

The real deal

Stephen Joseph calls for more research into the psychology of authenticity

Has anyone ever given you the advice to 'just be yourself'? Perhaps you were going for a job interview, or maybe you were about to meet a new date. Did you ponder what it actually means to be yourself?

It's a topic that appeals to common sense, but it is only over the past decade that authenticity has become a focus for research. In 2002, Susan Harter, one of the most eminent developmental social psychologists, commented that 'there is no single, coherent body of literature on authentic self-behavior, no bedrock of knowledge' (p.382). A decade later Harter described how this situation has begun to change, with new positive psychology research inspired by the early humanistic psychologists. Following a brief historical excursion into that area to set the scene, I will give an overview of some recent research, and finally consider future directions for this new and important area.

How does authenticity develop?

Authenticity has a long history as one of the core themes of humanistic psychology, but the terminology of these previous writers was somewhat different. Notably, back in 1943 Abraham Maslow described the state of 'self-actualisation'. Self-actualised people were, for example, thought to be realistic in their perceptions, accepting of themselves and of other people, guided by inner goals and values, able to form deep relationships, not needing to seek other people's approval, and they are well adjusted to culture but not immersed in it unthinkingly. Similarly, in the sixties Carl Rogers described the state of 'fully functioning'. This involved movement: away from façades, from oughts, from meeting expectations, from pleasing others, and towards self-direction, openness to experience, acceptance of others and trusting oneself.

Roger's description of the fully functioning person was largely synonymous with Maslow's description of the self-actualised person, but importantly both were describing states that they believed were the default settings for human beings, a universal urge. We were, in their view, hardwired to be authentic. The ideas find echoes in modern research: studies led by the University of Edinburgh's Alison Lenton have found that people seem motivated to deliberately seek out experiences in which they feel authentic, and to avoid situations in which they feel inauthentic.

Of course, how these self-actualised or fully functioning states are expressed in behaviours will vary from person to person depending on their idiosyncratic preferences, strengths and abilities. Look at Rogers' list of the qualities of the fully functioning person.



For example, the authentic person is self-directing. For one person that could be to engage in scholarly work, another to be a musician, and for another to be a sportsperson. But whatever the route, Rogers posited that authenticity is the natural and normal direction for children's development.

However, the social environment can thwart these developmental tendencies. Richard Ryan and Ed Deci's self-determination theory echoes the earlier ideas of the humanistic psychologists to also posit how controlling, chaotic, and restrictive social environments thwart the normal and natural developmental process. Research in the self-determination tradition (reviewed by myself and Terrence Patterson in 2007) has provided a wealth of evidence consistent with these earlier humanistic ideas. For example, in a 1993 study led by Deci, children aged 6 or 7 years were observed playing. In the room were children's magazines, jigsaw puzzles, building blocks, and so on. But what the researchers were interested in

was how parents interacted with the children. Watching from behind a one-way screen, they categorised controlling statements made by the parent into those that pressure the child to do something, distract the child's attention from what they are doing, imply conditional worth, use words such as 'should' and so on (for example, 'Good, that's just what you should do', 'Don't you think you should use smaller building blocks for that?' or 'You are a good boy for doing that'). The children had been watched beforehand when they were on their own to establish what they freely liked doing and what interested them the most. When parents were controlling, children spent less time on the things they freely liked doing – the things that they were intrinsically motivated to do.

Thinking back to our own childhoods can sometimes give us a clue about our own intrinsic motivations and can be a useful tool in counselling. What are your first memories as a child when you remember yourself feeling

joy? What were you doing? The chances are you were using one of your natural strengths, talents or abilities to its full extent. There would have been sheer pleasure in the doing. Left to our own devices, as children we will do the things that come naturally to us. We will use our strengths, interests and abilities. Looking back on our lives in this way can give us insight into what our natural strengths, interests and abilities are.

The problems of inauthenticity

Humanistic psychologists are sometimes thought of as being somewhat 'Pollyannaish' with their talk of people actualising their potential, but it was not their claim. Rather, they recognised that this tendency in people would be thwarted when their basic needs were not met, and that degrees of inauthenticity were the norm.

To illustrate, Rogers wrote in 1963 about a potato bin in the basement of the family farm where he grew up. It was here that the family stored their winter supply of potatoes. The bin was several feet below a small window. He noticed how, unlike the healthy green shoots that potatoes sprout when planted in the soil, the potatoes

stored in the basement produced pale, white and unhealthy looking sprouts: '...these sad, spindly sprouts would grow 2 or 3 feet in length as they reached toward the distant light of the window. The sprouts were, in their bizarre, futile growth, a sort of desperate expression of the directional tendency ... They would never become plants, never mature, never fulfil their real potential.'

Famously, Rogers wrote of how he thought of these potatoes when he encountered people in the back wards of state hospitals in his job as a psychologist. His analogy focuses our minds on what happens when the sun doesn't shine: does that lead to wide individual differences in authenticity, and how would we know?.

