Authenticity in Context: Being True to Working Selves

Serena Chen
University of California, Berkeley

The core premise of this article is that it is scientifically informative and psychologically meaningful to conceptualize and assess authenticity in context. I begin by providing some theoretical background on the nature of the self-concept, highlighting how the self-concept is composed of a collection of selves, with different selves activated and therefore at play in different contexts. This basic fact, that the self-concept is both multifaceted and malleable, implies that authenticity is a construct that requires study at a contextual level. I illustrate this by reviewing theory and findings from 3 areas of research, incorporating studies from my laboratory throughout. These areas are (a) authenticity in the context of close relationships; (b) authenticity in hierarchical contexts, wherein one occupies a lower versus higher position of social power; and (c) authenticity in relation to the larger cultural context. Finally, I address a number of issues and questions that arise when considering authenticity in context and propose a number of directions for future research on the context-specific nature of authenticity.

Keywords: authenticity, working self-concept, relational self, culture

“Be true to yourself.” This admonition is often uttered by parents to their children, teachers to their students, people to friends, and others seeking advice. And for good reason. Ample research has indicated that being true to the self has benefits for psychological well-being (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2000; Goldman & Kernis, 2002; Schlegel & Hicks, 2011). But what exactly does the phrase mean? Lay wisdom and psychological theorizing suggest that being true to the self involves being authentic, broadly defined as living in accord with one’s beliefs, values, feelings, and desires. But who exactly should we be trying to be true to? Or, to put it another way, which “self” are we talking about when it comes to authenticity?

Wide-ranging theory and research have indicated that the self is actually made up of a collection of selves and that the self that is operating at a given moment depends at least in part on the context (e.g., Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Chen, Boucher, & Tapias, 2006; Linville & Carlston, 1994; Markus & Kunda, 1986). Thus, it may be more apt to refer to the working self-concept (Markus & Wurf, 1987)—the particular subset of a person’s array of stored self-knowledge that is active in the current context—than to use a term that connotes a single, monolithic self. Working selves can refer to people one considers oneself to actually be (e.g., a mother; someone who likes to cook) but can also denote possible selves (Ibarra, 1999; Markus & Nurius, 1986)—such as selves one dreams about becoming or feel obligated to be. Regardless, the implication is that a full understanding of what it means to be authentic would seem to require taking into account the current context and the particular self that is at play in it.

In this article, I review theory and research that bear on this core proposition, starting with general theorizing on the nature of the self-concept and the widely accepted viewpoint that the self-concept is multifaceted and malleable. These features of the self-concept imply that authenticity likely operates, at least in part, at a contextual level. This proposition raises a number of important questions and issues, about which I offer initial speculations regarding before turning to relevant empirical evidence, emphasizing findings from three different domains of inquiry from my laboratory, with each focusing on a different kind of context.

Specifically, I first describe research on authenticity in the context of close relationships, including findings that show that authenticity in such contexts often involves being true to one’s relational selves, that is, selves in relation to particular significant others. Second, I review research on the implications of hierarchical contexts for the authenticity strivings of those relatively higher and lower in power in the current hierarchical structure. Third, I consider authenticity in relation to the broader cultural context, reviewing research that has examined potential cultural differences in various facets of authenticity. Finally, I bring the discussion back to the key proposition that authenticity operates, at least partly, in context and then end with a consideration of outstanding issues and directions for future research.

Authenticity and the Working Self-Concept

Authenticity has been featured in various theories in psychology throughout modern history. For example, it has played a central role in humanistic (Maslow, 1968) and psychodynamic (Horney, 1939) theories, self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985),...
and the broad field of positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). Recent decades have witnessed a marked rise in empirical examination of the concept among social and personality psychologists, prompting advances in knowledge about authenticity, while also uncovering complexities and raising new questions about the construct. Terminology and definitions vary depending on one’s theoretical agenda, but common views of authenticity include that it involves being aware of one’s internal states (e.g., thoughts and feelings), subjectively experiencing them as one’s own, and choosing to act in alignment with them (e.g., Harter, 2002; Kernis, 2003; Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne, & Ilardi, 1997; cf. Fleeson & Wilt, 2010). There’s also broad consensus that authenticity breeds intrapersonal and interpersonal benefits (Deci & Ryan, 2012; Schlegel & Hicks, 2011). But most pertinent to this article is the assumption, seen in most conceptualizations of the construct, that authenticity implicates the self. The study of authenticity would thus seem to require a clear grasp of what the self is.

Working Definitions of the Self

Some researchers use the terms self and self-concept interchangeably, whereas others deliberately use one or the other term. The former tends to have broader connotations—for example, it can be used to refer to the phenomenologically experienced self, just as it can be used to refer to the self as measured by relatively objective criteria. By contrast, the term self-concept tends to have more specific, social–cognitive connotations, often used to refer to self-knowledge that people have stored in memory. An in-depth history of these terms is beyond the scope of this article. For the present purposes, I primarily use the term self to refer to the person that people subjectively experience as “the self” and self-concept to refer to stored self-knowledge. But I also assume that the two are related, at least to some degree—that is, that people have at least some knowledge stored in memory, regardless of how accurate or grounded in reality that knowledge is, that corresponds to their subjective sense of who they are.

