Introduction to the Special Issue: Authenticity: Novel Insights Into a Valued, Yet Elusive, Concept

Joshua A. Hicks¹, Rebecca J. Schlegel¹, and George E. Newman²

Abstract
Authenticity is generally believed to play an important role in our daily lives. Empirical research thus far has made progress in understanding the nature of this important construct. We identify four broad conclusions about authenticity based on this research: (a) People value authenticity in their own behavior and other domains (e.g., life experiences, consumer products), (b) Self-reports of personal authenticity are linked to psychological well-being, (c) People generally believe authentic, or “true,” selves are morally good, and (d) Authenticity judgments are guided by cognitive tendencies related to psychological essentialism. Despite this progress, many basic questions about authenticity remain unresolved including (a) What is the best way to define the construct? (b) Why do people care so much about whether something or someone is authentic? and (c) Why is personal authenticity so strongly related to psychological well-being? This special issue presents articles aimed to shed light on some of these basic questions. Although each of the articles offers a unique perspective to understanding authenticity, these collections of articles provide a generative framework to help researchers continue to explore this elusive construct.

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Authenticity is generally believed to play an important role in our daily lives. Empirical research thus far has made progress in understanding the nature of this important construct. We identify four broad conclusions about authenticity based on this research: (a) People value authenticity in their own behavior and other domains (e.g., life experiences, consumer products), (b) Self-reports of personal authenticity are linked to psychological well-being, (c) People generally believe authentic, or “true,” selves are morally good, and (d) Authenticity judgments are guided by cognitive tendencies related to psychological essentialism. Despite this progress, many basic questions about authenticity remain unresolved including (a) What is the best way to define the construct? (b) Why do people care so much about whether something or someone is authentic? and (c) Why is personal authenticity so strongly related to psychological well-being? This special issue presents articles aimed to shed light on some of these basic questions. Although each of the articles offers a unique perspective to understanding authenticity, these collections of articles provide a generative framework to help researchers continue to explore this elusive construct.

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Authentication seems to be everywhere—from Shakespeare to self-help authors, from advertisers to artists. In almost every facet of daily life, people seek what is true, genuine, or real. And yet, defining what it means for an object or entity to be authentic may vary drastically between one context and another, and even between one person and another. As a result, rigorous psychological inquiries into the concept of authenticity—how it is defined, how it is used, its antecedents and consequences—have proved difficult. If there is one thing that contemporary scholars of authenticity agree upon, it is that the concept of authenticity, though valued, is elusive.

Nonetheless, academic interest in this area has surged in recent years, leading to hundreds of journal articles (e.g., Kraus, Chen, & Keltner, 2011; Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne, & Ildarid, 1997; Swann, De La Ronde, & Hixon, 1994; Wood, Linley, Maltby, Baliousis, & Joseph, 2008) and a number of review papers (e.g., De Freitas, Cikara, Grossmann, & Schlegel, 2017; Harter, 2002; Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Schmader & Sedikides, 2018; Strohminger, Knobe, & Newman, 2017), conference symposia, workshops, and so on. Thus, the goal of this special issue is to highlight research by leading scholars in psychology, as well as related disciples such as sociology, philosophy, management studies, and marketing, with the aim of developing broader conclusions about when authenticity matters, why it is important, and what it even is.

Drawing on extant research as well as the research highlighted in this special issue, one can begin to make some broader conclusions about the concept of authenticity:

1. All else being equal, authenticity is a good thing—in other words, people seem to value “being authentic” in their evaluations of others, their perceptions of themselves, and their evaluations of a wide array of goods and experiences (e.g., Beverland, Lindgreen, & Vink, 2008; Kovács, Carroll, & Lehman, 2013; Morhart, Malär, Guèvremont, Girardin, & Grohmann, 2015; Newman & Bloom, 2012).

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2. Feeling authentic, or in touch with one’s “true self,” is a robust predictor of psychological well-being, even after controlling for similar positive self-evaluations, such as self-esteem (Goldman & Kernis, 2002; Heppner et al., 2008; Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Liu & Perrewe, 2006; Wood et al., 2008).

3. People tend to apply normative considerations when evaluating the authenticity of themselves and others and generally believe that deep down, people are morally good (Christy et al., 2017; De Freitas & Cikara, 2017; De Freitas et al., 2017; Fleson & Wilt, 2010; Newman, Bloom, & Knobe, 2014; Strohminger et al., 2017).

