



“Releasing the beast within”? Authenticity, well-being, and the Dark Tetrad

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ABSTRACT

Two studies examined whether the well-documented link between authenticity and well-being is moderated by the Dark Tetrad (Machiavellianism, narcissism, psychopathy, and sadism). We predicted that among those high on these traits, authenticity would be less strongly associated with well-being. Study 1 ($N = 404$) and Study 2 ($N = 415$) showed that authenticity was less strongly related to well-being among those high on Dark Tetrad personality traits. In addition, Study 2 showed that the pattern of moderation was not accounted for by desirability bias. Study 2 demonstrated that the Dark Tetrad did not moderate the association between authenticity and basic need satisfaction. In both studies, at low levels of authenticity, the Dark Tetrad were associated with higher well-being.

1. Introduction

The idea that it is best for people to be themselves is well represented in popular lore and psychological research and theory. Authenticity, defined as being aware of one's own characteristics and genuinely expressing these in behavior, is a central theme in many psychological approaches to optimal functioning (see Robinson, Lopez, Ramos, & Nartova-Bochaver, 2012). In particular, humanistic conceptions of personality present authenticity as a key to adjustment and personal growth. Yet, in a sense, the value of genuinely expressing one's innermost desires and impulses rests on another humanistic assumption, namely, that these innermost impulses are ultimately for the betterment of the self and others. In this article, we consider whether authenticity is associated with well-being even for those whose innermost impulses may stand apart from or even conflict with the greater good, individuals who possess so-called dark personality traits. Does authenticity relate to well-being even among such individuals? We propose that authenticity might be less strongly linked to well-being for those high on traits that predispose them to being callous and manipulative toward others. Before presenting two studies testing this proposal, we review the meaning of authenticity and its role in human functioning. We then describe the dark traits that were the center of this investigation and suggest predictions about the ways that Dark Tetrad traits might moderate the association between authenticity and psychological well-being.

1.1. Authenticity and human functioning

Authenticity has long been embraced by philosophers and psychologists as an optimal strategy toward psychological functioning. Following on Kierkegaard's (1983) famous quote, “To be that self which one truly is, is indeed the opposite of despair,” Rogers (1961) traced the central role of becoming one's genuine self in the process of therapeutic healing. Rogers observed that as his clients developed toward optimal functioning they showed a pattern of moving away from various externally oriented behavioral controls (e.g., facades, “oughts,” meeting expectations, and pleasing others) in favor of relying on their own inner impulses (what Rogers' termed the “organism”).

Similarly, the contemporary humanistic approach to motivation, Self Determination Theory (SDT), maintains that authentically following one's innate desires is a pathway to optimal functioning (Ryan & Deci, 2001, 2004). Within SDT, following one's innate tendency toward the satisfaction of organismic needs leads naturally to well-being and growth (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2001). Not unlike Rogers' portrayal of movement away from reliance on external social controls to reliance on internal personally congruent impulses, SDT presents autonomy as a central aspect of healthy human motivation, particularly as the person is increasingly motivated by intrinsic rather than extrinsic ends (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Research supports these humanistic ideals. Self-reported authenticity relates to numerous aspects of well-being (Kernis & Goldman, 2006) and does so across cultures (Robinson et al., 2012). Following one's innate values (Sheldon, Arndt, & Houser-Marko, 2003) toward greater concordance between one's goals and intrinsic, organismic

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needs predicts ever greater well-being (Sheldon, 2014; Sheldon & Houser-Marko, 2001; Sheldon & Kasser, 1995). Individuals high in “self-presentational congruence” (presenting oneself as one truly is across a variety of social relationships) show higher social and psychological well-being (Gohar, Leary, & Costanzo, 2016). Those who present themselves as they really are in everyday life experience higher relationship satisfaction (Gosnell, Britt, & McKibben, 2011). Such findings lend support to the humanistic proposal that authenticity is an essential part of optimal human functioning.

Yet, as noted above, the psychological benefits of authenticity arguably rest on the humanistic assumption that the content of one's innermost impulses are toward self-growth and compassion toward others. In contrast, we might question whether it is optimal for someone who possesses traits that predispose him or her to negative behavior, such as aggression or self-harm, “to be that self which one truly is.”

Rogers anticipated this concern. He (1961, p. 177) noted that, for some, his advocacy for being true to oneself might imply “releasing the beast within.” In an answer to the possibility that innermost desires might be problematic or dangerous, Rogers (1961) drew an analogy to a lion, attacking and devouring its prey. For the lion, such behavior is an expression of its innermost natural impulses as a member of its species. Rogers maintained that human behavior could be viewed similarly. Increasing trust in a person's “organism” was a good: “...when one is truly and deeply a unique member of the human species, this is not something which should excite horror” (Rogers, 1961, p. 178). Impulses that are feared by the person are likely to emerge as natural and innately beneficial. Of course, from Rogers' perspective, this emergence of feared behaviors as expressions of true human nature would involve the undoing of the socialization that has led to a chasm between the person's current self and his or her true nature. Similarly, addressing the “darker side” of human functioning, SDT scholars maintain that truly heinous behavior can be traced to “serious thwarting of psychological needs during development” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 321). From a humanistic perspective, there are those who have not received the proper nutrients of self-development (for Rogers, unconditional positive regard; for SDT, autonomy support) and may have impulses that are twisted accordingly. For such individuals, true authenticity may be a complicated matter, involving first the uncovering of long suppressed impulses (Kernis & Heppner, 2008).

