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The Enigma of Being Yourself:
A Critical Examination of the Concept of Authenticity

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Abstract

As the term is typically used, authenticity refers to the degree to which a particular behavior is congruent with a person's attitudes, beliefs, values, motives, and other dispositions. However, researchers disagree regarding the best way to conceptualize and measure authenticity, whether being authentic is always desirable, why people are motivated to be authentic, and the nature of the relationship between authenticity and psychological well-being. In this article, we examine existing views of authenticity, identify questionable assumptions about the concept of authenticity, and discuss issues regarding subjective feelings of inauthenticity, the implications of authenticity for psychological and social well-being, and the importance that people place on being authentic.

The Enigma of Being Yourself:

A Critical Examination of the Concept of Authenticity

At least since the time of ancient Greece, a broad variety of philosophers, theologians, psychologists, and other writers have advocated that people should live congruently with who they are and what they are like, as reflected in adages such as “to thine own self be true,” “dare to be yourself,” and “march to the beat of your own drummer.” For example, Aristotle argued that the highest good is attained when people behave in ways that reflect one’s true calling (Hutchinson, 1995), and Kierkegaard (1941) wrote about the moral imperative of “becoming that self which one truly is” (p. 29). Being authentic is highly valued by lay people as well. Children are taught that they should “be themselves,” and adults often strive to live congruently with their values. Popular culture has also advocated that people “be real,” and self-help gurus peddle the importance of authenticity for well-being and success (e.g., Maraboli, 2009; McGraw, 2005; Winfrey, 2015; Winget, 2008). Authenticity even became an issue during the Presidential election of 2016 as many voters reported that they preferred Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton because Trump seemed more authentic (Pillow, Crabtree, Galvan, & Hale, 2017; Sargent, 2015).

Within psychology, the study of authenticity was popularized by the humanistic psychology movement during the 1950s and 1960s (Maslow, 1968; Rogers, 1959, 1961). However, with the exception of work coming from the self-determination perspective (e.g., Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne, & Ilardi, 1997), it attracted little research attention until interest in the positive aspects of human behavior brought renewed attention to the concept within the past 20 years (Harter, 2002; Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Yet, despite the amount of attention that has been devoted to the topic, authenticity remains a problematic construct. Behavioral researchers disagree about the best way to

conceptualize and measure authenticity, whether behaving authentically is always desirable, and the implications of authenticity for psychological well-being. Furthermore, many common assumptions about authenticity appear, on close inspection, to be questionable, undermining the usefulness of the concept, and uncritical acceptance of prevailing views of authenticity have had undesirable implications for theory, measurement, and research. Our goal in this article is to provide a critical examination of authenticity by summarizing common approaches to authenticity, identifying problems with those conceptualizations, and suggesting solutions.

Conceptualizations of Authenticity

Psychologists and other behavioral researchers have used the word “authenticity” to refer to several related, yet distinct concepts. Some such conceptualizations are explicit and precise, but others can be gleaned only by examining the ways in which authenticity has been operationalized in particular studies. Looking at the field as a whole, existing approaches to authenticity fall into four broad categories.

Self-Congruence

Most conceptualizations define authenticity as behaving congruently with who one “really” is or what one is “really” like. However, various approaches conceptualize and operationalize self-congruence in different ways.

Congruence with the “true self.” Many researchers and theorists have defined authenticity as behaving congruently with one’s “true self.” Although the concept of a true self is fuzzy at best, researchers and theorists generally seem to mean a person’s “actual physiological states, emotions, and beliefs” (Wood, Linley, Maltby, Baliousis, & Joseph, 2008, p. 386). Researchers who view authenticity as congruence with the true self typically assess it with items such as “I was my true self during the last 20 minutes” (Fleeson & Wilt, 2010) and “I find it easy

to pretend to be something other than my true-self” (reverse-scored; Kernis & Goldman, 2006). Along the same lines, Harter, Marold, Whitesell, and Cobbs (1996) conceptualized authenticity as “acting in ways that are not the real me or my true self” (p. 360), and Schlegel, Hicks, Arndt, and King (2009) examined the cognitive accessibility of people’s true self as a correlate of self-reported authenticity.

