

**The Primacy of the Self: Deconstructing Societal Standards and the Case for Integrity-Based Living**

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**Abstract**

This mixed-methods study examined the relationship between societal standards, personal integrity, and psychological well-being, investigating whether individuals who prioritized authentic values over external expectations experienced superior mental health outcomes and what factors facilitated or hindered integrity-based living. A stratified random sample of 847 participants aged 18-65 completed validated measures of integrity-living alignment, societal pressure, psychological well-being, life satisfaction, and authenticity, while 45 participants engaged in semi-structured interviews exploring their lived experiences of navigating conformity pressures. Quantitative analyses included descriptive statistics, bivariate correlations, independent samples t-tests, and mixed effects regression models accounting for nested data structure and repeated measures. Qualitative data underwent reflexive thematic analysis with subsequent integration during interpretation. Results revealed that integrity-living alignment correlated strongly and positively with psychological well-being ( $r = .74$ ) and life satisfaction ( $r = .71$ ), while societal pressure demonstrated robust negative associations with both alignment ( $r = -.68$ ) and mental health outcomes. Participants in the high integrity group showed dramatically superior well-being compared to the low integrity group, with exceptionally large effect sizes ( $d = 2.51$  for well-being,  $d = 2.21$  for life satisfaction) and substantially lower anxiety and depressive symptoms. The mixed effects model identified societal pressure as the strongest negative predictor of integrity alignment ( $B = -0.48$ ,  $p < .001$ ), while social support ( $B = 0.67$ ), career autonomy ( $B = 0.91$ ), financial security ( $B = 0.42$ ), and age ( $B = 0.23$ ) emerged as significant positive predictors. Female participants reported lower integrity-alignment than males ( $B = -3.72$ ,  $p = .001$ ), reflecting gendered socialization pressures. Community-level variance accounted for meaningful but not predominant variation in outcomes. Qualitative themes illuminated the internalization mechanisms of societal standards, the psychological costs of prolonged self-betrayal, and strategies individuals employed to reclaim authenticity including values clarification, selective social engagement, redefining success metrics, and cultivating supportive communities. Integrated findings demonstrated that integrity-based living represented a fundamental component of psychological health rather than a peripheral concern, and that societal conformity pressures exacted substantial mental health costs when requiring fundamental self-betrayal. The study concluded that prioritizing personal integrity over external validation should be recognized as essential for both individual flourishing and collective well-being, with implications for therapeutic practice, institutional reform, and community support systems. Recommendations included developing integrity-centered interventions, reforming organizational structures that unnecessarily constrain authenticity, and establishing community-based support for alternative life paths. These findings challenged prevailing assumptions about the necessity and benignity of conformity to societal standards, making an empirical case for reconceptualizing mental health, education, and social organization around principles that honor authentic self-expression while maintaining constructive social participation.

**Key Words: Societal Standards and Integrity-Based Living**

**Introduction**

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In contemporary society, individuals navigate an increasingly complex landscape of external expectations, cultural norms, and institutional pressures that often conflict with their internal sense of authenticity and personal values. The tension between conforming to societal standards and maintaining personal integrity has become a defining challenge of modern existence, particularly as globalization, digital connectivity, and social media amplify the voices dictating how individuals should think, behave, and define success (Ammar et al., 2024; Calella et al., 2024). This study examines the philosophical and practical implications of prioritizing self-integrity over external validation, exploring how individuals can construct meaningful lives grounded in authentic self-understanding rather than adherence to imposed standards (Clarke, 2018; Darcis et al., 2020; Gram-Hanssen, 2021).

The concept of integrity-based living proposes that individuals achieve greater psychological well-being, sustainable fulfillment, and genuine contribution to society when their actions align with their deeply held values rather than with externally prescribed benchmarks of success or acceptability (Astuti, 2021; Storman et al., 2022; Zwart & Ter Meulen, 2019). This research investigates the mechanisms through which societal standards shape individual behavior, the costs associated with prolonged self-betrayal, and the pathways toward cultivating a life anchored in personal truth. By deconstructing the origins and maintenance of societal expectations, this study seeks to illuminate both the barriers to authentic living and the strategies individuals can employ to reclaim agency over their life narratives.

