

**Strategizing Authenticity: A Grounded Theory Approach in Demonstrating Authenticity at
Work**

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Dedication

“Be yourself; everybody is already taken.” – Oscar Wilde

This dissertation is dedicated to all of those who are brave enough to embrace their authenticity, to those who dare to show up as themselves in a world that often rewards conformity. May this work honor the courage it takes to navigate the tension between who we are and who the world expects us to be. To those who continue to strategize authenticity, who thoughtfully choose when, how, and to what extent to reveal their true selves while holding firm to their values – your quiet strength is revolutionary. And lastly, this is for every individual who has ever questioned, hidden, or reclaimed their authenticity and still chose to keep showing up. You are proof that being yourself is both the hardest and most powerful act of all.

Abstract

Authenticity has long been regarded as a cornerstone of psychological well-being, yet its meaning and manifestation remain inconsistently defined across philosophical, psychological, and organizational research. Despite its popularity as both a social ideal and leadership principle, little is known about how individuals actually demonstrate authenticity in their everyday professional lives. This constructivist grounded theory study explored how people experience, define, and enact authenticity at work. Sixteen participants across diverse professional backgrounds in the United States were interviewed virtually to capture their lived experiences and reflections on what it means to be authentic in the workplace. Through iterative coding, memoing, and constant comparative analysis, a substantive theory emerged: *Strategizing Authenticity at Work*. This core category encapsulates the dynamic and context-sensitive process through which individuals actively negotiate authenticity amid workplace norms, power dynamics, and relational expectations. The resulting theory comprises nine interrelated conceptual categories that collectively illustrate authenticity as an adaptive, strategic, and relational practice rather than a fixed personality trait or moral ideal. Findings highlight that authenticity at work involves ongoing calibration between internal alignment and external demands, revealing both the emotional rewards and costs of being authentic in professional contexts. The study extends existing literature by reframing authenticity as a fluid process of navigation rather than a static state of being. The implications of these findings inform leadership development, organizational culture, and future research on identity and authenticity in the modern workplace.

Table of Contents

List of Tables.....	12
List of Figures	13
Chapter 1: Nature of the Study.....	14
Chapter Overview.....	14
Background	14
Problem Statement.....	17
Purpose of the Study.....	20
Research Question	22
Conceptual Framework.....	22
Limitations	24
Synthesis of Theoretical Perspectives.....	24
Scope of the Study.....	25
Definitions of Key Terms	27
Significance of the Study	28
Chapter Summary	30
Chapter 2: Literature Review	32
Chapter Overview.....	32
Research Strategy	32
Philosophical Historical Background of Authenticity.....	33
Early Greek Philosophers.....	33
Existential Philosophers.....	34
Ethical Authenticity.....	36
Sincerity vs. Authenticity.....	37

Philosophical Limitations.....	38
Section Summary.....	40
The Self-Concept.....	40
True Self.....	42
True Self vs. False Self	43
Self-Discrepancy Theory	44
Limitations to Theories of the Self.....	45
Section Summary.....	47
Social & Personality Psychology's Contribution to Authenticity.....	48
Self-Determination Theory	48
Self-Regulation Theory.....	49
Authentic Functioning	50
Authentic Functioning vs. Other Models.....	54
Limitations	55
Section Summary.....	57
Leadership's Contribution to Authenticity	57
Authentic Leadership.....	57
Section Summary.....	64
Measures of Authenticity.....	65
The Authenticity Inventory (AI-3)	65
The Authenticity Scale.....	66
The Authentic Leadership Questionnaire (ALQ).....	67
The Authentic Leadership Inventory (ALI).....	68

Quantitative Limitations	69
Section Summary.....	72
Inauthenticity.....	72
Self-Monitoring	73
Impression Management	74
Self-Verification	75
Additional Outcomes	75
Alternative Arguments.....	76
Limitations	77
Section Summary.....	78
Additional Considerations.....	78
Section Summary.....	81
Gaps in the Research.....	81
Chapter Summary	82
Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology.....	83
Chapter Overview.....	83
Research Worldview.....	83
Background and Description of Grounded Theory	85
Constructivism.....	86
Use of Literature Reviews.....	86
Constructivist Grounded Theory Process	87
Procedure	88
Eligibility Criteria.....	89

Sample Size	89
Participant Recruitment and Screening.....	90
Interview Procedure.....	91
Interview Protocol	93
Demographic Questions.....	93
Data Processing and Analysis	94
Coding.....	95
Theory Building or Model Construction.....	98
Trustworthiness and Research Quality	99
Reflexivity	102
Assumptions	103
Limitations	103
Ethical Assurances.....	104
Informed Consent	104
Confidentiality.....	105
Data Storage	105
Risks and Benefits	106
Chapter Summary	107
Chapter 4: Results.....	109
Chapter Overview.....	109
Participants.....	109
Constructivist Grounded Theory Process	110
Initial Coding.....	111

Focused Coding and Categorizing.....	112
Theory Building.....	112
From Initial Coding to Preliminary Categories.....	116
Initial Coding Process.....	117
Line-by-Line and Incident-by-Incident Coding.....	117
Initial Coding Results.....	118
Emerging Preliminary Categories.....	122
From Focused Coding to Conceptual Categories.....	126
External Forces Shaping Authenticity.....	129
Strategic Authenticity.....	132
Grounding the Self.....	134
Interpersonal Expression of Authenticity.....	135
Identity-Based Understanding of Authenticity.....	138
Inauthenticity as a Response to Context.....	139
Emotional Consequences of Authenticity.....	141
Integrative Meaning of Authenticity.....	143
Tensions of Identity at Work.....	145
Interpreting the Final Conceptual Model.....	146
Core Conceptual Category: Strategizing Authenticity at Work.....	147
Overview of the Model Structure.....	148
Description of Conceptual Categories.....	148
Relational Dynamics and Feedback.....	150
Chapter Summary.....	150

Chapter 5: Discussion, Recommendations, and Conclusion.....	152
Chapter Overview.....	152
Discussion of Results.....	154
Research Question 1 (Focal Question): How Do People Demonstrate Authenticity at Work?	160
Research Question 2 (Sub-Question): How Do They Understand Authenticity?.....	161
Research Question 3 (Sub-Question): What Does It Mean To Be Authentic?.....	161
Adherence to the Literature.....	162
Departure from the Literature.....	166
Addressing Gaps in the Literature.....	170
Implications for Practice and Theory	173
Implications for Practice	173
Implications for Theory	176
Recommendations for Future Research.....	177
Study Limitations	180
Conclusion.....	182
References.....	184
Appendix A	208
Appendix B	210
Appendix C	211
Appendix D.....	215

List of Tables

Table 1: <i>Participant Demographics</i>	110
Table 2: <i>Breakdown of Initial Codes</i>	119
Table 3: <i>Open Codes to Emerging Themes</i>	123
Table 4: <i>Research Questions and Corresponding Emergent Categories</i>	124
Table 5: <i>Emergent Codes to Focused Code Categories</i>	128
Table 6: <i>Focused Codes and Conceptual Categories</i>	129

List of Figures

Figure 1: <i>A Visual Representation Of A Conceptual Framework</i>	25
Figure 2: <i>A Visual Representation Of A Constructivist Grounded Theory</i>	88
Figure 3: <i>A Visual Representation Of A Constructivist Grounded Theory</i>	111
Figure 4: <i>Strategizing Authenticity at Work</i>	147
Figure 5: <i>Strategizing Authenticity at Work</i>	155

Chapter 1: Nature of the Study

Chapter Overview

This chapter introduces the concept of authenticity and provides the framework to support further exploration and discussion of the concept as well as the intention and direction behind the overall research. The chapter starts with some background information on authenticity followed by a statement of the research problem that highlights some gaps in the existing literature that this study addresses. Following this, the purpose of the study is presented with the research questions that will guide this study. This chapter also includes a discussion on the conceptual framework, the scope of the study, and definition of key terms. Finally, this chapter concludes with an overview of the structure of the study with a brief description of the content of subsequent chapters.

Background

The word *authenticity* has become increasingly prevalent in today's world. People are more frequently expressing a desire to "show up" as their true selves and are requesting authentic content in their interactions. This desire for authenticity extends beyond leadership and has permeated various domains, including social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, professional networks like LinkedIn, and leadership theory research, such as authentic leadership. The appeal for authenticity has become so widespread that it tops lists like the "Top 3 Social Marketing Trends in 2024" (Digital Time Savers, 2023). On the other hand, there are those who publicly deny the existence of authenticity, with claims such as "authenticity is a myth" appearing on large platforms where researchers and professionals gather (Hogan, 2024). The concept of authenticity has taken center stage in public discourse, but this heightened interest prompts an essential question: What does authenticity truly mean?

At its core, authenticity is commonly understood as the quality of being genuine or true to oneself (Kernis & Goldman, 2006). It is a psychological construct that represents the alignment between one's internal beliefs, values, and external actions. Authenticity is rooted in philosophy and can also be traced back to existential and humanistic psychology. Thinkers like Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow emphasized the importance of congruence, self-actualization, and living in accordance with one's true self (Maslow, 1943; Rogers, 1959). Rogers' theory of self-concept underlined the idea that authenticity arises when an individual's self-image matches their lived experiences and behaviors. According to Rogers (1959), inauthenticity emerges when a gap exists between one's self-perception and one's behavior, often resulting in discomfort or cognitive dissonance.

Researchers in personality and social psychology have investigated the role of authenticity in well-being, demonstrating that individuals who perceive themselves as more authentic report higher levels of life satisfaction and self-esteem (Sheldon et al., 1997; Wood et al., 2008). However, the majority of these studies rely on quantitative measures, which reduces authenticity to a series of survey items or scale scores; thus, missing the dynamic, processual nature of authenticity as it unfolds in everyday experiences (Sedikides et al., 2017). Additionally, while much of the literature presents authenticity as inherently positive, a growing body of research suggests that being authentic may not always be a comfortable or desirable experience. Authenticity can lead to internal conflict, especially when one's true self is at odds with social norms or professional expectations, a reality that is frequently ignored in much of the existing literature (Sedikides et al., 2017).