Congruence with beliefs, attitudes, or values. Authenticity has also been viewed as behavior that is congruent with one’s beliefs, attitudes, and values (e.g., Erickson, 1995). Items that assess this approach to self-congruence include “I try to act in a manner that is consistent with my personally held values, even if others criticize or reject me for doing so” and “I am willing to ensure negative consequences by expressing my true beliefs about things” (Kernis & Goldman, 2006). Similarly, the Authenticity Scale includes items such as “I always stand by what I believe in” and “I am strongly influenced by the opinions of others” (reverse-scored; (Wood et al., 2008).

Integrity has sometimes been defined as acting in accordance with one’s personal values or morals (Alliger, Lilienfeld, & Mitchell, 1996; Woolley & Hakstian, 1992) and, thus, can be viewed as a manifestation of authenticity. However, like authenticity, integrity has been inconsistently defined and operationalized (Rieke & Guastello, 1995), and we are not convinced that they are the same. Although people high in integrity are often authentic in following their values, people who are low in integrity may or may not be inauthentic—people who behave congruently with immoral or antisocial values would be authentic but low in integrity.

Cross-situational and cross-role consistency. Other researchers have measured self-congruence indirectly by assessing the degree to which people’s behavior varies across situations or social roles. For example, Sheldon et al. (1997) assumed that people who scored similarly on

the Big Five personality traits across multiple roles were more authentic than people who displayed greater cross-role variability in these traits. In addition, behavioral consistency across situations and roles is associated with people's perceptions of their own authenticity (Boucher, 2011; Cross, Gore, & Morris, 2003; English & Chen, 2011). Although researchers typically do not justify their use of behavioral consistency as a proxy for authenticity explicitly, it seems to be based on the assumption that people who act congruently with how they really are necessarily demonstrate greater consistency across situations and roles, but we will dispute this characterization later in the paper.

Person-centered Approach

Based on clinical observations, Rogers (1959, 1961) concluded that his clients progressed in therapy when they responded authentically, distancing themselves from societal expectations, relinquishing externally motivated goals, and revealing their true selves to close others. Along the same lines, Maslow (1971) suggested that, to be authentic, people must discover their true identity, allow their behavior to be a true and spontaneous expression of their feelings, and live in a way that expresses their actual characteristics and desires.

In a more recent incarnation of the person-centered approach, Barrett-Lennard (1998) suggested that authenticity involves congruence among three components of psychological functioning: internal experience, awareness of experience, and external behavior. The more that people are aware of their inner experiences and then behave in ways that are congruent with those experiences, the more authentic they are. Like Rogers (1959), Barrett-Lennard argued that people are authentic when their internal experience and behavior are free of outside influences and other people's expectations.

Intrinsically-motivated Behavior

According to self-determination theory, human beings inherently value acting congruently with their intrinsic motives but differ in the degree to which they actually do so (Ryan, 1995; Ryan & Deci, 2004). The theory maintains that the most autonomous or authentic source of motivation is intrinsic motivation—a desire to engage in behaviors because they are inherently enjoyable or interesting (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Thus, people are most authentic when they are intrinsically motivated.

Intrinsic motivation is contrasted with four types of extrinsic motivation. The most extrinsic type of motivation, *externally regulated behavior*, is performed solely because of external incentives or pressure. The second type is *introjected regulation of behavior*, which is enacted to protect one's ego and avoid negative emotions without the behavior being internalized as part of one's self-concept. The third type, *regulation through identification*, involves consciously placing personal importance on a goal even though the reasons for pursuing it are external. Finally, *integrated regulation* occurs when a goal is completely integrated with one's self-concept but is not intrinsically enjoyable or interesting (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

From the self-determination perspective, authenticity can be assessed by determining the degree to which people chose to behave in a particular way for intrinsic reasons rather than because of external pressures. For example, to assess authenticity, Sheldon et al. (1997) asked participants to rate how freely they had chosen to behave in particular ways (e.g., “I have freely chosen this way of being”).

Subjective Feelings of Authenticity

Researchers sometimes conceptualize authenticity experientially, focusing on people's subjective *feelings* of self-congruence or authenticity (Kraus, Chen, & Keltner, 2011; Heppner et al., 2008; Lenton, Bruder, Slabu, & Sedikides, 2013; Lenton, Slabu, Bruder, & Sedikides, 2014;

Sheldon et al., 1997; Slabu, Lenton, Sedikides, & Bruder, 2014). For example, Lenton, Bruder et al., (2013) asked participants to rate their feelings of authenticity, telling them that “According to psychologists, the sense of authenticity is defined as ‘the sense or feeling that you are in alignment with your true, genuine self.’” Other studies have asked participants to describe a past event during which they felt most like their true or real self (Lenton et al., 2014; Sheldon et al., 1997) or used items such as “I feel like it is easy to express my true attitudes and feelings during interactions with others” and “I feel like I’m artificial in my interactions with others” (reverse-coded; Kraus et al., 2011). Similarly, research on authenticity at work has asked participants to indicate how often they feel that they are and are not being themselves while at work (Erickson & Wharton, 1997; Vannini, 2006).

