

Humanism, authenticity, and humor: Being, being real, and being funny



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ABSTRACT

Authenticity is an important construct in humanistic psychology; it consists of discrepancies between the true self, the noticed self, and the expressed self. Humor may be conceptualized as having two axes: benign or disparaging, and improving the self or improving relationships with others. The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between facets of authenticity and humor styles among a large sample of U.S. college students ($N = 813$). It was found that lower incongruences between the three stages of authentic experience (i.e., higher authenticity) were associated with benign humor styles. Larger discrepancies in the self as well as the impact of external influences were associated with disparaging humor styles. These results suggest that there is a relationship between individuals' experience of the self and their style of humor.

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1. Introduction

Authenticity – who a person is, how they perceive themselves, and how they operate on those perceptions – is an important construct in humanistic psychology (Boyraz, Waits, & Felix, 2014; Harter, 2002; Maslow, 1962). Authenticity has been linked to self-esteem and well-being (Ménard & Brunet, 2011; Wood, Linley, Maltby, Baliousis, & Joseph, 2008) as well as lower levels of depression, anxiety, and stress (Grégoire, Baron, Ménard, & Lachance, 2014; Satici & Kayis, 2013; Wood et al., 2008). Many believe that authenticity is a key component in humor; according to Collins (2014), anyone can pretend to be serious, but you cannot pretend to be funny. Individuals' humor style is related to their well-being as well as situational factors (Kuiper, Martin, & Olinger, 1993; Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003). The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between authenticity and humor style in a large sample of U.S. college students.

2. Authenticity

Historically, living a life outside of one's true self has been viewed as unhealthy and an obstacle to overcome in self-achievement (Rogers, 1965). The ancient Greeks prescribed leaving falsities out of the personal conception and letting one's true self be the most evident (Harter, 2002). The original concept of authenticity, in an existential sense, can be attributed to Heidegger, 2008, who illustrated humans' crisis of identity and purpose as a "being-toward-death." This has become an important concept well into the 21st century as life purpose and achievement

are still sought after (Guignon, 2013; Jirásek & Veselský, 2013). Authenticity is thought of by many as a crucial element of well-being, with Rogers (1965) going so far as to state that the feeling of authenticity is the most valuable experience in achieving full functionality. For the purpose of authenticity, Leary (2003) states that the "true self" demarcates where a person is before they have expressed something outwardly or even thought about it themselves (Wood et al., 2008). Without a realization of what entails a personal self, a high feeling of self worth is unlikely as actions become inauthentic and hard to appreciate (Leary, 2003). Wood et al. (2008) state the impossibility of conscious awareness perfectly mirroring the experienced reality, resulting in an inevitable gap. This means that what someone thinks they are feeling, is actually only their cognitive awareness of an initial perception that cannot be a complete match. This disparity is actually measured in the person-centered conception of authenticity with its first construct, self-alienation.

There are three components to authenticity: self-alienation, authentic living, and accepting external influences (Wood et al., 2008). This distinction is an important aspect of the person-centered conception of authenticity (Barrett-Lennard, 1998). This model uses three stages of living and experience to explain the different components of authenticity and how they are relevant to life (Van den Bosch & Taris, 2014). These stages are: A) the real experience (the true self), B) the awareness of that experience (noticement of the self), and C) the way in which that awareness is expressed in emotions and behavior (the expression of the self; Satici & Kayis, 2013). This model is shown in Fig. 1.

Integrating the aspects of authenticity into this model, self-alienation stands in between stages A and B, delineating the amount that the awareness differs from the actual experience. High amounts of self-alienation can lead to psychopathology due to the difficulties of living with a discrepancy between the self and the perceptions of the

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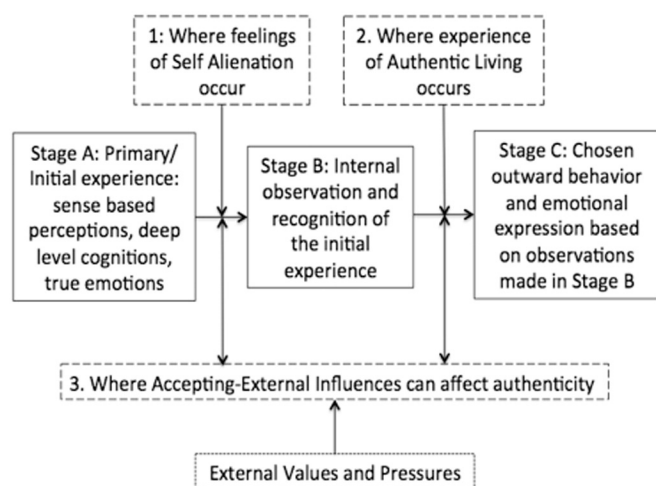


Fig. 1. The person centered conception of authenticity (Wood et al., 2008).

