Balanced authenticity predicts optimal well-being: Theoretical conceptualization and empirical development of the authenticity in relationships scale

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the theoretical development and validation of the authenticity in relationships scale (AIRS), and tests whether balanced authenticity predicts optimal well-being and simultaneous gains of agency and communion. Six independent adult samples ($N = 1115$; M age $= 31.75$; $female = 642$) completed the AIRS and measures used to establish construct validity, psychological well-being (PWB), and subjective well-being (SWB). Exploratory and multigroup confirmatory factor analysis supported a tripartite conception of authenticity (ego-centric authenticity, other-distorted authenticity, and balanced authenticity), and this was shown to be invariant across samples and gender groups. With good reliability and test–retest stability, subscale scores composed of factor-unique items were found to correlate with criterion-related constructs in the directions predicted. Specifically, ego-centric authenticity was related to unmitigated agency and low relationship satisfaction. Other-distorted authenticity was related to unmitigated communion and low autonomy. Balanced authenticity was shown to predict both agency and communion, and was positively correlated with SWB, even when social desirability was controlled for. These findings contribute to our understanding of the relational essence of authenticity and its subsequent association with well-being.

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1. Introduction

The concept of "authenticity" has its roots in ancient Greek philosophy, as illustrated by well-known phrases such as "*To thine own self be true*" (Harter, 2002). In recent years, individual differences in authenticity have begun to be viewed as essential to understanding the human condition from a range of psychological perspectives, including positive (Horney, 1950; Kernis, 2003), developmental (Harter, Marold, Whitesell, & Cobbs, 1996), interpersonal (Lopez & Rice, 2006; Wang, 2014), and clinical (Joseph & Wood, 2010) psychology.

A broad definition of authenticity is that it is a way of being that reflects one's true self through the accurate portrayal of one's thoughts, feelings, and emotions (Kernis & Goldman, 2006; White, 2011). To date, 3 measures examining dispositional authenticity (Goldman & Kernis, 2002; Lopez & Rice, 2006; Wood, Linley, Maltby, Baliousis, & Joseph, 2008) all consider authenticity as a reflection of the true self that must overcome the influence of others. However, humans are fundamentally social beings, and the authentic living is bound to be affected by the social environment (Schmid, 2005b). In another word, the true self coexists with the relational self (Brewer, 1991; Chen,

Boucher, & Tapias, 2006; Sedikides & Brewer, 2001). The most challenge is not to realize one's inner thoughts through eliminating others' influences, but rather how to obtain one's goal in the enviromental restrictions and then to achieve harmonious unity between true self and relational self. Given this, we proposed the conceptualization of authenticity in relationships to show only the balanced authenticity would lead to high global well-being: both personal and relational satisfaction.

2. Balancing the true self with external influences

Throughout people's daily lives there is an ongoing conflict between one's inner through and the dictates of the environment. When confronted with external forces, individuals have two spontaneous options—conceal the truth (inauthenticity) or speak out (authenticity). Inauthentic actions frequently occur when people are concerned about social disapproval (Leary, 2003), which has been shown to increase the risk for low well-being (Bettencourt & Sheldon, 2001; Neff & Harter, 2002; Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne, & Ilardi, 1997). At the other extreme, when the authenticity is characterized by inadequate consideration for others' perspectives (known as egocentric authenticity) (Davis & Oathout, 1987; Schmid, 2005a), it may lead to inharmonious interpersonal relationships and lower levels of well-being (Chen, Lee-Chai, & Bargh, 2001; Helgeson, 1994; Kwan, Bond, & Singelis, 1997; Wang, 2015b).

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The deficiencies associated with both egocentric authenticity and in-authenticity may be captured via the constructs of unmitigated agency and unmitigated communion, respectively. Both agency and communion are required for optimal well-being (high subjective well-being (SWB) and psychological well-being (PWB) (Bakan, 1966; Keyes, Shmotkin, & Ryff, 2002). Any focus on the self resulting in the exclusion of others (unmitigated agency), or any focus on others resulting in the exclusion of the self (unmitigated communion), will incur a wide range of health hazards (Bem, 1974; Helgeson, 1994; Helgeson & Fritz, 1998, 1999).

With this in mind, several paradigms have attempted to explain how best to deal with the challenge of striking a healthy balance between agency and communion. Subsequent theories on the topic include optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer, 1991), functional flexibility theory (Paulhus & Martin, 1988), and Eastern dialectical thinking (Cheung et al., 2003; Peng & Nisbett, 1999). Dialecticism, rooted in Eastern culture, advocates the mutual consideration of opposites and contradictions in order to gain optimal results (Cheung et al., 2003; Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001). In this perspective, authenticity is a process term that encompasses unity and plurality, which ultimately contributes to the "fully functioning person" (Schmid, 2001). When confronted with a conflict between agency and communion, highly dialectical individuals will neither stand by their own ideas to maximize self-interests, nor easily abandon their own opinions to meet the expectations of others. Instead, they will maintain a balance between internal and external pressure and find a solution that will be broadly accepted (Yang & Chiu, 1997). It is not a coincidence that the person-centered approach argues that "there is no authenticity, no presence in relationship without mutuality" (Rogers, 1962).