Feelings of authenticity and inauthenticity are an interesting and potentially important phenomenon in their own right (Slabu et al., 2014), but such feelings do not necessarily reflect how authentic people actually are. As we will discuss, people often do not know what they are like or why they do what they do (Bargh, Gollwitzer, Lee-Chai, Barndollar, & Trötschel, 2001; Nisbett & Wilson, 1977; Wegner, 2003; Wilson, 2002; Wilson & Dunn, 2004) and, thus, their feelings of authenticity and inauthenticity do not necessarily reflect actual self-congruence. Furthermore, people tend to feel more authentic when they behave in socially desirable than in socially undesirable ways (Fleeson & Wilt, 2010; Harter, 2002; Jongman-Sereno & Leary, 2016; Sherman, Nave, & Funder, 2012; Sheldon et al., 1997; Wood, Christensen, Hebl, & Rothgerber, 1997), raising questions about the validity of their feelings. Subjective feelings of authenticity cannot not be regarded as indicators of actual authenticity.

Problems with Conceptualizations of Authenticity

Despite their differences, most approaches converge on the idea that, at its heart,

authenticity involves the degree to which people behave in ways that are congruent with “how they really are,” that is, congruently with their personal characteristics, attitudes, beliefs, values, and motives. On its face, such a conceptualization seems straightforward, but five issues raise serious questions about the viability of this conceptualization of authenticity as a scientific construct.

The True Self

As noted, many approaches conceptualize authenticity as behaving congruently with one’s “true self” (e.g., Barrett-Lennard, 1998; Fleeson & Wilt, 2010; Harter et al., 1996; Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Wood et al., 2008), but writers have not been clear regarding exactly what the construct of a true self entails or how it could ever be measured. Certainly, people have ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving that are more natural and unaffected than other ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving. But are these inclinations due to having a “true” self?

For us, the notion of a true self is misleading because it implies a monolithic psychological entity that perfectly reflects who the person “really” is and that coordinates all of a person’s disparate psychological characteristics in a unified, coherent, and consistent fashion. Yet, the human personality invariably contains myriad personality dispositions, emotional tendencies, values, attitudes, beliefs, and motives that are often contradictory and incompatible even though they are genuine aspects of the person’s psychological make-up (Allport, 1968; Atkinson & Birch, 1970; Emmons, King, & Sheldon, 1993; Festinger, 1962; Kuhl & Beckmann, 1994; Kurzban, 2010; Linville, 1985; Oyserman, Elmore, & Smith, 2012). In fact, intrapersonal variability on many traits is as great as the variability observed across people (Fleeson, 2004). Furthermore, given the complexity of people’s personalities, two seemingly incompatible actions

might both be highly self-congruent. People are simply too complex, multi-faceted, and often conflicted for the concept of a unitary true self to be a useful standard for assessing authenticity, either in oneself or in others (James, 1890).

Self-knowledge

In order to strive for authenticity and to know whether they are being authentic, people must know what they are actually like. People usually think that they have a good idea of who they are, what they are like, and why they do what they do, but all indications suggest that people's self-perceptions are partial, selective, and biased (Vazire & Carlson, 2010; Wilson & Dunn, 2004). For starters, much behavior is mediated by nonconscious processes (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999; Kahneman, 2011)—both implicit motives, dispositions, and other intrapersonal processes that operate outside of awareness as well as situational factors of which people are not aware. And if people are not aware—and, indeed, cannot be aware—of what causes them to act as they do, then they cannot possibly know whether a particular reaction is “really them.” Even when some behavior seems foreign to who people think they are, the possibility always exists that it was caused by an aspect of their psychological make-up that operates nonconsciously. Thus, at most, people can directly assess the authenticity of only the small subset of their actions that are consciously mediated, but they have no way of knowing for certain which actions those are. To make matters worse, much of what people believe about themselves is incomplete, biased, or untrue (Vazire & Carlson, 2010; Wilson & Dunn, 2004), so people should not have much faith in their conclusion that a particular action was or was not congruent with their personal characteristics, attitudes, beliefs, values, and motives.

