# *The different ways of being true to self at work: a review of divergence among authenticity constructs*



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human relations
THE TAVISTOCK INSTITUTE

# The different ways of being true to self at work: A review of divergence among authenticity constructs

human relations
1–29

DOI: 10.1177/00187267241288109
journals.sagepub.com/home/hum


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## Abstract

As the number of publications demonstrating the benefits and risks of being authentic at work grows, so does the variety of interpretations of what it means to be authentic—and with it increasing inconsistencies and contradictions in conceptualizations of authenticity and its outcomes. We propose that the reasons for these inconsistencies stem from differing underlying assumptions on what authenticity is and thus what it means to be "true to self". To better understand these differences, we conducted a systematic review of authenticity constructs in organization science, concentrating on the divergence among definitions and underlying theoretical assumptions of authenticity constructs. We identified two dimensions underlying authenticity constructs' assumptions. First, constructs differed in whether the self was oriented more toward independence (emphasis on the self as

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distinct from others) or toward interdependence (self as relationally oriented). Second, constructs ranged in their perspectives on the self as fixed (self as stable) to more malleable (self as changing). In this review, we delineate the different ways of "staying true to one's self" at work and show the inherent complexities in the process of being authentic in the workplace, explaining how these differences may lead to seemingly contradictory work-related outcomes of authenticity.

**Keywords**
authenticity, conceptual, review, self-construal

## Introduction

Authenticity is commonly and intuitively defined as the extent to which an individual remains "true to self" (Harter, 2002). However, this definition can be deceivingly simple. What exactly does "true to self" entail? Is there a true self already established that needs only to be found, or does it need to be developed over time? Do others have a voice in what that true self is, or is it separate and independent from others' views of the self? Depending on the answer to these questions, one's understanding of "true to self" is likely very different, and arguably the outcomes of being authentic may differ, at times even contradicting one another. Given these debates, it is not surprising that earlier reviews of authenticity (Cha et al., 2019; Jongman-Sereno and Leary, 2019; Lehman et al., 2019) observed that the concept is popular but also highly contested. Some even claim that the state of the authenticity literature is messy with few converging ideas (Gooty et al., 2024), resulting in significant hurdles for the field to develop a clear agreed-upon understanding of authenticity (Caza et al., 2018; Cooper et al., 2005). While we agree with this assessment, we argue that this diversity reflects the inherent complexity of the phenomenon in such a way that this divergence should be appreciated and understood. Thus, as a first step toward greater conceptual clarity in the field, this article aims to provide an organizing framework that explicitly highlights the divergence among different authenticity concepts. Rather than reducing the wide variety of interpretations into a single perspective (predominantly the focus of prior reviews), we take stock of the diverse perspectives and examine the underlying assumptions about what it means to be "true to self" that may have led to such divergence.

As reflected in an editorial here in *Human Relations* (Ogbonnaya and Brown, 2023: 384), reviews such as ours that capture and highlight the diversity of a phenomenon or construct are particularly valuable, because it is through explicitly looking for differences that the scholarly community can "maximize what we see" and "complexify rather than simplify". This is especially important for the construct of authenticity: embracing the complexities of authenticity constructs (rather than simplifying and unifying) avoids a "myopic, or even dangerously incomplete understanding of authenticity" (Cha et al., 2019: 655). More specifically, we believe that the complexity of the authenticity literature is best understood by integrating this literature with theory on self and identity (see Caza et al., 2018) to enable a clearer understanding of what "true to self" means. Our

systematic literature review (Briner et al., 2009; Ogbonnaya and Brown, 2023) suggests that the literature on self-construal (Cross et al., 2003) can help to deconstruct the definition of authenticity as remaining "true to self" in four different directions: an independent versus interdependent self-construal and a fixed versus malleable self-construal.

In examining authenticity constructs through these dimensions, this article moves the authenticity field forward in several ways. By clarifying how the "self" that one is staying true to is construed, this article can enhance our understanding of authenticity and provide an explanation as to why different authenticity constructs exist and how they differ in their basic assumptions. Furthermore, it provides researchers with a roadmap to guide their choice of which construct best aligns with their ontology (e.g. da Costa Júnior et al., 2022). Our work encourages researchers to be more explicit about the values and assumptions (e.g. Walker, 2003) underpinning their conceptualizations of authenticity (i.e. their self-construal assumptions). Using our framework, researchers can locate themselves more reflectively within the broader authenticity literature, which will allow for more nuanced and richer theoretical arguments (e.g. Tsoukas, 2017). Furthermore, applying the framework to current research on authenticity can be useful in explaining potential contradictions in existing research on work-related outcomes of authenticity. For instance, some authors have debated heavily on whether authenticity has positive or negative implications for leadership effectiveness (e.g. Bedeian and Day, 2004). Being explicit about self-construal could help advance those debates and even reconcile discordant empirical findings.

## Theoretical background

Existing reviews (Cha et al., 2019; Jongman-Sereno and Leary, 2019; Lehman et al., 2019) have attributed the complexity or inconsistencies in the authenticity literature to different contexts, theoretical traditions, or empirical errors and have aimed to provide unifying conceptualizations to address them. For instance, Cha et al. (2019: 634) attempted to integrate diverse authenticity conceptualizations, arguing: "Many of these definitions emphasize alignment between a person's internal sense of self and outward behavior." In a similar vein, Lehman et al. (2019: 3) integrated definitions of authenticity to "congruence between an entity and 'a person, place, or time as claimed'", again, by focusing on similarities in the literature. Finally, Jongman-Sereno and Leary (2019: 133) defined authenticity as "the degree to which a particular behavior is congruent with a person's attitudes, beliefs, values, motives, and other dispositions". In contrast to previous work, rather than advocate for one best approach, we propose that an alternative approach is to delineate, summarize, and appreciate the complexity and diversity of the construct (Ogbonnaya and Brown, 2023).

To do so, we start from the basic yet broad idea of authenticity as staying "true to self". In this article, we define the self as a process of reflexivity consisting of an individual's reflective activities and social interactions (James, 2007; Mead, 1934). In turn, the self-concept is a product of this reflexive phenomenon (Gecas, 1982) or a theory (i.e. an organizing structure of identities and characteristics and their evaluation) that a person has about themselves as a functioning being in interaction with the world (Epstein, 1973). However, as most of the literature speaks about "true to self", we will use this terminology

rather than referring to staying "true to self-concept". Our review draws upon the literature on self and identity (see Leary and Tangney, 2011), with the goal of unpacking what "true to self" means and understanding the diversity in its interpretations.

We found self-construal theory (Cross et al., 2003) to be a useful theoretical framework to capture and better understand the diversity of thinking about authenticity as being "true to self", and to organize the differences and similarities between authenticity constructs. Taking a view of the self as a cohesive entity (Brown, 2015), the key dimensions of self-construal theory reflect the basic differences underlying conceptualizations of authenticity at work—whether people define themselves as individuals who are independent of others, or whether their self-construal is shaped by their membership in the organization and their relationships with others in it; and whether one's self is stable and unchanging or whether it is dynamic and changing. Beyond the conceptual alignment, some work has directly linked self-construal theory to authenticity (e.g. Heine, 2003; Ito and Kodama, 2007).

