



From micro to macro

Behavioural science is starting to tackle the big macro challenges as well as micro ones. In the early years, behavioural scientists looked for quick wins for proof of concept. For instance, the UK's Behavioural Insights Team was set up with a two-year sunset clause, which required them to achieve at least a tenfold rate of return on the cost of the team. In reality, it achieved more than £300m of gains by focusing on small, inexpensive changes that had significant impacts on decision-making and behaviour.

Part of what growing up is about, however, is realising that the power we have unlocked can also tackle bigger challenges, even the looming existential problems facing us. With the permacrisis intensifying, behavioural science is becoming an essential tool in any major organisation of the future – be it governments, global corporations or social activism – to help solve some of the biggest challenges of our generation. Several applied behavioural scientists, including Dan Ariely and Kelly Peters, have recently stepped up to face these challenges. Ariely wrote in his blog in December 2022: “I still think that social science has a large role to play in improving our personal lives, but I think that other important topics have emerged and many of these are more pressing. When I look at the world now, with the climate crisis, fake news and political fragmentation, my view is that our priorities should be different, and so is the role of social science.

“Over the past two decades or so, we have done a lot to get people to think about principles from social science in terms of our personal lives, and we now need to turn our attention to these larger challenges ahead of us.”

Peters sold her consultancy, BEworks, to the Kyu Collective and has founded Trial Run, a product-innovation company to harness the power of behavioural science, with blockchain technologies to help companies drive their sustainability goals.

How to live in these adult years

- Appreciate and celebrate the breadth of behavioural science in its applicability to both the micro and the macro challenges we face; the small tweaks that make a frustrating consumer journey a satisfying one, to tackling the critical issues that people are facing today, such as complex health problems, living more sustainably, and, right now, coping with the cost-of-living crisis.
- Thoroughly research the context to understand what's driving current behaviour, recognising the roles of culture and emotion.
- There is no one size fits all. Look for, anticipate and enjoy variation in the impact of a behavioural intervention, then dig deeper and try to understand that variation.

¹ Bryan, C J, Tipton, E & Yeager, D S, ‘Behavioural science is unlikely to change the world without a heterogeneity revolution’, *Nat Hum Behav* 5, 980–989 (2021).