Theorists differ in whether they assume that authenticity requires self-knowledge. Some explicitly state that people must have accurate self-views in order to be authentic (Barrett-

Lennard, 1998; Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Maslow, 1971; Rogers, 1959, 1961; Wood et al., 2008). Others seem to assume that self-congruence is authentic whether or not people fully understand what they are like or can accurately assess their congruence (Fleeson & Wilt, 2010; Sheldon et al., 1997). For example, some writers coming from the self-determination tradition assume that intrinsically-motivated behaviors are, by definition, autonomous and authentic regardless of what the person might believe about him- or herself (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Sheldon, Ryan, Deci, & Kasser, 2004).

In addition, some theorists assume that people can assess their authenticity indirectly via their feelings about their behavior (Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Lopez & Rice, 2006; Sheldon et al., 1997). When their actions don't "feel right," people may conclude that those actions are incongruent with how they really are. In some instances, this inference is probably accurate. However, people may feel uncomfortable about their behaviors for reasons other than the fact that they are incongruent. Even when behaviors are fully self-congruent, people may question their self-efficacy, worry about their actions' consequences, or wonder about how other people will perceive and evaluate them, and there's no evidence that people can distinguish these sources of discomfiture from those associated with behaving incongruently. If not, then such feelings cannot be regarded as a valid index of authenticity and inauthenticity.

In our view, admonitions to be authentic make sense only if people have full and accurate knowledge about themselves and, thus, know when they are and are not being authentic. Given that people do not have the requisite self-knowledge and feelings cannot be trusted, requiring accurate self-perceptions as a precondition for authenticity is highly problematic. Even so, judgments of one's authenticity is an important topic in its own right because people's emotions

and behaviors are affected by their perceptions of their authenticity, whether or not those perceptions are accurate. We return to this topic later in the paper.

Consistency

As noted, behavioral consistency is sometimes used as a proxy for authenticity. The implicit assumption underlying the operationalization of authenticity as consistency is that people who behave congruently with how they really are naturally behave quite similarly across situations and roles. Yet, equating consistency with authenticity is based on one of two unfounded assumptions: either people have a monolithic, internally-consistent personality, or they possess a psychological mechanism that somehow coordinates all of their actions to render them consistent.

But, as noted, people are genuinely multi-faceted, and human behavior is characterized by a tremendous amount of intra-individual variability and inconsistency (Fleeson, 2004). Furthermore, a great deal of consistency in behavior is situation-dependent so that people behave consistently each time they are in a particular situation but inconsistently across varied situations (Mischel & Shoda, 1998). In light of these considerations, behavioral inconsistency does not imply that people are not behaving congruently with how they really are.

Moreover, evidence suggests that the ability to change one's behavior to meet situational demands (often called "functional flexibility") is, within limits, psychologically and socially adaptive and that behavioral invariance can be a sign of maladaptive inflexibility (Funder & Colvin, 1991; Mischel, 1968; Neuberg & Newsome, 1993; Paulhus & Martin, 1988; Shapiro, 1982; Sheldon et al., 1997; Tracey, 2005; Wiggins, Phillips & Trapnell, 1989). Some approaches to functional flexibility focus on the broad range of traits that people naturally possess and others emphasize people's potential to enact various traits in order to adapt to situational requirements,

but most perspectives maintain that changing one's behavior to meet situational demands is psychologically and socially adaptive. Taken together, these considerations suggest that cross-situational consistency should not be regarded as either a defining feature of authenticity or an implication of being authentic.

Antisocial Authenticity

Virtually all researchers and theorists who have written about authenticity have touted its virtues, and we know of no one who has recommended that people should not be authentic. Ibara (2015) pointed out that efforts to be authentic may result in rigid behavior and undermine effectiveness, but even she seemed generally to endorse the value and virtue of authenticity.

Yet, given that everyone possesses both good, socially desirable characteristics and bad, socially undesirable characteristics, should we admonish people to act congruently with how they really are? Should people behave authentically when being themselves means that they act in ways that hurt themselves or other people? If the answer to that question is “no”—that people shouldn't act congruently with their undesirable personal characteristics, attitudes, beliefs, values, motives, and other dispositions—then we need to rethink whether being authentic is truly a desirable quality.