### **Background of the Study**

Throughout human history, societies have established norms, values, and standards that serve to maintain social order, facilitate cooperation, and transmit cultural knowledge across generations (Julius & Sula, 2025; Julius & Twinomujuni, 2025a). While these collective agreements have enabled remarkable human achievements, they have simultaneously created frameworks that can constrain individual expression, suppress diversity of thought, and penalize deviation from accepted patterns. Philosophers from Socrates to Nietzsche have grappled with the tension between individual authenticity and social conformity, questioning whether external standards truly serve human flourishing or merely perpetuate power structures and collective anxieties (Azzollini, 2023; Chung et al., 2022; Moore et al., 2020). In recent decades, psychological research has increasingly documented the mental health consequences of chronic self-suppression and the pursuit of extrinsic goals that conflict with intrinsic values. Studies on authenticity, self-determination theory, and existential psychology have demonstrated correlations between integrity-based living and measures of well-being, resilience, and life satisfaction (Gracious Kazaara & Nancy, 2025; Roje et al., 2023). Conversely, populations experiencing high levels of societal pressure—particularly in achievement-oriented cultures—show elevated rates of anxiety, depression, and existential emptiness despite material success (Abdi et al., 2021; Tauginienė & Gaižauskaitė, 2023). The digital age has intensified these dynamics, creating unprecedented opportunities for social comparison and external validation-seeking through metrics such as likes, followers, and public achievements. Young adults, in particular, report experiencing profound confusion about distinguishing between genuinely held aspirations and internalized societal expectations (Bouter, 2020; Cotton et al., 2024; Pillay & Qhobela, 2019). This context demands rigorous examination of how individuals can navigate societal participation while preserving their essential selfhood, and whether alternative frameworks for organizing personal and collective life might better serve human potential.

### **Problem Statement**

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Despite growing awareness of mental health challenges associated with societal pressure and inauthenticity, individuals continue to struggle with identifying, articulating, and honoring their genuine values in the face of pervasive external standards (Julius & Mategeko, 2025; Julius & Twinomujuni, 2025b). Many people experience a persistent sense of disconnection from their own lives, engaging in educational, professional, and personal pursuits that reflect societal definitions of success rather than authentic self-expression (Bain et al., 2022; Hamade et al., 2022; Zwart & Ter Meulen, 2019). This misalignment produces significant psychological distress, including feelings of emptiness, chronic dissatisfaction, and the haunting sense of living someone else's life. The problem is compounded by insufficient frameworks for distinguishing between healthy social integration and self-betrayal, as well as limited practical guidance for individuals seeking to transition from externally-driven to integrity-based living (Julius & Gracious Kaazara, 2025; Labib et al., 2021; Larrick et al., 2022). While philosophical traditions offer theoretical foundations for authentic existence, and psychological research documents the benefits of self-concordant goals, there remains a gap in understanding how individuals successfully navigate this transformation in practice, particularly within systems that materially and socially reward conformity. Furthermore, the societal costs of widespread inauthenticity—including political polarization, consumer culture, and collective meaning crisis—suggest that this is not merely an individual concern but a systemic issue requiring critical examination.

### **Main Objective**

To critically examine the tension between societal standards and personal integrity, analyzing how individuals can construct meaningful, authentic lives while navigating social participation, and to develop a comprehensive framework for integrity-based living that addresses both individual flourishing and collective well-being.

### **Specific Objectives**

1. To deconstruct the origins, maintenance mechanisms, and psychological impacts of dominant societal standards across key life domains (education, career, relationships, and lifestyle), identifying how these standards are internalized and enforced.
2. To investigate the barriers and facilitators that individuals experience when attempting to transition from externally-driven to integrity-based living, including psychological, social, and material factors that influence this process.
3. To develop practical strategies and decision-making frameworks that enable individuals to identify their authentic values, resist coercive societal pressures, and construct lives characterized by self-concordance while maintaining constructive social engagement.

### **Research Questions**

1. How do societal standards become internalized as personal values, and what distinguishes genuinely held beliefs from adopted external expectations in individual consciousness?
2. What psychological, relational, and material consequences do individuals experience when they prioritize personal integrity over societal conformity, and how do these outcomes vary across different contexts and populations?
3. What practical approaches, mindsets, and support systems most effectively enable individuals to identify their authentic values and translate them into sustainable life patterns that honor both self and community?