4. Evaluations of authenticity appear to be supported by more general cognitive processes, such as the belief that various entities possess a deeper, underlying essence (Christy, Schlegel, & Cimpian, 2019; De Freitas et al., 2019; Newman, 2016).

Beyond these areas of convergence, however, we believe this construct remains elusive due to a lack of understanding of a few basic questions about authenticity. Specifically, we believe research and theory have yet to fully examine three broad, yet, essential questions. First, there is lack of consensus about what it means for something or someone to be authentic. Second, only a handful of studies have uncovered what situational and psychological variables actually give rise to feelings of being authentic. Third, although it is clear that people value almost anything that is perceived to be authentic, from personal behaviors to local restaurants, we know surprisingly little about why people place so much value on authenticity in the first place.

Although each article in this special issue offers its unique perspective on the construct, all of them directly address one or more of these questions. Below, we briefly describe how these articles speak to each of these important issues.

**How Can We Best Conceptualize and Define Authenticity?**

As we suggest in the title to this special issue, authenticity is universally valued, yet poorly understood. For example, although we know that people care about authenticity, researchers have yet to come to a consensus on how it should be defined. Several articles in this special issue are primarily devoted to tackling this issue. One consistent theme that emerged in each article is that it is important to consider the subjective nature of authenticity judgments.

Part of the challenge of accurately understanding authenticity is that people often define authenticity differently across a variety of domains. What makes a person authentic is often different from what makes a brand authentic or an artifact authentic and so forth. Given this complexity, Kovács (2019) argues that looking at lay conceptions of authenticity is needed to best understand the construct. Participants in his studies indicated words they commonly associate with authenticity in different domains (e.g., people, restaurants). His findings revealed substantial variation across both individuals and domains in how people think of what it means to be authentic, thus highlighting the potential need to consider both individual differences and domain differences when examining the construct.

Further complicating this issue is that authenticity of a single entity can also be conceptualized multiple ways. Lehman, O’Connor, and Carroll (2019) address this idea by distinguishing between two different meanings of authenticity: moral authenticity, staying true to a professed set of values, and type authenticity, staying true to a particular social category. The authors present compelling empirical evidence that even with respect to the same entity, different conceptualizations of authenticity may influence different types of evaluations.

Similarly, Newman (2019) proposes three broad kinds of authenticity including historical, categorical, and value types of authenticity. Two studies then examine the extent to which people’s conceptions of authenticity naturally segment into these three types. The results from both studies indicate a striking degree of convergence in support of these three broad dimensions. Moreover, his findings reveal significant differences in how different groups of people weigh each of these dimensions when evaluating authenticity.

Jongman-Sereno and Leary (2019) focus specifically on perceived authenticity within one’s self. They highlight these complexities by reviewing the current literature and distilling four broad approaches researchers have previously used to define authenticity: self-congruence, person-centered approaches, intrinsically motivated behavior, and subjective feelings of authenticity, and they ultimately question whether any of these approaches to authenticity are scientifically viable.

**What Makes People Feel Authentic?**

Many of the existing empirical articles on authenticity have aimed to examine the relationship between authenticity and psychological well-being. This aim is noble given that philosophers, existential and humanistic psychologists, and lay people alike have long posited authenticity as necessary for a meaningful existence. However, there are few studies that directly examine what variables actually engender feelings of authenticity. What is it about the person and the situation that leads to subjective feeling of authenticity? Answers to this question have clear implications for the meaning of authenticity—that is, if we know what engenders feelings of authenticity, this may shed light on what authenticity actually is.
Perhaps the best-known idea is that people will feel authentic when their behaviors align with their underlying traits, or their “true self.” However, as Jongman-Sereno and Leary (2019) and Rivera et al. (2019) argue, this self-/trait-dependent view of authenticity is not always supported in the literature. Moreover, Baumeister (2019) and Rivera et al. (2019) raise the possibility that true selves, themselves, likely do not exist. This latter possibility would suggest that attempts to study objective authenticity may not be worthy of serious scientific inquiry (see also Jongman-Sereno & Leary, 2019).