As the concept of authenticity has evolved, its influence has extended into areas such as leadership studies, particularly through the development of authentic leadership theory

(Walumbwa et al., 2008). Authentic leadership focuses on leaders being self-aware, genuine, and transparent with their followers. This emphasis on authenticity is seen as critical to building trust and fostering positive organizational outcomes (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). While this theory has gained traction in leadership literature, its application remains largely limited to work environments, leaving the broader understanding of authenticity in personal and social contexts underexplored. In fact, the dominance of leadership-focused frameworks has contributed to an operationalization of authenticity that is narrowly focused to an individual who holds the official title of a leader and often fails to capture the complexity of the concept with its imposition of leadership attributes to the core authenticity as well as failing to consider other individuals within the work context (Alvesson & Einola, 2019, 2022, 2023; Einola & Alvesson, 2021; Gardner et al., 2021; Gardner & McCauley, 2022a, 2022b).

The bias towards the positive aspects of authenticity is evident not only in leadership studies but also in popular culture, where authenticity is often idealized as a desirable trait that leads to personal success and happiness (Harter, 2002). The social media landscape plays a significant role in reinforcing these positive portrayals, particularly in the way influencers and public figures promote curated versions of authenticity to their audiences. On platforms like Instagram and TikTok, “authentic” content is frequently associated with vulnerability, openness, and relatability—qualities that resonate with users seeking genuine connections in a heavily mediated online world. However, critics argue that these representations of authenticity are often superficial, commodified for the sake of engagement and social capital (Marwick, 2013).

There are still many unanswered questions and lack of agreement on this overall construct despite the growing popularity of authenticity as a concept. As recent as 2024, there was a call for submissions to revisit 20 years later the progress and where we are at today as it

relates to authenticity's development (Lowe & Lux, 2023). Its definition remains ambiguous and context-dependent, leading to inconsistent interpretations across disciplines. In leadership theory, authenticity is often seen as a behavioral quality of leaders (Gardner et al., 2011); in psychology, it is viewed as a personal characteristic related to self-awareness and congruence (Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Rogers, 1961). Meanwhile, social media culture presents authenticity as a curated, often idealized image. This lack of clarity in defining authenticity suggests that there is still much to uncover on what it truly means to be authentic, and this was further explored through how it is demonstrated in the professional domain where one's authenticity is constantly being challenged.

Given these complexities, it is clear that authenticity is a multifaceted concept. And while it has been difficult to understand authenticity, much insight was obtained through evaluating it within the professional setting. There was a need for research that goes beyond the positivity bias found in many studies and accounts for the tensions and contradictions inherent in striving for authenticity. Additionally, much of the existing research relies on quantitative methods, which do not capture the richness of how authenticity is experienced. As authenticity continues to be a central focus in both public discourse and academic research, a qualitative, process-oriented examination of the concept in the professional context was essential to fill the gaps in our understanding.

Problem Statement

Authenticity, as a psychological construct and lived experience, has garnered significant attention in recent years across disciplines such as personality psychology, social psychology, and leadership studies. Despite its widespread use, significant gaps persist in how authenticity is defined, operationalized, and experienced, especially across different contexts (Kernis &

Goldman, 2006; Lenton, Bruder, et al., 2013). These inconsistencies present challenges for both researchers and practitioners, as the term *authenticity* is often applied with varying definitions that emphasize different aspects of the construct. In personality psychology, for example, authenticity is sometimes reduced to self-congruence, or the alignment between one's values and actions (Sheldon, 2004), whereas in social psychology, it may be framed around self-awareness and the accurate expression of emotions (Kernis & Goldman, 2006). Similarly, in authentic leadership theory, authenticity is generally understood in terms of the leader's behavior—leaders being true to their values and ethical principles (Walumbwa et al., 2008). The result is a fragmented understanding of authenticity that complicates its study across the professional domain.

While much research has focused on the definition and outcomes of authenticity, there has been a notable gap in examining how authenticity is actually demonstrated within the work context. The existing literature, particularly in leadership studies, often emphasizes abstract qualities of authentic leaders, such as self-awareness, relational transparency, and ethical behavior (Walumbwa et al., 2008), but rarely addresses the dynamic processes through which individuals enact their authenticity in everyday workplace interactions. Authentic leadership theory has contributed to this gap by focusing on the outcomes of leaders being “true to themselves” without exploring how authenticity unfolds in real-time professional settings (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). This omission leaves a critical gap in understanding the practical implications of authenticity, particularly how individuals navigate complex social and professional expectations (Erickson, 1995; Ladkin & Taylor, 2010). Research has largely overlooked how authenticity is embodied and expressed in the workplace, where external demands, organizational cultures, and role expectations shape behavior (Ibarra, 2015). The

emphasis on defining authenticity has overshadowed the need to explore it as a fluid, context-dependent process (Leary, 2003). Consequently, the demonstration of authenticity in work environments—how individuals balance genuine self-expression with the demands of external roles—remained underexplored (Sedikides et al., 2017). This lack of focus on the process perpetuated an incomplete understanding of the construct, overlooking the tension-filled experiences employees face when trying to maintain authenticity in professional roles (Erickson, 1995; Shamir & Eilam, 2005).

Complicating matters further is the ambiguity surrounding the very notion of “being true to oneself,” which lies at the heart of authenticity. What does it mean to be authentically oneself? How do individuals manage the tension between their inner values and the demands of various social or professional environments (Erickson, 1995)? Current research often fails to provide an in-depth exploration of these questions, particularly with respect to how authenticity is sustained or compromised in different settings. For instance, much of the literature focuses on authenticity either in personal or professional contexts but rarely explores the interconnections between these domains (Harter, 2002). This neglect left unresolved whether an individual’s authenticity is consistent across various roles and situations or if it changes in response to social pressures.

Additionally, the existing research on authenticity is overwhelmingly quantitative, with studies often relying on fixed, static measurements such as questionnaires or rating scales (Gill et al., 2018). While these approaches can provide broad generalizations, they risk oversimplifying the complex and dynamic nature of authenticity as it is experienced in everyday life. Quantitative studies focusing primarily on the outcomes of authenticity tend to overlook the process of authenticity—how individuals continuously navigate their sense of self in relation to external expectations. Furthermore, quantitative research often contributes to a positivity bias,

emphasizing only the beneficial aspects of authenticity, such as enhanced well-being, greater self-esteem, and improved relationships (Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Wood et al., 2008), while ignoring the potential negative experiences of authenticity. These may include discomfort, conflict, or social alienation when an individual's authentic self clashes with societal norms or the expectations of others (Sedikides et al., 2017).

Given these gaps in the literature, there was a pressing need to re-ground the concept of authenticity, not merely as a fixed personality trait or leadership quality, but as a dynamic process of actions and behaviors that unfold across the professional setting (Erickson, 1995). To advance both theory and practice, it was crucial to explore how authenticity is demonstrated, accounting for its complexities, potential drawbacks, and variability in different contexts (Sedikides et al., 2017). This study addressed these gaps by focusing on the process of authenticity, exploring how individuals define and enact their authenticity in the professional sphere of their life. A qualitative constructivist grounded theory approach was employed, prioritizing the lived experiences of individuals in order to provide a deeper, more holistic understanding of how authenticity is constructed and maintained in the work context (Charmaz, 2006).

In sum, this study offers a more nuanced understanding of authenticity by examining the complexities, tensions, and challenges individuals encounter in their efforts to remain true to themselves, rather than relying on simplified or exclusively positive representations of the concept. By focusing on the process of authenticity and incorporating its demonstration in the professional context, this research contributes valuable insights to the academic literature and practical fields such as leadership, workplace culture, and identity formation.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this constructivist grounded theory study was to explore and define the process of authenticity as experienced and enacted by individuals in their professional lives within the United States. By examining how individuals demonstrated authenticity within the work domain and how they defined authenticity, this study sought to uncover the common threads that anchor individuals back into their authenticity. Specifically, this research aimed to identify the characteristics, qualities, and actions that comprise the authentic individual in today's context, shedding light on how authenticity manifests in professional environments across different industries and regions in the U.S.

This study utilized virtual interviews with individuals who have at least one year of working experience in the U.S. to examine how authenticity was expressed, perceived, and constructed in the professional setting. Through these interviews, participants reflected on their lived experiences of authenticity in their professional roles, how they demonstrated and defined what authenticity means, and how they navigated the complexities of maintaining their authentic selves across various social contexts. The virtual format of the interviews allowed for flexible participation while fostering deep, reflective discussions on authenticity in professional spaces.

At the heart of this research was the desire to understand authenticity and doing so in a way that provided more clarity into how authenticity is lived out by individuals within work today, as well as to redefine what it means to be authentic. The study sought to understand how authenticity was enacted and also to move beyond traditional definitions of authenticity, expanding the inquiry into how authenticity represents a deeper, more holistic expression of self. In this context, the authentic individual was conceptualized as someone who is fully present and true to themselves, embodying their values and beliefs in a way that is consistent across both personal and professional domains. By uncovering the common traits and practices of

authenticity, this study contributed to a deeper understanding of what it means to be truly authentic in today's complex and multifaceted world, especially as it relates to the work context in the United States.

Research Question

The guiding question for this study was as follows: How do people demonstrate authenticity at work? The study was further grounded by the following two sub-questions: How do they understand authenticity? And what does it mean to be authentic?

Conceptual Framework

The concept of authenticity has long intrigued scholars and practitioners across various fields, as it touches upon the core of human existence—what it means to be true to oneself. In this study, the phenomenon of authenticity was explored with a focus on understanding how individuals experienced and enacted authenticity in their professional lives. The goal was to develop a grounded theory that captured the complexities of authenticity as it was constructed and lived by individuals within the social context of work. See Figure 1 for a depiction of the conceptual framework.

At its core, authenticity is deeply rooted in philosophy, particularly in existential thought. These philosophers emphasize living a life that is true to one's essence, free from societal constraints and external validation (Heidegger, 1962, 1968; Sartre, 1946, 2015). Authenticity is not only about alignment between values and behavior, but also about a profound existential commitment to living in accordance with one's true self. This study drew upon these philosophical foundations to explore how individuals navigated authenticity in environments where personal and professional roles may clash.

Several social and psychological theories provided a lens for this exploration. Self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000) highlights the role of intrinsic motivation and the pursuit of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in the authentic self. This framework was crucial for understanding authenticity across personal and professional domains. Rogers' (1951) theory of self-concept emphasizes the importance of self-awareness and congruence between self-concept and behavior, underscoring the need for alignment between one's beliefs, values, and actions in maintaining authenticity. Winnicott's (1960) concept of the false self is also relevant, explaining how individuals may adopt defensive mechanisms under pressure, leading to inauthenticity. Baumeister and Vohs' (2007) self-regulation theory offers further insight into how individuals manage thoughts, emotions, and behaviors to maintain authenticity, especially when external demands challenge one's true self.

