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Authenticity at Work: Its Shapes, Triggers, and Consequences*

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* This is the introductory article to the special section on authenticity.

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Abstract

The concept of authenticity has been increasingly on the scholarly radar. While conceptualized in numerous ways, authenticity has been suggested to include some form of alignment of one's internal sense of self (e.g., beliefs, values, motivations) and the external expression of it. State or felt authenticity has been defined as the sense of being one's real self. Much evidence highlights the positive consequences of authenticity, both in general and at work. Yet, many questions remain. This special section consists of four articles that theorize and provide novel empirical evidence, including experiments and field studies, on antecedents and consequences of authenticity in the work context. The articles focus on behavioral, felt, and perceived authenticity, document intrapersonal and situational factors triggering authenticity. Moreover, the articles lay the foundation for novel research directions, integrating concepts such as identity integration, humility, and power into the authenticity at work discourse.

Authenticity at Work: Its Shapes, Triggers, and Consequences

Over the past decades, the concept of authenticity has been attracting the attention of both psychologists and the popular press (Cha et al., 2019). Even some recent high-level political successes and failures were in part attributed to the actors' presumable authenticity or lack thereof (e.g., Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton; Hobbs, 2015; Miller, 2015). The increased interest in authenticity is not surprising given the rise of positive psychology, which grants authenticity a central position (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Authenticity has been defined in numerous ways, but most definitions assume "the unobstructed operation of one's true- or core-self in one's daily enterprise" (Kernis & Goldman, 2006, p. 294), or acting in accord with one's core values, beliefs, self-representations, and motivations (Caza, Moss, & Vough, 2017; Cha et al., 2019; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Erickson, 1995; Lehman, O'Connor, Kovacs, & Newman, 2019; Rogers, 1964). Echoing the alignment between the internal sense of self and the external expression of it, the feeling of authenticity has been defined as "the sense ...that one is being their real self" (Sedikides, Slabu, Lenton, & Thomaes, 2017, p. 521). Authenticity has been shown to benefit facets of well-being such as self-esteem, affect, life satisfaction, meaning of life, and basic needs of relatedness, competence, and autonomy (Harter, 2002; Sheldon & Elliot, 1999; Thomaes, Sedikides, Van den Bos, Hutteman, & Reijntjes, 2017; Wood, Linely, Maltby, Baliouisis, & Joseph, 2008). At work, authenticity has been shown to increase motivation, engagement, and job satisfaction (Cable, Gino, & Staats, 2013; Martinez, Sawyer, Thoroughgood, Ruggs, & Smith, 2017; van den Bosch & Taris, 2014). At the same time, many questions remain unanswered. For instance, what triggers authenticity, especially in the organizational context? In which specific work contexts behaving authentically is likely to be an asset? What makes some people to be perceived as authentic, and does perceived authenticity matter?

1. Overview and summary of articles in the special section

This special section on Authenticity at Work comprises four articles that theorize and provide novel empirical evidence, including experiments and field studies, on antecedents and consequences of authenticity in the work context. Table 1 summarizes these articles.

Insert Table 1 about here

In the first article, “To Be or Not to Be Your Authentic Self? Catering to Others’ Preferences Hinders Performance”, Francesca Gino and colleagues demonstrate that authenticity has implications not only for an actor’s psychological experience and well-being (Thomaes et al., 2017; Wood et al., 2008), but also for performance. Specifically, they document the superiority of behaving authentically to catering to the target’s interests and expectations in order to make a good impression during interpersonal first meetings, such as job interviews or entrepreneurial pitches. They illustrate that catering, an impression-management tactic, is less effective because, as compared to focusing on oneself that behaving authentically implies, focusing on others and trying to fulfil and anticipate their preferences triggers instrumentality and increases anxiety.

Given the beneficial effects of authenticity on well-being, motivation, and performance, it is important to understand well its antecedents. The literature has documented several triggers of felt authenticity (Sedikides, Lenton, Slabu, & Thomaes, 2019), such as acting in an extraverted, agreeable, and conscientious manner (Fleeson & Wilt, 2010; Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne, & Ilardi, 1997), experiencing power (Kifer, Heller, Perunovic, & Galinsky, 2013; Kraus, Chen, & Keltner, 2011), being in a positive mood (Lenton, Slabu, Sedikides, & Power, 2013), and acting in accordance with one’s values (Smallenbroek, Zelenski, & Whelan, 2017). Yet, less is known on what makes individuals feel authentic, specifically in

the organizational context. Two articles in the special section point to both intrapersonal and interpersonal precursors of authenticity at work.

In “Juggling Work and Home Selves: Low Identity Integration Feels Less Authentic and Increases Unethicality”, Mahdi Ebrahimi and colleagues bridge the literatures on authenticity and identity integration (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Cheng, Sanchez-Burks, & Lee, 2008; Ramarajan, 2014) and argue that individuals feel more authentic when they perceive their multiple identities to overlap, such as when they see their “work persona” and “home persona” as similar, compatible, and combined into a highly integrated “one persona”. Furthermore, the authors show that identity integration is a consequential driver of inauthenticity, which ultimately may contribute to unethical behavior such as interpersonal and organizational deviance. These findings suggest that organizations that care both about their employees’ well-being and ethical climate would be well-advised to allow their employees “to bring the whole self to work” (Sandberg, 2013).