Fortunately, many of the articles in this special issue go beyond this simple trait-behavior consistency perspective when examining variables that influence subjective feelings of authenticity. Sedikides, Lenton, Slabu, and Thomaes (2019), for example, argue for the importance of distinguishing between state and trait authenticity. They note that even individuals high in trait authenticity experience significant variation in their state authenticity, suggesting certain types of contextual variables (e.g., positive affect) may play an important role in the momentary experience of authenticity.

In a related vein, Chen (2019) argues for the importance of conceptualizing authenticity in context. Specifically, she makes a persuasive case that if we want to understand what influences personal authenticity, we first need to take into account how the current context makes certain aspects of the self-concept more, or less, salient. She then reviews an impressive line of research examining how close relationships, social power, and the broader social context influence subjective feelings of authenticity. Overall, her perspective suggests that scholars need to pay attention to the consistency between one’s behavior and their current self-conceptions, rather than conceptualizing authenticity solely in terms of broad, fixed aspects of personality.

Moving even further away from a consistency perspective, Vess (2019) examines how basic cognitive processes might bear on subjective feelings of authenticity. He suggests that self-evaluations of authenticity may not always require any specific evaluation of one’s self-concept. Instead, he summarizes an emerging line of empirical research that documents how becoming mentally detached from present experience (i.e., mind-wandering) is related to feeling disconnected from one’s “true” self. This suggests that personality or situational variables that disrupt one’s current mental experience may also undermine perceptions of authenticity.

Ryan and Ryan (2019) also examine how one’s environment might bear on the experience of authenticity. Using self-determination theory as a guide, they specifically argue that people are more likely to experience a sense of authenticity in environments that are autonomy supportive. This experience of authenticity, in turn, contributes to both psychological well-being and relationship satisfaction. They further argue that autonomy support may play a critical role in helping stigmatized individuals (e.g., LGB individuals) feel comfortable expressing their true selves.

Finally, in critiquing the construct authenticity both Jongman-Sereno and Leary (2019) and Baumeister (2019) briefly review possible psychological mechanisms that lead to the feeling of authenticity such as possessing higher order goals, understanding the source of one’s behavior, and how our perceptions of authenticity may be determined more by being aware of our “false” selves than our “true” selves.

**Why Do People Value Authenticity?**

People often think of authenticity as universally good, placing more weight on authentic relationship, vacations, types of clothes, and so forth compared with those perceived as less authentic. Jongman-Sereno and Leary (2019), however, question whether authenticity is always beneficial to the person or society. For instance, they point to the fact that all people possess at least some socially undesirable characteristics, suggesting we would not want people to actually be who they “really are” all of the time.

Of course, even if we consider this possibility, it is still unclear why most people believe authenticity is inherently valuable. Two articles describe basic social cognitive mechanisms may contribute to the valuation of authenticity. First, Finkel (2019) suggests the language we use, specifically, the metaphors we use to make sense of experience, influence why we place so much value on this construct. He points particularly to the “sculpting” metaphor for relationships and how this metaphor might relate to authenticity. Second, Rivera and colleagues (2019) suggest that there is a prominent and widely accepted lay theory that suggests authenticity is valuable, particularly, when it comes to one’s own behaviors. They refer to this as the “true self as guide” lay theory and suggest that people explicitly endorse the idea that following one’s true self is likely to lead to a satisfying decision. They further argue that the wide endorsement of this lay theory may underlie the relationship between perceived authenticity and well-being. Essentially, people value authenticity because it signals that one has lived up to a satisfying cultural narrative related to the best way to make decisions in one’s life. Importantly, both of these approaches do not require that true selves literally exist for perceptions of authenticity to be psychologically consequential.

Two other articles point to potential confounds that may help us understand why people value authenticity. Jongman-Sereno and Leary (2019) suggest that the relationship between well-being and subjective authenticity may be understood not because of the value of authenticity per se but because subjective authenticity is confounded with other variables such as behavioral consistency and honesty.
Finally, Baumeister (2019) makes a compelling case that feelings of authenticity are confounded with one’s desired reputation. On this view, what people think of as their true self is really just what people want to be seen/known as. Thus, authenticity is valued because it portrays the self in a favorable way to others.

Conclusion

As presented throughout the articles in this special issue, the complexities of studying authenticity present both challenges and opportunities for researchers. Although it is clear that authenticity researchers, including ourselves, need to start examining the construct through a more sophisticated framework, we are confident that doing so will yield important insights into what authenticity means and why we deeply value those things perceived as authentic.

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