Another complexity in defining the self pertains to its unitary or multifaceted nature. Some researchers have treated the self in relatively unitary terms, emphasizing who the self is overall or in general, with corresponding references to global subjective conceptions of the self or global self-knowledge stored in memory (Rosenberg, 1965). Others, however, have focused on the fact that subjective experiences of the self fluctuate across contexts, with different pieces of stored self-knowledge rendered accessible in different contexts (Markus & Cross, 1990). This idea, captured in the term working self-concept (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Markus & Wurf, 1987), is central to the main thesis of this article. The working self-concept refers to that subset of knowledge that is activated, recruited into short-term or “working memory,” at a given moment in time and place. The content of working memory—including the self-knowledge that is active in there—is ever-changing depending on internal and external cues and circumstances. When the working self-concept shifts, too do subjective experiences of the self. Thus, even as the overall array of self-knowledge stored in long-term memory is relatively stable, there is malleability in the particular pieces of self-knowledge that are in the forefront and, accordingly, in how people subjectively experience who they are. Thus, alongside global forms of self-conceptions and self-knowledge, people have multiple, context-specific selves, with different selves brought to the foreground in different contexts.

The related notions of the working self-concept and multiple selves are central to many theories in the psychological literature. For example, self-complexity theory (Linville, 1985) maintains that there are individual differences in how multifaceted the self-concept is, but it nonetheless assumes that it’s common for all people to define themselves in terms of multiple different facets. Self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987) also assumes people have multiple selves—in this case, in the form of actual, ideal, and ought selves. Past and present theory and research on possible selves, such as the selves people hope to become or fear becoming, similarly assume multiplicity in the self-concept (e.g., Markus & Nurius, 1986; Oyserman, Bybee, Terry, & Hart-Johnson, 2004; Oyserman, Destin, & Novin, 2015). A final example is Brewer and Gardner’s (1996) tripartite model of self-definition, wherein they identify multiple levels at which the self is defined—corresponding to personal, relational, and collective selves.

Working Definitions of Authenticity

The foregoing sets up the main premise of this article—that it is informative to study authenticity in context, given that there is fluidity in the particular self that is at play in any given context. Before delving into theory and research that support this proposition, it is important to delineate some conceptual boundaries and to acknowledge, even if not fully resolve, several definitional and measurement issues regarding authenticity. First, as noted, theoretical definitions of authenticity vary in emphasis. One dimension of variability has to do with whether authenticity is defined in dispositional or state terms. The present focus is on the subjective experience of authenticity—people’s current feelings about how authentic they are or, in more lay terms, how true to the self they are. This working definition fits with recent theorizing on what Sedikides and colleagues refer to as state authenticity (Sedikides, Slabu, Lenton, & Thomaes, 2017), which captures the notion that subjective feelings of authenticity vary across time and place. Here I zero in on the intersection of state authenticity with the idea that the self is multifaceted, with the content of the working self-concept—and corresponding subjective experiences of the self—varying as a function of the current context.

It is important to note that the current focus on state authenticity does not mean that extant theory and data on dispositional authenticity are not meaningful or important for predicting some outcomes, and certainly state and trait levels of authenticity may be related (although perhaps not as regularly or as highly as one might assume; see Lenton, Bruder, Slabu, & Sedikides, 2013). However, the day-to-day experience of individuals typically involves the operation and subjective experience of multiple selves, so it stands to reason that authenticity should be considered at least in part in relation to different, context-specific selves. In this vein, Fleeson and Wilt (2010) used experience sampling methods to measure people’s self-reports of authenticity in specific social situations. One of their key findings was that levels of self-reported authenticity were predicted by the degree to which specific social situations promoted behavior reflecting particular personality traits (e.g., extraversion). In other words, situations shape authenticity,
consistent with the proposition that authenticity needs to be considered in context.

Finally, I note here at the outset that just as conceptual definitions of authenticity have varied, so too have the approaches and tools that researchers have used to measure the construct. Self-reported, subjective feelings of authenticity (in general or in the moment) are arguably the most direct measure of the definition of authenticity guiding the present analysis. However, in my review of relevant research I include a discussion of studies that have used other, less direct, measures, recognizing here that although it is reasonable to assume some level of convergence among people’s responses to different measures of authenticity, the exact degree will require further research. I return to this issue in the concluding section of this article.

**Authenticity, Close Relationships, and the Relational Self**

In this section, I review theory and research that situates authenticity in specific close relationship contexts. I start with broad theoretical perspectives and notions that make this connection and provide a flavor of relevant evidence from the broader literature, before shining a spotlight on research specifically examining the link between the authenticity and relational selves—defined as the specific selves people are in their interactions and relationships with significant others (Andersen & Chen, 2002; Chen, Boucher, & Tapias, 2006).

**Broad Theoretical Perspectives**

It makes sense that authenticity would come into play in one’s close relationships, given that relationships are contexts wherein one self comes into contact with another self and people need to develop ways of relating to one another. Sometimes the selves we are in relationship contexts are perceived and experienced as authentic, sometimes they are not—but regardless, relationships typically arouse authenticity considerations. Indeed, it’s just as easy to imagine a relationship partner—whether a friend or romantic partner—around whom it is easy to just “be yourself”—as it is to imagine a relationship partner around whom that’s not at all the case. Also supporting the relevance of authenticity to close relationships, being authentic in one’s relationships is widely thought to bode well for relationship health (e.g., Swann, 1990, 2012; Swann, De La Ronde, & Hixon, 1994).

