

Role of Authenticity in Healthy Psychological Functioning and Subjective Well-being

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Abstract

A variety of conceptualizations of authenticity exist, ranging from emphasizing actualization of “being needs” (Maslow, 1968) to engaging in self-determined behavior consistent with intrinsic organismic needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000). These conceptualizations are complemented by some empirical data indicating that authenticity is linked to greater psychological functioning and subjective well-being (Sheldon & Kasser, 1995). In this paper, we offer a new multicomponent conceptualization of authenticity and report initial findings obtained with our measure (Goldman & Kernis,

2001) and indices of well-being. We found that higher total scores on the Authenticity Inventory (AI) were positively related to reported self-esteem level and life satisfaction and negatively related to contingent self-esteem and negative affect. Specific correlations involving the subscale components are also reported. The overall pattern of findings suggests that the AI and its subscales have important implications for various aspects of psychological functioning and well-being.

What makes a person true or authentic? The humanistic tradition, as exemplified by, for example, Maslow (1968), suggests that authenticity occurs when individuals discover their true inner nature by sufficiently satisfying higher order psychological needs. That is, after gratifying their physiological needs, individuals then turn toward satisfying their “being” or growth-oriented needs. Focusing on growth-oriented needs presumably results in fuller knowledge and acceptance of one’s true, or intrinsic nature, which then moves one further on the path toward self-actualization (Maslow, 1968). Rogers (1961) emphasized the congruence between one’s self-concept and experience as reflecting authenticity. He noted that maladjustment often stems from incongruence between one’s immediate experiences (or behaviors) and one’s self-reflections. Contributing to such incongruencies are conditions of worth that involve love-worthiness based on achieving externally-based standards or expectations.

Other scholars emphasize the importance of self-regulatory processes to authenticity (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 1985, 1995; Sheldon & Kasser, 1995). Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1995, 2000) suggests that authenticity occurs when individuals self-regulate in ways that satisfy their basic psychological needs for competence, self-determination and relatedness. In contrast, self-regulation based on meeting other people’s expectations or demands (i.e., external regulation) is associated with inauthentic functioning (see Sheldon & Kasser, 1995 for an empirical example).

Goldman and Kernis (2002) found that the more individuals characterized their academic goals as reflecting “who they really are,” the more positive affect and life satisfaction they reported approximately one month later. Other research has found that self-determination (i.e., autonomous self-regulation) is related to higher levels of, and more stable, feelings of self-worth (Kernis, Paradise, Whitaker, Wheatman, & Goldman, 2000).

In sum, existing literature supports the contention that psychological authenticity is an important aspect of healthy psychological functioning and positive subjective well-being. Our goals in this article are to describe a new multicomponent conceptualization of authenticity and to report initial findings obtained with our measure designed to assess these components (Goldman & Kernis, 2001).

In our view, authenticity can be defined generally as the unobstructed operation of one’s true or core self in one’s daily enterprise (see also Kernis, in press). More specifically, it involves the following four components: awareness, unbiased processing, behavior, and relational orientation. The awareness component refers to having awareness of, and trust in, one’s motives, feelings, desires and self-relevant cognitions. It involves being aware of one’s strengths and weaknesses, trait characteristics, emotions, including knowledge

about one's inherent contradictory self-aspects, and their roles in behavior. In our view, awareness is not reflected in self-concepts wherein inherent polarities are unrecognized or denied (i.e., that have been characterized as internally consistent; see [Campbell, 1990](#)). Rather, awareness represents a recognition of existing polarities that exist in one's self-concept, or, as Perls (Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1951) stated, being aware of both "figure" and "ground" in one's personality aspects. Kernis and Goldman (in press) suggest that awareness involves knowledge and acceptance of one's multifaceted and potentially contradictory self-aspects, as opposed to rigid acceptance of only those self-aspects deemed internally consistent with one's overall self-concept.

A second component of authenticity involves the unbiased processing of self-relevant information. Unbiased processing reflects objectivity in assessing one's positive and negative self-aspects, attributes, qualities and potentials. Stated differently, unbiased processing involves "not denying, distorting, exaggerating or ignoring private knowledge, internal experiences and externally generated evaluative information" (Kernis, in press).