Burak Oc and colleagues in “Humility Breeds Authenticity: How Authentic Leader Humility Shapes Follower Vulnerability and Felt Authenticity” identify social precursors of authenticity at work and document a contagious authenticity effect in leader-follower dyads. In particular, they show that followers feel more authentic at work when they perceive their leaders as authentically humble. That is, when the leaders authentically display a willingness to view themselves accurately, to show appreciation of others’ strengths and contributions, and to learn from others (Owens, Johnson, & Mitchell, 2013). These findings point to the crucial role the social context plays in determining whether individuals feel authentic (Sedikides et al., 2017, 2019). The results not only support the idea that to feel true to themselves, individuals need others (Didonato & Krueger, 2010; Lenton, Slabu, Bruder, & Sedikides, 2014), but also indicate that those others have to be perceived as open-minded and authentic to trigger the cascading effects of authenticity.

The relevance of perceived authenticity is further highlighted by Feng Bai and colleagues in “Do Status Incentives Undermine Morality-Based Status Attainment? Investigating the Mediating Role of Perceived Authenticity”, where perceived authenticity is shown to contribute to status conferral. Their results add to the understanding of the interplay among power, status, and authenticity, and, together with previous evidence (Kifer et al., 2013; Kraus et al., 2011), suggest a possible reinforcement effect whereby power enables individuals to behave more authentically, which makes them appear as more authentic, consequently enhancing their perceived status. Bai and colleagues also link perceived authenticity with morality by demonstrating that individuals are perceived as more authentic when their moral behaviors (such as altruism and generosity) are not seen as being motivated by status attainment (e.g., reputation and promotion). This finding resonates with the idea that people believe that the authentic self is morally good (Newman, Bloom, & Knobe, 2014).

In all, the research featured in this special section highlights beneficial outcomes of behaving authentically (e.g., in interpersonal first encounters) and being perceived as authentic (e.g., for status attainment and for triggering the sense of authenticity in others). It also reveals novel antecedents of felt authenticity, both intrapersonal (e.g., identity integration) and interpersonal (e.g., perceived authenticity of leader humility), and helps to refine the definition of authenticity by delineating its boundaries (e.g., catering to others’ preferences and interests is *not* authentic behavior).

2. An agenda for future research

The novel evidence provided in these articles notwithstanding, many questions related to the dynamics and role of authenticity in the organizational context remain for future research. For example, what can organizational leaders do to facilitate a sense of authenticity among individuals with low identity integration in the workplace, such as those with a stigmatized identity? Beyond status attainment, what are other potential consequences of

perceived authenticity? For instance, are people perceived as authentic better positioned to exercise influence? Do they also enjoy a greater leeway when it comes to ethical transgressions? What other factors, situational, actor-related, or observer-related, influence whether the actor is perceived as authentic? From the organizational and team perspective, what is the “right mix” of authenticity and conformity? What can organizations do to ensure that all employees can be authentic at work while simultaneously promoting a culture of respect and professionalism? What cultural factors, if any, are relevant for the antecedents and desirability of authenticity at work? How is authenticity experienced during different stages of life and during professional transitions? What are the liabilities of authenticity? We hope that the section articles will spark additional interest in the concept of authenticity in general and authenticity at work in particular. We look forward to seeing more research on when, why, and how authenticity is experienced, achieved, observed, and is desirable.

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Table 1

Summary of Articles in the Special Section

Authors	Research Question	Data	Key findings
Gino, Sezer, Huang, Brooks	Does catering to others lead to better outcomes than behaving authentically in interpersonal first encounters?	9 studies (in total over 2500 participants), including a pilot study, 7 experiments, and a field study (166 entrepreneurs)	Behaving authentically – as opposed to catering to others – leads to better outcomes in interpersonal first encounters, and this is because catering increases anxiety and the feeling of instrumentality.
Ebrahimi, Kouchaki, Patrick	What is the relationship between identity integration and the sense of authenticity?	4 studies (in total over 800 participants), including 3 experiments and a field survey (150 employee-supervisor dyads)	Identity integration is an antecedent of the sense of authenticity. Unethical behavior is an indirect consequence (via the sense of authenticity) of identity integration.
Oc, Daniels, Diefendorff, Bashshur, Greguras	What role does leader humility play in determining follower sense of authenticity? Does it matter if leader humility is perceived as authentic?	4 studies (in total over 800 participants), including 3 experiments and a 2-wave field study (258 employee-supervisor dyads)	Cascading authenticity effects. Perceived authenticity of leader humility is an antecedent of follower felt authenticity.
Bai, Ho, Liu	Does perceived authenticity of one's behavior matter for one's social standing? How is it related to status conferral?	3 studies (in total over 700 participants), including 2 experiments and a 2-wave field survey (191 working adults)	Perceived authenticity of moral behavior is an antecedent of status conferral.