The basic notion that authenticity can be relationship-specific is reflected in Kernis and Goldman’s (2006) multicomponent conceptualization of authenticity, which is made up of four core facets: (a) being aware of one’s thoughts and feelings; (b) processing one’s experiences in an objective rather than biased, self-defensive manner; (c) behaving in alignment with one’s beliefs, values, and preferences; and, most pertinent, (d) being genuine in one’s relationships with close others. In other words, Kernis and Goldman recognized that there is a measurable component of a person’s overall authenticity that is specific to relationship contexts. Compatible with this, Lopez and Rice (2006) developed the Authenticity in Relationships scale, which includes items such as “I am basically the same person with my partner as I am with other people I care about.” Also recognizing the relationship-specific nature of authenticity is developmental research examining both age- and gender-related trends in the tendency to avoid voicing one’s opinions, a form of inauthentic or “false self behavior” (Harter, Waters, Whitesell, & Kastelic, 1998). In such research, the degree to which adolescents express their voice is assessed in relation to specific relationship settings (e.g., with parents, with teachers, with male classmates).

In a related vein, Sheldon et al. (1997) found that people reported greater authenticity within each of various roles they occupy in their lives (e.g., student, friend) to the extent that their self (defined in terms of ratings of their personality traits in each role) matched their general personality traits. Thus, Sheldon et al. conceptualized and measured authenticity in a role-specific manner. Also relevant is work by English and John (2013), who found that inauthenticity mediated the inverse relationship between emotional suppression and relationship satisfaction among U.S. and Chinese undergraduates. In other words, suppressing one’s emotions with relationship partners breeds subjective feelings of inauthenticity, which in turn hurts relationship satisfaction. As a final example, researchers have shown that people momentarily induced with attachment security, compared to counterparts in neutral or general positivity conditions, reported greater state authenticity (Gillath, Sesko, Shaver, & Chun, 2010). Thus, in contexts involving relationship partners to whom one is securely attached, authenticity is greater—once again implying that authenticity can be relationship-specific. This basic idea lies at the heart of several lines of research in my laboratory linking authenticity to relational selves.

**Authenticity and Relational Selves**

Relational selves refers to the specific people—our thoughts, feelings, goals, and behaviors—we are in our relationships with significant others (Andersen & Chen, 2002; Chen, Boucher, & Tapias, 2006; see also Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Klohnen, Weller, Luo, & Choe, 2005; Overall, Fletcher, & Friesen, 2003). Every individual possesses a repertoire of relational selves, with each relational self embodying aspects of the self in relation to a particular significant other (Andersen & Chen, 2002; Chen, Boucher, & Kraus, 2011). Thus, a person might possess a relational self with her mom, her brother, her best friend, and so forth. Relational-self theorizing adheres to the broad notion of the working self-concept (Markus & Wurf, 1987), only with a focus on the specific relational self that is accessible in working memory in a given context, such as when having lunch with a friend or talking to one’s mother on the phone.

Corresponding relational selves should get activated when we are actually interacting with significant others themselves. However, even simply imagining interacting with a significant other (i.e., the significant other is not actually physically present) or imagining or actually interacting with someone who reminds us of a significant other—any of these contexts can activate the relevant relational self (Andersen & Chen, 2002; Chen et al., 2011; Hinkley & Andersen, 1996). In other words, whenever and however a significant other is brought to mind, this constitutes a context that then activates the relevant working self—in this case, the self that one is in relation to the significant other who was brought to mind. As a concrete example, Harry’s relational self with Sally is activated and at play when he’s actually interacting with Sally but can also be elicited when thinking about Sally or interacting with
someone who reminds him of her (e.g., someone who, like Sally, is very picky about how her food is prepared).

Research has demonstrated a broad range of affective, motivational, and behavioral consequences that unfold when a relational self is activated in the context of a real or imagined interaction with a significant other or with someone who reminds us of a significant other. In one of the first studies on this phenomenon, Hinkley and Andersen (1996) showed that when a significant other is brought to mind, people’s momentary self-descriptions and self-evaluations shift to reflect how they see and feel about the person they are with the relevant significant others. In other words, we come to define and evaluate ourselves in line with the person we are in the context of our relationship with the particular significant other who is at the top of our mind. This shift toward the relevant relational self in significant-other contexts can happen consciously, but considerable research has suggested it often happens without conscious awareness or intent (Andersen, Glassman, Chen, & Cole, 1995; Glassman & Andersen, 1999).

What are the implications of such relational-self shifts for authenticity? Do people strive to be authentic to relational selves? In one set of studies examining these very questions, Kraus and Chen (2009; see also Kraus & Chen, 2014) extended self-verification theory to the domain of relational selves. Self-verification theory (Swann, 1990) argues that people feel authentic when others perceive and evaluate them as they do themselves. Thus, particularly for self-views that are highly self-defining, people strive to get others to verify these self-views. Most self-verification research has focused on people’s need and efforts to get others to verify their global (i.e., non-context-specific) self-conceptions. Yet the theory also argues that people are especially inclined to pursue self-verification—in other words, strive for authenticity—in the context of their significant-other relationships because, of all people, significant others ought to know who we “really are” (Swann et al., 1994). Put another way, it is particularly damaging to our subjective sense of authenticity if a significant other doesn’t “get” who we truly are.

Given this, Kraus and Chen (2009, 2014) proposed that the self-views that people are often trying to get others to verify likely reflect, at least in part, relational self-views—because in significant-other contexts, the working self-concept is infused with knowledge reflecting the particular self one is in relation to the significant other in question (cf. Swann, Bosson, & Pelham, 2002). Supporting this, one study, for example, showed that when a significant other (vs. a control person) was brought to mind in an interaction with a new person, participants expressed a greater desire for their interaction partner to evaluate them in a manner that verified self-views that they had rated in a prior session as highly defining of the relational self with the significant other who had been brought to mind. Another study showed that priming a significant other (vs. an acquaintance) led participants to provide more favorable ratings of feedback that verified the relevant relational self (i.e., the self they are when with the relevant significant other), compared with other forms of feedback (e.g., self-enhancing).

