



Full Length Article

Feeling good and authentic: Experienced authenticity in daily life is predicted by positive feelings and situation characteristics, not trait-state consistency [☆]

A. Bell Cooper ^{a,*}, Ryne A. Sherman ^b, John F. Rauthmann ^c, David G. Serfass ^d, Nicolas A. Brown ^d

^a Lynn University, USA

^b Hogan Assessment Systems, USA

^c Universität zu Lübeck, Germany

^d Facebook, USA

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ABSTRACT

According to an “acting consistently = feeling authentic” hypothesis, people with higher ipsative trait-state consistency (degree to which one’s state expressions of personality patterns match one’s personality trait patterns) should experience higher experienced authenticity (degree to which one feels authentic). According to a “feeling good = feeling authentic” hypothesis, this should be the case because of positive feelings. In an experience sampling study, $N = 210$ participants completed personality questionnaires and then eight surveys per day for one week, where they reported the current situational characteristics and states. Behaving congruently with one’s traits did not predict experienced authenticity, while positive feelings did. Further, participants felt more authentic in situations that were characterized by them as more pleasant. Our findings thus support the “feeling good = feeling authentic” hypothesis, and we conclude that trait-state consistency and experienced authenticity cannot be used interchangeably and are distinct constructs in daily life.

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1. Introduction

When a person is acting like he or she typically acts, does that person feel more authentic? In principle, it seems that the answer ought to be “yes.” However, recent evidence from vignette-type studies (i.e., “imagine yourself in a situation...”) suggest that self-reports of authenticity are contaminated by the positivity or negativity of one’s behavior (Jongman-Sereno & Leary, 2016). This study further examines the assumption that being authentic = acting like oneself using experience sampling methods to measure behavior in real-world environments in real-time.

[☆] **Author notes:** All statistical analyses were conducted using R (R Core Development Team, 2014). Supplemental materials, including data and analytic scripts for reproducing the results presented herein will be available online at <https://osf.io/p35nd/>. This study was not preregistered. **Contributions:** Bell Cooper was responsible for study conceptualization, data collection, data preparation, data analysis, and report writing. Ryne Sherman was responsible for study conceptualization, data collection, and report writing. John Rauthmann was responsible for report writing. David Serfass and Nicolas Brown were responsible for study conceptualization, data collection, and data preparation.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: bcooper@lynn.edu (A.B. Cooper).

The importance of feeling authentic is deeply ingrained into our every language, being exemplified in the positive valuation of phrases such as “being true to yourself”, “being yourself” and “expressing who you are.” Not surprisingly, there is active research on authenticity as a psychological construct (e.g., Harter, 2002; Schlegel, Hicks, Arndt, & King, 2009; Fleeson & Wilt, 2010; Lenton, Bruder, Slabu, & Sedikides, 2013). Some strands of that research highlight the beneficial side of authenticity, for example, for job satisfaction in employees (Abraham, 1998; Pugliesi, 1999; Zerbe, 2000), self-esteem (Kernis, 2003; Goldman & Kernis, 2002; Heppner et al., 2008), well-being (Cross, Gore, & Morris, 2003), satisfaction within a given role (Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne, & Ilardi, 1997), and psychological adjustment (Sherman, Nave, & Funder, 2012). Given the apparent importance of authenticity in a broad range of contexts, it is also important to ask under what circumstances people feel authentic. Specifically, authenticity has been related to (a) how people enact their personality traits in behavioral states (Fleeson & Wilt, 2010), (b) how positively people feel in a given situation (Lenton, Slabu, Sedikides, & Power, 2013), and (c) which situational effects may be present (Lenton, Slabu, & Sedikides, 2016). Thus, in the current study, we set out to examine how trait-state consistency (i.e., when one’s profile of state expressions of personality matches one’s

trait personality profile), state expressions of personality, positive feelings (i.e., happiness and self-esteem), situation characteristics (i.e., the Situational Eight DIAMONDS) predict experienced authenticity (i.e., the subjective feeling of authenticity) in people's everyday life with an experience sampling design.

2. Background

2.1. The relation between authenticity and trait-state consistency

Authenticity is often operationalized phenomenologically as a perception of authentic states, usually the degree to which one *feels* true to oneself (Fleeson & Wilt, 2010; Lenton, Bruder, et al., 2013; Sheldon et al., 1997; Turner & Billings, 1991). It can be measured by asking participants to self-report how authentic they feel or felt at a given moment. We refer to this form as *experienced authenticity*. On the other hand, we might also measure the extent to which people express or manifest momentary states in line with their enduring traits (Fleeson & Wilt, 2010; Sherman, Nave, Funder, 2012). We refer to this as *trait-state consistency* – the degree to which one is behaving in line with one's personality. This represents a form of personality consistency (Fleeson & Nofhle, 2008) at the within-person profile level (Wood & Furr, 2016) where the patterning among personality traits ipsatively matches the patterning among corresponding personality states later. For example, a person that is dispositionally more extraverted than conscientious should also behave, within a given situation, more extraverted than conscientious. In other words, the rank-ordering among personality states should mirror those among personality traits for high trait-state consistency at a within-person profile level. Although both experienced authenticity (acting in line with oneself) and trait-state consistency (acting in line with one's traits) seem to capture related constructs, few studies have so far empirically investigated their relations. Do people report being more authentic when they are behaving more congruently with their personality traits?