Authentic leadership theory (Avolio & Gardner, 2005), though it may not fully capture the internally driven aspects of personal authenticity, remains relevant in the work context for its focus on how authenticity manifests in leadership roles within organizations. The theory emphasizes the relational and social dynamics of being authentic in professional environments, exploring how leaders foster authenticity not just in themselves, but also across their teams. It highlights the importance of transparent, value-driven behavior in shaping workplace cultures and building trust. By considering authenticity within the context of professional relationships and organizational expectations, authentic leadership underscores how workplace dynamics influence the expression and perception of authenticity, prioritizing the outward demonstration of authenticity in organizational settings over internal self-alignment.

This study also incorporated the concept of inauthenticity. Kernis and Goldman (2006) described inauthenticity as behaviors that conflict with one's true self, often stemming from

societal expectations or conformity pressures. By examining both authenticity and inauthenticity, the study aimed to uncover how individuals reconcile these opposing forces in their lives.

Limitations

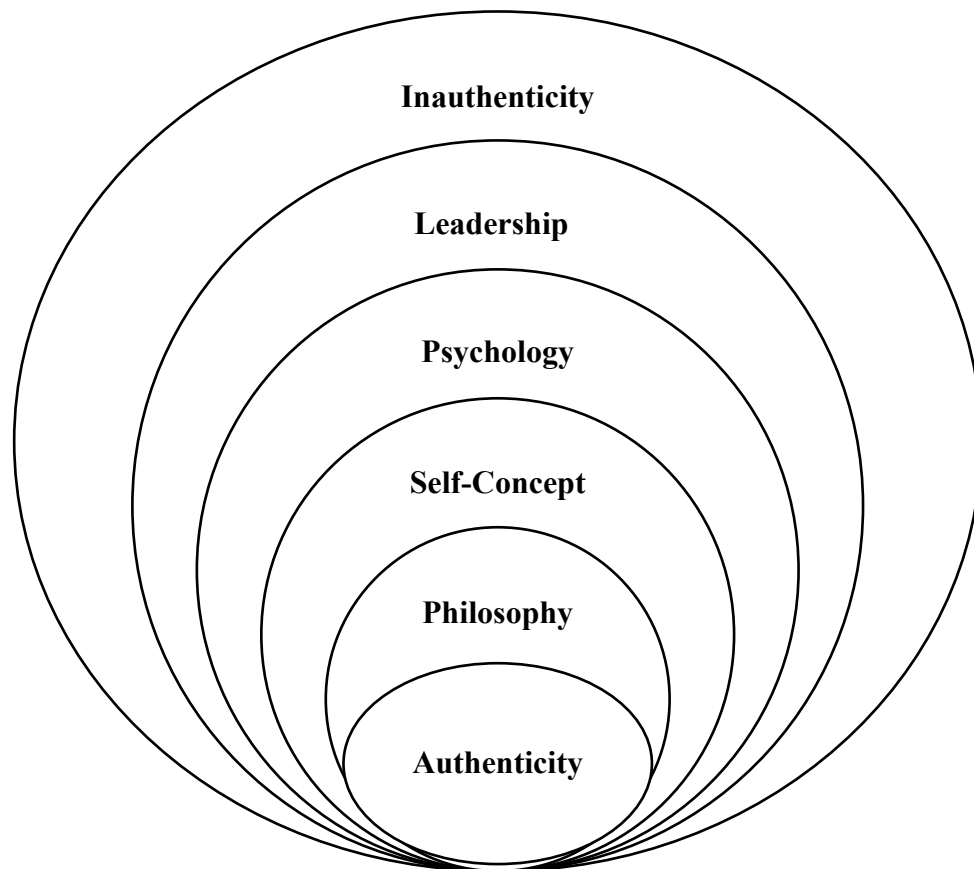
While these theories and models provided valuable perspectives on authenticity and inauthenticity, they also had their limitations. For example, SDT emphasizes intrinsic motivation but may not fully account for the complex social influences that impact an individual's authenticity. Similarly, the theory of self-concept and the concept of the false self offer important insights into the internal struggles individuals face, but they may not adequately address the dynamic nature of authenticity and inauthenticity as they evolve over time.

Synthesis of Theoretical Perspectives

By synthesizing these philosophical, social and psychological, and leadership theories, this study sought to develop a comprehensive understanding of authenticity and inauthenticity that accounts for both the internal psychological processes and the external social influences that shape these phenomena. The study also aimed to fill gaps in the existing literature by exploring how authenticity and inauthenticity are constructed in specific contexts, such as the workplace, where individuals may face unique challenges in maintaining their true selves while resisting the pull toward inauthenticity. Ultimately, this conceptual framework guided the data collection and analysis processes, helping to uncover the ways in which authenticity and inauthenticity were experienced and lived by individuals. The grounded theory that emerged from this study contributes to the ongoing dialogue around these concepts, offering new insights and practical implications for individuals and organizations alike.

Figure 1

A Visual Representation of a Conceptual Framework



Scope of the Study

The scope of this study was defined by its focus on exploring and examining the concept of authenticity across various contexts, from its philosophical roots to its future development in personality and social psychology, as well as in leadership research. Taking the concept of authenticity across the collective and utilizing a constructivist grounded theory approach, this study sought to develop a theoretical understanding of how individuals perceived and

experienced authenticity in their professional lives. The research was bounded by key parameters that will be further discussed.

Participants were purposely selected based on their potential to provide in-depth insights into the concept of authenticity and how they experienced this phenomenon. These individuals, who were dispersed across the U.S. and came from different organizations and social groups, had been in the professional world for at least one year and were able to offer diverse perspectives that enriched the exploration of authenticity. This dispersion and variation of individuals allowed for a deep dive into how authenticity was constructed and understood from these various backgrounds. Additionally, these participants were individually interviewed virtually at one time point for about 60-90 minutes with the researcher. This allowed for the participants' professional perceptions and experiences of authenticity during this specific period. This temporal boundary ensured that findings reflected a particular snapshot of how authenticity was experienced, while recognizing that these perceptions may evolve over time.

The research was confined to the exploration of authenticity as a social construct, with an emphasis on how it was shaped by participants' interactions and personal values and belief systems. Through the constructivist nature of the study, the analysis was focused on generating a grounded theory that was context-specific and co-constructed with the participants (Charmaz, 2014). While the insights gained from this study were rich and deeply rooted in the lived experiences of the participants, they were not intended to be generalized beyond the study's specific context. Rather, the goal was to provide a theoretical understanding of authenticity that offers valuable insights, particularly for those in similar settings or facing similar challenges.

Definitions of Key Terms

Authenticity. Authenticity refers to being true to self. It is the alignment between one's actions and their true self, values, and belief systems. Regardless of external pressures or outside expectations, it involves being genuine and transparent while staying true to self (Harter, 2002; Kernis & Goldman, 2006).

False self. The false self involves suppressing one's true thoughts, feelings, and desires as part of conforming to external influences and the expectations of others (Winnicott, 1960). This can lead to a loss of authenticity.

Inauthenticity. Inauthenticity refers to not being true to self. It involves misalignment in one's actions and their true self, values, and belief systems. This can result in a desire to fit in and other external pressures leading one to present a façade or adopt behaviors that are not genuine to one's inner values and beliefs (Kernis & Goldman, 2006).

Self-awareness. Self-awareness refers to the ability to introspect and recognize one's own emotions, motivations, values, and beliefs (Silvia & Duval, 2001).

Self-concept. The self-concept is foundational to authenticity as a clear and coherent concept of the self allows the expression of the true self. It is the cognitive and affective understanding of who one is, and it encompasses the beliefs and perceptions one holds about themselves (Rogers, 1951).

Self-determination. Self-determination refers to an individual's ability to make choices and control their own life, driven by an intrinsic motivation that is aligned with the true self (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Self-regulation. Self-regulation is the process in which individuals control their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors to achieve their goals and maintain alignment with their true selves (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007).

True self. The true self is often contrasted with the false self. The true self refers to the core aspects of one's identity that remain consistent and reflects an individual's most authentic self (Harter, 2002). The true self is in full alignment with values and beliefs that lead to genuine expression and enhance authenticity.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to a deeper understanding of authenticity as experienced by individuals in their professional lives. This research, using a constructivist grounded theory approach, explores the complex and multifaceted nature of authenticity. It sheds light on how individuals construct and navigate their authentic selves within various social and organizational contexts.

The findings of this study are particularly relevant to those who are invested in fostering authentic environments, whether in personal relationships, educational settings, or professional organizations. For individuals, the insights gained from this research can offer valuable guidance on how to align their actions and decisions with their true selves, leading to more fulfilling professional lives. In a world where pressures to conform to external expectations can often obscure one's true identity, understanding the nuances of authenticity can empower individuals to live more congruently with their core values and beliefs.

Professionals, particularly in leadership roles, will find this study's findings significant in informing how they can cultivate authenticity within their teams and organizations. By understanding how authenticity is perceived and enacted by others, leaders can create

environments that encourage openness, trust, and genuine engagement, which are critical for organizational success. In educational settings, teachers and administrators can use these insights to support students in their journey toward self-discovery and authentic expression.

Academically, this study makes a significant contribution to the ongoing dialogue around the concept of authenticity. While authenticity has been explored extensively in philosophical and psychological literature, this study adds a unique perspective by focusing on the lived experiences of individuals and how they interpret and practice authenticity in their everyday lives, especially, as it relates to the professional domain. The constructivist grounded theory approach allows for the generation of a context-specific theory that reflects the real-world complexities of authenticity, offering a more nuanced and dynamic understanding of the concept than previous studies that may have sought to define authenticity in more static terms.

Furthermore, this research contributes to the broader discourse on identity, self-concept, and the interplay between personal and professional domains. By exploring authenticity within the work setting, the study highlights the interconnectedness of personal and professional identities and the challenges individuals face in maintaining authenticity within the professional domain. The findings suggest that authenticity is not a fixed trait but rather a fluid, context-dependent construct that individuals negotiate continually (Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Shamir & Eilam, 2005).

This study will be of interest to scholars in psychology, sociology, leadership studies, and organizational behavior, as well as practitioners in fields such as human resources, education, and counseling. By offering a grounded theory of authenticity that is rooted in the lived experiences of individuals, this research provides a valuable framework for future studies and practical applications. It encourages a rethinking of authenticity as a dynamic process, inviting

further exploration into how individuals can better navigate the complexities of being true to themselves in a rapidly changing world. Ultimately, this study not only contributes to academic knowledge but also has the potential to impact individuals and organizations by fostering a deeper understanding of what it means to be authentic. By bridging the gap between theory and practice, the research offers actionable insights that can lead to more authentic and fulfilling lives, especially within the professional setting.