The notion that authenticity is beneficial can be traced to humanistic ideas regarding fully-functioning people (Jourard, 1963; Maslow, 1968, 1971; Rogers, 1959, 1961). Humanistic psychologists proposed that human beings develop most adaptively in an environment in which their natural tendencies toward self-actualization are not thwarted by external pressures or conditional regard from other people. Rogers (1951) explained this in terms of the organismic valuing process in which people naturally select goals based on their personal characteristics and inner purpose; when organismic valuing operates freely, people understand what is important to

them and what is essential for a fulfilling life. Because they assumed that people are inherently oriented toward growth and self-actualization, humanistic psychologists believed that unimpeded operation of the organismic valuing process would result in people becoming who they really are, which would always lead people in positive, prosocial directions.

If the humanistic psychologists are correct that people inherently develop positively unless external conditions derail the process, then touting the benefits of authenticity may be reasonable. In this view, authenticity inherently involves movement toward positive growth and adjustment. However, with the exception of self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), contemporary perspectives on authenticity do not endorse this assumption but rather equate authenticity with behaving congruently with one's current characteristics, attitudes, beliefs, values, and motives, whatever they may be. (For a description of the organismic valuing tendency from the self-determination perspective, see Sheldon, Arndt, and Houser-Marko [2003]).

Even so, contemporary perspectives implicitly assume that authenticity is uniformly beneficial, without recognizing that behaving congruently with one's undesirable attitudes, beliefs, values, motives, and other characteristics can be highly problematic. In order for civilized society to function, people must restrain impulses that might hurt themselves or others no matter how genuine and self-congruent those urges might be.

Inevitable Authenticity

All intentional behaviors, even behaviors that are influenced by exceptionally strong situational pressures, are motivated by, draw upon, or are mediated by people's personal characteristics, attitudes, beliefs, values, and motives. Thus, we cannot conceive of any

intentional behavior that does not reflect some genuine internal characteristic, which raises questions about whether goal-directed behavior is ever inauthentic (see Kurzban, 2010).

Even when a person lies, cheats, hurts other people, or engages in other behaviors that violate his or her moral standards, the behavior is a reflection of the person's genuine personal characteristics, attitudes, beliefs, values, and motives. In essence, the person is being authentically dishonest, hurtful, or otherwise immoral. Similarly, when a person does something under duress—with the proverbial gun to his or her head—the behavior is nonetheless congruent with some personal characteristic, attitude, belief, value, or motive, such as the quite genuine motive to stay alive. The action may certainly be incongruent with certain internal standards, but it is fully congruent with others and, thus, cannot remotely be considered to be inauthentic. Even highly desirable behaviors that are congruent with certain motives (such as getting out of bed to go to work in the morning) are often incongruent with other strong motives (to stay in bed), yet people don't feel inauthentic when they engage in the (partly) self-incongruent behavior of dragging themselves out of bed. These considerations suggest that, whatever authenticity is, it is not as simple as behaving congruently versus incongruently with one's characteristics, attitudes, beliefs, values, or motives.

Of course, behaviors differ in the degree to which they are aligned with people's psychological characteristics versus imposed by external forces (Ryan & Deci, 2004) and, thus, some behaviors are more self-congruent (and authentic) than others. Yet, researchers have no easy way to operationalize the degree of genuine congruence – as opposed to perceived congruence – in any instance.

Summary

As we have shown, conceptualizations of authenticity are unclear, inconsistent, and

muddled, and serious questions may be raised about all of them. Evidence suggests that people do not know themselves and understand the causes of their behavior well enough to assess with certainty whether a particular action is congruent with their dispositions, attitudes, beliefs, values, motives, and goals (Wilson & Dunn, 2004). In fact, people sometimes respond so inconsistently that it's difficult to know who the "real" person is (Allport, 1968; Fleeson, 2004; Mishel & Shoda, 1998; Oyserman et al., 2012). Furthermore, authenticity is not an unmitigated value because we do not want people to behave congruently with their antisocial attitudes, motives, and other characteristics. Finally, questions can be raised regarding whether any intentional action is ever genuinely self-incongruent and, thus, whether inauthenticity is possible.