As new interest in authenticity emerged in the mid 2000s, researchers recognised that work in this area was hampered by a lack of psychometric tools. Two such scales were introduced following extensive factor analytic work to investigate the earlier conceptions of the humanistic psychologists. The 46-item Authenticity Inventory from Kernis and Goldman (2006) was based largely on Rogers' description of the characteristics of the fully functioning person, measuring four interrelated components:



(1) awareness (e.g. self-understanding), (2) unbiased processing (e.g. objective self-evaluation), (3) behaviour (e.g. congruence between one's actions and needs), and (4) relational orientation (e.g. sincerity in relationship functioning with one's intimates). Our own 12-item The Authenticity Scale (AS; Wood et al., 2008) was based on Rogers' description of how authenticity involves congruence between the experience of inner emotional and cognitive states, awareness of those states, and the ability to be openly expressive of those states. It consists of three subscales: (1) Accepting external influence, (2) Self-alienation and (3) Authentic living.

Since the development of these scales, new research has begun to emerge investigating the correlates of authenticity. For example, in 2014 Boyraz and colleagues collected information from college students on their authenticity, life satisfaction and levels of distress at two points in time separated by almost two months. They found that those who showed greater authenticity as measured by the AS at the first time point were more satisfied with life and less distressed at the second time point. In other studies, authenticity has also been found to be associated with grit (Vainio & Daukantaitė, 2015), mindfulness (Lakey et al., 2008), decisiveness (White & Tracey, 2011), social engagement (Lenton et al., 2016), unconditional positive self-regard (Murphy et al., in press), perceptions of the balance of power in relationships (Kristin Neff & Marie-Anne Suizzo, 2006), and eudaimonic states of wellbeing (Smallenbroek et al., 2016).

Other research has investigated the interaction of authenticity with other variables. In a 2015 paper, Bryan and colleagues showed that those who felt lonely were also more depressed and anxious, had more physical symptoms and more drink problems; but for those who felt lonely and who also scored highly on authenticity, their feelings of depression and anxiety, physical

symptoms and drink problems were not as intense.

In a 2012 experimental manipulation led by Diana Pinto at the University of Leicester, a study tested how people high in authenticity behave in social situations compared to people low in authenticity. Participants were asked to engage in a computer task in the laboratory. All they had to do was press a button in relation to a message that appeared on the screen. If they pressed a certain button in the time allocated, they earned points that they could exchange for money. The twist was that they were told that they were playing against another person in an adjoining laboratory who could steal points from them. The task was designed to mirror real-life situations where people might sometimes take credit for others' hard work. However, participants were not actually playing against another person – the idea being that by thinking that someone else was stealing points from them, the participants would feel cheated and be provoked to play the game aggressively. To test for aggression, they were told that they could steal points from their opponent next door if they wished. It was found that players who scored high on authenticity were actually less likely to respond aggressively. They continued to do their best to earn points for themselves rather than turning their attention to getting their own back – they were less punitive towards others. It was people who scored low on authenticity who were more likely to behave aggressively despite this being at some personal cost – by behaving aggressively, participants lost even more of their own points.

Turning to the practical implications, Yona Kifer's team at Tel Aviv University have used an experimental method in which a group was instructed to simply recall and write about a situation in which they were authentic, while another group recalled an experience of inauthenticity. The 'authentic' group were happier, raising the tantalising prospect that it may be possible to induce happiness through authenticity.

Invitation to research

So results to date are promising. However, research into authenticity is in its infancy. Most studies have been correlational and require replication and further scrutiny



I got interested in authenticity during my education to become a person-centred therapist. Here was an approach that valued people for who they are rather than for what others thought they should be. This was different from everything I had experienced in my own life up to that point. For me, authenticity is ultimately about self-knowledge and that is always a work in progress. There is no once and for all pass mark. I strive to live according to the principles of the person-centred approach, doing my best to be open to learning and respectful of people's right to self-determination.

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using more sophisticated prospective and experimental designs. I hope that this article will inspire a new generation of psychologists to pursue research in this challenging but important area of human experience. We need developmental research into the antecedents of authenticity. What are the factors in a young person's life that thwart the development of their authenticity? What problems in living does a lack of authenticity lead to? How can we nurture authenticity anew and maintain it in adult life? How stable is authenticity over time and right across the lifespan? Is change gradual or abrupt?

We also need strong evidence that authenticity is associated with the best of human experience, not the worst - one of the major criticisms of authenticity is that it will lead to selfish behaviours, as one would predict from a Freudian point of view. For Sigmund Freud, humans were lustful murderous savages if they followed their natural instincts, and it was only through civilisation that we learned to keep checks and balances on our destructive nature. For humanistic psychologists, however, human nature is seen as essentially social and constructive, with the recognition that authenticity involves a difficult process of always striving for balance in the process of realising one's own needs while

living together with others in such a way that meets the needs of those relationships. We need hard data on this balance, for example are authentic people more altruistic, caring, emotionally intelligent and expressive?

I hope to have convinced you that authenticity is the real deal: a topic with a rich theoretical history, now attracting the attention of contemporary psychologists. There is now a need for more rigorous research into the development of authenticity and what difference it makes, and that research could come from across the discipline. For practitioners in clinical and counselling psychology it may be that the promotion of authenticity may have benefits for improved mental health and increased wellbeing. For educational and school psychologists there may be wider applications as we change the way we look at parenting, and the role of schools and universities. For business and coaching psychologists, there may be new ideas about how to develop people at work.

Key sources

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