



Self-focused attention, authenticity, and well-being



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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine whether two distinct forms of self-focusing tendencies (i.e., self-rumination and self-reflection) predict authenticity, as well as to determine whether authenticity mediated the relationship between these self-focusing tendencies and both life satisfaction and distress. Data of this study were collected from 619 adults through an online survey. The hypothesized model was examined using structural equation modeling. Supporting the hypotheses of the study, after controlling for gender and age, both self-rumination and self-reflection had significant indirect effects on life satisfaction and distress through authenticity. Specifically, participants with a tendency to engage in self-reflection reported higher levels of authenticity, which then was associated with increased life satisfaction and decreased distress. On the other hand, participants who are inclined to self-ruminate reported lower levels of authenticity, which in turn, mediated the effect of rumination on both life satisfaction and distress.

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1. Introduction

The psychological benefits of authenticity have been emphasized in many counseling theories. For example, several humanistic-existential theorists (e.g., Maslow, 1968; Perls, 1969; Rogers, 1951) considered authenticity as the central aspect of positive psychological functioning and personal growth, and suggested that psychological dysfunction results from the discrepancy between one true self and his or her external experiences (i.e., inauthenticity). Accordingly, the quest for authenticity lies at the core of humanistic-existential theories (e.g., Maslow, 1968; Perls, 1969; Rogers, 1951).

Person-centered theory defines authenticity as the congruence between different aspects of the self (see Barrett-Lennard, 1998; Rogers, 1951). Using this theory as a framework, Wood, Linley, Maltby, Baliouis, and Joseph (2008) defined dispositional authenticity as involving three components: a) *self-alienation* (the extent to which individuals are in touch with their true self, including their emotions, beliefs, and physiological states), b) *authentic living* (the congruence between one's true self and one's behaviors and actions), and c) *accepting external influence* (internalization of the values or beliefs of other people without considering whether these values and beliefs are congruent with one's personality). According to this conceptualization, authentic individuals know themselves, live in accordance with their values and beliefs, and have the courage to reject the influence of other people.

Although the concept of authenticity has a long history in the psychology literature, only recently has this concept and its relationship

with psychological functioning gained attention in the empirical literature (e.g., Boyraz, Waits, & Felix, 2014; Goldman & Kernis, 2002; Wood et al., 2008). Several recent studies provided support for the theoretical literature and suggested that authenticity is related to positive psychological outcomes, such as increased life satisfaction, psychological well-being, self-esteem, and reduced distress (e.g., Boyraz et al., 2014; Goldman & Kernis, 2002; Wood et al., 2008).

These findings highlight the positive effects of authenticity on wellbeing; however, despite the considerable theoretical literature on the determinants of authenticity, the variables explaining why some individuals are more authentic than others have received little attention in the empirical literature. Given the central role of authenticity in positive psychological functioning, developing an insight into the factors that enhance authenticity is critical. Drawing from humanistic-existential theories, which suggest that exploring and accepting one's internal experiences fosters authenticity (e.g., Maslow, 1968; Rogers, 1951), the present study examined whether two distinct forms of self-focusing tendencies (i.e., self-rumination and self-reflection) predict authenticity. In addition, we examined whether authenticity mediates the relationship between these self-focusing tendencies and both life satisfaction and distress.

1.1. Self-focused attention, authenticity, and well-being

Several humanistic-existential theories discuss the factors that foster authenticity. For example, Maslow (1968) suggested that authenticity involves discovering, accepting, and expressing one's inner self, which then fosters actualization of one's latent capacities (i.e., self-actualization). In a similar vein, gestalt therapy perceives self-reflective awareness as an important mechanism that fosters authenticity; accordingly, the primary

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focus of the gestalt therapy involves helping clients get in touch with their inner selves and discover the mechanisms by which they self-alienate and thereby avoid self-awareness (e.g., see Rice & Greenberg, 1992; Yontef, 1993; Yontef & Jacobs, 2011). Likewise, person-centered therapists focus on fostering inward experiential search to enable clients to develop an authentic contact with their inner selves (see Rice & Greenberg, 1992). This form of experiential search helps clients trust their internal experiences as a reliable guide, rather than denying or shutting these experiences out of awareness due to internalized conditions of self-worth or need for positive regard or acceptance from others (Rogers, 1951; also see Rice & Greenberg, 1992).

Clearly, several humanistic-existential theories share one common assumption: exploring, bringing out, or recognizing one's inner experiences fosters authenticity. In other words, the attention needs to be directed inward, toward the self to develop an authentic contact with one's inner self and to reduce self-alienation. While this appears to suggest that individuals who have a natural tendency to attend to and be aware of their inner experiences may be more authentic or happier than those who do not engage in self-analysis often, research (e.g., see Trapnell & Campbell, 1999) suggests that this may not always be the case. Specifically, research suggests that self-focused attention (i.e., the tendency to attend to and be aware of one's inner experiences) has both adaptive and maladaptive aspects (see Trapnell & Campbell, 1999) that may both enhance and hinder authenticity and well-being. Trapnell and Campbell (1999) used the term *self-absorption paradox* to refer to these maladaptive and adaptive aspects of self-focused attention and proposed a distinction between two forms of dispositional self-focused attention to explain this paradox: 1) self-rumination, a maladaptive form of self-focused attention, and 2) self-reflection, a potentially adaptive form of self-focused attention.