In what follows, we explain the two dimensions of self-construal according to the theory and how they can be useful in capturing and understanding the diversity of authenticity constructs.

## *Independent versus interdependent self-construal in authenticity constructs*

Self-construal theory examines the ways in which individuals define and make sense of their self, commonly thought of in terms of how one sees themselves in relation to others (Cross et al., 2011; Markus and Kitayama, 1991). Self-construal theory posits that individuals construe their sense of self in different ways, most commonly classified as including two main types—independent and interdependent self-construal (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). Independent self-construal characterizes a perception of one's self as separate from others; one's internal attributes are what regulate one's behavior and reflect their uniqueness as an individual who is bounded and separate from others (Cross et al., 2003; Geertz, 1975; Markus and Kitayama, 1991). On the contrary, interdependent self-construal posits that an individual's sense of self is meaningful only in the context of their relationships with others, such that the self is defined in context and with regard to one's social roles and relationships (Cross et al., 2003; Markus and Kitayama, 1991).

This key distinction is useful to differentiate authenticity constructs based on their assumptions on the relational nature of the self-concept. For instance, authenticity constructs reflecting independent self-construal include authentic personality (Wood et al., 2008) and authentic functioning (Kernis and Goldman, 2006). Authentic personality (Wood et al., 2008) regards authenticity as consistency between one's thoughts, feelings, and values, and their external behavior, such that one's behavior reflects an internal bounded self. Similarly, authentic functioning (Kernis and Goldman, 2006) defines authenticity as related to an objective self-view, positing that people operate based on their unique and individual characteristics (i.e. demonstrating an independent self-construal). On the contrary, other authenticity constructs reflect a more interdependent self-construal—for example, authentic leadership (Avolio and Gardner, 2005), which views

authenticity as involving a high degree of self-awareness and self-regulation, thus placing significant importance on the context in shaping the individual's sense of self. Or authentication (Caza et al., 2018), which posits that authenticity is socially constructed—a process in which individuals reconcile their identities and self, determining who they are based on the situation they are in (i.e. demonstrating an interdependent self-construal).

### *Fixed versus malleable self-construal in authenticity constructs*

Another aspect of self-construal theory relevant for conceptualizations of authenticity is the view of the self as fixed and unchanging versus dynamic, malleable, and changing over time and in different circumstances (Markus and Kunda, 1986). The former views the self as fixed, in the sense that it is viewed as an identifiable object (self-as-object; Hayes et al., 2001), a "true self" that exists and is unchanging (entity view of the self; Dweck, 2000). The alternative perspective does not assume a core or "true self" but views the self as constructed and developed (self-as-process; Hayes et al., 2001), thus reflecting a view of the self as incremental—or malleable (Dweck, 2000).

Applying this key distinction to authenticity constructs reveals that some authenticity constructs view authenticity as a reflection of a fixed and unchanging self. For instance, authentic self-expression (Cable et al., 2013) defines authenticity in terms of having a "true inner self" that one needs to connect with and express. Concepts such as self-verification (Swann, 1987) make a similar assumption and add that individuals are concerned with getting others to see them as they see themselves. On the other hand, constructs such as narrative authenticity (Ibarra, 1999; Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010) emphasize the need for experimentation with who one is, thus creating and modifying one's self in their personal life and specifically in their career (e.g. protean career; Briscoe et al., 2006). These perspectives represent a view of authenticity as a dynamic and changing process, thus reflecting a malleable view of the self.

To summarize, we propose that self-construal theory is useful in capturing the diversity of perspectives on authenticity. These differences can be characterized as concerning two questions regarding the nature of the self that is at the core of the definition of authenticity as being "true to the self": first, is the self independent of others, or is it interdependent, defined through one's relations with others? Second, is the self stable and fixed, or is it changing? In what follows, we present our divergence-seeking review that aims to unpack the tensions and contradictions in common conceptualizations of authenticity. We decipher the most salient characteristics (Rousseau et al., 2008) in how the self is seen by researchers studying authenticity and use this framework to capture and organize the diversity in definitions.

## Literature search and review procedure

Since the approach of this review—to reveal and unpack the differences in constructs—is relatively new (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2020; Ogbonnaya and Brown, 2023; Sandberg and Alvesson, 2011), we first present three principles that guide our review effort. First, we intend to break the boundaries between different constructs that pertain to the notion of authenticity. Specifically, this means that, in our literature search, we cast our net

broadly (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2020), including not only the constructs that explicitly contain "authenticity" in their labels, but also the constructs that indirectly tap into the notion of "true to self". Second, while we search broadly, we follow the advice of Alvesson and Blom (2022) to read broadly, but selectively. Given that our level of analysis is the construct conceptualization, we focus on seminal articles—usually founding articles or subsequent reviews of a construct—that shed light upon the core interpretation authors may have used. Third, in our analysis of such texts, we take the interpretative approach (Ogbonnaya and Brown, 2023), treating articles as a discourse of ongoing scholarly conversation to be explored. By analyzing the narratives and content of such publications, we aim to unpack the different assumptions underlying various authenticity constructs.

Operationally, these principles translate into the following procedures carried out as part of the literature search: as a first step, we conducted a literature search on Web of Science on 1 September 2020 using the search term "authentic", restricting results to the broad categories of "management", "business", and "applied psychology". The earliest articles found were from 1971 from Brumbaugh and 1974 from Snyder, indicating that the articles we covered span approximately the last 50 years. This search yielded 1173 articles in total. We then searched for the different conceptualizations that have been used in the identified articles. This search revealed 37 different constructs that refer to authenticity either directly (in name, e.g. authentic functioning) or indirectly (constructs whose label did not include the terms authenticity or authentic, but reflected the construct itself, e.g. surface acting).

For a review such as ours, we needed to strike a balance between broadening the scope of the analysis to make sure existing authenticity research is sufficiently covered and, at the same time, not losing focus. For this purpose, we established three criteria for inclusion. First, our central focus was on active approaches to being "true to self", meaning we excluded conceptualizations that use authenticity as a descriptor or adjective to describe something else than the functioning of the self. Second, we only retained established perspectives in organization studies. Specifically, we excluded conceptualizations that are unique and singular; that is, to our knowledge no other work has used this conceptualization (e.g. Brumbaugh, 1971) or constructs that lacked further theoretical development and empirical testing. For instance, the concept of leader authenticity (Henderson and Hoy, 1982) was excluded because only a few articles have built on this work, especially considering its origin date. Lastly, we checked whether there has been sufficient traction of the constructs, reflected in either comprehensive reviews of these constructs, or associated follow-up empirical work published in the past decade. In Supplemental material A, we detail the reasons for exclusion for each of the constructs that were removed from this process. The constructs included in the review are displayed in Table 1.

This process resulted in a list of 19 authenticity constructs (of the initial list of 37 constructs) to be included in the review. At this stage, we focused our review on the construct level, rather than the article level, relying on seminal (or review) articles to extract a clear definition of the construct and later to map the constructs onto the two dimensions we identified. Figure 1 shows the review process resulting in the final list of 19 constructs.