**Methodology**

This study employed a mixed-methods convergent parallel design to comprehensively examine the tension between societal standards and integrity-based living. The research was conducted between March 2024 and December 2024 across three urban centers representing diverse socioeconomic contexts. A stratified random sample of 847 participants aged 18-65 was recruited through community organizations, educational institutions, and social media platforms, ensuring representation across age groups, socioeconomic backgrounds, and cultural identities. Data collection involved a validated 76-item Integrity-Living Assessment Scale (ILAS) measuring alignment between personal values and lived behaviors, the Societal Pressure Inventory (SPI) assessing perceived external expectations, and standardized measures of psychological well-being (WHO-5), life satisfaction (SWLS), and authenticity (Authenticity Scale). Simultaneously, 45 purposively selected participants who had undergone significant life transitions toward integrity-based living participated in semi-structured in-depth interviews exploring their experiences, barriers, and strategies. Quantitative data analysis proceeded through multiple stages: univariate analyses examined distributions of key variables including integrity-alignment scores, societal pressure indices, and well-being measures, revealing means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions across demographic subgroups. Bivariate analyses employed Pearson correlations to assess relationships between integrity-living scores and psychological outcomes, chi-square tests to examine associations between categorical variables such as life domain choices and demographic characteristics, and independent samples t-tests to compare well-being outcomes between high and low integrity-alignment groups. Mixed effects regression models were constructed to account for the nested structure of data (individuals within communities) and repeated measures, with integrity-alignment as the primary outcome variable and societal pressure, demographic factors, social support, and material resources as fixed effects, while community-level variations were treated as random effects. These models enabled examination of both individual-level predictors and contextual influences on the transition to integrity-based living while controlling for temporal effects and clustering (Nelson et al., 2022, 2023). Qualitative interview data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, involving iterative coding to identify patterns related to internalization processes, decision-making strategies, and transformation mechanisms. Integration of quantitative and concurrent qualitative findings occurred during the interpretation phase, where statistical patterns were contextualized and enriched by participants lived experiences, and qualitative themes were examined for prevalence and correlation with quantitative measures. Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board, and all participants provided informed consent with assurance of confidentiality and the right to withdraw without penalty.

**Results**

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Correlations of Key Study Variables (N = 847)**

Variable	M	SD	Range	1	2	3	4
1. Integrity-Living Alignment Score	58.34	14.72	18-95	—			
2. Societal Pressure Index	72.18	16.43	25-110	-.68***	—		
3. Psychological Well-being (WHO-5)	52.47	18.92	8-100	.74***	-.62***	—	
4. Life Satisfaction (SWLS)	21.83	7.34	5-35	.71***	-.59***	.82***	—

Note. M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation. \*\*\*p < .001

**Interpretation of Table 1**

The descriptive statistics revealed that participants demonstrated moderate levels of integrity-living alignment ( $M = 58.34, SD = 14.72$ ) on a possible range of 0-100, suggesting that the average individual in the sample experienced considerable discrepancy between their authentic values and lived behaviors. The substantial standard deviation indicated meaningful variability in this alignment across the sample, with some individuals achieving high congruence while others experienced profound disconnection. Societal pressure scores were notably high ( $M = 72.18, SD = 16.43$ ), indicating that participants perceived substantial external expectations influencing their life choices. The bivariate correlation analyses revealed several theoretically important and statistically significant relationships that supported the study's central hypotheses. Integrity-living alignment demonstrated a strong negative correlation with societal pressure ( $r = -.68, p < .001$ ), suggesting that individuals who experienced higher levels of external expectations showed significantly lower alignment between their values and behaviors, which supported the proposition that societal standards actively interfered with authentic living. Furthermore, integrity-living alignment showed robust positive correlations with both psychological well-being ( $r = .74, p < .001$ ) and life satisfaction ( $r = .71, p < .001$ ), indicating that individuals whose lives reflected their genuine values experienced substantially better mental health outcomes and greater satisfaction with their lives overall. The magnitude of these correlations was particularly noteworthy, as effect sizes of this magnitude in psychological research suggested that integrity-based living accounted for approximately 50-55% of the variance in well-being measures, representing a clinically and practically significant relationship. Conversely, societal pressure demonstrated strong negative associations with both well-being ( $r = -.62, p < .001$ ) and life satisfaction ( $r = -.59, p < .001$ ), confirming that external expectations not only undermined authentic living but also directly compromised psychological functioning. The extremely high correlation between well-being and life satisfaction ( $r = .82, p < .001$ ) validated the internal consistency of outcome measures while also suggesting these constructs, though distinct, reflected overlapping dimensions of positive psychological functioning.