The Kraus and Chen (2009, 2014) studies suggest, then, that people strive to be true to their relational selves in their significant-other relationships in part by seeking feedback from others that verifies their relational self-views. In more recent research, we took a step back by asking what relational self-views contribute most to subjective feelings of authenticity in a relationship. Gan and Chen (2017) tested competing hypotheses about the basis of relational authenticity, whether it arises from being one’s actual self in a relationship (actual-relational selves overlap), ideal self (relational-ideal selves overlap), or both. In other words, do people feel more authentic in their relationships to the degree that they are with their significant others (and how their relational selves are seen by others) approximates who they are in general, outside of the relationship, or to the degree that their relational selves approximate their ideal selves, selves they are hoping to become someday?

In one study, Gan and Chen (2017) found that relational-ideal, but not actual-relational, overlap predicts relational authenticity. In subsequent studies, we experimentally manipulated the degree of perceived overlap between relational and ideal selves and showed that low overlap reduced relational authenticity compared to a control condition, as well compared to varying degrees of actual-relational overlap and to varying degrees of actual-ideal overlap. Overall, these studies indicated that overlap between one’s relational and ideal selves is a primary basis for relational authenticity. Considering the Kraus and Chen (2009, 2014) evidence with these findings would suggest that self-verification—that is, authenticity-strivings in relationship contexts may often reflect aiming to get others to see us in line with who we see our ideal selves to be.

This section explores authenticity in hierarchical contexts wherein people occupy lower or higher positions of social power relative to others in the hierarchy. How does being lower versus higher in power influence authenticity-related phenomena? I start with broad theoretical notions that speak to this question and present a few key pieces of evidence from this larger literature, before zooming in on relevant findings from my own laboratory.

Social power is widely defined as having influence and control over others’ outcomes (Emerson, 1962; Fiske, 1993; Kipnis, 1972; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Such control derives from the ability to grant or withhold valued resources as well as to dispense punishments (Anderson & Berdahl, 2002; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003). Research adopting this or closely related views has linked power to an array of cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes (for reviews, see Galinsky, Rucker, & Magee, 2015; Guinote & Chen, 2018). Most relevant to this article are theory and research forging a link between power and a core facet of many conceptualizations of authenticity—the outward expression of one’s internal states, traits, beliefs, values, and attitudes.

In this vein, one of the central claims of the approach— Inhibiting theory of power (Keltner et al., 2003) is that high power elicits approach tendencies, whereas low power activates inhibitory ones. Building on this claim, Keltner et al. (2003) argued that because high power frees people to pursue rewards and be less vigilant against threats, high power is linked to a greater likelihood of expressing state- and trait-consistent behaviors. Along related lines, others have argued that the relative self-sufficiency of the powerful frees them to pursue their own beliefs, goals, emotions, and values, whereas the lack of self-sufficiency of the powerless
The giving and receiving of benefits between themselves and oriented individuals follow a tit-for-tat rule, aiming to ensure that of concern and responsibility for others. In contrast, exchange-oriented individuals, authentic goal pursuit should ensue (Chen et al., 2001). That is, communals should respond in socially responsible ways per their chronic goals, whereas exchangers should respond more in line with their chronic self-interest goals. We found support for this hypothesis using various operationalizations of both power and goals. To illustrate, in one study communally oriented participants who were subtly primed with power looked out significantly more for the interests of a fellow student relative to their communally oriented counterparts, who were primed with low power and relative to exchange-oriented participants, who were primed with power (Chen et al., 2001; Study 3).

In another set of studies (Kraus, Chen, & Keltner, 2011), we aimed to demonstrate a link between authenticity and social power using a different operationalization of authenticity—namely, consistency in ratings of the self-concept across different social contexts (e.g., Sheldon et al., 1997). It is important to note that the Kraus et al. (2011) research also incorporated direct measures of subjective feelings of authenticity, demonstrating correspondence between different conceptualizations and measures of authenticity. In this work, we reasoned that high-power individuals, disposed to having greater control of their environments and greater freedom of self-expression (Keltner et al., 2003), would exhibit greater self-concept consistency relative to their lower power counterparts.

Supporting this, across three studies in which we either measured or manipulated power, high-power participants showed elevated self-concept consistency in terms of both greater coherence and consistency in their spontaneous self-descriptions, as well as less variability in trait ratings of themselves across different contexts, relative to low-power participants (Kraus et al., 2011). Moreover, empirically documenting the link between self-concept consistency and subjective feelings of authenticity, we showed that high-power participants’ greater self-concept consistency across different contexts explained their higher subjective reports of authenticity relative to low-power participants (Kraus et al., 2011; Study 3).

In the studies on authenticity and social power just described, as with the vast majority of research on social power, power has been operationalized in either dispositional or situational terms. Examples of power-related dispositions include trait dominance (Mast & Hall, 2004; Operario & Fiske, 2001) and a generalized sense of power (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006), whereas examples of situational power include a person’s current role or position vis-à-vis another person (Overbeck & Park, 2001) or physical cues in the environment that prime the concepts of high or low power (Chen et al., 2001). Departing from and extending such research, in one set of studies we explicitly examined the joint effects of dispositional and situational power on authenticity-related outcomes (Chen, Langner, & Mendoza-Denton, 2009).