**Table 1.** An overview of established authenticity constructs in organization studies.

| Construct name | Seminal theory article | Construct definition | Construct clarification |
|---|---|---|---|
| Authentic Functioning | Kernis and Goldman (2006) | "The unobstructed operation of one's true, or core, self in one's daily enterprise." (p. 294) | Authentic functioning is an open and non-defensive way of interacting with oneself and others to come to an objective self-view that is accurate and socially informed. |
| Authentic Leadership | Avolio and Gardner (2005) | "Those who are deeply aware of how they think and behave and are perceived by others as being aware of their own and others' values/moral perspectives, knowledge, and strengths; aware of the context in which they operate; and who are confident, hopeful, optimistic, resilient, and of high moral character." (p. 321) | A form of leadership (i.e. a process of influence) that is characterized by a high degree of self-awareness and self-regulation from leaders (e.g. operating according to internal morals and being transparent with others), in a way that is observable and thus able to influence others. |
| Authentic Personality | Wood et al. (2008) | "Authenticity is a tripartite construct defined by Barrett-Lennard (1998, p. 82) as involving 'consistency between the three levels of (a) a person's primary experience, (b) their symbolized awareness, and (c) their outward behavior and communication.'" (p. 386) | Authentic personality is the consistency between the mental interpretations of life experiences (i.e. thoughts, feelings, and values), the accuracy of these interpretations, and subsequent behaviors that are performed as a result. |
| Authenticity of Positive Emotional Displays | Grandey et al. (2005) | "The extent to which [these] required displays seem authentically positive." (p. 39) | The perception that an employee's required display of positive emotion is seen as genuine by others regardless of whether the employee truly experiences the emotion. |
| Authentic Self-Expression | Cable et al. (2013) | "Each person has a true inner self and can only achieve self-fulfillment as an authentic human being by expressing this inner self through actions in the external world. Thus, to be authentic, we must align our internal experiences (e.g., feelings, values, perspectives) with external expressions." (p. 6) | The accurate representation of one's self through words and actions prompted by a self-perception of consistency between private or inner states and outward or public behaviors. |

*(Continued)*

**Table 1.** (Continued)

| Construct name | Seminal theory article | Construct definition | Construct clarification |
|---|---|---|---|
| Behavioral Integrity | Simons (2002) | "Behavioral integrity is the extent to which employees perceive that their managers tend to represent themselves and their motivating values accurately in their communications with employees. Behavioral integrity is the extent to which employees believe a manager 'walks her talk', and, conversely, it reflects the extent to which they see her as 'talking her walk'." (p. 19) | A subjective judgment that others make about a person's authenticity and character based on the perceived degree of alignment or consistency between the person's words and deeds. |
| Deep Acting | Grandey (2003) | "When engaging in deep acting, the actor attempts to modify feelings to match the required displays." (p. 87) | The modification of inner feelings to match situationally dictated emotional displays such that the behavior is felt and perceived as authentic. |
| Facades of Conformity | Hewlin (2003) | "When conflicts arise between personal and organizational values, some employees may perceive the need to suppress their own values and pretend to embrace organizational values. I describe this behavior as 'creating facades of conformity'." (p. 633) | Images created by employees in order to come across as if they authentically embrace the values of the organization. |
| Impression Management | Bolino and Turnley (1999) | "Impression management is the process whereby people seek to influence the image others have of them." (p. 187) | A process by which individuals influence the image that others make about them by enacting strategies to be seen as authentically possessing certain characteristics or as motivated by a particular goal. |

*(Continued)*

**Table 1.** (Continued)

| Construct name | Seminal theory article | Construct definition | Construct clarification |
|---|---|---|---|
| Apparent Sincerity | Ferris et al. (2005) | "The extent to which one is successful at appearing sincere." (p. 147) | A component of political skill that is measured by the appearance of being authentic, sincere, and genuine; ultimately in the eye of the beholder. |
| Protean Career | Briscoe et al. (2006) | "Individuals who hold protean career attitudes are intent upon using their own values (versus organizational values for example) to guide their career ('values-driven') and take an independent role in managing their vocational behavior ('self-directed')." (p. 31) | An employment path that is proactively constructed and self-directed in order to be consistent with personal values and representative of the true self. |
| Self-Determination | Weinstein et al. (2012) | "More autonomous individuals experience their actions as self-organized or initiated, that is, as either originating from or endorsed by the self. When behavior is fully autonomous the person is wholeheartedly willing to act, or 'stand behind' what he or she does, and experiences behavior as self-congruent and integrated." (p. 397) | Self-endorsing one's activities at the highest level of reflection. Being authentic or self-determined does not mean opposing one's environment. Instead, authentic individuals are likely to integrate external demands into an already existing and core sense of self. |
| Self-Monitoring Personality | Snyder (1974) | "The self-monitoring individual is one who, out of a concern for social appropriateness, is particularly sensitive to the expression and self-presentation of others." (p. 528) | While high self-monitors are assumed to have chameleon-like characteristics, low self-monitors are assumed authentic in that they are unwilling to take the demands of the social situation into account. |
| Self-Verification | Swann and Read (1981) | "Using social interactions as opportunities to verify and confirm their self-conceptions." (p. 351) | The strategies that people engage in in order to reduce inconsistency between self-views and other-views of the "authentic" self. |

*(Continued)*

**Table 1.** (Continued)

| Construct name | Seminal theory article | Construct definition | Construct clarification |
|---|---|---|---|
| Surface Acting | Grandey (2003) | "In surface acting, employees modify their displays without shaping their inner feelings." (p. 87) | The display of situationally dictated emotions (i.e. display rules) that are not a reflection of the "true self". |
| Authentication | Caza et al. (2018) | "The emergent, socially constructed process of both determining who one is and helping others see it." (p. 1090) | A socially constructed process of authenticity construction through the reconciliation of multiple identities and the verification of the emergent self by others. |
| Authenticity Work | Ibarra (1999) | "These 'provisional selves' are temporary solutions people use to bridge the gap between their current capacities and self-conceptions and the representations they hold about what attitudes and behaviors are expected in the new role." (p. 765) | The formulation of a new identity that encompasses the "true" and "new" self through the enactment of a temporary, transitional identity during the evolution from "true self" to "new true self". |
| Fabricated Authenticity | Jones et al. (2005) | "The performance and interpretation of authenticity is accomplished through impression management." (p. 894) | A perception of authenticity that is fabricated or manufactured by the actor but is not true or reflective of the inner self. |
| Narrative Authenticity | Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010) | "Social efforts to craft self-narratives that meet a person's identity aims." (p. 137) | The process of creating and modifying the self-told story to accommodate new experiences into a coherent self. |