Chapter Summary

In this introductory chapter, the study has been framed within the context of exploring the concept of authenticity as experienced by individuals in their professional lives. The research problem has been outlined, highlighting the need for a deeper understanding of how authenticity is constructed and enacted within organizational contexts. The purpose of the study has been established, emphasizing the importance of developing a grounded theory that reflects the lived experiences of the participants. The scope of the study has been clearly defined, delineating the boundaries within which the research will be conducted. Additionally, the significance of the study has been discussed, demonstrating its relevance to individuals, professionals, and the broader academic community.

The subsequent chapters of this dissertation are organized to build upon this foundation. Chapter 2 reviews the relevant literature on authenticity, focusing on the historical context of the concept as well as how it has been explored in other domains such as personality and social psychology, and leadership research. This chapter also identifies gaps in the literature that this study aims to address. Chapter 3 presents the methodology of the study, detailing the constructivist grounded theory approach and explaining how this methodology is uniquely suited to capturing the complexities of authenticity. This chapter also describes the data collection and

analysis processes, providing a thorough explanation of how the research was conducted.

Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study, including the focused codes, categories, and the final conceptual model that emerged from the participants' narratives. Chapter 5 provides a discussion of the results, connecting the findings to existing literature, addressing the research questions, and outlining implication for theory, practice, and future research. As this study progresses, it continues to delve into the intricate ways in which authenticity is understood and practiced, contributing to both theoretical knowledge and practical applications in various fields.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Chapter Overview

In this chapter, the concept of authenticity will be explored. The evolution of authenticity from its earliest inception, rooted in philosophical thinking, will be discussed, as well as the other different schools of thought around authenticity, which include social and personality psychology and leadership research. Current conceptions and research findings on authenticity will be addressed in addition to the ways in which authenticity has been operationalized. It is imperative to understand the current standing of authenticity in order to establish a solid basis for the study. Lastly, inauthenticity will be discussed, followed by additional considerations on authenticity from the current research. The literature review is structured as such to provide the foundation and support for the research itself, the research questions, and methodology.

Research Strategy

Databases used included PsycInfo, EBSCOhost, ProQuest, as well as Google Scholar. Key search terms included authenticity, inauthenticity, awareness, self-monitoring, the 'self,' philosophy, ethics, social psychology, personality psychology, sociology, measurement, leadership, and management. Depending on the various keyword combinations, there were hundreds of articles applicable to the study. To narrow the search, authenticity's historical development as well as articles referencing authenticity relating to people's experiences of authenticity were a requirement for inclusion to help funnel out articles relating to authenticity of inanimate objects or in fields such as marketing. Additionally, year parameters were put in place, seeking more recent studies published in the last five years to evaluate advancement of the concept of authenticity. To note, founding articles in each field's conception of authenticity were

included outside of the five-year parameter to reference and help build the historical context of the concept.

This process originally started reviewing authentic leadership and authenticity as a construct before honing in on the direction of the research and the focus of the research questions. Much of this research in the authentic leadership space had not changed its approach nor produced any new findings in the last 20 years since its construct inception. This led to broadening the search for authenticity into different areas outside of psychology and also through the lens of authenticity as a concept and phenomenon. Upon review of the articles identified, most of the articles measuring authenticity were quantitative roughly in comparison to those that were qualitative.

Philosophical Historical Background of Authenticity

The notion of authenticity is not new. We have been familiarized with the term often in various subjects—philosophy, psychology, sociology, literature, management, marketing, and so forth. To consider the origins of the concept of authenticity, one must consider the etymology of the word itself in that it can be traced back to the Latin word *authenticus*, meaning original, genuine, and authentic which is also derived from the Greek word *authentikos*, with similar meaning of original and genuine (“Authenticus,” 1982; Harper, 2001–2022;). The meaning of the word has evolved over time with the basic tenant of authenticity is to be true to oneself. The main drivers of this concept evolution starts with the discussion around the different philosophical schools of thought as well as highlighting the distinction between authenticity and sincerity.

Early Greek Philosophers

There is much weight and complexity within this word that to fully understand what it means to be authentic, one must dive back into time to the ancient Greek philosophers and the philosophers of the existential movement. The earliest Greek philosopher's account being the maxim, "know thyself," produced by Socrates, where self-inquiry is the center point of his work and his stance being that an unexamined life is not one worth living (Huppert, 2018; Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Plato, 2019; Socrates, n.d.). It is with this maxim that Socrates advocated for the pursuit of self-knowledge as it related to one examining their values, beliefs, knowledge, and limitations in their understanding of themselves and the world.

Aristotle paralleled the notion of self-knowledge through his work around ethics with his philosophy of the pursuit of actions for the higher good, meaning that these pursuits are an alignment of the soul with the best virtue in a complete life and thus tied to one's overall well-being (Crisp, 2014; Hutchinson, 1986; Kernis & Goldman, 2006). Well-being—also referenced as *eudaimonia*—is essentially achieved through self-realization when one is performing activities that are aligned and reflective of one's true calling (Alvesson & Einola, 2019; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Kernis & Goldman, 2006). There is a sense of purpose through the types of actions an individual takes in attaining their highest good. It is through his contribution to conceptualizing authenticity that the connection is made with self-knowledge and self-regulation (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Existential Philosophers

Existential philosophy is recognized as the early development for depicting authenticity, particularly through the works of Søren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Paul Sartre. Kierkegaard viewed authenticity through the lens of faith in that to be true to self is a result of finding an authentic faith. Additionally, he proposed that the self should be understood in

relational terms, meaning that individuals are not objects and that they should see themselves as beings in the world in which they create their own personal meaning throughout their life course (Kierkegaard, 1980; Varga & Guignon, 2023). He saw inauthenticity as an outcome of modern society, creating despair through the process of massification, which is the process of modernization in which people are treated as masses, losing their individuality, which can be observed through defiance, denial, and lack of connection to spirit (Kierkegaard, 1962; Varga & Guignon, 2023). Kierkegaard is important to reference here as he saw the importance of the individual finding meaning in the self and being true to the self, which we see more of this concept of the self in Heidegger and others' contributions to the concept of authenticity.

Heidegger's conception of authenticity is one of the more familiar and well-known as the word we translate as authenticity is a term coined by Heidegger through the word *eigentlichkeit*, which is more closely associated with authenticity today. Broken down, the word *eigentlich* means 'truly' and 'really' with the stem *eigen* to mean 'own' or 'proper', thus meaning to be one's own (Heidegger, 1962, 1968; Hom, 2023; Riker, 2021; Varga & Guignon, 2023). He employed a phenomenological approach to framing existence termed 'Dasein' or 'Being-there,' by way of seeking to understand the question, "What is meant by being?" and considering both historical and temporal aspects as it relates to existence (Heidegger, 1968; Hom, 2023; Riker, 2021). He saw being as a relation of being temporally in that what one is at any moment in the present can have many possibilities in the future, transforming the person into many variations of what one can be. Additionally, he expressed that our way of being is always at issue and that our identity is always in question requiring us to consistently take a stand on who we are (Heidegger, 1927, 1968; Hom, 2023; Riker, 2021; Varga & Guignon, 2023). Further, he stated that our understanding of being in the world is built on our agency and the choices we make to act on our

existence to be who we are in this world (Heidegger, 1927, 1968; Hom, 2023; Riker, 2021; Varga & Guignon, 2023). Essentially, to be in the world means to understand what it means to exist, and through the choices we make. Through his view, we exist for ourselves through the roles we take on, how we express ourselves, and what it means to be human—to just sit in our being—and create meaning and our reality from it all. From this, authenticity reflects an individual's choice to act with care and purpose in the activities that allow existence in the world—to be in the world.

Sartre further emphasizes choice as it relates to being. Everything we do is a reflection of who we are, as we are our choices, such that “to be” is to choose and “to cease to choose” is to cease to be (Flynn, 2003; Kernis & Goldman, 2006). Authenticity through Sartre's existential philosophy is to embrace one's freedom to define oneself and to create meaning without external influence; to make authentic choices on what one values and believes rather than conforming to societal pressures and other external influences (Freeman & Auster, 2012; Sartre, 2015).

Ethical Authenticity

Another philosophical addition to authenticity is around the notion of the ethics of authenticity. This view considers values, motives, desires, and commitments as the foundation of self-imposed guidelines that one should follow as they lead their life based on these personal principles (Ferrara, 1993, 2017; Varga & Guignon, 2023). These motives are core to the self – the identity of the individual – and authenticity through this lens requires that these core principles should be expressive of an individual's self-identity (Varga & Guignon, 2023). A moral compass emerges in which the individual is a moral agent of their choices, built on this foundation. As a result, this gives the individual autonomy to decide for themselves.

There have been other philosophers who have had an influence on the concept of authenticity through the ethic of authenticity. Nietzsche takes a more ethical lens to authenticity, seeing it more as a virtue. His view is more on the notion of individuals being who they are, staying true to their uniqueness (Donzé, 2018; Franco, 2018). To be one's self gives meaning in life, which is ultimately the antidote to his concept of *nihilism*, which is life without meaning or existence (Donzé, 2018; Franco, 2018). Descartes, known for his saying "I think therefore I am," sees authenticity as being built on following this moral inner compass mentioned previously, which guides how one thinks, acts, and responds (Descartes, 1996, 2006; Kernis & Goldman, 2006). Rousseau's view is also centered on morality, and that authenticity is based more on how modernization reflects how the life of an individual is closely aligned to the positive attributes of the natural self (Varga & Guignon, 2023). Taken together, these philosophers see that the ideal of authenticity is around an individual staying true to who they are and in using their self-set moral guidelines to make a choice as it relates to what they deem to be ethical and in line with who they are.

Sincerity vs. Authenticity

Oftentimes, the words sincerity and honesty can be misinterpreted to mean authenticity and are used interchangeably to represent the concept. However, there is quite a difference in the meanings such that the evolution of both sincerity and authenticity have been noted in philosophical underpinnings. Sincerity holds the weight of honesty, truthfulness, trustworthiness, and integrity. The word itself means the quality of being free from pretense, deceit, or hypocrisy (Oxford English Dictionary, 2023). In earlier times, to be sincere meant to be seen as being honest in attempts to neither violate societal expectations that follow from one's specific position that they hold in society, nor present or appear to be what they are not (Varga & Guignon, 2023).

