained aspects of transformative change. Moreover, people's verbal expressions often diverge from their actual behaviour (Nisbett and Wilson, 1977; Parry et al. 2021).	Ethnography emphasizes immersive participant observation, enabling researchers to capture implicit, embodied, and culturally ingrained aspects of behaviour that may not be articulated verbally. Observing actions alongside words can provide more understanding of the values, ideas, social practices, and interactions that shape transformative change.
Short-term data collection	Qualitative studies often involve short-term data collection (e.g., a few interviews or focus groups) (Willig, 2019), which may fail to capture the temporal dynamics of transformative change.	Transformative behavioural change may unfold over extended periods and/or may involve events or occurrences that are challenging to predict, articulate, or capture within short time frames (Basso and Krpan, 2022; Krpan, 2024).	Ethnographic research involves long-term participant observation, enabling the study of transformative change as it unfolds over time. This approach captures the temporal dynamics and unpredictable nature of such change, providing a deeper understanding of the processes involved.
Fragmented view of structural Influences	While qualitative research might consider individual experiences, it often does not fully integrate broader structural forces (e.g., global political economy, cultural norms, historical factors) into the analysis (Willig, 2019).	Broader structural forces can play a significant role in shaping and influencing transformative behavioural change and/or interact with other triggers of such change (Krpan, 2024; Nielsen et al. 2024; Whitmarsh and Hampton, 2024).	Anthropology embeds individual experiences in broader structural processes, to understand how they intersect in a unique way. This holistic perspective reveals how these forces interact with personal triggers of transformative change, offering a more comprehensive analysis of its underlying mechanisms.

From Table 1, it can be seen that quantitative methods used in mainstream psychological and behavioural science are generally problematic for studying transformative behavioural change because such changes are rare, making it difficult to achieve the large sample sizes and repeated measurements typically required, and because these changes often involve unique, unpredictable, and deeply personal phenomena that cannot be adequately captured by standardized measurements or group averages. Although qualitative methods allow for more nuanced and richer insights, they also have various disadvantages, such as relying heavily on verbal articulations that may overlook implicit, embodied, or culturally ingrained aspects of transformative change, and often involving short-term data collection that fails to capture the temporal trajectories and broader structural influences shaping such changes.

Furthermore, transformative behavioural shifts often unfold through non-linear, iterative processes in which individuals may cycle between newfound motivations and returning to earlier mindsets or actions. These fluctuations are poorly captured by methods that prioritize stable measurements or group averages over extended observation. Even within qualitative designs, short-term interviews may miss critical turning points that arise months after an initial transformation begins. Researchers must also contend with the influence of evolving life circumstances (e.g., changing family obligations, social networks, or economic conditions) that can accelerate, decelerate, or redirect the path of transformative change. The focus on the individual can also occlude the relational nature of values and behaviours. Understanding the broader cultural conceptions of sociality and personhood, which vary from bounded individuals to more dividual and porous persons that extend across bodily boundaries and

non-human entities (Smith, 2012), are essential to understanding environmentally oriented transformative behavioural change. While the overall emphasis on the individual may be justified for the study of values and behavioural change in the global north, ethnographic approach produces an understanding of a person as part of their social world. Such complexities underscore the need for more immersive, flexible methodologies.

Leveraging anthropological approaches to overcome these challenges

Adopting methods from anthropology can help address the limitations of mainstream psychological methods identified in Table 1. The core methodology of anthropology is ethnography (Campbell and Lassiter, 2014; Galman, 2018; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019), which centres around participant observation (DeWalt and DeWalt, 2010; Spradley, 2016) and is supplemented by other methods (e.g., interviews, surveys). Participant observation involves immersion in the daily lives of research participants, sharing their activities, events and conversations, and asking questions in an informal way. It is best described as an apprenticeship, giving primacy to observation through sharing of experiences, over asking people to explicitly articulate their thoughts, beliefs, and feelings (Astuti and Bloch, 2015). Observations are repetitive and detailed over a sustained period of time. This allows researchers to capture implicit, embodied, and culturally ingrained aspects of behaviour that may be missed by other approaches. Ethnographic methodology prioritizes open-ended exploration over rigid hypothesis testing, enabling the discovery of unanticipated patterns and insights. Where fields such as cognitive anthropology have integrated controlled

methods of comparison and hypothesis testing (e.g., experiments, domain analysis techniques) into ethnographic fieldwork (Astuti and Bloch, 2012; Kajanus et al. 2019, 2020; Kajanus, 2019; Weisman et al. 2021; Sequeira et al. 2024), participant observation has maintained its explorative character.