1.2. Dark personality traits

Paulhus and Williams (2002) identified the Dark Triad (i.e., Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy), a constellation of traits reflecting aversive personality characteristics. These traits are considered to be subclinical reflections of a shared core of callousness and manipulateness (Furnham, Richards, & Paulhus, 2013). Machiavellianism is characterized by the willingness to engage in manipulation of others in the pursuit of personal success (Christie & Geis, 1970). Narcissism is reflected in grandiose self-views, dominance, and a strong sense of entitlement (Corry, Merrit, Mrug, & Pamp, 2008). Psychopathy refers to being impulsive, antisocial, and lacking in empathy (Miller, Lyman, Widiger, & Luekefeld, 2001). The traits are conceptually distinct but empirical overlap has been identified (Furnham et al., 2013). Considered together with sadism, which is the enjoyment of cruelty and the suffering of others (Buckels, Jones, & Paulhus, 2013), these traits comprise the Dark Tetrad, which may be considered contemporary personality psychology's approach to evil (Book et al., 2016).

A notable conceptual ambiguity regards whether the Dark Tetrad traits represent the core selves of those who endorse measures of the Dark Tetrad or are, instead, superficial qualities, laid over true, good human nature. To some extent, research and theory on the Dark Triad treats these traits as core aspects: They share substantial genetic components (e.g., Onley, Veselka, Schermer, & Vernon, 2013; Petrides, Vernon, Schermer, & Veselka, 2011), and evolutionary approaches to these dark traits consider them under the umbrella of fast life history

strategies (e.g., Jonason, Koenig, & Tost, 2010; McDonald, Donnellan, & Navarrete, 2012). In some ways, descriptions of these traits resonate with Rogers' notion of the feared “beast within.” Dark personality traits, particularly psychopathy, have been conceptualized as predatory life strategies that hold frequency dependent adaptive value (Hare, 2001; Mealey, 1995). Psychopathy and Machiavellianism are thought to represent social mimicry strategies, similar to those of non-human predators that extract resources by using deception (Jones, 2014). Clearly, as noted above, the humanistic perspective would posit that such characteristics likely emerge from problematic socialization. This ambiguity notwithstanding, if one possesses these traits, is it a good idea to express oneself genuinely in behavior? We consider this question next.

1.3. The content of the authentic self

How might the content of a person's traits affect the association between authentic self-expression and well-being? Answering this question is complicated by the fact that authenticity and positivity share a strong association. Indeed, Strohminger, Knobe, and Newman (2017) proposed that the true self is inherently moral. Although authenticity is often thought of as being oneself “warts and all,” research suggests that when people feel that they are being themselves they are rarely showing their warts: positive, socially desirable behaviors are more likely to feel like authentic expressions of the self, even if they are not. For example, Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne, and Ilardi (1997) found that people feel more authentic when they are enacting socially desirable traits. Similarly, Jongman-Sereno and Leary (2016) found that people rated positive behaviors as more authentic expressions of themselves than negative behaviors, regardless of whether these were actually behaviors they had performed.

Research on the “true self” has addressed this issue indirectly. Schlegel, Hicks, Arndt, and King (2009) showed that exposure to even negative aspects of one's true self led to higher meaning in life, suggesting that authenticity may relate to well-being regardless of the qualities a person possesses. Gohar et al. (2016) found that self-presentational congruence predicted higher well-being and social adjustment controlling for Machiavellianism. However, these authors did not test for moderation.

For those who possess traits that are socially problematic, inauthentic behavior could be functional, at least in terms of personal well-being. That is, if one knows that s/he is prone to manipulative or callous behavior toward others, hiding that fact might be lead to better well-being outcomes. There are at least three reasons for this possibility. First, for such individuals, hiding who “they really are” may be an attempt, simply, to be a good person. For those low in the dark traits, following their innermost impulses toward goodness may be a relatively easy proposition. However, for those high on dark traits, personal well-being, growth, and maintaining positive social relationships may require them to hide their innermost impulses (which the person may have no intention of actually enacting). Being good, even if it is not an expression of the person's “true self,” may lead to well-being benefits (e.g., Martela & Ryan, 2016). Second, individuals who possess Dark Tetrad traits might engage in strategic inauthenticity. Not showing one's hand might be a superior strategy to revealing one's negative or harmful intents. Well-being might be higher among those who are successful at this manipulation as a function of goal attainment (e.g., Heckhausen & Kay, 2018). Finally, it might be that for those who report themselves as cold and calculating, being inauthentic is, itself, authentic. That is, if a person experiences his or her “core self” as deceitful and manipulative, being inauthentic may be a genuine expression of the self. To the extent that being true to oneself is associated with well-being, we might expect inauthenticity to be associated with well-being for those for whom being inauthentic is true to their core sense of self.

Essentially, we propose that the context of the Dark Tetrad will flip the meaning of (in)authenticity. This idea is akin to a recent set of studies showing that narcissism is associated with finding higher

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