Although existing conceptualizations of authenticity are problematic in the ways we described, something like authenticity does seem to exist phenomenologically. People do feel authentic and inauthentic at times, and problems with the conceptualization and measurement of authenticity do not negate the reality of that experience. Furthermore, many people take authenticity seriously and sometimes try to behave authentically, and research suggests that self-rated authenticity is associated with well-being (Bettencourt & Sheldon, 2001; Brunell et al., 2010; Goldman & Kernis, 2002; Harter et al., 1996; Kernis, Lakey, & Heppner, 2008; Robinson, Lopez, Ramos, & Nartova-Bochaver, 2013; Sheldon et al., 1997), suggesting that the phenomenon that people call "authenticity" is psychologically meaningful but perhaps misconstrued. We see no easy answers to this quandary yet believe that it is critically important for researchers to think more carefully and critically about the construct.

In the remainder of the paper, we dive more deeply into the concept of authenticity by addressing three specific questions: (a) Why do people experience something that they interpret as inauthenticity?, (b) why is authenticity associated with indicators of psychological well-

being?, and (c) why do most people place a value on authenticity and believe that people should strive to be authentic?

Perceptions of Inauthenticity

As we noted, no behavior is ever entirely inauthentic in the sense that it does not reflect some aspect of a person's characteristics, attitudes, beliefs, values, or motives. Yet, people sometimes perceive that their own actions are not really them. Setting aside the fact that people sometimes confuse authenticity with honesty, if actual inauthenticity is not possible, why do people sometimes experience something that they interpret as inauthenticity in themselves or others? If these perceptions do not reflect that their behavior is incongruent with their psychological characteristics, what do they indicate?

First, some experiences of inauthenticity arise when people perceive that they behaved incongruently with their *conscious* personal characteristics, attitudes, beliefs, values, and motives. When people realize that they have behaved in ways that are incongruent with how they see themselves – or with how they want to be – they understandably feel inauthentic. As noted, people's self-views are often not veridical (Wilson & Dunn, 2004), so their self-judgments of authenticity may or may not be accurate even with respect to their conscious self-beliefs. Furthermore, as discussed earlier, people are often not aware of the causes of their behavior (Bargh et al., 2001; Nisbett & Wilson, 1977; Wegner, 2003; Wilson, 2002), so they are often not in the position to judge for certain whether an action is congruent with how they really are. An action that is incongruent with a conscious belief, value, or motive may be consonant with an implicit belief, value, or motive. Note that we are not suggesting that people never have accurate self-insight but rather that they rarely, if ever, have reason to be certain that a particular self-view or behavioral inference is accurate. Even so, people may feel inauthentic when they react in ways

that are incongruent with what they perceive their beliefs, values, motives, and other characteristics to be.

Furthermore, in some cases, people are unable to arrive at a viable explanation for why they behaved in a particular way, leading to attributional consternation. When the search for the cause of a behavior comes up empty, people seem to conclude that the behavior was incongruent with their characteristics, attitudes, beliefs, values, and motives. In these cases, feelings of being inauthentic may reflect the fact that people do not know enough about the intrapersonal and situational forces acting upon them to understand why they did what they did in a particular instance. In such cases, feeling inauthentic does not indicate that people behaved incongruently with how they really are but rather that they simply do not know why they behaved as they did. When introspection does not reveal any (conscious) beliefs, values, motives, or traits that would explain an action, people conclude that the action did not originate within them and, thus, does not reflect who they “really are.”

In addition to the fact that people feel inauthentic when their actions are incongruent with their beliefs about what they are like, people may feel inauthentic when they act on a goal that is lower in their hierarchy of goals than another salient goal. People value some goals more than others (Kasser & Ryan, 1993) and naturally place a higher priority on more important goals. For example, people generally cast motives that are essential to long-term interests as goals but tend to view short-term motives that interfere with important goals as temptations (Fishbach, Friedman, & Kruglanski, 2003; Leander, Shah, & Chartrand, 2009). Likewise, people tend to value intrinsically-motivated goals more highly than extrinsically-motivated goals (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Kasser & Ryan, 1993), and research on values shows that, although people may value many things highly, the relative rank-order of their values (and goals) is critical in determining

their behavioral choices (e.g., Connor et al., 2016). Even when people's goals are contradictory and incompatible or their behavior violates conscious values or motives, their actions are authentically enacted in the service of some goal that reflects their characteristics, attitudes, beliefs, values, or motives, and whatever behavior the person chooses is necessarily self-congruent.

People seem to feel most authentic when they believe that they are acting in accord with goals that are higher rather than lower in their ranking of goal priorities. So, when people choose to do something that satisfies a lower-ranking goal, particularly at cost to a more important goal, they may perceive that they are not behaving in line with their "true self" (although, of course, they are). However, these feelings arise not because people are being inauthentic but rather because they are pursuing less important goals over more important ones.