In this research, we assumed that although people may be drawn to roles that fit their dispositions (e.g., Caspi & Bem, 1990; Haley & Sidanius, 2005; Newcomb, 1943), the realities of life usually dictate that dispositionally high- and low-power people have to assume a mix of high- and low-power roles. To illustrate, dispositionally high-power graduate students may prefer and sometimes...
find themselves in a high-power role, such as when giving orders to their research assistants, but at other times these same students are forced to occupy a low-power role, such as when meeting with their department chair or faculty advisor. Conversely, a dispositionally low-power son of a corporate magnate might typically shun opportunities to assume positions of power in his father’s company, preferring low-power roles that better suit his power-related dispositions, only to find himself thrust into power when his father falls ill. Hence, sometimes our roles fit our power-related dispositions, but at other times we find ourselves in roles that result in a lack of dispositional-role power fit.

What implications does the degree of fit between the person and situation have for authenticity? Bettencourt and Sheldon (2001) tackled this very question, hypothesizing that social roles offer people the opportunity to satisfy the basic psychological need of autonomy, which was defined in terms of true self-expression—a key facet of authenticity in various conceptualizations of the construct. More specifically, they reasoned that enacting a social role can satisfy autonomy needs to the degree that the dictates and expectations associated with the role correspond to one’s personal characteristics. Such correspondence allows people to express themselves—to act in accord with their personal beliefs and values, thereby breeding subjective feelings of authenticity. Supporting this, they showed that greater fit between people’s self-reported traits (e.g., cooperative), on the one hand, and the traits required by an assigned group role (e.g., moderator role in a group discussion), on the other hand, was associated with higher participant reports of true self-expression in the role.

Building on these various theoretical and empirical strands, Chen et al. (2009) reasoned that when people are in a high- or low-power role that fits their dispositional sense of power, such a fit should lead them to express a wide array of their states and traits (i.e., not just states and traits associated with power). Conversely, when people are assigned to a role that conflicts with their dispositional power, self-expression is diminished. In addition to examining the impact of dispositional-situational power fit on self-expression, we also assessed the degree to which people are seen by others in ways that are congruent with their inner states and traits. In other words, we had two measures of authenticity—self-expression and congruence between self- and other-judgments of the self. Thus, for example, we predicted that just as dispositionally high-power graduate students are more apt to express their states and traits, and hence to have these states and traits perceived by others, when giving rather than receiving orders, dispositionally low-power students are more likely to engage in self-expression and to be perceived in a manner congruent with their self-judgments when receiving rather than giving orders.

In several studies designed to test these predictions, we randomly assigned dispositionally high- and low-power participants to play a high- or low-power role in an interaction with a confederate (Chen et al., 2009). When participants’ dispositional and role power fit (vs. conflicted), they reported greater self-expression in the interaction. Moreover, under dispositional-role power fit conditions, the confederate’s ratings of participants’ emotional experiences and personality traits were more congruent with participants’ self-reported emotions and traits compared to under conditions lacking such fit. Overall, these findings reveal potential complexities in the relationships between authenticity and social power. Power and authenticity are clearly linked, but when multiple sources of power are at play, one may need to consider the congruence or conflict among these sources to make predictions about the implications for authenticity.

A final example of our research on authenticity and power looked at the bidirectional relationship between the two (Gan, Heller, & Chen, 2018). Thus far we have focused on the notion that one’s position of power in a hierarchy has implications for authenticity. But the increasingly well-documented effect of power on authenticity raises the possibility that authenticity may in fact be a precursor to power. People are able to readily detect power hierarchies and categorize others within these social frameworks (Srivastava & Anderson, 2011; Zitek & Tiedens, 2012), suggesting that they have rich and highly accessible beliefs about the powerful (Hall, Coats, & LeBeau, 2005). Such lay beliefs about power likely serve as the basis for self-perception processes (Bem, 1972), such that people may derive a sense of power from observing that they feel the way they believe that powerful people typically do. Indeed, research has indicated that because certain actions are often associated with power (e.g., abstract thinking, rule breaking), over time the behaviors themselves come to signal power for the actors themselves, not to mention for observers (Magee, 2009; Van Kleef, Homan, Finkenauer, Gündemir, & Stamkou, 2011; Wakslak, Smith, & Han, 2014).

Extending such logic, we predicted that because the powerful frequently experience thinking and acting in line with their true selves, the concepts of power and authenticity are repeatedly jointly activated in people’s minds, leading the two concepts to become mentally associated (e.g., Bargh, 1997). Thus, when people experience a subjective sense of authenticity, the concept of power should be activated. In other words, the circumstances of the powerful allow them to be more authentic, which means that lay beliefs about power have come to include authenticity. As a result, momentary feelings of authenticity come to signal having power, thereby enhancing a person’s subjective sense of power.

Supporting this hypothesis, across numerous experiments we found that situationally induced feelings of authenticity enhance people’s sense of subjective power (Gan et al., 2018). For instance, participants reported feeling more powerful when they visualized themselves behaving authentically versus inauthentically, or recalled a time when they felt authentic versus inauthentic. Overall, such findings advance our understanding of the association between authenticity and social hierarchy by documenting the bidirectional nature of this link.