A third component of authenticity involves behavior or action. Authenticity reflects acting in accord with one's values, preferences and needs as opposed to acting merely to please others or to attain rewards or avoid punishments, even if it means acting falsely. In our view then, authentic behavior involves behavior that reflects self-determination, that is, autonomy and choice, as opposed to controlled behavior that is contingent upon meeting introjected or external goals ([Deci & Ryan, 2000](#); [Kernis et al., 2000](#)). Kernis (in press) suggests that authentic behavior reflects sensitivity to the fit (or lack of) between one's true self and the dictates of the environment and an awareness of the potential implications of one's behavioral choices. Moreover, authenticity is not reflected in a compulsion to be one's true self, but rather in the free and natural expression of one's core feelings, motives and inclinations in the environmental contexts one encounters.

Finally, a fourth component is relational in nature, involving valuing and achieving openness and truthfulness in one's close relationships. Relational authenticity involves an active process of self-disclosure and the development of mutual intimacy and trust so that intimates will see one's true self-aspects, both good and bad.

We view these multiple components of authenticity as related to, but separable from, each other. For instance, there are invariably situations when environmental pressures may militate against the expression of one's true self (e.g., an employee may choose not to express his or her true opinion about a project to a highly punitive and powerful supervisor). Although behavioral (and perhaps relational) authenticity may be stymied in such instances, authenticity at the levels of awareness and unbiased processing may be fully operative. Awareness may involve active attempts to resolve conflicting motives and desires involved in knowing one's true evaluation and the implications expressing it may have for one's job security. Unbiased processing may involve acknowledgment of the fallibility of one's assessment capabilities. In contrast, inauthenticity may involve actively ignoring or denying one's opinion or unbridled belief in the superiority of one's judgmental abilities.

In essence, complex circumstances exist in which people must respond to simultaneously conflicting feelings and goals. In our view, authenticity involves acknowledgment of these complexities and the use of one's core sense of self as an important source of information relevant to their resolution. In fact, conflicted feelings may be meaningful self-growth experiences that promote authenticity, inasmuch as they are informative about the complexity of one's true feelings. Overall, then, we would expect that greater authenticity would be reflected in more favorable psychological functioning and subjective well-being. In the study reported here, we report the relationships between authenticity (as assessed by the AI) and self-esteem level, contingent self-esteem, i.e., feelings of self-worth that are dependent upon the achievement of specific outcomes or evaluations, a form of fragile self-esteem (Deci & Ryan, 1995; Kernis, in press; Paradise & Kernis, 1999), daily affect, and life satisfaction.

Method

Participants

Participants were 79 introductory psychology students at a large southeastern university who received class credit for their participation.

Materials and Procedure

Participants completed each of the following measures in small group sessions of 7-12 participants. The order of completion was the same for all participants. Other measures not relevant to the present study were also included such as:

Self-Esteem Level. Rosenberg's (1965) well-validated ([Blascovich & Tomaka, 1991](#)) 10-item measure of global self-esteem was administered to determine participants' level of global self-esteem. Responses were made on a 5-point scale with anchors ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.

Contingent Self-Esteem. The Contingent Self-esteem Scale (CSS; Paradise & Kernis, 1999) consists of 15-items that assess the extent to which individuals' self-worth depends upon meeting expectations, matching standards, or achieving specific outcomes or evaluations. Responses are made on a 5-point scale with anchors ranging from 1 = not at all like me to 5 = very much like me. Higher scores indicate more contingent self-esteem. Validity and psychometric data are reported in Kernis (in press).

Life Satisfaction ([Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985](#)). This 7-item measure assesses how satisfied individuals feel about their lives in general over the past few days (e.g., "In most ways, my life is close to my ideal"). Responses were made on a 5-point scale with anchors ranging from 1 = no agreement to 5 = very much agreement.

Positive Affect/Negative Affect Scale ([Brunstein, 1993](#)). Participants rated how often they felt each of 10 positive and 10 negative emotions (e.g., upset, anxious) during the

past few days. Responses were made on a 5-point scale with anchors ranging from 1 = very slightly or not at all to 5 = extremely.

Net negative affect scores were computed by subtracting the total for the positive emotions from the total for the negative emotions. Higher scores indicate people experienced more negative, as opposed to positive affect.