This effect may partly explain why people tend to infer that their socially desirable behaviors are more authentic than socially undesirable ones (Fleeson & Wilt, 2010; Gino, Kouchaki, & Galinsky, 2015; Jongman-Sereno & Leary, 2016; Lenton, Slabu, et al., 2013; Newman, Bloom, & Knobe, 2014; Sherman et al., 2012; Wood et al., 1997). Of course, people's attributions for their behavior are often biased in self-serving ways that cast them in a positive light, and believing that undesirable actions are not congruent with who one really is can serve that purpose (Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1982; Kruger & Dunning, 1999; Mullen & Riordan, 1988). But even when people are not making self-serving attributions, they may view desirable behaviors as more authentic than undesirable behaviors because socially desirable goals tend to be more important and of higher priority.

This consideration may also explain why people report feeling more authentic when they behave in ways that reflect the desirable pole of each of the Big Five traits, regardless of their actual standing on the trait (Fleeson & Wilt, 2010). Most people probably place a higher priority on being extraverted, emotionally stable, agreeable, conscientious, and open rather than introverted, neurotic, disagreeable, nonconscientious, and closed (John & Robins, 1993; Rushton & Irwing, 2011). As a result, behaving in ways that are consistent with those higher priority goals is perceived as more authentic.

The Consequences of Authenticity and Inauthenticity

Psychologists and lay people alike tend to assume that authenticity is psychologically beneficial, and research generally supports a positive link between self-reported authenticity and well-being (Bettencourt & Sheldon, 2001; Brunell et al., 2010; Goldman & Kernis, 2002; Harter et al., 1996; Kernis, Lakey, & Heppner, 2008; Robinson, Lopez, Ramos, & Nartova-Bochaver, 2013; Sheldon et al., 1997). But why?

Our reading of the literature suggests that the relationship between authenticity and well-being arises partly from the fact that most operationalizations of authenticity confound authenticity with other variables that are associated with psychological adjustment, such as consistency, honesty, and the belief that one is authentic. As noted earlier, many studies have assessed authenticity by measuring consistency in behaviors across situations, roles, or relationships (e.g., Sheldon et al., 1997). This operationalization confounds authenticity with behavioral consistency and raises the possibility that obtained effects are a function of consistency rather than of authenticity. Many theories have emphasized the importance of behavioral consistency for psychological or interpersonal well-being (Festinger, 1962; Lecky, 1945; Tedeschi, Schlenker, & Bonoma, 1971), and research shows that behavioral consistency is

associated with positive psychological and social outcomes, at least up to a point (Donahue et al., 1993; Funder, 1995; Gohar, Leary, & Costanzo, 2016; Harter et al., 1996; Kernis & Goldman, 2005; Sheldon et al., 1997). Erratic, unstable, highly inconsistent people do not fare as well as predictable, stable, and consistent people do.

Among other things, consistency is highly valued because it serves as a proxy for dependability and trustworthiness (Cottrell, Neuberg, & Li, 2007; Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, & Giles, 1999), and inconsistency violates basic rules of social exchange that maintain positive interpersonal relationships (Blau, 1960; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Leary, Diebels, Jongman-Sereno, & Fernandez, 2016). Being viewed as consistent garners interpersonal benefits such as being judged as more likeable and as having better social skills (at least in Western cultures; Suh, 2002) and being perceived as a better leader (Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans, & May, 2004; Walumbwa, Luthans, Avey, & Oke, 2011). In light of the association between consistency and positive social outcomes, it is not surprising that consistency-based measures of authenticity correlate with psychological and social well-being.

In addition, measures of authenticity that emphasize openness and honesty in one's dealings with other people also correlate with social and psychological well-being (Brunell et al., 2010; Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Lopez & Rice, 2006). Within romantic relationships, authenticity (defined in terms of honest self-disclosures) is related to behaving in ways that promote partner trust, increase intimacy, lower conflict, and result in more positive reactions when conflict arises (Descutner & Thelen, 1991). More generally, studies have shown that being "authentic" is related to positive relationship behaviors such as being open, sincere, trustworthy, and nondefensive (Bettencourt & Sheldon, 2001; Brunell et al., 2010; Kernis, Lakey, & Heppner, 2008; Lakey, Kernis, Heppner, & Lance, 2008; Sheldon et al., 1997), and people who are more

authentic receive more social support from close others (Hodgins, Koestner, & Duncan, 1996). Not surprisingly, then, self-rated authenticity is also associated with higher relationship quality (Brunell et al., 2010). When authenticity is operationalized in terms of behaviors that facilitate interpersonal relationships, rather than in terms of self-congruence, we should not be surprised that it is associated with positive social outcomes and higher well-being.