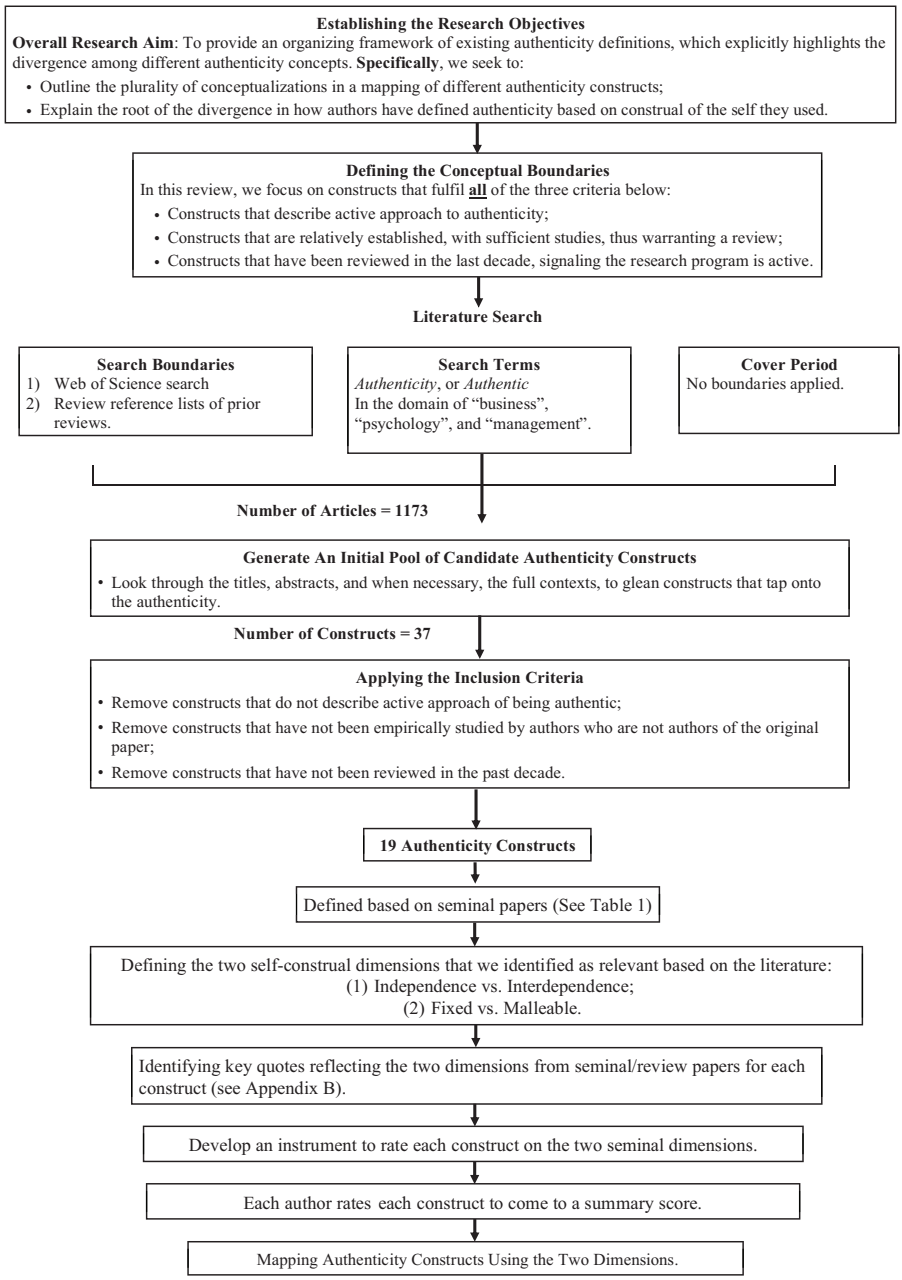


**Figure 1.** An illustration of our review approach.

## Mapping of existing authenticity conceptualizations on two self-construal dimensions

In focusing on the final set of 19 constructs, we treated the descriptions of authenticity in these seminal publications as qualitative material that can be informative of the authors' underlying assumptions of self. Specifically, we first reviewed the seminal articles for each of our 19 constructs and identified instances where each construct was discussed in terms of their view of relational and malleability self-construal. Supplemental material B provides an overview of quotes derived from the seminal articles that describe how these constructs map onto the two dimensions.[1] These quotes helped us understand how self-construal is embedded within each authenticity construct.

Our next step involved a thematic content analysis (Krippendorff, 1980) to highlight how constructs differed in their understanding of self-construal across the two dimensions and develop the rating instrument used to map the 19 constructs onto these dimensions. First, we discussed and established the meaning of each degree of variation on the two self-construal dimensions. For each dimension, we created seven distinct anchoring points, each point being qualitatively different from the others, uniquely reflecting a different view of self-construal (thus comprising our "codebook" for the mapping of each construct). For example, on the independent–interdependent dimension, some constructs can be characterized as "posits the self as fundamentally distinct from social context, entirely focused on innate individual qualities" (i.e. completely independent). On the contrary, other constructs can be described as "while anchoring the self in individuality, this perspective gives weight to the shaping force of social interactions and contexts" (i.e. slightly independent). For complete definitions of the different anchoring points on the two self-construal dimensions see Supplemental material C.

Each author then mapped each authenticity construct on the two continuums we developed in the prior step. When individual categorization was completed, we compared our mapping of the constructs. For the most part, these mappings were consistent and aligned with one another, indicating that these two dimensions provide reasonable and reliable categories to interpret authenticity. For occasional inconsistencies, we inspected the texts together, elaborated on our reasoning for the mapping, and adjusted the categorization where necessary. The revised mapping was used to produce the two-dimensional graph in Figure 2, depicting how the 19 constructs map onto the two dimensions of self-construal, representing the differing assumptions of self-construal underlying each construct.[2]

## A self-construal view of authenticity

### *Relational orientation of self-construal in authenticity constructs*

Along the dimension of independence versus interdependence, we find authenticity constructs that make different assumptions about the self's relation to others. The left-hand side of Figure 2 represents a view of authenticity as grounded in independent self-construal, which assumes that authenticity is a reflection of a self that is bounded and separated from the interpersonal and social context. In this view, to be authentic means one

