Authenticity attenuates the negative effects of interpersonal conflict on daily well-being

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Prior research has established a consistent relationship between felt authenticity and greater psychological and physical well-being. Nevertheless, a number of important questions remain regarding the role of authenticity in shaping individuals' responses to stressful events in daily life. Interpersonal conflict in particular, has been established as one of the strongest contributors to daily stress, and a number of prior studies suggest that the negative effects of interpersonal conflict may be moderated by personality factors. The present work used a diary design to examine the role of trait authenticity in buffering individuals from the negative effects of interpersonal conflict. More importantly, we show that the protective role of trait authenticity functions independently from the previously established effects of agreeableness and neuroticism.

1. Introduction

The concept of authentic self-expression is well established in philosophy, literature, and humanistic psychology. Theorists such as Maslow (1968) and Rogers (1961) have long touted the benefits of knowing one's "true-self" and maintaining a state of being in which one's behavior is free from external coercion. Though authenticity is a relatively new construct in empirical psychology, the existing research demonstrates that a more authentic orientation toward life is associated with higher self-esteem (Kernis, 2003; Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Wood, Linley, Maltby, Baliousis, & Joseph, 2008), greater self-concept clarity (Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne, & Ilardi, 1997), lower levels of psychological distress (e.g., anxiety, depression, stress, negative affect; Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Ryan, LaGuardia, & Rawsthorne, 2005; Wood et al., 2008) and better physical health (Ryan et al., 2005; Sheldon et al., 1997). However, questions remain regarding the role of authenticity on peoples' response to daily life events. Interpersonal conflict in particular has been established as one of the strongest contributors to daily stress (Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, & Schilling, 1989), and a number of prior studies suggest that the negative effects of interpersonal conflict may be moderated by the Big-5 Model personality traits of agreeableness and

neuroticism (Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995; Jensen-Campbell & Graziano, 2001; Suls, Martin, & David, 1998), though no published research has examined whether authenticity shapes how individuals respond to conflict. The present work uses a diary design to examine the role of two facets of trait authenticity, specifically, self-*awareness* and *unbiased processing* of self-relevant information (Kernis & Goldman, 2006), in buffering individuals from the negative effects of interpersonal conflict. More importantly, we show that the protective role of trait authenticity functions independently from the previously established effects of agreeableness and neuroticism.

1.1. Authenticity

Authenticity has been broadly defined in contemporary psychological research. Theorists working from a Self-determination Theory (SDT) perspective have described authenticity as an action or behavior that reflects one's "true-self" (Deci & Ryan, 2000), and highly authentic persons as being "open" to their ongoing experience without attempting to distort their perception or interpretation of reality (Hodgins & Knee, 2002). Drawing heavily on SDT and earlier humanistic conceptualizations, Kernis (2003, p. 13) describes authenticity as the "unobstructed operation of one's true- or core-self in one's daily enterprise." More recently, Wood et al. (2008) proposed a "person-centered" model of authenticity that draws heavily on the Rogerian therapeutic model (Rogers, 1961), and focuses on the interplay between self-alienation, authentic living (behavior), and environmental forces. Similarly,

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Harter (2002) emphasized a consistency between thoughts, feelings, and behavior, such that authenticity is manifested by the outward expressions of one's inner self.

Regardless of the specific organizing framework, contemporary research provides considerable empirical evidence that an authentic orientation toward life is associated with greater well-being, independent of trait positive or negative affect (Goldman & Kernis, 2002; Heppner et al., 2008; Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Ryan et al., 2005; Sheldon et al., 1997). Other work examining self-complexity suggests that reporting greater authenticity across different self-aspects (Ryan et al., 2005) or life roles (Sheldon et al., 1997) is associated with better functioning. A growing body of research also suggests that authenticity in one's romantic relationships is uniquely associated with more positive relationship outcomes (Brunell et al., 2010; Wickham, 2013; Wickham, Reed, & Williamson, 2015).

The present work adopts the multi-component conceptualization of authenticity described by the Kernis–Goldman Authenticity (KGA; Kernis & Goldman, 2006) model, which is comprised of four dimensions: *awareness*, *unbiased processing*, *behavior*, and *relational orientation*. Awareness refers to the knowledge of and trust in one's motives, feelings, wants, and self-relevant cognitions. Heightened awareness of one's strengths and weaknesses, the salient and latent aspects of one's personality, as well as the reasons behind one's emotional experience, allow a person to maintain a multi-faceted, yet well-integrated self-structure. As such, individuals reporting higher levels of awareness may experience greater functional flexibility, allowing them to deal more effectively with stressful events. Unbiased processing refers to the ability to acknowledge and incorporate self-evaluative information in a non-defensive manner. A person high in unbiased processing is able to objectively evaluate his or her attributes, emotions, and internal experiences, even when the conclusions have unflattering implications for the self. Furthermore, individuals who frequently engage in unbiased processing may be less reactive to discordant social interactions because the corresponding negative self-implications are readily acknowledged and accepted. Awareness and unbiased processing describe fundamental aspects of self-knowledge that are likely to play a key role in shaping a person's cognitive and affective responses to stressful social events, such as interpersonal conflict.