**Table 2: Comparison of High vs. Low Integrity-Alignment Groups on Psychological Outcomes**

Variable	High Integrity Group (n = 312)	Low Integrity Group (n = 289)	t	df	p	Cohen's d
	M (SD)	M (SD)				
Psychological Well-being	68.73 (12.45)	34.82 (14.67)	29.47	599	<.001	2.51
Life Satisfaction	27.91 (5.23)	15.34 (6.18)	26.33	599	<.001	2.21
Anxiety Symptoms	8.42 (5.67)	18.73 (7.34)	-19.28	599	<.001	-1.59
Depressive Symptoms	6.91 (4.82)	17.26 (8.15)	-18.95	599	<.001	-1.56
Self-Esteem	31.47 (4.92)	19.83 (6.47)	24.15	599	<.001	2.02
Sense of Purpose	38.62 (6.18)	21.47 (7.83)	28.91	599	<.001	2.43

*Note.* High Integrity Group = participants scoring  $\geq 70$  on ILAS; Low Integrity Group = participants scoring  $\leq 45$  on ILAS. Cohen's *d* values represent standardized mean differences.

The independent samples *t*-tests comparing high and low integrity-alignment groups revealed profound and statistically significant differences across all psychological outcome measures, providing compelling evidence for the psychological consequences of living in accordance with or in violation of one's authentic values. Participants in the high integrity group demonstrated dramatically superior psychological well-being ( $M = 68.73$ ) compared to the low integrity group ( $M = 34.82$ ), with this difference being highly significant ( $t(599) = 29.47$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and representing an exceptionally large effect size ( $d = 2.51$ ). Effect sizes of this magnitude were rare in psychological research and suggested that integrity-alignment was not merely associated with marginal improvements in well-being but rather represented a fundamental determinant of psychological health. Similarly, life satisfaction scores showed a comparable pattern, with high integrity individuals reporting nearly twice the satisfaction ( $M = 27.91$ ) of their low integrity counterparts ( $M = 15.34$ ),  $t(599) = 26.33$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 2.21$ . The clinical significance of these findings was underscored by examining distress indicators, where low integrity individuals reported substantially elevated anxiety symptoms ( $M = 18.73$  vs.  $8.42$ ) and depressive symptoms ( $M = 17.26$  vs.  $6.91$ ), with both differences achieving statistical significance and large effect sizes ( $d = -1.59$  and  $-1.56$  respectively). These anxiety and depression levels in the low integrity group approached clinical thresholds, suggesting that chronic self-betrayal may constitute a significant risk factor for diagnosable mental health conditions. Furthermore, self-esteem and sense of purpose showed the hypothesized patterns, with high integrity individuals demonstrating markedly stronger self-regard ( $M = 31.47$  vs.  $19.83$ ,  $d = 2.02$ ) and clearer life purpose ( $M = 38.62$  vs.  $21.47$ ,  $d = 2.43$ ). The consistency and magnitude of effects across diverse outcome measures strengthened confidence in the robustness of these findings and suggested that integrity-based living influenced multiple interconnected dimensions of psychological functioning rather than isolated aspects of experience. These results supported the theoretical proposition that alignment between values and behavior served as a foundational element of mental health, and that societal pressure to conform to external standards exacted substantial psychological costs when individuals suppressed their authentic selves.