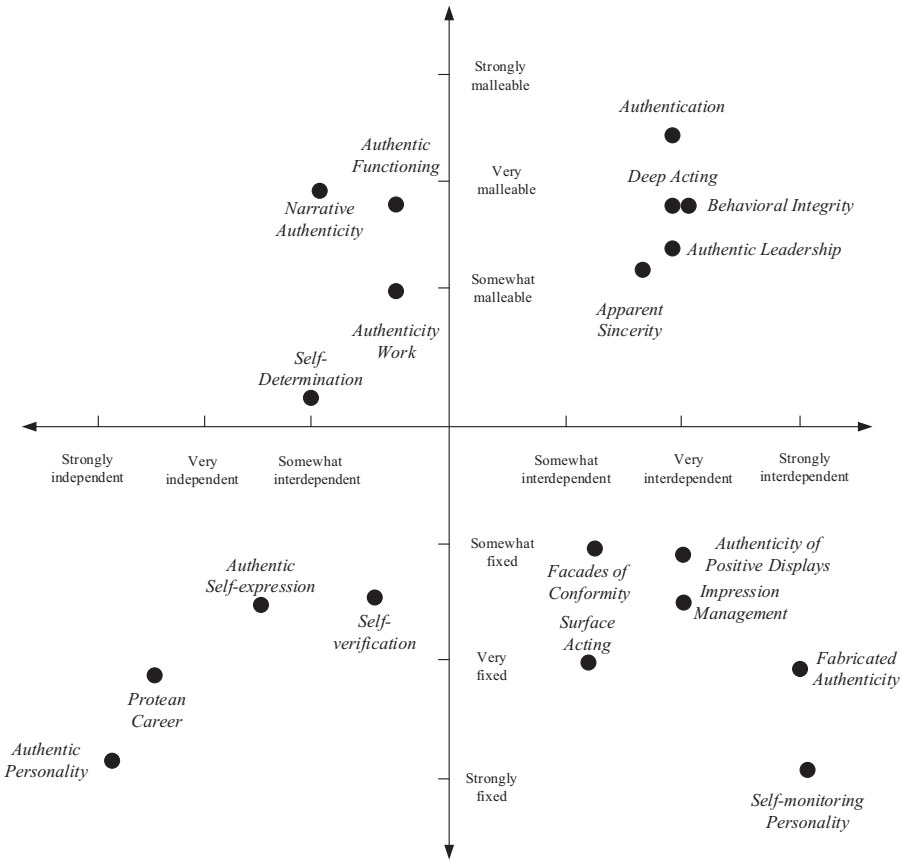


**Figure 2.** Mapping of existing authenticity constructs in organization studies.

should express their unique and idiosyncratic qualities (such as personality, values, emotions, and thoughts) as an individual. One example is protean career (Briscoe et al., 2006), which describes employment that is self-directed by one's personal values and representing one's true self; thus, the self in this regard is separate from others. In addition, authentic self-expression (Cable et al., 2013) describes authenticity as involving the external expression of one's core self as an internal bounded self, again defining authenticity as independent of others and one's relationships with them.

The right-hand side of Figure 2 represents a view of authenticity as grounded in interdependent self-construal, such that to be authentic means that one's self is relationally defined and embedded in their social relationships and context. In this view, to be authentic means to align oneself (thoughts, emotions, etc.) with the expectations of others, the relationships, and the situations one is in. For example, fabricated authenticity (Jones et al., 2005) defined authenticity as a manufactured presentation of the self that is not reflective of the self in order to align with others, thus indicating a significant role for others in self-construal.

Similarly, impression management (Bolino and Turnley, 1999) involves behaving in an attempt to be seen as authentically possessing certain characteristics, responding to what others might expect of oneself, thus reflecting the role of social embeddedness in definitions of self and authenticity.

### *Malleability of self-construal in authenticity constructs*

On the dimension of fixed versus malleable self-construal, constructs make different assumptions about whether the self is stable or changing. The bottom of Figure 2 represents a view of authenticity as grounded in fixed self-construal, which assumes that the self is a stable entity. In this paradigm, authenticity hinges on the identification and unwavering commitment to one's inherent values, objectives, and beliefs (thus assuming that these exist as unchanging aspects of the self)—continuously sustaining oneself as it is. Constructs that are more fixed in their view of self-construal include authentic personality (Wood et al., 2008), which defines authenticity as the accuracy of the representation of one's personality (or inner experiences) through their subsequent behavior, treating it as a stable part of the self. Another example is surface acting (Grandey, 2003), which views authenticity as modifying one's expressed emotions without changing the way one actually feels. This construct differs from authentic personality in that the external and internal expressions are not aligned; however, both constructs assume an internal, unchanging self.

The top part of Figure 2 reflects a view of authenticity grounded in malleable self-construal, which emphasizes that authenticity is something that needs to be constructed and created by individuals. Thus, constructs that fall on the malleable end view the self as an ongoing process of self-exploration and redefinition. For example, authenticity work (Ibarra, 1999) emphasizes the need for experimentation with who one is, such that one can formulate new self-definitions over time. Similarly, authentication (Caza et al., 2018) views the self as a product of construction through the reconciliation of multiple identities and the verification of the emergent self by others. Both examples demonstrate a view of authenticity as reflecting the ongoing and changing nature of the self.

## Discussion

In response to a lack of clarity on what authenticity means and the diversity of ways in which it may have an impact on work-related outcomes, our goal was to create an organizing framework that captures the diversity of perspectives on authenticity. To this end, we conducted a systematic review of established authenticity constructs in organization science. Our review revealed that the different authenticity constructs all aligned to some extent with the basic definition of "true to self". However, authors widely differed in their interpretation of what the "self" is. Iterating between the literature on authenticity and the literature on identity and self, specifically self-construal theory, we developed a framework to help capture the diversity of authenticity constructs through the two dimensions of independent–interdependent and malleable–fixed self-construal. These dimensions make explicit the assumptions underlying various authenticity constructs and offer insight into understanding common ways of being authentic at work.

The mapping process revealed that while some scholars view authenticity as reflecting selves that are separate and disconnected from others (independent) others view authenticity as reflecting selves that are embedded in and constructed in response to one's social relationships with others (interdependent). Authenticity constructs also differed in terms of whether being authentic means one is the same across situations and time (fixed) or whether authenticity means one will change at different points in time and across situations (malleable).

We believe that these two dimensions of self-construal capture some of the unique features and inherent difficulties of authenticity at work. Cha et al. (2019) suggested some of this in explaining the bounded nature of workplace authenticity: at work, one's authenticity is co-determined not just by the agentic intentions of the individual, but there are also structural restrictions imposed by the organization on what is viewed as authentic in this context. Indeed, an organization is inherently structured in a way that requires interdependence between unique and independent individuals to achieve common goals. In this way, authenticity at work likely differs from expressed authenticity in one's personal life. While we recognize similar tensions in other areas of life, we expect the need to balance between independence–interdependence to be especially pronounced at work, as at home, one might be more able to completely stay true to an independent sense of self without costs in terms of relational success.

Furthermore, an organizational context is constantly evolving, and employees are expected to be flexible in aligning with changing demands over time. What leaders, colleagues, and clients want from employees in terms of their authenticity changes (Fleming and Sturdy, 2011). This pressure to change may be met with resistance as it may challenge some individuals. Depending on one's belief of what it means to stay true to the self, such change may be experienced as difficult versus natural. At the same time, such change is a constant, and individuals are challenged to maintain a sense of internal consistency while adapting to external demands. Once again, we assume that similar tensions play out in individuals' personal lives, but expect these to be especially pronounced in the workplace. While we develop and grow as individuals throughout our lifetime, the volatile nature of the work environment challenges our capacity to develop.

### *Theoretical implications of the self-construal framework for authenticity constructs*

This review makes several theoretical contributions to the literature on authenticity. First, this article offers the first divergent review of the authenticity literature. While previous reviews (Cha et al., 2019; Jongman-Sereno and Leary, 2019; Lehman et al., 2019) focused on integrating and identifying the commonalities between different conceptualizations of authenticity, our focus was on capturing and organizing the diversity of these definitions. The framework presented in this article enables us to organize the literature in a coherent manner, highlighting the underlying assumptions leading to differences between authenticity constructs, thereby helping us to better understand the complexities surrounding authenticity. In doing so, our framework offers a better understanding of some of the debates in the field of authenticity.