Authenticity. Participants completed the 60-item Authenticity Inventory (AI; Goldman & Kernis, 2001). The inventory is comprised of four subscales: awareness (e.g., “I am generally aware of times when my needs and/or motives are in conflict with one another,” “I am aware when I am not being my true self”), unbiased processing (e.g., “I generally am capable of objectively considering my limitations and shortcomings,” “I do not exaggerate my strengths to myself”), behavior, (e.g., “I am willing to wear the right social mask for the right social occasion if it will get me what I want {reversed scored item},” “I do not like to receive credit for things I have not done”) and relational orientation (e.g., “I place a great deal of importance on close others understanding who I truly am,” “People I am close to have seen my darkest moments”).

Results

Zero-order correlations were computed between each of the measures of well-being, total AI scores, and subscale AI scores. The correlation matrix is displayed in Table 1.

Importantly, total AI scores were significantly related to each of the psychological well-being measures. Specifically, greater self-reported authenticity was related to higher levels of self-esteem ($r = .33$) and life satisfaction ($r = .40$), and to lower self-esteem contingency ($r = -.27$) and net negative affect ($r = -.31$).

In terms of the individual subscales, the awareness subscale was related to three of the four well-being measures. Specifically, greater self-reported awareness was related to higher life satisfaction ($r = .43$) and self-esteem ($r = .28$), and to lower net negative affect ($r = -.36$). The unbiased processing subscale was related to one of the four well-being measures. Specifically more unbiased processing was related to greater life satisfaction ($r = .23$). The behavioral subscale was related to two of the four well-being measures. Specifically, greater behavioral authenticity related to higher levels of self-esteem ($r = .33$) and to less contingent self-esteem ($r = -.31$). Finally, the relational subscale was related to two of the four well-being measures. Specifically, greater relational authenticity related to higher life satisfaction ($r = .41$) and to less net negative affect ($r = -.36$).

Discussion

The findings from this study offer initial support both for our conceptualization and assessment of multiple components of authenticity. The total authenticity scores were positively related to self-esteem level and life satisfaction, and negatively related to self-esteem contingency and net negative affect. Importantly, these findings indicate that

authenticity is related to feelings of self-worth that are not only more positive, but that are more secure as well (i.e., less contingent on specific outcomes; Kernis & Goldman, in press). The current findings also indicate that greater self-reported authenticity is related to the frequency of experiencing negative emotions (i.e., less net negative affect), as well as more global appraisals of individuals' perceived satisfaction in life (i.e., more life satisfaction). Taken as a whole, these findings provide empirical support for the contention that authenticity is related to healthy psychological functioning and positive subjective well-being.

The AI subscales also showed some relations with specific measures of well-being. Although not all relations were statistically significant, all were in the expected direction. That is, all of the subscales correlated positively with life satisfaction and self-esteem and all correlated negatively with measures of negative affect and contingency of self-esteem. Therefore, these data provide initial validity support for our conceptualization and measure. Further refinement of the scale presumably will lead to stronger subscale findings. Additional research may also show that the specific subscales have different implications for various aspects of well-being. For instance, the behavioral subscale may have more of a direct relationship with self-esteem components than does the relational subscale.

Additional research is needed to further validate the AI. One issue of particular importance is the extent to which scores on the AI relate to other indices of fragile versus secure forms of self-esteem (Kernis, in press). Theoretically, the importance of the AI lies in it being based on a relatively broad conceptualization of authenticity that incorporates aspects of authenticity that previously have been implicated in well-being and psychological functioning (e.g., Maslow, 1968; Deci & Ryan, 1995; Kernis, in press). Importantly, the AI includes aspects of authenticity not previously the focus of explicit empirical attention. Additional research may show linkages among these aspects that allow for a richer conceptualization of authenticity. For example, the extent to which behavioral authenticity depends upon awareness, unbiased processing, and relational authenticity is worthy of investigation.

In conclusion, the AI allows for an examination of multiple components of authenticity.

Further research is needed to determine the AI's effectiveness in helping investigators better understand optimal psychological functioning and subjective well-being.

About the Authors:

Brian Goldman received his M.S. in social psychology from the University of Georgia. His work includes coauthorship (with Michael Kernis) of "Self-Esteem" in the Encyclopedia of Human Emotions (1999; Macmillan Library Reference) and "Stability and Variability of Self-Concept and Self-esteem" to appear in the Handbook of Self and Identity (Mark Leary & June Tangney, Eds., Guilford Press). In addition, he was a coauthor of "Master of one's psychological domain? Not likely if one's self-esteem is unstable" (with Michael Kernis, Andrew Paradise, Daniel Whitaker, and Shannon

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