The German philosopher Hegel viewed sincerity and honesty as being about living by the norms and expectations rather than going against or breaking them (Alvesson & Einola, 2019; Hegel, 2002; Varga & Guignon, 2023). Trilling (1972) went on to make the distinction between sincerity and authenticity by citing sincerity to be based on judgment to the extent to which the self is represented honestly and accurately to others whereas authenticity is centered around being true to the self. Sincerity is more other/outside directed, while authenticity is more internal and inward, and more about an individual's private and unique self rather than the public self we see.

Philosophical Limitations

While the existentialist philosophers, such as Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Sartre, have provided essential contributions to the understanding of authenticity, their perspectives are not without limitations. Kierkegaard's focus on faith as the key to self-authenticity introduces a potential issue: it confines authenticity within a particular religious or spiritual framework. His emphasis on the individual's relationality to God may limit its applicability to secular contexts or other belief systems (Varga & Guignon, 2023). Additionally, his assertion that inauthenticity results from societal massification may overlook the complex individual experiences in modern society, reducing societal influence to a mere obstacle rather than a nuanced contributor to one's sense of self.

Heidegger, on the other hand, is often critiqued for his abstract and dense phenomenological approach. His concept of "Dasein" as a temporal and relational entity might seem overly theoretical, which makes it difficult to apply to practical contexts of authenticity. Furthermore, Heidegger's focus on existential angst and 'Being-toward-death' as crucial for understanding authenticity may appear somewhat pessimistic and inaccessible for those not

steeped in existential dread (Hom, 2023). His philosophy lacks a direct treatment of how societal roles, culture, and external influences might contribute positively to an individual's authentic self, instead portraying them mainly as constraints.

Sartre's emphasis on absolute freedom also faces critiques. While the notion of "radical freedom" might seem liberating, it overlooks the socio-political structures that inevitably influence an individual's choices. Authenticity, according to Sartre, requires full responsibility for one's choices, yet he does not account adequately for the limiting factors, such as socio-economic constraints or institutional pressures, that can shape and restrict personal autonomy (Flynn, 2003). Critics have pointed out that his philosophy of authenticity might lead to existential paralysis, where the overwhelming freedom of choice results in a sense of aimlessness or nihilism, thus contradicting the concept of meaning-making central to authenticity (Freeman & Auster, 2012).

The ethical perspectives on authenticity presented by philosophers such as Nietzsche and Rousseau have also been subjected to scrutiny. Nietzsche's concept of authenticity is closely tied to his critique of nihilism and the importance of creating meaning in life through self-assertion. However, his extreme individualism can be problematic. Critics argue that Nietzsche's emphasis on the "will to power" and self-overcoming can lead to a disregard for ethical responsibility towards others, potentially promoting a form of authenticity that is selfish and destructive (Franco, 2018). His notion of authenticity may conflict with communal or relational understandings of the self, where one's identity and values are co-created with others (Donzé, 2018).

Similarly, Rousseau's romanticized view of the "natural self" and the idea that modernization corrupts authenticity could be seen as an oversimplification. His perspective lacks

consideration for how modernization, technology, and societal progress can enhance rather than hinder individual authenticity (Varga & Guignon, 2023). This critique highlights that authenticity is not solely found in a return to nature or isolation but can also be fostered in complex social contexts.

Section Summary

This section discussed the philosophical historical context of authenticity. It discussed the origins of the word authenticity and how each school of philosophy interpreted the word. A theme that has come out across each is that authenticity is about being true to the self. It introduces the self-concept as pivotal in the identity of an individual. Another theme that has been identified is about being who one is and doing it without the influence of external sources, such as societal expectations. The notion of freedom, choice, and autonomy to decide are indicated in the concept of authenticity. Although not always directly stated, the role of self-reflection in determining if one is being true to themselves—by using self-imposed guidelines—is implied in many philosophical views of authenticity. Philosophers such as Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Sartre emphasize the importance of internal self-assessment as a means of aligning one's actions and choices with personal values, which is essential in the pursuit of authenticity.

The Self-Concept

The true self is often discussed in relation to authenticity, with the general premise centered around the idea of being true to oneself. But what exactly is the “true self?” To answer this question, we must first define and explore the concepts of “the self” and “self-concept.” This groundwork provides the foundation for understanding the true self, particularly as it relates to the extensive body of research on authenticity.

The terms self and the self-concept are often used interchangeably, and while their general meanings are very similar, there are some important nuances to each that need to be highlighted. The self is multifaceted and encompasses the entire identity of an individual and includes self-awareness, self-knowledge, self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-identity, and self-perception (Baumeister, 1997, 1999; McConnell & Strain, 2007; Owens & Samblanet, 2013; Sedikides & Spencer, 2011; Swann & Bosson, 2010). Self-awareness is the conscious awareness and ability to recognize one's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Morin, 2011; Neill, 2005). Self-knowledge is the information one has on their traits, values, beliefs, and experiences (Gazzaniga, 1998; Vazire & Carlson, 2010). Self-esteem is the evaluation of one's worth (Kernis, 2003; Neill, 2005; Orth & Robins, 2014). Self-efficacy is the belief in how skilled and capable one is in terms of their abilities (Bandura, 1997). Self-identity is the sense of who one is and it includes personal attributes, roles, and group memberships (Swann & Bosson, 2010). And self-perception is how one perceives their own behaviors and characteristics (Dunning, 2011; Neill, 2005). Taken together collectively, the self is comprehensive in representing how an individual is a distinct entity that interacts in the world and reflects on these personal experiences and attributes.

The self-concept lies in this broader framework of the self and centers around internalized perceptions, beliefs, values, and ideas that an individual holds to make meaning of who they are in defining the self (Baumeister, 1997, 1999; Markus & Wurf, 1987; Owens & Samblanet, 2013). Beliefs in this context are defined as an assumption that one holds to be true while values are more universal than contextual (e.g., valuing justice; Kesberg & Keller, 2018; Kim, 2023; Lewis, 2018). The self-concept is the notion of what one believes to be true about oneself in terms of one's abilities, characteristics, and roles in various contexts, which shapes the behaviors and psychological well-being of the individual (Baumeister, 1999; McConnell &

Strain, 2007; Rosenberg, 1979). The self and the self-concept are the foundation and core of a person's psychological existence; thus, influencing their thoughts, feelings, and actions that occur in their daily lives (Swann & Bosson, 2010).

True Self

There has been much exploration and research around the self and the self-concept. William James (1910) was one of the earliest psychologists to write on the self and set the groundwork for others to elaborate on the self-concept and for others to later identify the true self (Epstein, 1973; Rogers, 1961; Strohming et al., 2017). Carl Rogers' took a humanistic psychotherapy approach to his theory of self in which he used a person-centered focus in his sessions to determine that individuals have a real self which is the self that feels most true to who we are and that individuals also have an ideal self which is the self that strives towards ideals, ambitions, and/or goals (Rogers, 1951, 1954; Strohming et al., 2017). Rogers' identified that where the real self and the ideal self overlap is where congruence occurs and the individual is in alignment with who they really are (Rogers, 1951, 1954; Strohming et al., 2017).

Building on Rogers' work, psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott introduced the notion of the "true self" and "false self." The true self represents an authentic and spontaneous expression of one's deepest feelings and desires (Winnicott 1965/2016, 1967). In contrast, the false self is a defensive construct, a response to external pressures and societal expectations, which prevents the authentic self from being fully seen by others (Winnicott 1965/2016, 1967). This dichotomy of true versus false self emphasizes the tension between living authentically and conforming to external demands.

The concept of the false self, in particular, has sparked debates around the pressures of modern society, which often lead individuals to suppress their authentic selves in favor of

socially acceptable behaviors. This suppression is seen as contributing to psychological distress, as individuals become disconnected from their true selves in order to meet external expectations (Harter, 2002; J. T. Johnson, Robinson, & Mitchell, 2004). Thus, aligning with one's true self is essential for authenticity, a concept central to self-actualization theories such as Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs.

There have been many variations and referents of the self and how some of these parts of the self are more real, authentic than other portions of the self. This more authentic self in the psychological research has been referred to as the real self (Koole & Kuhl, 2003; Rogers, 1961), the actual self (Rogers, 1961), the ideal self (Higgins, 1987), the authentic self (Cable et al., 2013), and the deep self (Sripada, 2010). All of these variations in the research point to the true self in meaning though not always directly defined as such. Additionally, there have been some questions and views surrounding whether or not the true self does exist with proponents for the true self claiming that it does and even so lurks below a false front that one puts on (Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Koole & Kuhl, 2003; Maslow, 1943; Rogers, 1961; Strohming et al., 2017).

True Self vs. False Self

The contrast between the true self and the false self raises important questions about the nature of authenticity and how it affects the self-concept. Winnicott's framework of the false self as a defense mechanism sheds light on the social and psychological costs of conformity, but it also opens the door to critique. Is the dichotomy between true and false self too simplistic? Some researchers argue that this binary model may overlook the complexity of self-presentation in different social contexts (Harter, 2002; Strohming et al., 2017). It is possible that elements of the false self are not always inauthentic but may serve adaptive functions in various social environments.

Furthermore, the “true self” itself can be elusive. Research by Strohming et al. (2017) suggested that the true self is not a fixed entity but rather a dynamic and evolving construct. This complicates earlier models like those of Rogers and Winnicott, which seemed to suggest a more static, essentialist view of the true self. Moreover, while self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987) discussed below highlights the alignment between different aspects of the self (e.g., actual, ideal, ought), the theory also suggests that achieving congruence is more of an ongoing process rather than a singular endpoint.

Self-Discrepancy Theory

When reviewing the true self and self-concept, the alignment of the true self is often a consideration. The comparison of the current self to a more future directed self is a focus in many self-regulation theories (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Higgins 1987, 1997; Ryan & Deci, 2000). In the regulatory focus model, which has also been known as self-discrepancy theory in its expansion, it is proposed that one has an actual, current self and that there are self-guides such as an *ideal* self, representing one’s aspirations, and an *ought* self, reflecting one’s obligation (Higgins, 1987, 1997; McConnell & Strain, 2007). It provides a comparison between the actual self and one of the self-guides to explain the intent behind goal-relevant behaviors (McConnell & Strain, 2007). When disparities arise between an individual’s real identity and their self-directed goals or aspirations (i.e., ideal self), Higgins’s (1987, 1997) self-discrepancy theory suggests gaps between the actual and ideal selves prompt feelings of disillusionment, potentially resulting in negative psychological well-being (i.e., depression). Conversely, when there is misalignment between one’s actual self and perceived obligations (i.e., ought self), it tends to evoke a sense of remorse and creates anxiety (Higgins, 1987, 1996, 1997; McConnell & Strain, 2007). The goal is to have alignment between the actual self and ideal self, as well as the actual self and ought self.