As one example, conceptualizing the independent versus interdependent dimension helps us understand why scholars differ in opinion on whether authenticity is experienced (self-rated) or perceived (other-rated; Cha et al., 2019). If one takes the former perspective, they will view authenticity as reflecting one's internal self and their own individual characteristics, and thus may argue that authenticity is an internal experience of an individual (e.g. as argued by self-determination theory; Ryan and Deci, 2000). On the contrary, those who view the self as interdependent, will see authenticity as granted by others, thus leading to a view of authenticity as performed or enacted by an individual wishing to present specific features (i.e. fabricated authenticity; Jones et al., 2005). We would argue that both are valid perspectives on authenticity that can co-exist. By articulating these underlying assumptions, scholars can now make sense of these debates and position their own views on authenticity along these dimensions.

As another example, two seemingly contrasting constructs such as self-monitoring versus authentic personality can capture "being true to self" (Bedeian and Day, 2004), albeit in different ways that stem from differing assumptions about the self, one more independent and the other more interdependent. Bedeian and Day (2004) engaged in a strong debate about which one of these constructs is most likely to influence trust—authentic personality or self-monitoring personality? Nguyen et al. (2022) further develop this idea and show empirically that authentic personality and self-monitoring personality are factorially distinct constructs that are slightly positively correlated (rather than assumed to be oppositional). These authors draw on Baumeister's (2012) theory on private and public self-views, which argues that individuals may see themselves as staying true to both their private self-views (authenticity) and public self-views (self-monitoring), both of which can be deemed to be an authentic part of who one is. Moreover, the article by Nguyen et al. (2022) demonstrated that both authentic personality and self-monitoring personality may be perceived as authentic (i.e. they are perceived as "walking their talk", thus reflecting behavioral integrity—a third conceptualization of authenticity) but only when they are separated from each other. In other words, authentic self-monitoring evokes confusion from the audience as the person switches between private and public self-views as a guide to their behavior. While the person themselves may understand and can perfectly see how both self-views are part of one coherent self, observers do not have access to this complex self-view (action-observer bias; Jones and Nisbett, 1971), therefore they observe and judge that this person fails to be consistent across situations (i.e. does not walk their talk; Simons, 2002), see them as inauthentic, and are not inclined to trust the person as a result. The framework can help us explain these differences, and thus better understand such findings.

Next, we further elaborate on how our proposed framework not only helps to solve theoretical debates in the literature, but also can help us make sense of the different, even contradicting, findings regarding the outcomes of authenticity in the literature.

## *Implications for work-related outcomes of authenticity*

When one assumes that all authenticity constructs can be reduced to one singular definition, not appreciating the diversity of conceptualizations as demonstrated here, it is easy to be confused by the diverse, sometimes seemingly contradictory, outcomes of authenticity.

These inconsistencies and contradictions not only undermine our understanding of the effects of authenticity on work-related outcomes, but also raise questions on the value of the common advice "to be oneself" at work (Cha et al., 2019). We argue that these contradicting findings could be better understood as a result of scholars' different assumptions on self-construal. In this sense, the proposed framework can be instrumental to our understanding of the role of authenticity in work-related outcomes. In this section, we discuss how the framework can contribute to two central debates in the literature: the effects of authenticity on personal well-being versus relational outcomes, and the effects of authenticity on short- versus long-term outcomes.

A recurring debate in the literature is whether authenticity positively affects personal versus relational outcomes. Work on personal outcomes has focused on individuals' well-being and sense of satisfaction (Diener et al., 2003; Ryan and Deci, 2001). Relational outcomes refer to the extent to which authentic individuals are liked by others and accrue relational success (Baumeister and Leary, 2017; Leary and Allen, 2011). Our proposed framework helps to understand not only why certain constructs predominantly focus on certain outcomes (e.g. independent constructs focusing more on personal well-being and interdependent constructs focusing more on relational success), but also the limitations in doing so. In other words, by not considering alternative conceptualizations and their corresponding assumptions (as identified in this review), scholars may not realize how focusing only on one conceptualization (without considering others) limits our understanding of the impact of authenticity on personal well-being and relational success.

On the one hand, research involving constructs characterized by an independent self-construal has frequently focused on how being true to oneself helps individuals to maintain a sense of self-worth and personal well-being (Kernis and Goldman, 2006). This is evident in work on constructs such as authentic personality (Wood et al., 2008), protean career (Briscoe et al., 2006), self-determination (Ryan and Deci, 2000), and authentic functioning (Harter, 2002). This work demonstrated the impact of authenticity on attitudinal, typically self-rated, measures of well-being (e.g. job satisfaction, reduced emotional exhaustion, engagement, reduced depression, subjective career success), revealing that being authentic leads to higher personal well-being.

On the other hand, research involving authenticity constructs characterized by interdependent self-construal more often focused on relational outcomes, such as fostering good relationships with others (even when this may hurt one's personal well-being in the process; Markus and Kitayama, 1991). Constructs such as authentic leadership (Avolio and Gardner, 2005), impression management (Leary et al., 1994), behavioral integrity (Simons, 2002), and self-monitoring personality (Snyder, 1974), tended to focus on the relevance of authenticity for improving relational, typically other-rated success (e.g. trust, customer satisfaction, leader effectiveness, promotions, liking), revealing a positive effect of authenticity on relational outcomes.

Yet, intriguing insights emerge when we start to consider work that breaks away from the above patterns. For instance, while the relationship between independent forms of authenticity and well-being is well established (Sutton, 2020)—the relationship with relational outcomes is less clear. Findings by Karelaia et al. (2022) show that authentic personality (an independent conceptualization of authenticity) may lead to social conflict, especially when the values of the authentic, independent person clash with the

environment. This supports the notion that while an independent self-view can make people feel good, there may be some detrimental social consequences unless an interdependent self-view (i.e. person–environment fit) is taken into account. Supporting this proposed balance of assumptions, Leroy et al. (2022) found that in a team environment, greater levels of authentic personality (independent self-construal) decreased team information elaboration and team performance, unless it was equally coupled with perspective taking personality within the team. This further highlights how an interdependent self-construal may complement an independent self-construal for effective functioning within a social environment.

Finally, prior work has shown that leaders who feel independently authentic (i.e. authentic personality) will not be perceived as authentic by their followers unless they also have political skill (i.e. apparent sincerity—one of the more interdependent authenticity constructs we investigated) to communicate their authenticity effectively to others (Cullen-Lester et al., 2016). Politically skilled individuals understand that their authenticity not only needs to be experienced by the person themselves, but it needs to be carefully communicated so that it is also understood by others. In sum, while some may argue that authenticity leads to relational success, this view should be more nuanced, as our review demonstrates that constructs characterized by an independent self-construal are associated with relational challenges. Therefore, research should look at an effective integration of independent and interdependent forms of authenticity to promote relational success.