Although authenticity requires the ability to both understand one-self and to be influenced by others (Schmid, 2001), little previous research has empirically investigated whether and how maintaining balanced authenticity will satisfy both SWB and PWB. In order to fill this gap, we propose a novel conceptualization of balanced authenticity that refers to giving consideration to the interests of both oneself and others. Furthermore, this study will examine whether balanced authenticity predicts optimal well-being via an increase in both agency and communion in order to enhance our understanding of authenticity and how this concept contributes to overall well-being.

3. Conceptualization of balanced authenticity

We hypothesized that only balanced authenticity will lead to high global well-being, and then developed a theoretical schema for the proposed model (see Fig. 1). Inspired by Brewer's (1991) optimal distinctiveness model, authenticity is conceptualized as increasing with self-oriented behaviors and decreasing with other-oriented behaviors. Ego-centric behaviors are characterized by the unobstructed operation of one's uncontrived inclinations, whereas other-oriented behaviors
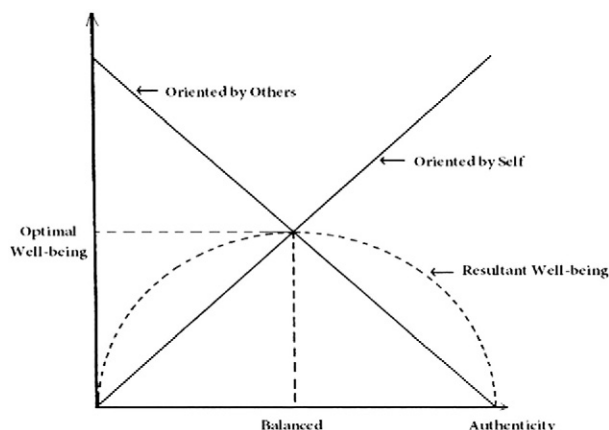

Fig. 1. The balanced authenticity leading to optimal well-being model.

are characterized by striving for the approval of others while concealing one's inner tendencies. The two orientations work in opposing directions as motivators of individual behavior, and the result of this conflict predicts individual well-being. It is proposed that optimal well-being will be achieved through balanced authenticity, so that the reconciliation of one's own inclinations and the inclinations of others in order to achieve one's aim will occur naturally within the constraints of any given situation. Individuals high in balanced authenticity will choose the *middle ground* in order to maximize this outcome, and will thereby ultimately gain the advantages of both agency and communion.

Any deviations from balanced authenticity in either direction may reduce individual well-being. When people stubbornly pursue personal autonomy without empathy with others, thus demonstrating ego-centric authenticity, their well-being will typically decline as a result of poorer interpersonal relationships. Conversely, those who completely inhibit their inner desire to meet the expectations of others, thus demonstrating other-distorted authenticity, will be more likely to report diminished well-being due to lower levels of autonomy.

In sum, we proposed a tripartite conception of authenticity that represents the three distinct dimensions of authenticity. Every person might possess the three dimensions of authenticity to some extent. While a typical individual with high balanced authenticity, but low ego-centric and other-distorted authenticities, would neither deny their own natural inclinations in return for the approval of others (unmitigated communion), nor rigidly adhere to uncontrived inclinations at the expense of others (unmitigated agency). Hence, he or she will profit from the advantages of both agency and communion via exercising balanced authenticity.

4. Overview of the present research

Two studies across 6 samples were conducted in order to test the theoretical construct of balanced authenticity through a comparison with ego-centric authenticity and other-distorted authenticity. Study 1 involved the development of the authenticity in relationships scale (AIRS) through the measurement of a tripartite conception of authenticity in order to quantify balanced authenticity. An initial examination of the scale's factor structure was also performed. Study 2 confirmed the factor structure, investigated the measure's psychometric properties, and tested whether balanced authenticity predicted global well-being and a simultaneous gain in agency and communion.

5. Study 1

The aim of Study 1 was the initial development of the AIRS through standard psychometric procedures (Clark & Watson, 1995), and to measure the tripartite conception of Authenticity in the Relationships as described in the introduction. We aimed to develop a short scale to reduce the cognitive load on respondents and emphasize brevity and clarity of wording and instructions.

5.1. Method

5.1.1. Development of item pool

We developed a pool of 17 items that addressed experiences of ego-centric authenticity, other-distorted authenticity, and balanced authenticity. Each item was expressed as a statement, with which participants rated their level of agreement on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *does not describe me at all*, 5 = *describes me very well*).

5.1.2. Sample and procedure

We recruited 191 Chinese participants from a professional website that offers financial reward for completing online tasks. Participants (*male* = 95, *M* age = 33.26, *SD* = 6.04) each received RMB 10 for participation. Participants varied considerably in profession (for example, 10.1% were college students and, 26.4% were technical personnel),