Alignment in either of these self-guides results in feelings of positive fulfillment, happiness, and well-being (e.g., actual-ideal) as well as feelings of security, relief, and confidence (e.g., actual-ought; Higgins, 1996).

The self-discrepancy theory complements earlier discussions on the true versus false self by providing a framework for understanding the tension between internal and external self-guides. Higgins (1997) asserted that reducing these discrepancies, either by achieving congruence with one's ideals or obligations, leads to psychological fulfillment. Thus, achieving a balanced and coherent self-concept is not only about recognizing the true self but also about integrating different self-referents to reduce internal conflict.

Limitations to Theories of the Self

Despite the insights provided by various theories on the self, there are notable limitations that need to be acknowledged. Each theory, while offering a valuable perspective on self-concept, authenticity, and the true self, has inherent constraints that may oversimplify or miss critical aspects of human identity and psychological experience.

One of the most significant limitations found in Rogers' and Winnicott's theories lies in their essentialist view of the self. Rogers (1951), in his distinction between the real self and the ideal self, suggested that individuals can find harmony when their real self aligns with their ideal self. This model implies that there is a singular, fixed "real self" that one can discover and live in accordance with. Similarly, Winnicott's theory of the true self versus the false self assumes a stable, core self that is authentic and unchanging, hidden beneath layers of conformity and defense mechanisms (Winnicott, 1967).

This essentialist perspective fails to fully account for the dynamic and evolving nature of the self. The self may not be a static entity but rather a fluid and continuously developing

construct, shaped by new experiences, personal growth, and changing social contexts (Strohming et al., 2017). Modern research on identity suggests that individuals often adapt and modify their sense of self over time, based on new relationships, environments, and shifting life goals. Therefore, framing the true self as a fixed, singular concept may oversimplify the complexities of personal identity and development.

Another limitation resides in the assumption that the true and false self are binary concepts. Winnicott's distinction between the true self and false self, while valuable in understanding the pressures of conformity, is perhaps overly binary. It presents the true self as inherently authentic and the false self as a defensive, inauthentic response to external pressures (Winnicott, 1967). However, this rigid dichotomy overlooks the possibility that aspects of the so-called false self may still serve important adaptive or socially beneficial functions. Rather than existing as strictly binary concepts, the true and false self may be better understood as points along a continuum, with varying degrees of authenticity expressed across different contexts. In different situations, certain behaviors or presentations that might be classified as part of the "false self" could actually help individuals navigate complex social environments, fulfill necessary roles, or even discover new aspects of their identity.

Furthermore, the idea that authenticity is solely tied to one's inner true self may not fully reflect the complexities of modern life. Individuals often play multiple roles in society, balancing different identities—such as professional, familial, and personal—which may not always perfectly align with their internal sense of self. Therefore, while Winnicott's framework sheds light on the psychological tension between authenticity and conformity, it may not fully appreciate the nuances of how individuals can authentically inhabit multiple, and sometimes conflicting, roles.

Higgins' self-discrepancy theory (1987) holds another limitation of the self that needs to be considered. The theory argues that misalignments between these self-referents—such as between the actual self and the ideal self—can lead to negative emotional states, including depression or anxiety. However, a limitation of this model is its emphasis on internal emotional conflict as the main consequence of self-discrepancy. The theory primarily focuses on individual well-being but does not fully address the social or relational contexts that contribute to these self-guides or how external influences like culture, work, family, and community shape and complicate self-concept.

Additionally, the self-discrepancy model tends to emphasize achieving harmony by aligning the actual self with one's ideals or obligations (Higgins, 1997). Yet, this overlooks the possibility that constant striving toward alignment may itself create psychological strain. Individuals may experience ongoing tension in trying to meet societal expectations or personal aspirations, leading to persistent feelings of inadequacy or pressure rather than fulfillment. The theory does not account for the potential benefits of accepting misalignment or embracing one's imperfections, which may offer a more flexible and compassionate approach to self-regulation.

Section Summary

This section has examined the self-concept, focusing on the true self and its various referents, including the real self, ideal self, and false self. By engaging with theoretical frameworks such as Rogers' humanistic psychology, Winnicott's psychoanalytic theory, and Higgins' self-discrepancy theory, we can see that the self is a dynamic and multifaceted construct. While the true self is important in maintaining a coherent self-concept, it is not the only aspect that matters. Instead, achieving congruence between the actual, ideal, and ought

selves, as well as recognizing the adaptive functions of the false self, contributes to psychological well-being and authenticity.

Social & Personality Psychology's Contribution to Authenticity

The concept of authenticity is prevalent in psychological research. Authenticity in this context is often defined as being true to oneself and includes self-awareness, self-acceptance, and living authentically (Harter, 2002). This section is going to look at authenticity through the lens of motivation, regulation, social psychology, personality psychology, outcomes of authenticity as well as exploring the limitations of the proposed models.

Self-Determination Theory

The concept of authenticity, though not directly called out, has been highlighted and influenced by the principles in SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000). SDT is a theory on intrinsic motivation that involves one's engagement in activities that are enjoyable and also aligned to one's values and interests (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000). The theory emphasizes the importance of three psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy is the need to be in control of one's own behaviors as well as having the freedom to make choices that are aligned to one's true self (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Competence is the need to feel capable and effective in achieving desired goals and outcomes as well as providing a feeling of confidence in performing these activities (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Relatedness is the need to belong and feel connected to others through feeling valued and understood by others (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000). These needs taken collectively are essential for well-being and when all three are satisfied, individuals experience intrinsic motivation.

Although these three needs are required to experience personal growth and intrinsic motivation, it is autonomy that is most closely linked to authenticity. Autonomy involves agency in choice and is displayed in actions that are aligned to one's true self through their values, beliefs, and desires (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000). This is further supported by authenticity's philosophical underpinnings discussed previously around the importance of autonomy in being able to choose, living by one's principles, and allowing for self-expression without the influence of outside, external factors. Competence may support authentic living through one feeling capable and confident in their actions, but on its own it does not guarantee authenticity if the actions are not aligned to one's true values (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Additionally, relatedness may at times conflict with authenticity if there is pressure for one to conform to societal norms and expectations in order to maintain memberships and relationships (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Although it is autonomy that is more directly related to alignment and acting in accordance to one's true self, it is beneficial to have all three needs met because when this occurs individuals are more likely to experience an integrated sense of self, thus fostering and supporting authentic living (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Ryan et al., 1995; 2008).

Self-Regulation Theory

Baumeister and Vohs' (2007) self-regulation theory adds another layer to understanding authenticity, focusing on the role of self-control and goal-setting in regulating behavior. Self-regulation refers to the processes by which individuals control their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors to achieve personal goals (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007). Authenticity, from this perspective, can be understood as the ability to regulate one's behavior in accordance with

personal values and beliefs. Individuals who demonstrate high levels of self-regulation are better able to resist external pressures or distractions that could lead them to behave inauthentically.

Self-regulation involves both setting appropriate goals that align with one's true self and using cognitive resources to monitor and adjust behaviors in line with these goals (Baumeister et al., 2007). However, the theory also highlights the finite nature of self-regulatory resources, known as ego depletion. When these resources are depleted, individuals may struggle to maintain authentic behavior, potentially acting in ways that are inconsistent with their values due to fatigue or stress (Baumeister et al., 2007). In the context of authenticity, this suggests that self-regulation plays a crucial role in sustaining authentic behavior, but there are limits to how effectively individuals can consistently regulate themselves.

Additionally, self-regulation theory provides a practical understanding of how individuals can align their behavior with their core self over time, thus highlighting the role of discipline and self-monitoring in authentic living. However, the theory also introduces the possibility that external demands and internal resource depletion can lead to temporary lapses in authenticity, which adds complexity to the discussion of whether authenticity is best understood as a trait or a fluctuating state.

Authentic Functioning

Kernis and Goldman (2006) broadened the conceptualization of authenticity. They defined authenticity as "the unobstructed operation of one's true- or core-self in one's daily enterprise" (Kernis & Goldman, 2006, p. 294). They created a multicomponent conceptualization of authenticity, leveraging philosophical perspectives, SDT, and personality research to identify their four dimensions of authenticity: awareness, unbiased processing, behavior, and relational

orientation. These four components are also interrelated in the model and collectively are known as authentic functioning.

Awareness is the foundational component in authentic functioning. It refers to being aware of personal motivations, feelings, desires, self-relevant cognitions, and having insight and understanding of strengths and weaknesses (Kernis & Goldman, 2006). Awareness is knowledge and acceptance. Unbiased processing intends to remove personal biases and be objective in processing an individual's positive and negative self-aspects, emotions, and internal experiences (Kernis & Goldman, 2006). It is meant to be a filtered way in which one removes possible distortions from experiences as they come in and process the world and how it relates to the self as is. Behavior is acting in alignment with one's values, beliefs, preferences, and self-knowledge (Kernis & Goldman, 2006). It is merely acting for the sake of the true self and not for others or other external factors or forces. Relational orientation is about valuing openness and sincerity in relationships—being genuine (Kernis & Goldman, 2006). This component looks at relationships to others and it encourages mutual reciprocity in authentic relationships by fostering an environment in which one can be their true self while creating the space for another individual to do the same. Authenticity is a dynamic concept with these four components interacting with and reinforcing each other, but without self-awareness, it may be challenging to achieve authenticity in a meaningful way.

While these four components are interrelated and holistically embody authentic functioning, it is awareness that underpins the other three components. As mentioned previously, it is the foundational component that, without it, Kernis and Goldman's (2006) model would not achieve authenticity. The way in which it influences unbiased processing is in that awareness is important in knowing the true self and in recognizing assumptions and biases that may distort the

individual's perception of who they really are (Kernis & Goldman, 2006). Awareness allows for a more unbiased and realistic self-concept. Additionally, awareness influences behavior by ensuring that, through being aware of the true self, actions will be congruent with values and beliefs. An individual's actions will be genuine and acted in accordance with who they are and how they feel. Extending upon the genuine in nature, this is also crucial for relatedness, as being aware allows for more genuine and real interactions in creating open and trustworthy relationships (Kernis & Goldman, 2006). When an individual is being true to their self, this allows for the individual to be more authentic and genuine in communication and be able to have honest conversations while also being able to deepen these connections.