Authenticity and Culture

As we have seen, close relationships and social hierarchies constitute contexts that are associated with measurable and meaningful variations in authenticity, operationalized in various ways. Of course, many contexts are embedded in larger contexts. For example, one’s relationship with a specific sibling is embedded in the larger context of one’s family as a whole. In this section, the focus is on culture as a broad context that can have implications for authenticity. I organize this section in terms of two main areas of inquiry—the first focused on culture and cross-situational consistency in the self-concept and the other on links among culture, authenticity, and well-being. Throughout, I highlight relevant findings from my own laboratory.
Consistency in the Self-Concept Across Contexts Versus Within Contexts Over Time

As noted in earlier sections, various researchers have treated consistency in ratings of the self across different contexts as one operationalization of authenticity (e.g., Sheldon et al., 1997), with some demonstrating convergence between this index of authenticity and self-reported, subjective ratings of authenticity (e.g., Kraus et al., 2011). Thus, the possibility of systematic cross-cultural variations in consistency in the self-concept across contexts is relevant to understanding how culture and authenticity are linked. Initial studies examining culture and self-concept consistency focused on comparisons between respondents from Western or more individualistic (typically United States), compared to East Asian or more collectivistic (e.g., Japan, Korea), cultures in their open-ended descriptions and/or trait ratings of the self (e.g., Suh, 2002; see also Cousins, 1989; Rhee, Uleman, Lee, & Roman, 1995). In broad strokes, these early studies found evidence suggesting that the self-descriptions and trait ratings of Westerners tended to be less contextualized and to show greater consistency across varying contexts, respectively, whereas the self-descriptions and trait ratings of East Asians were more apt to make reference to roles and relationships and to show less consistency across contexts, respectively.

Extending such findings, we (English & Chen, 2007) considered cultural differences in two different forms of self-concept consistency—specifically, consistency in ratings of the self-concept across different contexts, as in the prior studies, but also consistency in self-concept ratings within the same context over time (English & Chen, 2007). The latter form of consistency reflects an if–then perspective on stability in the self and personality (Mischel & Shoda, 1999), wherein there is malleability in the self and personality across different situations—consistent with the notion of the working self-concept—but there is stability nonetheless in terms of consistency at the level of if–then (situation–behavior) patterns. To illustrate, although individuals may vary in how assertive they are across different contexts—say, in the office versus with their mother—they may nonetheless show self-concept consistency in the form of being consistently high (or low) in assertiveness at the office and low (or high) in assertiveness with their mother. Are there cultural differences in either or both of these forms of self-concept consistency?

The key results of the English and Chen (2007) studies, which focused on comparisons between European versus Asian Americans, were first that Asian Americans were less consistent in their self-descriptions across specific relationship contexts than were European Americans, conceptually replicating the earlier studies described previously (e.g., Suh, 2002). Second, however, we found that Asian Americans’ self-descriptions nonetheless showed high consistency within specific contexts over time. Thus, we concluded that for Asian Americans it appears that self-concept stability derives from defining the self in if–then terms—that is, as variable across relationship contexts but stable within them. Put in working self-concept terms, Asian Americans’ working selves—or selves in particular contexts—showed consistency, whereas European Americans’ showed greater consistency at the level of noncontextualized selves. Overall, we took these results as highlighting the importance of examining multiple forms of stability in the self-concept in the study of culture and self-concept consistency and, by implication, authenticity.

Church and colleagues have since extended our findings in a number of ways, including by examining both forms of self-concept consistency across eight different cultures (i.e., United States, Australia, China, Japan, Malaysia, Venezuela, Mexico, and the Philippines; Church et al., 2012, 2013, 2014). Across cultures, participants rated themselves on various trait dimensions in specific roles at two different points in time. The central finding of Church et al. (2012) was evidence of moderate levels of both forms of consistency across all eight cultures. The few cross-cultural differences that did emerge mostly involved Japan, whose respondents exhibited significantly lower consistency of both forms when compared to respondents from a number of the other cultures that were examined. Overall, the researchers concluded that there is considerable consistency of both forms across cultures, although where cultural differences do emerge, they are consistent with extant findings in the literature (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

It is important to bear in mind that the foregoing research focused on self-concept consistency, which has been empirically associated with subjective ratings of authenticity in other, non-culture-related research (e.g., Kraus et al., 2011) but not directly in the studies just described. Thus, inferences about cultural similarities and differences in levels of subjective feelings of authenticity must be seen as tentative, though research on culture, authenticity, and well-being, to which I turn next, provides support for convergence between self-concept consistency and subjective reports of authenticity across cultures.

Culture, Authenticity, and Well-Being

As noted at the outset, wide-ranging research has suggested that authenticity breeds positive well-being-related outcomes. Yet for decades this conclusion was based nearly exclusively on research using samples from Western, individualistic cultures. Does the link between authenticity and well-being-related outcomes generalize across cultures? What indices of authenticity are more or less associated with well-being, and in what cultures? These are the kinds of questions that researchers in this area have attempted to address.

In one study, for example, Church et al. (2008) had respondents in six different cultures (United States, Australia, Mexico, Japan, Malaysia, and the Philippines) complete trait ratings of themselves across various roles, along with various measures of well-being. Key findings of this study were that the index of cross-role consistency predicted facets of well-being across all six cultures but most strongly among U.S. respondents and least robustly among Japanese respondents. In a subsequent study, Church and colleagues (Church et al., 2014; see also Locke et al., 2017) examined the link between self-concept consistency both across and within contexts, on the one hand, with both hedonic and eudaemonic forms of well-being, on the other. Across eight cultures (United States, Australia, Mexico, Venezuela, the Philippines, Malaysia, China, and Japan), Church and colleagues (2014) found that both forms of self-concept consistency were associated with facets of hedonic well-being (e.g., negative affect), but reliable cultural differences emerged in the link between self-concept consistency and facets of eudaemonic well-being. The specifics of these cultural differences are not the focus here. Rather, what is
interesting is the implication that it may be important to consider multiple types of well-being when studying the role of culture in the link between authenticity and well-being.

