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Original article

## Distinguishing between authenticity and personality consistency in predicting well-being: A mixed method approach

*Distinction entre authenticité et constance de personnalité dans la prévision du bien-être : une approche de méthode mixte*

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### ABSTRACT

*Introduction.* – The relationship between role personality consistency and well-being is somewhat ambiguous, with past research relying on methods confounded by social desirability or role stereotypes, or conflating consistency with authenticity.

*Objective.* – This study uses a robust mixed method approach to establish the distinct impacts of authenticity and personality consistency on well-being.

*Method.* – In the quantitative phase, 191 participants completed questionnaires assessing contextualised personality, well-being and authenticity. In the subsequent qualitative phase, a stratified sample of 22 participants completed a series of six open-ended reflective questions.

*Results.* – Findings demonstrated significant work-home personality differences at the individual, but not group, level and revealed that authenticity, but not personality consistency, predicted well-being. Thematic analysis demonstrated that authenticity was understood as acting in line with personal values rather than demonstrating behavioural consistency across situations. In addition, while both personality differentiation and inauthenticity were seen as functional, their associations with well-being were substantially different: differentiation was associated with both positive and negative feelings and interpretations, while authenticity was exclusively a positive experience.

*Conclusion.* – Authenticity, not personality consistency, is the key contributing factor to well-being. People who feel authentic, regardless of the extent of their contextual personality differentiation, are less stressed and more satisfied.

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### R É S U M É

*Introduction.* – Le rapport entre constance de personnalité et bien-être recèle une certaine part d'ambiguïté, avec des recherches passées s'appuyant sur des méthodes faussées par des biais de désirabilité sociale ou de rôle ou confondant constance avec authenticité.

*Objectif.* – La présente étude fait appel à une approche de méthode mixte solide pour déterminer les impacts distincts de l'authenticité et de la constance de personnalité sur le bien-être.

*Méthode.* – Lors de la phase quantitative, 191 participants ont rempli des questionnaires évaluant la personnalité contextualisée, le bien-être et l'authenticité. Lors de la phase qualitative ultérieure, un échantillon stratifié de 22 participants a répondu à une série de six questions réflexives ouvertes.

*Résultats.* – On relève d'importantes différences entre la personnalité au travail et celle à la maison et on montre que l'authenticité, et non la constance de personnalité, permettait de prévoir le bien-être. Une analyse thématique a fait apparaître que l'authenticité était perçue comme agissant en conformité avec les valeurs personnelles plutôt que démontrant une constance de comportement au travers de situations.

*Mots clés :*

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De plus, alors que la différenciation de personnalité et l'inauthenticité étaient perçues comme fonctionnelles, leurs associations avec le bien-être étaient substantiellement différentes : la différenciation était associée à des sentiments et à des interprétations à la fois positifs et négatifs alors que l'authenticité était exclusivement une expérience positive.

*Conclusion.* – L'authenticité, et non la constance de personnalité, est le facteur-clé déterminant du bien-être. Les personnes possédant un sentiment d'authenticité, quelle que soit l'importance de leur différenciation de personnalité contextuelle, sont moins stressées et plus satisfaites.

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Well-being is an increasingly central component of psychological, medical, economic and interdisciplinary research (Linton, Dieppe, & Medina-Lara, 2016). While both authenticity and personality consistency have been shown to influence well-being, the research on this relationship is somewhat contradictory. Consistency in personality traits across situations has shown positive relationships with well-being (Bleidorn & Ködding, 2013), but including moderators or correcting for methodological flaws in the measurement of personality consistency reduces or even reverses this relationship (Baird, Le, & Lucas, 2006). In addition, while personality inconsistency is often associated with lower well-being and even considered pathological (see for example, Baird et al., 2006), there is also clear evidence that 'normal' personality can and does change without negative impacts on individuals: whether in different contexts or throughout adult life (Roberts, Walton, & Viechtbauer, 2006; Scollon & Diener, 2006). Authenticity also appears to be positively associated with well-being (Kernis & Goldman, 2006) but the evidence here too is somewhat opaque due to the frequent conflation of authenticity measures with personality consistency. When defined as a subjective feeling of being true to oneself, authenticity can in fact be a source of personality change (Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne, & Ilardi, 1997).