This multidimensional approach to authenticity provides a comprehensive lens for understanding authentic functioning beyond just autonomy, incorporating how individuals relate to themselves and others. However, the model's strong emphasis on self-awareness and unbiased processing assumes that individuals are capable of accurately interpreting their inner experiences, a notion that may overlook cognitive biases and emotional defenses (Kernis & Goldman, 2006). Even with heightened self-awareness, individuals may still distort their experiences due to unconscious processes. Furthermore, the role of self-regulation, as proposed by Baumeister and Vohs (2007), is underemphasized, particularly in maintaining long-term authentic behavior in the face of ego depletion.

Trait vs. State

Authenticity has been viewed through the lenses of trait and state perspectives. A trait is one's propensity toward a set of emotions, actions, and cognitions, whereas a state is the actual set of emotions, actions, or cognitions given a particular context or situation (Endler et al., 1991). From personality research, traits have been found to play a role in determining one's propensity

towards authenticity, with traits such as openness to experience, conscientiousness, and emotional stability linked to higher levels of trait authenticity (Fleeson & Wilt, 2010; McCrae & Costa, 1999). As it further relates to the concept of trait authenticity itself, the trait perspective views authenticity as a stable, unchanging characteristic internal to one's personality, and it is consistent across situations (Wood et al., 2008). It includes self-awareness in that those who are high in trait authenticity are aware of who they are and how it aligns with their values and beliefs (Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Wood et al., 2008). Additionally, Kernis and Goldman (2006) referenced authenticity as dispositional authenticity in their model through the lens of trait authenticity linking the four components in their model to trait authenticity.

The state perspective considers authenticity as a fluctuating experience that is influenced by context and situational factors (Fleeson & Wilt, 2010). It is viewed as a transient sense of being true to one's self (Sedikides et al., 2017). Authenticity is often operationalized as a perception of authentic states, with it being the degree to which one feels true to oneself (Cooper et al., 2018; Fleeson & Wilt, 2010; Lenton, Bruder, et al., 2013; Sheldon et al., 1997). In state authenticity, it tends to be the subjective sense of authenticity because it is about assessing a feeling of being true to the self. Like trait authenticity, state authenticity is linked to greater well-being and also to positive emotions (Lenton, Bruder, et al., 2013).

Self-regulation theory offers support for the state perspective by acknowledging that authenticity can fluctuate depending on one's ability to self-regulate. When self-regulatory resources are depleted, individuals may struggle to maintain authentic behavior, even if they are typically authentic (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007). This introduces a dynamic element to the experience of authenticity that aligns with the state perspective, while also acknowledging that self-regulation can serve as a tool to sustain trait authenticity over time.

Outcomes

Achieving authenticity has been linked to positive outcomes. One of the most noteworthy outcomes is that of psychological well-being in which authenticity is associated with higher self-esteem, greater life satisfaction, and reduced anxiety and depression (Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Wood et al., 2008). Authenticity has also been found to be a buffer against stress and emotional exhaustion in the workplace in that those who feel that they can be their true selves are likely to experience less burnout and greater job satisfaction (Sutton, 2020). Additionally, research has shown the importance of authenticity in the social context, through which authentic individuals are more likely to enhance social connectedness by creating a sense of belonging and emotional stability through forming deeper meaning connections (Onyishi et al., 2023). All in all, authenticity hits on different aspects that relate back to the positive impact it has on overall psychological well-being.

Authentic Functioning vs. Other Models

When comparing Kernis and Goldman's (2006) model of authentic functioning with SDT, Baumeister and Vohs' (2007) self-regulation theory, and the trait versus state perspectives, several key distinctions and overlaps emerge. These models all attempt to explain how individuals achieve and maintain authenticity, but they emphasize different mechanisms and components of the process. The following sections will explore how these theories align with or diverge from Kernis and Goldman's multidimensional approach, providing a deeper understanding of the complexities of authentic functioning.

SDT's focus on autonomy as essential to authenticity aligns with Kernis and Goldman's emphasis on authentic behavior, but it lacks the depth of their multidimensional model. SDT does not explicitly account for relational authenticity, whereas Kernis and Goldman (2006)

highlighted the importance of being authentic in social relationships through their relational orientation component. Baumeister and Vohs (2007) added the dimension of self-regulation, proposing that the ability to regulate behavior in alignment with one's true self is crucial for sustained authenticity. This suggests that while autonomy is important, self-regulation is necessary for maintaining authentic behavior over time, especially in challenging or resource-depleting circumstances. The self-regulation model, therefore, complements both SDT and Kernis and Goldman's framework by explaining how individuals can manage their authentic behavior over time.

The trait versus state debate also provides an interesting contrast to Kernis and Goldman's framework. While Kernis and Goldman (2006) proposed that awareness and unbiased processing are more consistent across contexts (e.g., hinting at a trait-like nature), their model also allows for situational variability, particularly in how individuals navigate their authentic behavior and relational orientation. Self-regulation theory bridges the gap between these perspectives by acknowledging that authenticity can fluctuate with ego depletion, but also emphasizes that individuals can develop strategies to maintain authenticity; thus, combining elements of both trait and state perspectives.

Limitations

Despite the strengths of these theories, each model presents notable limitations and gaps that warrant further exploration. SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000) focuses heavily on autonomy as the core of authenticity, potentially overlooking how relatedness and competence contribute to authentic functioning in contexts where conformity or interdependence are valued. For instance, SDT's overemphasis on autonomy may not account for cultural contexts that prioritize collective

well-being over individual autonomy, such as in more collectivistic societies (Chirkov et al., 2003).

Kernis and Goldman's model (2006) assumes that increased self-awareness naturally leads to unbiased processing, but cognitive biases and emotional defenses can distort self-perception even when individuals are aware of their internal experiences (Pronin, 2007). Furthermore, the model could benefit from exploring how self-regulation, as discussed by Baumeister and Vohs (2007), affects long-term authentic functioning. The possibility of ego depletion introduces a limitation in how consistently individuals can be authentic, especially under stress or fatigue. It is unclear how individuals can replenish self-regulatory resources to maintain authenticity across varying contexts (Baumeister et al., 2007).

Additionally, the trait-based perspective on authenticity (Wood et al., 2008) fails to account for how external circumstances, such as stress or social expectations, can temporarily hinder a person's ability to act authentically. While the state-based perspective acknowledges this, it struggles with how to systematically measure and predict when authenticity will be expressed. While self-regulation theory may be a potential solution by offering a framework for understanding how individuals manage these fluctuations, a more integrative approach could bridge these perspectives by considering both the stable personality traits and the fluid situational factors that influence authenticity (Fleeson & Wilt, 2010).

Lastly, much of the research on authenticity tends to focus on its positive outcomes, such as enhanced well-being, self-esteem, and life satisfaction (Wood et al., 2008). However, there are instances where authenticity may lead to negative consequences, such as conflict in interpersonal relationships, social isolation, or marginalization (Sutton, 2020). More research is needed on the

potential downsides of authenticity, particularly in social environments that may not support or value individual authenticity.

Section Summary

This section has explored authenticity in social and personality psychology, revealing a multifaceted concept across various theoretical frameworks. SDT emphasizes autonomy, competence, and relatedness, with autonomy being most closely tied to authenticity, though it may downplay the complexities of external pressures and social relationships. Kernis and Goldman's (2006) model expands on authenticity by incorporating self-awareness, unbiased processing, behavior, and relational orientation, offering a more comprehensive framework but perhaps overestimating individuals' ability for unbiased self-perception. Baumeister and Vohs' (2007) self-regulation theory adds depth by highlighting the role of self-control in sustaining authentic behavior, particularly during ego depletion. It bridges the gap between trait and state perspectives, suggesting that self-regulation helps manage fluctuations in authenticity based on situational factors. Each of these models provides valuable insights into authenticity's complexity. Understanding how individuals balance personal authenticity with external pressures, and the role of self-regulation in sustaining authenticity, enhances our view of authenticity as both a trait and a state.

Leadership's Contribution to Authenticity

The primary focus of this section is on authentic leadership and its contribution to the authenticity research. The construct is reviewed with its differences to other theories of authenticity highlighted. Additionally, a focus on critical aspects of the model is discussed, with the limitations the model provides in fully understanding and capturing authenticity.

Authentic Leadership

The concept of authentic leadership was first introduced by Bill George, a CEO of Medtronic, in 2003, in his book that focused on leaders creating value and being able to find their true north through being authentic (George, 2007; George et al., 2007). The reasoning behind the focus of this style of leadership was a result of leadership in crisis, in which leaders were being deceitful and misleading to their organizations and followers. A call for a new way of leading was critical, in which the leader needed to be genuine and trustworthy, and one in which those would want to follow. Drawing upon this new leadership concept, psychologists rooted in positive psychology took transformational leadership theory and created authentic leadership development in which authentic leaders are defined as those who possess a profound understanding of their own thoughts and behaviors as well as how others perceive them (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Avolio, Gardner, et al., 2004). Additional qualities highlighted include these leaders exhibiting confidence, optimism, and a strong moral character, inspiring trust and respect among those around them (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Avolio, Gardner, et al., 2004).

The framework for authentic leadership leveraged Kernis' (2003) model on authenticity, which originally emphasized the components of self-awareness, unbiased processing, authentic behavior, and relational orientation. However, authentic leadership scholars adjusted Kernis' (2003) model by removing the explicit behavior component, reasoning that authentic behavior would naturally manifest through the other dimensions (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Gardner et al., 2005). Furthermore, Kernis' dimensions of unbiased processing and relational orientation were renamed to balanced processing and relational transparency, with balanced processing emphasizing the inclusion of others' perspectives rather than relying solely on one's own judgment (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Walumbwa et al., 2008). Additionally, an internal moral perspective was added to the authentic leadership

conceptualization as the researchers felt that being authentic has moral and ethical underpinnings (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Avolio, Luthans, & Walumbwa, 2004; Gardner et al., 2005; Walumbwa et al., 2008). The resulting model of authentic leadership includes and modifies the four dimensions: self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing, and internalized moral perspective.