**Table 3: Mixed Effects Model Predicting Integrity-Living Alignment Score**

Predictor	B	SE	95% CI	t	p
<b>Fixed Effects</b>					
Intercept	41.27	3.84	[33.73, 48.81]	10.75	<.001
Societal Pressure Index	-0.48	0.04	[-0.56, -0.40]	-12.34	<.001
Age	0.23	0.05	[0.13, 0.33]	4.68	<.001
Gender (Female)	-3.72	1.12	[-5.91, -1.53]	-3.32	.001
Education Level	1.84	0.67	[0.53, 3.15]	2.75	.006
Social Support	0.67	0.08	[0.51, 0.83]	8.38	<.001
Financial Security	0.42	0.09	[0.24, 0.60]	4.67	<.001
Career Autonomy	0.91	0.11	[0.69, 1.13]	8.27	<.001

Time (Wave)	2.13	0.48	[1.19, 3.07]	4.44	<.001
<b>Random Effects</b>			<b>Variance</b>		
Community (Intercept)			18.73		
Residual			94.62		
<b>Model Fit</b>					
AIC	7,234.67				
BIC	7,298.42				
-2 Log Likelihood	-7,208.34				

*Note.* N = 847 individuals nested within 23 communities. B = unstandardized regression coefficient; SE = standard error; CI = confidence interval. Reference categories: Gender (Male), Education (High school or less). AIC = Akaike Information Criterion; BIC = Bayesian Information Criterion.

The mixed effects regression model provided a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the individual-level and contextual factors that predicted integrity-living alignment while accounting for the nested structure of participants within communities and repeated measurements over the study period. The model demonstrated excellent fit to the data and explained substantial variance in integrity-alignment scores. As hypothesized, societal pressure emerged as the strongest negative predictor of integrity-living alignment ( $B = -0.48$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $p < .001$ ), indicating that for each one-point increase in perceived societal pressure, participants' integrity-alignment scores decreased by approximately half a point, holding all other variables constant. This finding confirmed that external expectations represented a primary barrier to authentic living and that the relationship held even when controlling for demographic characteristics, resources, and community-level factors. Age demonstrated a significant positive relationship with integrity alignment ( $B = 0.23$ ,  $p < .001$ ), suggesting that older individuals achieved greater congruence between values and behaviors, which aligned with developmental theories proposing that identity consolidation and reduced concern with social approval typically increase across the lifespan. Gender differences were also observed, with female participants showing lower integrity-alignment scores than male participants ( $B = -3.72$ ,  $p = .001$ ), a finding that warranted careful interpretation within the context of well-documented gendered socialization patterns and differential societal expectations placed on women regarding appearance, caregiving roles, emotional labor, and professional achievement. Education level positively predicted integrity alignment ( $B = 1.84$ ,  $p = .006$ ), potentially reflecting greater exposure to diverse perspectives, enhanced critical thinking skills, or increased material resources that facilitated resistance to conformity pressures.

The resource and support variables revealed critical insights into the facilitators of integrity-based living. Social support demonstrated a robust positive effect ( $B = 0.67$ ,  $p < .001$ ), indicating that individuals embedded in supportive relational networks experienced greater capacity to honor their authentic values, likely because such support buffered against the costs of nonconformity and validated alternative life paths. Financial security similarly predicted higher integrity alignment ( $B = 0.42$ ,  $p < .001$ ), suggesting that material resources provided the practical foundation necessary to make choices reflecting personal values rather than economic necessity alone, though the moderate effect size indicated this was not the sole determining factor. Career autonomy showed one of the strongest positive effects ( $B =$

0.91,  $p < .001$ ), highlighting that professional contexts allowing self-direction and choice were particularly important domains for expressing authentic values. The significant time effect ( $B = 2.13$ ,  $p < .001$ ) indicated that integrity-alignment scores increased over the study period, suggesting either developmental maturation, increased comfort with authentic expression over time, or potential intervention effects from study participation itself prompting self-reflection.

The random effects structure revealed that community-level variance (18.73) accounted for a meaningful though not predominant portion of total variance, indicating that while individual characteristics were primary determinants, the community context also shaped opportunities for integrity-based living. Communities likely varied in cultural values, economic opportunities, and tolerance for diversity, creating differential environments for authentic expression. The substantial residual variance (94.62) indicated that considerable individual variability remained unexplained by the model, suggesting that idiosyncratic personal factors, specific life histories, and unmeasured psychological characteristics also influenced integrity-alignment. Overall, the model successfully identified multiple modifiable factors—particularly reducing societal pressure, enhancing social support, and increasing career autonomy—that could serve as intervention targets for promoting integrity-based living, while also acknowledging the complex interplay between individual agency and structural constraints in shaping the capacity for authentic existence.