Finally, simply believing that one behaves congruently with one's true self is related to well-being. People who believe that their goals are consistent with their interests and values have higher well-being than people who think their goals are inconsistent with their interests and values (McGregor & Little, 1998; Sheldon & Elliot, 1999; Sheldon & Houser-Marko, 2001). In addition, pursuing self-concordant goals is related to better psychological adjustment than pursuing non-concordant goals (McGregor & Little, 1998; Sheldon & Elliot, 1999; Sheldon & Kasser, 1995). People who view themselves as inauthentic clearly have lower well-being than those who rate themselves as authentic, but these effects may reflect the belief that one is being incongruent rather than actual inauthenticity.

These three considerations suggest that the empirical link between scores on various measures of authenticity and positive outcomes may reflect effects of consistency, behaviors that promote positive interpersonal relationships, and self-perceptions of congruence rather than (or perhaps in addition to) the degree to which people behave congruently with their personal characteristics, attitudes, beliefs, values, and motives.

Striving for Authenticity

People regard authenticity as important, sometimes strive to be authentic, and may experience negative emotions or evaluate themselves unfavorably when they believe that they have behaved inauthentically. Although many examinations of authenticity suggest that self-

congruence is inherently beneficial (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2000; Goldman & Kernis, 2002), in our view, the importance that people place on being authentic can be traced to strong and widespread social pressures to be who and what one claims to be.

To deal effectively with others, people need to know what other people are like, what motivates them, what they value, and whether they can be trusted; misperceiving other people's personal characteristics generally leads to problems. But knowing other people accurately and well requires that others' actions are reasonably congruent with their personal characteristics, attitudes, beliefs, values, and motives and that they are conveying accurate and honest impressions of themselves. If this assumption is incorrect—if others appear to be someone they are not—then people are at a disadvantage in their interactions and relationships with them.

As a result, everyone is under a good deal of social pressure to be reasonably upfront about who they are and what they are like (Goffman, 1959). People who appear to be trying to lead others to form impressions of them that are not true are mistrusted, disliked, and avoided (Ham & Vonk, 2011). In fact, Anderson's (1968) study of the likeability of 555 trait words revealed that people rate sincere, honest, truthful, and trustworthy among the six most likeable traits, and untruthful, dishonest, phony, and liar among the six most disliked traits. Because of the very high value placed on being genuine, people are highly motivated to have others believe that they are behaving congruently with how they really are.

This is not a matter of authenticity: people can be authentically untruthful, disingenuous, and phony. From an interpersonal standpoint, however, people are motivated to be seen as behaving in ways that reflect their actual characteristics, attitudes, beliefs, values, and motives (Baumeister & Jones, 1978; Schlenker, 1975). Not only do people want to be seen as genuine and self-congruent for its own sake, but they want to be viewed as authentic so that others will

trust any positive impressions that they might have of them. Knowing that observers often discount socially desirable behaviors (Skowronski & Carlston, 1989), people want their positive actions and desirable self-presentations to be taken at face-value, and being perceived as authentic helps them achieve that goal.

Because authenticity is highly valued, people are motivated to be perceived as authentic for an array of interpersonal reasons. Although many perspectives have proposed intrapersonal motives for consistency (e.g., Lecky, 1945; Festinger, 1962), our analysis is consistent with the notion that most of the pressures to be consistent arise from interpersonal sources (Leary, Raimi, Jongman-Sereno, & Diebels, 2015; Tedeschi et al., 1971).

Conclusion

The extensive confusion and disagreement that surrounds the concept of authenticity has made work in this area difficult and the findings of much research suspect. Indeed, as typically construed and measured, authenticity may not be a viable scientific construct.

Even so, the subjective feelings that people interpret as authenticity and inauthenticity seem to be psychologically important. People sometimes strive to be authentic and experience negative emotions when they believe that they have acted inauthentically (Lenton, Bruder et al., 2013). But such reactions may stem from social pressures to be genuine, consistent, and honest in one's dealings with other people rather than from an intrapsychic need to behave congruently with one's personal characteristics, attitudes, beliefs, values, motives, or true self.

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