Participant observation involves working with a small number of people and is not well-suited for achieving large, representative samples. Rather, its aim is to provide in-depth understanding of complex phenomena. This should not be taken to mean that ethnography has no value beyond producing idiosyncratic descriptive accounts. Another key feature of ethnographic approach is the contextualization of findings within broader cultural, social, and structural frameworks. This contextualisation of complex phenomena makes ethnography a powerful tool for understanding transformative behavioural change and the diverse factors involved. An ethnographer will learn about the specific political, economic, and environmental processes individual experiences are embedded in, analyse the social positioning of their research participants, and identify the cultural models available in their environment. Offering this holistic perspective can produce richer and more integrated insights than qualitative methods used in mainstream psychological and behavioural science.

Through long-term observations and thick description (Geertz, 1973), ethnographic approach can provide a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of complex phenomena linked to everyday human life and experiences. Thick description is produced by interpreting human behaviours in their cultural contexts, in contrast to thin description, which limits analysis to observable parts of behaviour. The classic example of thick description is the ability to interpret a wink (Geertz, 1973). The simple act of contracting eyelid muscles could be interpreted as a muscle spasm. But the contextual knowledge gained through ethnographic research, of cultural code for such gestures, the relationships between those present, hierarchies and display rules, etc., will enable a thick description of the act. The wink could be playful, a signal of conspiracy or flirtation, a parody of a wink, and so on. A thick description of a social event or action takes into account not only the immediate behaviours, but also the contextual and experiential understandings of those behaviours that render the event or action meaningful.

As emphasised in Table 1, anthropological methods can address the challenges that mainstream psychological methods face in studying transformative behavioural change because they provide a more flexible and immersive approach to understanding complex human experiences. By relying on participant observation and long-term engagement with participants in their everyday environments, these methods enable researchers to study rare phenomena like transformative behavioural change without needing large sample sizes or rigid measurement schedules. Anthropological approaches also prioritize trust-building and collaborative knowledge-production, allowing participants to share deeply personal and nuanced experiences that are essential for understanding the multifaceted nature of such changes. Additionally, these methods avoid reductionism by embracing a holistic perspective that brings together changing cultural, social, and structural contexts, ensuring that unique and extreme cases, often dismissed as outliers in mainstream psychological research, are given the attention they deserve. Participant observation also sheds light on how behavioural transformation is relationally embedded and shaped by cultural conceptions of personhood and the self, which may move the individual from the centre of the analysis where necessary. Finally, by fostering open-ended exploration rather than being constrained by pre-existing hypotheses, anthropological methods enable the discovery of new insights and patterns that might otherwise remain obscure.

How mainstream psychological and behavioural scientists can adopt anthropological methods to investigate transformative behavioural change

Integrating anthropological methods into mainstream psychological and behavioural science offers a unique opportunity to overcome the limitations of traditional psychological approaches in studying transformative behavioural change. To achieve this, psychological and behavioural researchers can start by adopting participant observation or shadowing (Quinlan, 2008; Trouille and Tavory, 2019) as complementary methods. Rather than relying solely on self-reported data or standardized surveys, researchers can immerse themselves in participants' environments to observe behaviours, interactions, and cultural practices directly. This approach allows for the capture of rich, contextualized data and provides insights into the situational and structural influences that shape transformative experiences. By embedding themselves in the participants' everyday lives, researchers can uncover implicit, embodied, and culturally ingrained dimensions of behaviour that are often inaccessible through standard psychological tools. The open-ended approach of ethnography can increase the possibility of discovering unexpected connections and patterns, which characterise transformative behavioural change.

Mainstream psychological and behavioural scientists can also incorporate long-term engagement into their research design. Unlike studies typically used in mainstream psychology, which are either short-term or involve only several contact points between researchers and participants within some longer period of time, the ethnographic method emphasizes sustained observation over weeks or months to capture the dynamic and unfolding nature of transformative change. It is not possible for most mainstream psychological and behavioural scientists to carry out standard anthropological fieldwork for a year or more, but participant observation can be used in a more targeted way, by focusing on key life transitions or cultural domains where transformative change is more likely to occur. In balancing time constraints with the aim of gaining rich and comprehensive contextual data, mainstream psychologists can draw insights from anthropologists who have carefully developed approaches to time-efficient ethnography in applied, medical, and community-based research contexts (Handwerker, 2001; Sangaramoorthy and Kroeger, 2020). Collaboration with anthropologists or training in ethnographic approaches can further enhance mainstream psychologists' ability to employ these methods effectively. By leveraging anthropological principles such as thick description, researchers can ensure that their findings account for broader contextual factors, including cultural frameworks, social dynamics, and structural forces, which are often neglected in mainstream psychological studies.

A practical way to integrate these methods could involve hybrid designs that combine the strengths of both disciplines. There are at least three broad ways of integrating ethnography in psychological research: (1) for initial exploration, to inform the design of standardised interviews and measures; (2) for interpretation and validation of findings and to explore emergent patterns; and (3) in an interactive loop between psychological and anthropological approaches, further elaborated below.