	Benign Impact	Damaging Impact
For the relationship with others (improving worth and attractiveness to other people).	Affiliative Humor	Self-Defeating Humor
For the relationship with the self (improving self-worth and standing).	Self-Enhancing Humor	Aggressive Humor

Fig. 2. Two-by-two model of humor styles (Martin et al., 2003).

self (Grégoire et al., 2014). This is not because there is something innately wrong with a mismatch between the noticed self and the expressed self, but because there are feelings of distress and undervalue that can occur when an individual forces themselves to be inauthentic (Leary, 2003). The second aspect of authenticity lies between stages B and C and is known as authentic living. Authentic living encompasses the degree in which external expression of behavior and emotions matches the initial awareness of these natural behaviors and emotions, as well as the security of beliefs in varying scenarios (Wood et al., 2008). Incompatibility between outward acts and inward states can impair self-worth and self-efficacy (Grandey, Foo, Groth, & Goodwin, 2012), and could lead to overcompensating behaviors. This inauthenticity can also impair enjoyment of activities, as a discrepancy between inward states and outward expressions results in unnatural behavior (Boyraz et al., 2014). Finally, the third component of authenticity, accepting external influences, effects self-alienation and authentic living based on the level of conformity to external values. This occurs when the influences of society end up altering the way that the body's initial experience translates into the cognitive realm, effecting self-alienation, as well as how that cognition results in known behavior and emotions, effecting authentic living (Schmid, 2005). This effect of accepting external influences often results in an attempt to conform to or reject an idea based on what the outside world proposes to be true (Satici, Uysal, & Akin, 2013), and can prevent understanding of the self as well as understanding of others (Boyraz et al., 2014). The constant barrage of outside criteria, which are impossible to fully live up to in any circumstance, can lead someone who is susceptible to outside influences into a state of low self-esteem, even if internally they value themselves highly (Leary, 2003).

3. Humor

Martin et al. (2003) conceptualized humor style in a two-by-two model, in which one axis is the purpose of the humor – either to enhance the self or enhance the relationship with others – and the other is the route in which the humor is used to accomplish this purpose – by using either benign or potentially harmful humor. This yields four humor styles. The conceptual structure of the model is shown in Fig. 2.

Affiliative humor (enhance relationships/benign) uses harmless humor to put others at ease and reveals users who are appreciative of themselves and their surroundings and high in relational satisfaction, often telling jokes or stories for the amusement of both themselves and others (Leist & Müller, 2013; Martin et al., 2003; Mendiburo-Seguel, Páez, & Martínez-Sánchez, 2015). Self-defeating humor (enhance relationships/damaging) belittles the

self for the sake of the joke and is associated with higher levels of anxiety, depression, and aggression and lower levels of self-esteem and well-being (Mendiburo-Seguel et al., 2015; Ozyesil, 2012), an indicator of the acknowledgement of the need to change. The individual may be unimpressed with who they are, and uncomfortable with themselves in comparison to others due to perceived values, so he or she uses self-defeating humor to openly acknowledge their self-perceived faults in a way that eases social stress. Or, they are using self-defeating humor to hide their true feelings from both themselves and from others (Martin et al., 2003). The inverse of this shows humor as a tool to raise personal self-esteem, whether alone or with people, possibly to protect against feelings of inadequacy and isolation or as a defense against adversity (Kuiper et al., 1993; Martin et al., 2003), by using either rather benevolent or damaging humor. Self-enhancing humor (enhance the self/benign) provides this coping mechanism by adding humor to life elements that may traditionally be known to decrease mood and self-worth (Leist & Müller, 2013; Mendiburo-Seguel et al., 2015), such as joking around in a traffic jam rather than giving in to road rage. Self-enhancing humor may also indicate a person's ability to have a realistic view of the self, revealing the knowledge of their actual worth that results in their need to find a higher standing, if only internally. Unless this is taken to an extreme, in which there is disparagement between self-worth and perceived self worth and self-enhancing humor is not necessarily needed but used to overcompensate (Martin et al., 2003). Aggressive humor (enhance the self/damaging) accomplishes this same function of humor by instead increasing self-worth through the detriment of others and maintaining status in the social hierarchy (Leist & Müller, 2013; Ozyesil, 2012). Aggressive humor may hurt well-being though, as it may stop an individual from realizing their full self (Maslow, 1962) in that aggressive humor results from a low sense of self and can bar relationships with others (Martin et al., 2003; Mendiburo-Seguel et al., 2015). Using humor in this fashion may help the person in the immediate situation, but also has the potential to hide the true problems and prevent proper solutions from being implemented (Sugimura, Rudolph, & Agoston, 2014), as aggressive humor is used compulsively, even in inappropriate settings, for the purposes of disparagement and manipulation (Martin et al., 2003).

4. Authenticity and Humor

Authenticity and humor can both increase well-being when fully realized (Martin et al., 2003; Rogers, 1965). A high disparity between the true self and the awareness of the self (self-alienation) can prevent self-actualization (Maslow, 1962), which can result in maladaptive behavior, which may include excessive aggressive or self-defeating humor, and in turn can prevent an individual from pursuing a more psychologically and relationally healthy solution (Martin et al., 2003). The inverse, a high congruence between the noticed self and expressed self (authentic living), can result in high well-being, including self-esteem and relational satisfaction, that allows for ease in relationship building, which is when affiliative humor becomes most appropriate

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