At the same time, authenticity constructs that are more interdependently focused may come with a cost on one's personal well-being. For instance, Briggs et al. (1980) demonstrated that self-monitoring was unexpectedly linked to higher social anxiety (a fear of disapproval)—something that is inconsistent with the idea that self-monitors are socially well-adjusted individuals: individuals may be too focused on interpersonal demands such that they seek constant approval from others (Choi et al., 2024). Indeed, while the majority of research on self-monitoring suggests it is important for interpersonal success (e.g. performance evaluations, career advancement; Day et al., 2002), some have cautioned that high self-monitoring may also decrease well-being (e.g. through experiencing more role conflict; Mehra and Schenkel, 2008). Similarly, in her review of the impression management literature, Roberts (2005) highlighted that impression management tactics need to be perceived as authentic to ensure that it not only predicts relational success, but sustains personal well-being as well.

The preceding examples further hint at a second point of differentiation in work-related outcomes of authenticity: short- versus long-term outcomes, assumed to align with a more fixed versus malleable view of the self respectively. For instance, if we take the example of personal well-being, we can see that authenticity constructs characterized as reflecting a more fixed assumption of the self typically assume that being authentic leads to optimal or true self-esteem—self-esteem that is stable and deeply rooted within (Kernis, 2003), or a eudaimonic well-being, which is stable over time because it results from one's daimon or true self (Ryan and Deci, 2001). The assumption is that finding one's true self will lead to long-term and enduring well-being (eudaimonic well-being), in contrast to more short-term, and state-like boosts of positive emotions (hedonic well-being).

Despite this theoretical assumption, empirical research taking a fixed self-concept perspective is often conducted cross-sectionally, thus assuming (rather than testing) the effects of authenticity over time (Sutton, 2020). When one assumes a true self, discovering a cross-sectional relationship between authenticity and well-being may imply that these effects are likely to be sustainable, as the self-concept, which is at the origin of these effects, is unlikely to change. However, it is possible that the actual effects are quite different, such that authenticity leads only to short-term outcomes of well-being, rather than having the hypothesized long-term effect.

In contrast, a more malleable self-construal of authenticity assumes an ever-evolving sense of self—a puzzle that is never finished. One could easily see how this never-ending cycle of self-development comes with short-term well-being consequences, as such ongoing introspection and development are not easy, and may impair well-being in the short run. It is decidedly easier to reject external feedback highlighting required changes to one's self and hold onto one core or true sense of self. However, one can also assume that the successful adaptation of the self (a malleable authentic self) would promote more stable well-being over time as it leads to a more well-adjusted individual. Vangronsvelt's (2019) findings seems to confirm this: in her qualitative analyses of authenticity constructs, she demonstrated that individuals with a more fixed sense of self may utilize a more defensive authentic strategy (I am who I am) to defend their self-esteem to outside input. However, those same individuals would recurringly receive the same feedback in different contexts—ultimately impairing their long-term well-being. In contrast, individuals with a more malleable sense of self suffered when actively trying to integrate environmental feedback on the self; however, over time they experienced a more stable sense of well-being.

The distinction between short term and long term is not just relevant for individuals' well-being, but can shape our understanding of the findings on relational success as well (Cha et al., 2019), specifically, distinguishing between positive first impressions (i.e. a superficial connection based on a limited number of encounters; Bolino et al., 2008) and high-quality relationships (i.e. a mutually beneficial and trusting relationship; Dutton and Heaphy, 2003). Positive impressions are more short-term focused and involve seeking the approval of others, to avoid rejection. In contrast, high-quality relationships have a long-term focus, that is not based on immediate approval of whether the other party fits the norms, stereotypes, or prototypes, but an appreciation of the other person for who they are, as they develop over time.

Swann et al. (2013) captured this distinction in a romantic relationships context (focusing on self-verification). While dating, individuals preferred that their partner did not reveal too many non-confirming or non-perfect aspects of the self to maintain positive first impressions, but when married, individuals preferred the other party to reveal the most non-conforming aspects of the self to maintain high relationship quality. This implies there may be a potential tension between positive impressions and high-quality relationships when taking a fixed view of the self, that has not yet been demonstrated in the literature (Bolino et al., 2014).

Integrating authenticity constructs characterized by malleable self-construal can help us better understand the tension. For example, theory on behavioral integrity suggests one's consistency ("walking the talk") is a key driver of trust (Simons, 2002), which is a

hallmark of a high-quality relationship where both parties would show themselves willing to be vulnerable to each other (Mayer et al., 1995). When someone adapts their behavior (usually in response to others), this may lead to positive impressions in the short run. However, over time, others may notice inconsistencies (i.e. a lack of behavioral integrity), therefore reducing trust. Thus, we encourage future research that employs either a fixed or a malleable self-construal to consider both the short-term and the long-term work-related consequences to come to a more balanced view of authenticity.

### *Limitations and future research avenues*

While the proposed framework presented here makes an important contribution to the literature, there are several limitations to this work. We summarize here the potential limitations and avenues for future research. First, we used construct definitions to determine the underlying construal of the self that the authors used (see Supplemental material B). However, our analysis relied on our interpretation of these definitions. It is possible that the scholars who articulated these constructs would interpret the definitions differently. Nonetheless, even if our interpretation of constructs differs from that of the authors, it is clear that different constructs rely on different assumptions. Thus, future research should be more explicit in stating the self-construal assumptions that underlie its conceptualization of authenticity. Context (cultural, organizational, etc.) may have more subtly imprinted researchers with ideas about what is a "true self", therefore it is important that researchers consider such influences and are reflexive about their assumptions in their work on authenticity.

Another potential limitation relates to the ways we organized the literature and the dimensions we identified. First, in our review and mapping process we focused on the seminal definitions of the 19 constructs. These are constructs that have been debated and revised since their publication and thus may have been conceptualized in different ways throughout the years, such changes that have impacted their position on the two dimensions. For example, self-monitoring (Snyder, 1974) was reconceptualized by Lennox and Wolfe (1984) to emphasize the more skill-like rather than personality-like nature of the concept (thus impacting its score on malleability). Our decision to retain the original meaning was guided by the discrepancies that some re-conceptualizations created in constructs; however, it is important to recognize that were others to use different definitions of the constructs, the position of constructs across the two dimensions could potentially change.

Third, in our review of the authenticity literature, we identified self-construal theory as our framework and the self-construal-related dimensions (independence/interdependence and fixed/malleable) as the guides for the review; however, others might choose to focus on a different theory and dimensions and may organize the literature in a different manner as a result. Specifically, self-construal theory views the self as a cohesive entity, aligning with much of the literature in the field. While conceptualizing the self as comprised of different identities—or aspects of the self, self-construal theory argues that individuals work toward integrating these identities to create a cohesive sense of who one is (Ashforth and Schinoff, 2016; Bataille and Vough, 2022; Ramarajan, 2014). Yet, tensions exist in the self literature, specifically reflecting opposing views that would define the self

in a different manner—as a fragmented entity (for a review, see Brown, 2015). This perspective, views the self not as a continuous entity, comprised of different stories (or narratives) that hang together, but rather as inherently fragmented and fractured, reflecting tensions between different—and even contradicting—perceptions of the self (Brown, 2015, 2022; Gergen, 1991). This critical post-structuralist approach challenges the view that there is a self that is true versus others that are fake (Tracy and Trethewey, 2005). These approaches would further conceptualize the self and authenticity as reflecting a discourse of power, in which management and organizations attempt to control and even force certain identities that align with their own interests (Tracy and Trethewey, 2005; Zaeemdar, 2024). Thus, the literature on self and identity is one of inherent tensions in conceptualizations of the nature of the self. In our review this view did not emerge as a primary dimension in the authenticity literature, but as the literature continues to evolve this classification (and others) could become more central to our understanding of authenticity.