Arguably, people should report being more authentic when their personality traits and behaviors are more in alignment. As already mentioned, authenticity concerns the degree to which one feels like one feels true to oneself. It logically follows that people ought to feel more “true to themselves” when they are behaving in ways that are congruent with their core personality traits. As such, experienced authenticity should be positively related to the actual degree to which one's states in a given situation matches one's pattern of traits. In other words, feeling authentic should occur when one is acting in congruence with one's personality. We term this the “*acting consistently = feeling authentic*” hypothesis. However, previous findings present some conflicting evidence for this hypothesis. For example, one study showed that people report more authenticity when retrospective accounts of behavior within a specific role were more closely aligned with their own perceptions of themselves in general (Sheldon et al., 1997). In contrast, other research showed that individuals did not report feeling more authentic when their levels of Big Five behavior were directly in line with their trait levels (Fleeson & Wilt, 2010). Instead, people reported feeling more authentic when they were acting generally more socially desirable ways (i.e., more extraverted, conscientious, open, agreeable, and emotionally stable) – and *regardless* whether those states matched their traits or not. Thus, we set out to test the “*acting consistently = feeling authentic*” hypothesis that trait-state consistency is related to experienced authenticity.

2.2. The role of positive feelings

Another explanation of experienced authenticity is positive feelings, which we term the “*feeling good = feeling authentic*”

hypothesis. This hypothesis has long been philosophized; as detailed in historical Confucianism, authenticity and happiness are bidirectionally related and inseparable (Chen, 2013). Authenticity is empirically related to a variety of positive feelings, such as self-esteem (Wood, Linley, Maltby, Baliousis, & Joseph, 2008) and well-being (Goldman & Kernis, 2002; Wood et al., 2008). Further, experimental work has demonstrated a causal influence of mood on experienced authenticity, in that negative affective states can lead to decreases in experienced authenticity and positive affective states can lead to increases in experienced authenticity (Lenton, Slabu, et al., 2013). Fleeson and Wilt (2010) examined the possibility that feeling authentic at a given moment may simply come from feeling good at that moment, but demonstrate evidence against that case. More recently, Jongman-Sereno and Leary (2016) show that people's self-perceived authenticity is related to behaviors that reflected positive characteristics. Thus, we also aim to test the “*feeling good = feeling authentic*” hypothesis by examining how momentary positive feelings (i.e., happiness and self-esteem) predict experienced authenticity in experience sampling data. Notably, we are also interested in to what extent positive feelings predict experienced authenticity beyond the predictive effects of trait-state consistency (see the “*acting consistently = feeling authentic*” hypothesis).

2.3. Situational correlates

Several studies suggest that the situation surrounding an individual at a given moment may affect the degree to which he or she feels authentic (e.g., Lenton, Slabu, & Sedikides, 2016). For example, people feel more authentic in the company of friends (Turner & Billings, 1991). Similarly, having fun, relaxing with others, familiar settings, and achievement evoke authentic feelings, while having to meet certain expectations, feeling judged, facing difficult situations, or experiencing isolation evoke inauthentic feelings (Lenton, Slabu, et al., 2013). Some researchers suggest an interactive approach, such that when people's situational goal strivings align with their personal values, they will feel more authentic (Sheldon and Elliot, 1999). Others suggest that situational cues, such as interacting with a stranger over the internet rather than face-to-face, may give people access to their true selves, thus encouraging feelings of authenticity (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimmons, 2002). Further, Fleeson and Wilt (2010) showed that people reported feeling most authentic when they were acting more extraverted, open to experience, conscientious, emotionally stable, and agreeable, regardless of their trait scores. This finding suggests that people will feel more authentic in situations that afford acting in specific (usually socially desirable) ways.

If trait-state consistency and experienced authenticity are closely tied (see “*acting consistently = feeling authentic*” hypothesis), then we may also be interested in the situational correlates of trait-state consistency as these should be largely the same as those of experienced authenticity. To our knowledge, only one study has so far examined trait-state consistency and its situational correlates. Sherman et al. (2012) showed that when people were in situations that afforded autonomy, competence, and relatedness, they acted more consistently in terms of how people are typically as operationalized via a normative personality trait profile (characterized by high Extraversion, Openness, Conscientiousness, Emotional Stability, and Agreeableness). This finding suggests that people will have higher levels of trait-state consistency as a function of specific characteristics of a situation.

While the work of Fleeson and Wilt (2010) as well as the Sherman et al. (2012) suggests that authenticity and trait-state consistency should be systematically correlated with situational characteristics, both studies were limited to some extent. The

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