In this vein, in several studies using other measures of well-being, we (English & Chen, 2011) did find cultural differences in the association of self-concept consistency across versus within contexts, on the one hand, with well-being indices, on the other. In our research, we proposed that the implications of self-concept consistency for well-being ought to depend on both the cultural background of the individual and the type of consistency involved. More specifically, although consistency of the self-concept across different contexts may be less important in East Asian than Western cultures (English & Chen, 2007), East Asians may still benefit from consistency within specific social contexts over time. Supporting this reasoning, English and Chen (2011) showed that inconsistency in participants’ trait ratings across different relationship contexts was linked to lower subjective feelings of authenticity and relationship quality for European Americans but not East Asian Americans. However, inconsistency within the same relationship context over time showed similar negative associations with these outcomes in both groups (see also Robinson, Lopez, Ramos, & Nartova-Bochaver, 2012).

The English and Chen (2011) studies hint that the definition, meaning, and/or consequences of authenticity may differ among individuals from different cultural backgrounds. In this vein, Kokkoris and Kühnen (2014) examined how people from Germany versus China view the connection between self-expression and authenticity. They hypothesized that acts of self-expression should enhance perceptions of authenticity only when these acts fit with cultural norms about self-expression. For example, Germans consider expressing both one’s likes and dislikes to be appropriate forms of self-expression, whereas the Chinese consider it appropriate to mainly express one’s likes. When acts of self-expression conflict with the norms of one’s culture, the link between self-expression and authenticity should be attenuated. Supporting this, they found that Germans judged targets to be most authentic when they expressed both their likes and dislikes, whereas Chinese participants viewed targets as most authentic when they expressed only their likes.

Summary, Issues, and Future Directions

This core proposition of this article is that it is scientifically useful and psychologically meaningful to conceptualize and assess authenticity in context, alongside longstanding dispositional approaches to authenticity. This is because the self-concept reflects a collection of actual and possible selves, alongside global conceptions of the self, with different selves coming to the forefront in different contexts. The notion of the working self-concept (Markus & Wurf, 1987) captures these ideas: internal and external cues and circumstances in the immediate context bring particular pieces of stored self-knowledge into working memory, leading the self to be perceived, evaluated, and experienced in line with the recruited self-knowledge. Thus, for example, when Zoe is hanging out with her older sister, her working self-concept is characterized by self-knowledge reflecting her baby sister self, shaping her perceptions of herself in that moment accordingly. For Joseph, his CEO self is activated at work, leading him to view and judge himself in line with the characteristics and opinions he associates with himself as a CEO. In short, the self-concept is both multifaceted and malleable.

Authenticity fundamentally implicates the conceptions and knowledge about the self, which implies that authenticity needs to take into account the context-specific nature of people’s day-to-day experience of their selves. These contexts include significant others and close relationships, wherein the working selves in question are relational selves. The theory and research reviewed in this article reveal that it matters to people whether or not they feel authentic in their relationships with significant others—they aim to feel authentic and succeed to varying degrees depending on the individual and relationship in question. It is important to note that the precise nature of authenticity strivings in relationship contexts—the self we aim to be true to—is often specific to the significant other in question. Also worthwhile to consider is the basis of authenticity in relationships, with recent findings suggesting that feeling authentic with close others entails viewing the relational self with the relevant significant others as approximating the selves one ideally hopes to become.

Social hierarchy and the positions of higher and lower social power in them also create contexts that have significant implications for authenticity. In particular, the working selves of those in positions of higher power in a social hierarchy tend to be experienced as more authentic compared to the working selves that are operating among those in relatively lower positions of power. This is in large part because the greater opportunities and resources that tend to come with higher (vs. lower) positions of power enable true self-expression, a core component of many conceptualizations of authenticity. This self-expression can take many forms, including the expression of one’s inner emotions, personality traits, beliefs and attitudes, and valued goals. We also saw that taking into account the consistency between multiple sources of power in a given context—such as one’s dispositional power and the power associated with one’s current role—may have consequences for how authentic or inauthentic people feel in a given context.

One broad takeaway from the discussion of the intersection between culture and authenticity is the importance of recognizing that contexts exist at different levels of specificity versus generality. Whereas a particular significant other (e.g., one’s mother) or position of power (one’s position at work) constitutes relatively specific contexts that may influence authenticity, the culture in which people navigate on a day-to-day basis reflects a larger context that can also shape authenticity-related processes and phenomena. Among them, the literature has suggested, broad cultural forces may shift the emphasis on different ways of defining the self across contexts that may, in turn, have implications for the meaning and consequences of authenticity among the individuals in a given culture.

Issues and Questions

The ideas put forth in this article raise a number of issues and questions—beginning with the very definition of authenticity. As noted throughout, definitions of authenticity vary in the broader theoretical frameworks in which they are grounded and therefore in their emphasis. For example, some reflect a dispositional approach to authenticity, whereas others emphasize fluidity in authenticity, such as in recent theorizing on state authenticity (e.g., Sedikides et al., 2017). The present analysis defined authenticity
primarily in state terms—as subjective feelings of authenticity—
because this definition fits squarely with a contextualized under-
standing of authenticity. But taking such an approach leaves un-
answered how other viewpoints on authenticity would fit in—for
example, how crucial is self-awareness, a facet of authenticity
featured in some theories (e.g., Goldman & Kernis, 2002) to
experiencing authenticity at a contextual level, or how does the
basic need for autonomy, emphasized in some definitions of au-
thenticity (e.g., self-determination theory), operate at the contextu-
lar level?