As transformative behavioural change is a rare and profound phenomenon, typical large-scale recruitment approaches common in mainstream psychology are a good starting point for more targeted samples. For example, researchers can recruit participants through universities or online research platforms, targeting individuals who have experienced, are currently experiencing, or are connected to someone who has undergone such changes. This broad outreach allows identification of potential participants for further study. Participant observation

Table 2 Strategies for integrating anthropological methods with mainstream psychological and behavioural science methods.			
Step	Psychological Methods	Anthropological Integration	Purpose
Participant Engagement.	Surveys and interviews to gather initial data.	Participant observation for contextual and nuanced data (e.g., spending time with participants in their natural settings to observe their routines, conversations, and social dynamics, providing insights that go beyond self-reported data).	To deepen understanding of lived experiences.
Data Collection.	Standardized measures to ensure reliability and validity.	Open-ended ethnographic fieldwork (e.g., observing participants' interactions in real-life settings, such as workplaces or community events, to capture unstructured and emergent behaviours).	To capture dynamic and contextual elements of transformation.
Analytical Approach.	Hypothesis-driven analysis using statistical methods.	Inductive analysis with thick description (e.g., detailed attention to cultural meanings and social dynamics, to generate themes and narratives from observed behaviours and participant reflections to uncover patterns not constrained by predefined categories).	To combine deductive and inductive insights.
Longitudinal Design.	Repeated measures at fixed intervals.	Continuous immersion over extended periods (e.g., maintaining regular contact with participants over months to observe gradual changes and the unfolding of transformative processes).	To track unfolding transformative processes.
Contextual Framing.	Controlling for demographic and cultural variables.	Detailed analysis of how these intersect in the life of the participant, combined with an exploration of broader influences (e.g., examining how societal norms, economic systems, or historical factors shape individual behaviours and transformations).	To provide a holistic understanding of change.

with the carefully identified sample can then provide a rich understanding of participants’ experiences, cultural frameworks, and social dynamics. Researchers can use this in-depth ethnographic understanding to conduct qualitative interviews to hone in on significant patterns emerging through participant observation. This interactive use of methods can provide a holistic understanding of transformative behavioural changes by leveraging mainstream psychology’s scalability and anthropology’s contextual richness.

Table 2, which summarizes integration strategies, could guide researchers in this process. By adopting these strategies, mainstream psychological and behavioural scientists can integrate anthropological methods into their research in a practical, scalable manner. This integration not only enriches the depth and contextual relevance of their findings but also positions their work to make meaningful contributions to understanding transformative behavioural change in a way that bridges disciplinary boundaries.

Conclusion and call to action

Building on the above, it is crucial to clarify who should implement these integrated approaches to advance the study of transformative behavioural change, and how. First, scholars operating in mainstream psychological and behavioural science could begin by incorporating short-term, targeted participant observation into existing research designs, especially in studies involving life transitions or major shifts in personal behaviour. Departments and funding agencies should encourage cross-disciplinary collaboration, enabling anthropologists to join mainstream psychology research teams. Over periods ranging from a few months to a year, systematic observation of participants’ lived contexts can produce rich data on transformative processes that might otherwise go unnoticed.

Second, university ethics boards and institutional review boards should adapt their guidelines to accommodate ethnographic immersion. Establishing trust with participants is vital for investigating deep, personal transformations; therefore, ethical protocols must allow flexible methods suited to open-ended field-based inquiry. Finally, journals and conferences could create special tracks for interdisciplinary studies that combine

anthropological and mainstream psychological methods, incentivizing collaborative efforts.

If researchers heed this call to action, the impact could be significant. Transformative behavioural changes lie at the heart of crucial global challenges, from climate change mitigation to the adoption of healthier lifestyles. Gaining a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of these shifts could accelerate the development of interventions that are socially and culturally grounded, thereby improving their effectiveness. Conversely, if disciplinary silos persist, our grasp of how individuals truly undergo profound change will remain incomplete, limiting society’s ability to drive collective progress. By embracing an interdisciplinary framework, the stage is set for developing powerful, context-sensitive strategies to foster transformative change at individual and community levels.

Data availability

No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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D.K. was responsible for conceptualization (lead), investigation (lead), visualization (lead), writing of the original draft (lead) and writing review and editing (lead). F.C. was responsible for conceptualization (lead), investigation (lead), visualization (lead), writing of the original draft (lead) and writing review and editing (lead). A.K. was responsible for conceptualization (lead), investigation (lead), visualization (lead), writing of the original draft (lead) and writing review and editing (lead).

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The authors declare no competing interests.

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This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

Informed consent

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This article was conceptualized, researched, and written by the authors. An AI tool (ChatGPT) was used to check language and evaluate phrasing. The AI tool did not contribute any ideas or content related to the scientific arguments presented. All perspectives, arguments, and conclusions are the authors' own.

Additional information

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