Fourth, while the focus of our review was on the assumptions of self-construal by authors, it is still possible that individuals would disagree with this characterization of self-construal in the context of a specific view of themselves as authentic. For instance, although in our review we demonstrated that authentic personality (Wood et al., 2008) is categorized as reflecting an independent and fixed view of the self, it is still possible that someone who scores high in terms of authentic personality has a more malleable or interdependent self-view. In other words, we recommend that future research will employ measures of self-construal to account for individuals' own self-construal as a moderator for outcomes of different authenticity strategies.

Relatedly, we also suggest that future research combines different authenticity conceptualizations in one study design, which can allow for greater complexity and nuance in the examination of authenticity and its impact on work-related outcomes. In looking again at well-being, consider the combination of authentic personality and apparent sincerity: while a person high on authentic personality may feel that they know their true self, they may not necessarily be successful at communicating that true self to others, such that others also construe it as authentic (e.g. seen as having high apparent sincerity), thus undermining their relational effectiveness, and as a result their well-being. This suggests that combining strategies to be authentic—and specifically ones that are further removed from one another—may provide a more balanced perspective on authenticity as well as its outcomes.

Lastly, our review focused on established constructs used in organization science in order not to lose focus of the review. Other authenticity constructs may populate spaces in Figure 2 that are currently not filled. For instance, one can imagine an authenticity construct that builds on the idea that the self changes from one context to the next (Ashforth et al., 2016). Such "situated authenticity" is likely to score high on the interdependent and malleable spectrum of self-construal. Alternatively, other authenticity constructs could zoom in on more specific roles (e.g. role authenticity; Sheldon et al., 1997) or more collective identities, such as a sense of "true to self" that is derived from belonging to a certain profession. Thus, we encourage future research to explore novel conceptualizations that may capture under-explored areas of the proposed framework. This may seem like an unorthodox avenue when considering our starting point of many different conceptualizations with little convergence between them. Nevertheless, we noted at the

outset (repeated here) that we believe that there is room for various conceptualizations to co-exist.

## *Practical implications*

Career coaching professionals, media and communication consultants, leadership developers, and others often advise employees to "be yourself". Our article suggests that this may be risky advice to give when it is not clear what is meant by it. Overall, our review suggests that the answers are nuanced and depend on the self-construal on which authenticity is based. As such, the advice to employees on whether they should be authentic or not, suggests that—it depends. It depends on one's own (and others') definition of authenticity as there are trade-offs involved with each conceptualization of authenticity. We believe Figure 2 offers an intuitive framework to explain to employees the challenges involved with being authentic at work. Specifically, we advise employees to be cognizant of the fact that they are entering a social context with different personal and relational demands that must be carefully navigated. This means that while it is important to stay true to one's own values, there are also role requirements that need to be adhered to. Whereas a careful consideration of job- or context-fit might help prevent some tension between the two, it might not always be possible to fully avoid tensions or conflict. In these situations, employees need to be aware that choosing a particular way to be "true to self" comes with trade-offs for personal well-being and relational success. Thus, it might be advisable to balance both an independent and an interdependent self-construal in order for one to be effectively authentic at work.

Second, this work may be particularly relevant to managers or coaches who work with others on their personal and professional development, specifically focusing on helping them to find and "be themselves". Such individuals may find that their coaches hold a fixed self-construal seeing authenticity as just being who they already are, and thus may not engage with their efforts. For example, some may defensively reject developmental input altogether and argue that they just need to be themselves, whereas others may agree with the input but only superficially, nodding one's head without making any attempt to make any fundamental changes to the self. The challenge here is to advocate for a different view of authenticity and the self as malleable and changing, thus contributing to their personal development and a meaningful change in who and how they bring themselves to work. The proposed framework can offer a clear language and tools for those who wish to help others (and perhaps themselves) change the way they act authentically.

It is not only in developing others that the proposed framework can help leaders, but in fact authenticity has also been found to be critical for effective leadership (Leroy et al., 2012, 2013; Walumbwa et al., 2008), and is often a key topic in leadership development programs (Day et al., 2014; Vongswasdi et al., 2024). Work on leadership development frequently encourages managers to reflect and introspect on who they are—finding their "true self"—and how they can bring themselves into their leadership role (Goffee and Jones, 2015; Shamir and Eilam, 2005). Yet, as our review demonstrates, it is beneficial to ask what is the self that leaders should be true to and examine

the role of the two dimensions we identified in defining this self. These dimensions are specifically relevant in the context of leadership, as leadership involves relationships at its core, thus connecting to the relational dimension (independent–interdependent) and suggesting that in examining and developing leaders' selves, it can be valuable to ask: what is the role of others in defining this self? In addition, at the core of leadership development programs is the assumption that we can change elements of the leaders' perception of self and behavior, taking a malleable view of the self. Yet, those individuals participating in the programs may have a different view of their own selves, creating a need to explicitly recognize and address these gaps before or during the program. Thus, this review can offer vital insights to be incorporated into leadership development programs or other development opportunities for leaders (e.g. coaching), providing a framework and language for leaders to better understand their own perception of self and be more authentic in their leadership.

## Conclusion

It is easy to get lost in the myriad of conceptualizations of authenticity offered by organization scholars. Our work takes a first step toward organizing previously disconnected streams of literature on authenticity. Using self-construal theory to organize the literature provides a novel synthesis of the multitude of existing authenticity constructs and intends to help researchers to navigate the fragmented authenticity literature, to better understand existing conceptualizations and outcomes of authenticity at work, as well as to develop new research on this well-studied construct. As our review captures the diversity of constructs and provides a holistic picture of the authenticity literature, we hope that it serves as an impetus for more theoretical and empirical work that builds bridges between constructs. It is only through more boundary spanning that we can gradually work toward an integrated understanding of authenticity in the workplace and how it affects work-related outcomes.

### Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the Editor, Chidi Ogbonnaya, and the three anonymous reviewers for their valuable feedback and suggestions. We also want to thank Danielle Cooper, Bernd Vogel, and Karen Jansen for their insights, help, and support.

### Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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## Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

## Notes

1 Please note that sometimes authors were not clear about their construal of self. In those cases, quotes were derived from how the constructs are being talked about to infer construal of self. For instance, malleability of self was not always discussed but ideas on malleability of the construct were discussed. Similarly, interdependence was not always explicitly discussed but the assumed social orientation of the construct could be inferred.

2 To further establish that the two dimensions are understandable and relevant to other authors in the broader authenticity research community, we conducted a supplementary analysis by inviting 10 expert raters to map authenticity constructs on these two dimensions. The analysis showed reasonable consistency (see details in Supplemental material D).

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