Self-rumination is associated with the neuroticism domain of personality and involves a neurotic form of self-analysis that leads to chronic negative thinking about negative aspects or experiences of the self (Trapnell & Campbell, 1999). On the other hand, self-reflection is related to the openness domain of personality and involves an intellectual form of self-analysis that focuses on exploring new or alternative perceptions of the self (Trapnell & Campbell, 1999). While both self-rumination and self-reflection involve a heightened attention to self, self-rumination is motivated by "perceived threats, losses, or injustices to the self," whereas, self-reflection is motivated by "curiosity or epistemic interest in the self" (Trapnell & Campbell, 1999, p. 297). Supporting the distinction between these two self-focusing tendencies, findings suggest self-rumination is associated with negative affect, distress, and decreased meaning in life (e.g., Boyraz & Efstathiou, 2011; Thomsen et al., 2013; Trapnell & Campbell, 1999); on the other hand, self-reflection has generally been found to be associated with positive psychological outcomes, such as increased positive affect, self-acceptance, and greater meaning in life (e.g., Boyraz & Efstathiou, 2011; Boyraz & Waits, 2015). In addition, in a sample of bereaved individuals, having a tendency to engage in self-reflection was associated with finding positive meaning in the experience of bereavement (Boyraz, Horne, & Sager, 2010).

Because self-rumination and self-reflection involve different motivational, cognitive, and emotional processes, they will likely have differential effects on authenticity. Rumination involves an anxious and critical attitude toward the self and is characterized by repetitive negative thinking about past or current experiences (Trapnell & Campbell, 1999). Several counseling theories suggest that individuals who fear or disapprove of their inner experiences will likely repress these experiences by using a variety of defense mechanisms, such as denial, distortion, or projection (see Maslow, 1968; Perls, 1969). In addition, empirical literature suggests that rumination is closely related to thought suppression (Szasz, 2009) and cognitive, behavioral, and experiential avoidance (Cribb, Moulds, & Carter, 2006). Therefore, individuals with a tendency to self-ruminate will likely utilize defense mechanisms to avoid or suppress their inner experiences rather than accept them.

These maladaptive processes will likely increase self-alienation and prevent authentic living.

Unlike self-rumination, which involves self-doubt, anxiety, and negative thinking, self-reflection involves an open and non-judgmental attitude toward the self (Trapnell & Campbell, 1999). Given that authenticity requires an honest awareness and acceptance of one's true self, self-reflection may be an important predictor of authenticity, as self-reflection is related to intellectual curiosity, increased self-knowledge, and openness to experience (Trapnell & Campbell, 1999). Indeed, person-centered theory suggests openness to experience helps remove the barriers that prevent authentic contact with one's inner self and enables individuals to develop full awareness of their inner experiences (Rogers, 1962). In addition, self-reflection has been found to be associated with increased self-acceptance (Boyraz & Waits, 2015); therefore, individuals with a tendency to engage in self-reflection may have greater courage to live in accordance with their values and beliefs and reject external influence.

1.2. The present study

The aforementioned literature suggests that while self-rumination may hinder authenticity, self-reflection may foster authentic living by increasing self-knowledge and self-acceptance. Because authenticity is a significant predictor of life satisfaction and reduced distress (e.g., Boyraz et al., 2014; Wood et al., 2008), we posited that authenticity may serve as a mediator of the relationship between self-focusing tendencies and well-being. Using a correlational and cross-sectional study design, we tested a mediation model to examine these hypothesized relationships. Because previous research suggests that both gender and/or age may have significant effects on rumination, reflection (e.g., see Johnson & Whisman, 2013, for a meta-analysis; Sütterlin, Paap, Babic, Kübler, & Vögele, 2012), authenticity (Neff & Suizzo, 2006), well-being, and distress (e.g., Inglehart, 2002; Mirowsky & Ross, 1995), we used these two variables as control variables in our hypothesized model.

We hypothesized that, after controlling for gender and age: 1) Reflection would be positively related to authenticity and life satisfaction, and negatively related to distress, 2) rumination would be negatively related to authenticity and life satisfaction, and positively related to distress, 3) authenticity would be positively related to life satisfaction and negatively related to distress, 4) reflection would have a significant positive indirect effect on life satisfaction through authenticity, 5) reflection would have a significant, negative indirect effect on distress through authenticity, 6) rumination would have a significant, negative indirect effect on life satisfaction through authenticity, and 7) rumination would have a significant, positive indirect effect on distress through authenticity.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

The data of this study were collected from adults (18 years or older) through an online survey. Participants were recruited through two websites that provide links to online psychological studies on their websites and publicize these studies on several social networking sites. All participants completed an informed consent prior to completing the questionnaires of the study. The number of participants who participated in the study was 778; however, 157 of these participants were not included in the study either because they did not meet the inclusion criterion (i.e., being 18 years or older) or they had excessive missing data (i.e., they skipped more than 20% of the questions on the study instruments). After removing these participants and two additional participants who did not report their gender, the final sample of this study included 619 adults with a mean age of 26.92 ($SD = 10.49$).

Most of the participants were female ($n = 464, 75.0\%$). The majority of the participants identified their ethnicity as White/Caucasian ($n =$

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