This paper attempts to refine our understanding of these concepts using a robust and integrated multi-method approach, in order to more accurately identify the relationships between authenticity, personality consistency and well-being. First, this paper discusses the concept of authenticity and demonstrates its relevance to well-being. Next, personality consistency is defined, distinguishing it from authenticity and evaluating its relationship with well-being. Here, the utility of social roles as a means for capturing personality (in)consistency is explored. Finally, some significant methodological challenges in the study of contextual personality and authenticity are noted. The two phase, mixed method study reported in this paper attempts to overcome these challenges, providing a more robust foundation for establishing the relationship between authenticity, personality consistency and well-being than has hitherto been possible.

Authenticity is a complex concept, which has its origins in philosophical considerations of what it means to be human (Kernis & Goldman, 2006). Providing a concise historical review of the authenticity concept, Kernis and Goldman (2006) argue for a conceptualisation of authenticity as including awareness, unbiased processing, behaviour and relationship orientation. Measured using this approach, authenticity has been shown to be related to reduced defensiveness, improved coping, better self-concept, better social role functioning and pursuit of goals, and increased well-being. Wood, Linley, Maltby, Baliousis and Joseph (2008) argue for an alternative approach in their model of authenticity, which is based in Rogers' person-centred psychology and consists of three elements: lack of self-alienation (a sense of identity that is consistent with underlying beliefs and values), living authentically (behaving in line with this identity) and resisting external influence when it contradicts these beliefs and identity.

Despite these distinctions in definition, the positive relationship between authenticity and well-being appears to be robust across different models and measures (Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Lenton, Slabu, & Sedikides, 2016; Sheldon et al., 1997; Wood et al., 2008). Authenticity is also positively related to psychological adjustment. For example, it is negatively correlated with verbal defensiveness, perhaps because it indicates a greater tendency or willingness to engage with self-relevant information in an open and non-defensive manner (Lakey, Kernis, Heppner, & Lance, 2008). In this paper, Sheldon et al.'s (1997) simple definition of authenticity as 'being true to oneself' is adopted.

Unfortunately, authenticity is sometimes conflated with the concept of personality consistency, based on the assumption that higher consistency across situations indicates a higher level of individual authenticity. Sheldon et al. (1997) noted this potential for confusion. Does being true to oneself involve striving for consistency in personality or does the struggle for self-expression in different contexts mean that inconsistency is more appropriate as a sign of authentic behaviour? Their view was that felt authenticity can be an underlying source of personality differentiation and their research demonstrated that well-being was positively related to authenticity and personality consistency as well as low inter-role conflict.

Personality consistency is often highly valued in our society, as seen for example in the axiomatic belief in trait theories that consistency across situations is personality. If personality is defined as patterns of thoughts, feelings and behaviour that are consistent across situations, as in the trait approach (e.g. McCrae & Costa, 1990), then flexibility in these patterns is seen as error, a threat to the construct of personality or even pathology. An alternative view is to see that very situational variability as an indication of a hidden, but deeper underlying organisation of the personality system (Shoda & Mischel, 2000): a sign that the way personality is structured includes adaptation to different situations. Changes in personality across the lifespan also indicate the importance of individual interactions with the environment rather than simply a general maturation process (Scollon & Diener, 2006).

There is substantial evidence for inconsistency or differentiation in personality across different situations and social roles, of which 'work' and 'home' are identifiable examples. One of the most consistent findings is significantly higher levels of conscientiousness in the work role than other roles (Donahue & Harary, 1998; Daniel Heller, Ferris, Brown, & Watson, 2009a; Sheldon et al., 1997) though other trait differences tend to vary. For example, Heller et al. (2009a) reported that people were less extraverted at work than home while Donahue and Harary (1998) found that extraversion was higher in the work role than roles such as spouse or child but lower than in friend or sibling roles.

This variability in personality can only be understood if we can elucidate the when and why of personality differentiation. There were early calls for such a contextualised understanding of the Big Five traits (Van Heck, Perugini, Caprara, & Fröger, 1994) as a detailed and comprehensive understanding of personality necessitates a knowledge of both stability and dynamism in the

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