Alongside variations in how authenticity is defined are vari-
tions in how authenticity has been measured in the literature. In my
review of relevant research, I included studies that relied on relatively
direct measures of authenticity—namely, self-report measures tapping subjective feelings of authenticity—as well as studies that relied on less direct measures, including consistency in ratings of the self across different roles, situations, and relations-
ships and alignment of one’s own views of the self with others’
ratings of the self. I assumed some level of convergence in peo-
ple’s responses across various measures of authenticity, and there
are some data to support this assumption. At the same time, it is
important to recognize that the degree of convergence between any
two measures of authenticity may well vary, potentially to a con-
siderable degree. This makes it clear that systematic investiga-
tion of how different measures of authenticity relate to one another
is needed and will likely have bearing on our conceptual under-
standing of what authenticity is and its various possible versions.

In a different vein, various strands of theory and research on
authenticity have examined whether there are particular traits,
roles, and behaviors that people consider to be more or less a
reflection of their “true” or “real” selves. The implication here is
that people are particularly inclined to view some aspects of the
self as part of who they truly are, deep down, whereas other aspects
are not seen as a reflection of the real self. For example, re-
searchers have shown that positive aspects of the self, such as
engaging in moral behavior, are more likely to be perceived as part
of the true self compared to negatively valenced facets of the self,
such as engaging in immoral behavior (Christy, Seto, Schlegel,
Vess, & Hicks, 2016; Strohminger, Knobe, & Newman, 2017; see
also Fleeson & Wilt, 2010). How do such findings fit in with the
current analysis? Are all working self-concept features seen as part
of one’s true, authentic self, at least in the given time and place
those self-concept features are activated? Lacking direct evi-
dence to bear on this question, I cannot give any definitive
answers. However, I would conjecture that not all activated
features of the self in a given context are equally considered reflec-
tions of the true self. This implies, then, that subjective feelings of authenticity in a given context should hinge on the
degree to which the self-concept features that occupy working
memory are indeed considered part of the true self. If much of
the self-knowledge that is currently active in working memory
is not subjectively perceived to be a reflection of who one is,
deep down, then subjective feelings of authenticity in that
context should be diminished.

Future Directions

There are many possible directions for future research on the
contextual nature of authenticity, beyond those needed to address
the issues and questions discussed in the preceding section. Broad
questions to pursue include the following: How are dispositional
and contextual bases of authenticity related? Do they have simi-
larly strong effects on well-being outcomes? Are there some
contexts that exert a bigger impact on authenticity than do others?
Among whom? Why or why not? Many more specific research
directions also exist and seem especially promising in terms of
their ability to fill important gaps in our understanding of authen-
ticity. I mention two possibilities here.

First, theoretically speaking, working selves include both actual
and possible selves—that is, selves that people see as actually
characteristic of themselves in the here and now and selves that
people see themselves as possibly becoming at some point in the
future, respectively. Thus, although lay and scientific discourse
about authenticity often connotes that being true to the self in-
volves being true to selves that people actually see as characteris-
tic of themselves, authenticity can certainly be pursued and experi-
enced in relation to possible selves. In this vein are our recent
studies suggesting that being true to the self (i.e., feeling
authentic) in relationship contexts hinges largely on being true
to possible ideal selves (Gan & Chen, 2017). More research is
needed on what seems to be, at least on the surface, a counter-
intuitive notion—that being one’s true self may often involve
feeling true to a self that one does not actually see as true of the
self, at least not presently.

Second, investigations into how authenticity shapes and is
shaped by significant others and close relationship contexts have
already yielded important insights, among them that striving to be
authentic in relationships often involves trying to be true to the
relevant relational selves. Yet theoretical frameworks of the self-
concept such as Brewer and Gardner’s (1996) delineate multiple
levels at which the self can be defined—namely, the personal,
relational, and collective levels. The collective level of self-
definition refers, essentially, to people’s social identities—to
the selves that people see as themselves as members of particu-
lar social groups (e.g., the self one is as a woman, a Democrat,
a Warriors fan). Intergroup contexts infuse the working self-
concept with such collective selves (Turner, Oakes, Haslam, &
McGarty, 1994). Do people strive to be true to their collective
selves? What do authenticity strivings look like in relation to
these selves? A few strands of research have begun to explore
such questions, including research from my laboratory exam-
ining self-verification strivings in relation to collective selves
(Chen, Chen, & Shaw, 2004; Chen, Shaw Taylor, & Jeung,
2006) and recent theoretical work on the impact of experiencing
(or failing to experience) authenticity in settings where stigma-
tized social identities are salient concerning outcomes such as
belonging and academic performance (Schmader & Sedikides,
2018). Clearly, the literature on the intersection between au-
thenticity and social identities is in its infancy, but all signs
indicate this line of inquiry will likely bear important fruit.

In conclusion, wide-ranging evidence has revealed that authen-
ticity has a significant influence on well-being, fueling interest and
further investigations of the authenticity construct. Until recent
years, much of the extant literature has conceptualized authenticity
in dispositional terms that tend to underplay contextual variations
in people’s everyday strivings and subjective experience of au-
thenticity. In comparison, this article has shone a spotlight on
precisely this contextual variability, focusing on how the nature of
the self-concept—the self-knowledge that is activated and brought into working memory—shifts across different contexts and how such shifts in working selves often lie at the heart of contextual fluctuations in authenticity. In short, a complete understanding of what it means to be authentic—to be “true to the self”—requires taking into account the particular self that is at play in the current context, broadly defined.

References


Received February 15, 2018
Revision received August 1, 2018
Accepted August 6, 2018