The third component of the KGA model "reflects the behavioral output of the awareness and unbiased processing components" (Kernis & Goldman, 2006, p. 288). A person behaves authentically when his or her values or preferences are consistent with his or her overt actions, though this requires both self-knowledge and an environment supporting the normativity of one's beliefs (Kernis, 2003). Finally, relational orientation refers to the extent to which one values openness and honesty in close relationships. A relationally oriented person wants to be perceived accurately by close others, including both positive and negative self attributes. In contrast to awareness and unbiased processing, which describe intrapsychic or introspective processes, behavior and relational orientation represent an external manifestation of authenticity, and their expression is dependent on the development and maintenance of self-knowledge via awareness and unbiased processing (Kernis, 2003).

1.2. Interpersonal conflict, personality, and negative affect

Interpersonal conflicts represent salient negative events that threaten psychological well-being. In fact, interpersonal conflicts are among the most pervasive and troubling form of daily stressor. Bolger et al. (1989) found that individuals' conflicts with their romantic partner, children, and assorted close-others (i.e., relatives, coworkers, friends, etc.) were stronger contributors to

negative mood, than non-interpersonal demands and stressors. Indeed, the deleterious effects of interpersonal conflict are observed across all types of relationships. Lepore (1992) showed that interpersonal conflicts between college roommates were predictive of increased psychological distress over the course of the semester, and more recently, Page and Wilhelm (2007) found that arguments with family members uniquely contributed to post-partum depressive symptoms among recent mothers. Even workplace conflicts have the potential to increase global distress and strain (Hahn, 2000).

Interpersonal conflict has consistent negative effects on well-being across a variety of life domains and relationship types. However, individuals vary in the degree to which conflict influences their subjective well-being. Many of the prior studies investigating moderators of the association between conflict and well-being have examined Big-5 trait makers as potential buffering factors. These studies draw on the argument that higher levels of agreeableness is associated with a stronger desire to maintain positive interpersonal relationships, which should lead these individuals to react more negatively to conflicts. Jensen-Campbell and Graziano (2001) used a diary design to examine interpersonal conflicts among adolescents, and found that self-rated agreeableness was associated with higher levels of negative affect during conflicts, whereas teacher-rated agreeableness was negatively associated with negative affect during conflict. Similarly, individuals reporting higher levels of neuroticism were assumed to be generally more emotionally reactive, and thus more negatively impacted by conflict. Consistent with this line of reasoning, Bolger and Zuckerman (1995) reported that participants reporting lower levels of neuroticism showed a weaker relationship between interpersonal conflict and daily depressive symptoms. Finally, Suls et al. (1998) used the diary design to examine the moderating effects of both traits, and found that the relationship between interpersonal conflict and negative affect was stronger (more positive) for participants reporting higher levels of agreeableness, but not neuroticism. In light of these prior findings, the present work examined both neuroticism and agreeableness as covariates in order to provide a more powerful and precise test for the moderating effects of authenticity.

1.3. Authenticity, interpersonal conflict, and well-being

Prior research has established a robust relationship between interpersonal conflict and psychological well-being (Bolger et al., 1989; Hahn, 2000; Lepore, 1992; Page & Wilhelm, 2007), and has identified the Big-5 traits of agreeableness and neuroticism as moderators of this association (Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995; Jensen-Campbell & Graziano, 2001; Suls et al., 1998). However, we are aware of no prior work examining the role of trait authenticity as a potential conflict buffer. As such, the present study used an interval-contingent diary design to examine the extent to which the relationship between interpersonal conflict and subjective well-being is moderated by psychological authenticity. Although the KGA model (Kernis & Goldman, 2006) is comprised of four facets, the present study focused on the awareness and unbiased processing components because they are most relevant to the self-esteem regulation process operating when an individual experiences discordant social interactions. Moreover, in light of the prior work showing cross-level moderating effects for agreeableness and neuroticism, these two personality factors were also included as control variables in the analysis.

Individuals reporting higher levels of awareness were expected to exhibit a weaker relationship between conflict and psychological well-being because they should be less likely to view the conflict incident as a threat to their global self-esteem. More specifically, individuals experiencing greater awareness should be more effective in putting the conflict into context by viewing it