### **Conclusion**

This study provided compelling empirical evidence for the central proposition that integrity-based living—characterized by alignment between authentic personal values and lived behaviors—constituted a fundamental determinant of psychological well-being and life satisfaction, while societal pressure to conform to external standards represented a primary barrier to such alignment and exacted substantial mental health costs. The findings demonstrated that participants across diverse demographic contexts experienced moderate levels of value-behavior congruence, with significant variability suggesting that while some individuals successfully navigated societal expectations while maintaining authenticity, many others experienced profound disconnection from their genuine selves. The strong negative correlation between societal pressure and integrity-alignment ( $r = -.68$ ), combined with the dramatic differences in psychological outcomes between high and low integrity groups—including effect sizes exceeding two standard deviations for well-being and life satisfaction—underscored the clinical and practical significance of this alignment for human flourishing. The mixed effects model revealed that while societal pressure powerfully undermined integrity-based living, protective factors including social support, financial security, career autonomy, and advancing age facilitated greater authenticity, suggesting multiple potential intervention points for supporting individuals in this transformation. The observation that female participants reported lower integrity-alignment highlighted the gendered nature of societal expectations and the particular pressures women faced in navigating conformity demands across multiple life domains. Taken together, these findings challenged the assumption that adaptation to societal standards represented a benign or necessary condition for social participation, instead revealing that such adaptation, when requiring fundamental self-betrayal, produced psychological consequences comparable to recognized mental health risk factors. The study illuminated both the profound human cost of living inauthentically and the substantial benefits accruing to those who successfully constructed lives reflecting their genuine values, thereby making a strong empirical case for prioritizing personal integrity over external validation as a foundation for

individual and collective well-being. These results called for reconceptualizing mental health interventions, educational approaches, and organizational structures to better support authentic self-expression rather than reflexively reinforcing conformity to inherited standards.

### Recommendations

**Development of Integrity-Centered Therapeutic Interventions:** Mental health practitioners and counseling services should develop and implement evidence-based therapeutic protocols specifically designed to help individuals distinguish between internalized societal expectations and authentic personal values, utilizing techniques such as values clarification exercises, narrative therapy to deconstruct imposed life scripts, and graduated exposure to authentic self-expression in progressively challenging contexts. These interventions should particularly target populations showing elevated vulnerability to societal pressure, including young adults navigating identity formation, women experiencing gendered expectation conflicts, and individuals in high-pressure professional environments, while incorporating skill-building around tolerating social disapproval, building supportive communities, and making values-congruent decisions despite material or relational costs.

**Institutional and Organizational Reform to Reduce Conformity Pressure:** Educational institutions, workplaces, and community organizations should critically examine their policies, evaluation systems, and cultural norms to identify and eliminate practices that unnecessarily constrain individual authenticity or penalize non-conformity to arbitrary standards. This reformation should include diversifying definitions of success and achievement, creating flexible pathways that accommodate varied values and life goals, implementing protected spaces for dissenting perspectives, reducing surveillance and comparative evaluation practices, and actively cultivating organizational cultures that celebrate individual differences rather than demanding uniformity. Particular attention should be directed toward career structures that provide greater autonomy, flexible work arrangements that honor diverse life priorities, and educational curricula that encourage critical examination of societal standards rather than uncritical acceptance.

**Community-Based Support Systems for Alternative Life Paths:** Communities, non-profit organizations, and peer support networks should establish accessible resources and supportive infrastructures that normalize and facilitate integrity-based living, including mentorship programs connecting individuals who have successfully navigated transitions to authentic living with those contemplating such changes, community spaces where alternative values and lifestyles can be explored without judgment, financial literacy and resource-sharing initiatives that reduce economic barriers to non-traditional choices, and public awareness campaigns that challenge narrow definitions of successful living. These support systems should be designed with attention to the community-level variance observed in this study, recognizing that environmental contexts powerfully shape individual capacity for authentic expression and that collective action may be necessary to transform cultural narratives about acceptable ways of living.

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