According to the new model, self-awareness is knowing oneself deeply in the sense of recognizing one's strengths, weaknesses, beliefs, values, and emotions (Gardner et al., 2005). As a result of being in tune with their inner selves, these leaders are able to lead with authenticity and integrity, ensuring they align their actions with their core values. Relational transparency requires leaders to be open, honest, genuine, and consistent in their communications and in interactions with others (Gardner et al., 2005). These leaders openly express vulnerability and admit mistakes. Balanced processing consists of seeking diverse perspectives and viewpoints before making decisions (Gardner et al., 2005). They ensure thorough understanding, fairness, and inclusivity. The final dimension, internalized moral perspective, implies a strong moral compass guided by ethical principles in which leaders prioritize a greater good over personal gain, ensuring they do what is right (Gardner et al., 2005). Authentic leadership requires a leader to be authentic if they demonstrate all four of these dimensions. In this sense, authenticity can be thought of as a combination of these dimensions working together, but authentic leadership goes beyond merely possessing authenticity—it also involves intentionally leading with these qualities in action and behavior (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Therefore, while authentic leadership overlaps with the concept of authenticity, it is more dynamic, encompassing both being authentic and demonstrating leadership grounded in ethical and relational principles (Walumbwa et al., 2008).

Outcomes

Authentic leadership has been linked positively to many desirable work outcomes. Some of these outcomes include follower trust, increased engagement, higher organizational commitment, and more satisfaction (Avolio, Gardner, et al., 2004; Ilies et al., 2005). Authentic leadership has also predicted more positive emotions and improved well-being (Chan et al., 2005); greater leadership effectiveness (Eigel & Kuhnert, 2005); higher motivation (Ilies et al., 2005); and fostering a more positive climate (Gardner et al., 2005; Woolley et al., 2007). Additionally, authentic leadership has been found to be negatively related to turnover intentions, antisocial behaviors, and burnout (Avolio & Walumbwa, 2014; Einola & Alvesson, 2021; Gardner et al., 2011).

Alternative Arguments

The construct of authentic leadership has been criticized for being both too demanding and too complex. The idea of being “too demanding” refers to the expectation that leaders must consistently demonstrate all the dimensions of authenticity (e.g., self-awareness, relational transparency) in every situation, which may be unrealistic in dynamic and high-pressure environments. On the other hand, the model is considered “too complex” because it combines two distinct constructs—leadership and authenticity—each of which requires its own lens and evaluative criteria. For example, leadership focuses on influencing and guiding others, often requiring strategic thinking and adaptability, while authenticity centers on personal integrity and congruence with one’s core values. These two areas have different demands and may conflict with one another, as being an effective leader might sometimes require behaviors that are not entirely aligned with one’s authentic self (Alvesson & Einola, 2019, 2022; Einola & Alvesson, 2021). It is a lot to ask of one individual to take on the qualities and characteristics while also meeting the demands of two different constructs that have been attempted to be melded into one.

Additionally, there is ambiguity in the definition of authenticity as what one person deems as authentic might be viewed differently through the lens of another individual (Alvesson & Einola, 2019). This subjectivity is rooted in the varying definitions of authenticity itself. For instance, Kernis and Goldman's (2006) model of authenticity focuses on self-awareness, unbiased processing, authentic behavior, and relational orientation, while trait theories of authenticity see it as a stable characteristic, and state theories consider it more dynamic and context-dependent. These differing perspectives make it challenging to agree on a universal standard for authenticity. This is especially true when asking a follower to rate their leader's authenticity, as followers may have different interpretations of what "authentic" leadership looks like. Some may emphasize relational transparency, while others may focus on moral consistency, leading to inconsistent or biased evaluations.

The ambiguity in defining authenticity also complicates the measurement of authentic leadership. Since authenticity is perceived differently across individuals and contexts, developing clear, standardized guidelines and measures becomes problematic (Alvesson & Einola, 2019). For instance, a leader who displays vulnerability may be seen as authentic by one follower, but another may perceive this vulnerability as a sign of weakness, affecting the assessment of the leader's authenticity. Therefore, this lack of clarity not only impacts the evaluation of authentic leadership but also calls into question the validity of the measures used to assess it, creating an ongoing challenge for researchers and practitioners in the field.

In line with the above, there has been much debate on how authentic leadership has been operationalized. Critics argue that the rapid development and widespread adoption of a quantitative measure in 2008, just a few years after the concept of authentic leadership emerged in 2004, was premature. This is particularly concerning because authentic leadership

encompasses abstract and complex dimensions like authenticity and self-awareness, which are difficult to quantify without a deeper qualitative understanding (Alvesson & Einola, 2019, 2022, 2023; Einola & Alvesson 2021; Gardner et al., 2021; Gardner & McCauley, 2022a, 2022b; Harter, 2002; Kernis, 2003; Kernis & Goldman, 2006). The quantitative survey measure, while useful for large-scale studies, may have oversimplified the construct, failing to capture the nuanced, subjective nature of authenticity that varies greatly across individuals and contexts (Harter, 2002; Kernis & Goldman, 2006). Additionally, with this predominance of quantitative studies (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Gardner et al., 2011) and unquestioned adoption has contributed to the model being seen as overly rigid and not adequately reflecting the deeper, qualitative aspects of leadership authenticity, particularly in relation to individual lived experiences. Consequently, there has been a growing call for more qualitative studies to truly explore what authenticity means to individuals, both in personal and professional contexts, and to reconceptualize the authentic leadership model (Alvesson & Einola, 2019; Crawford et al., 2020). Scholars have suggested going back to basics and re-grounding the concept of authenticity from a qualitative perspective, to better capture its richness and complexity (Alvesson & Einola, 2019, 2022, 2023; Crawford et al., 2020; Einola & Alvesson 2021; Helmuth et al., 2023; Iszatt-White et al., 2021; Iszatt-White & Kempster, 2019; Kempster et al., 2019).

There has also been concern around the addition of the internalized moral perspective as a dimension in authentic leadership. Avolio and Gardner (2005) argued that authentic leadership is inherently moral, suggesting that authenticity cannot be separated from an ethical or moral foundation. This position emphasizes the belief that to be a truly authentic leader, one must lead from a place of internalized moral conviction, which ensures integrity and alignment with ethical principles. However, critics like Alvesson and Einola (2019, 2022, 2023) have pointed out that

imposing morality and ethics as requirements for authenticity is problematic. One concern is the subjective nature of morality—what one individual or culture considers ethical might differ significantly from another’s perspective, leading to conflict when imposing a universal moral standard within a leadership model (Einola & Alvesson, 2021; Gardner et al., 2021). This debate extends to the concern that an individual’s moral and ethical compass could be at odds with the ethical expectations or culture of the organization. For instance, a leader might possess personal moral values that conflict with organizational practices or the ethical framework set by the company. This raises the question: can a leader still be authentic if they have to compromise their moral stance to align with organizational norms? The subjectivity of ethics further complicates this, as moral standards are influenced by culture, personal experiences, and context, making it difficult to universally define what is “authentic” behavior for all leaders (Gardner & McCauley, 2022a, 2022b). Moreover, relying heavily on traits like internalized moral perspective and self-awareness risks ignoring other critical external factors that shape leadership. Ladkin and Spiller (2013) highlighted that situational elements, such as organizational culture, team dynamics, and the external environment, play essential roles in determining leadership effectiveness. By focusing too much on internal qualities like morality, the authentic leadership model may overlook these contextual influences, which could limit its practical applicability in diverse settings. This critique calls for a more balanced approach that considers both internal traits and external circumstances in understanding authentic leadership.

Cultural bias and role incongruity have been significant concerns regarding the authentic leadership model. Developed primarily by men and rooted in Western individualistic values, the theory emphasizes self-awareness and individual autonomy, potentially limiting its applicability to collectivist cultures where harmony, conformity, and group cohesion are prioritized over

individual expression (Walumbwa et al., 2008). For example, in many East Asian cultures, the collective good often supersedes personal authenticity, leading to tensions between a leader's sense of authenticity and their obligation to conform to cultural expectations. This discrepancy raises questions about whether authentic leadership, as currently defined, can fully resonate in non-Western contexts. Moreover, the theory is less beneficial for women and minorities in the workplace, as it often assumes a normative model of leadership that aligns with white, male experiences. Eagly (2005) highlighted how gendered expectations of leadership roles can make it particularly difficult for women to lead authentically, as they must navigate between being perceived as competent leaders and adhering to societal expectations of femininity. Similarly, minorities often feel pressured to adapt to organizational and societal norms that do not reflect their authentic identities, limiting their capacity for authentic leadership (Alvesson & Einola, 2019, 2022). For example, African American leaders may feel compelled to downplay aspects of their cultural identity to fit into predominantly white organizational environments, reducing their ability to lead authentically. This cultural and role-based incongruity illustrates that authentic leadership is not universally attainable for all groups, making it a critical concern that warrants deeper consideration and reevaluation (Einola & Alvesson, 2021).

Section Summary

This section reviewed leadership's contribution to authenticity through evaluating authentic leadership. Much of authentic leadership has evolved from Kernis' (2003) conceptual framework of authenticity, with modifications to the model being more follower-focused and the inclusion of a moral component. Self-awareness remains a recurring theme in the necessity for authenticity, although this model emphasizes the need to capture all four dimensions to be authentic, as well as placing importance on morality as an underpinning. While authentic

leadership in theory sounds appealing and has produced positive outcomes, there is much criticism and challenges to the framework, including ambiguity in both conceptual and operational definitions, propensity towards quantitative studies, and overlooking cultural, group, and gender biases.

Measures of Authenticity

In the study of authenticity, several measurement tools have been developed to assess how individuals perceive and express their true selves. Each of these scales is designed to capture different dimensions of authenticity, offering valuable insights into self-perception, behavior, and leadership. However, these tools also have distinct strengths and limitations, which merit further exploration, particularly regarding their psychometric properties and applicability in various contexts.

The Authenticity Inventory (AI-3)

Kernis and Goldman (2006) created and developed the Authenticity Inventory (AI-3), which is a self-report measure that evaluates the individual differences of authenticity. The individual takes the assessment and rates themselves on each of the items. The AI-3 is a 45-item scale composed of a 12-item awareness subscale (e.g., “For better or for worse I am aware of who I truly am”), a 10-item unbiased processing subscale (e.g., “I find it very difficult to critically assess myself”), a 11-item behavior subscale (e.g., “I find that my behavior typically expresses my values”), and a 12-item relational orientation subscale (e.g., “I make it a point to express to close others how much I truly care for them”).

This is a subjective measure looking at an individual’s perceived authenticity, and it also demonstrates good reliability, with high internal consistency across the four subscales (Cronbach’s $\alpha > .80$). The construct validity has been supported through correlations with

related measures of self-esteem, psychological well-being, and self-acceptance (Kernis & Goldman, 2006). However, more research is needed to establish its predictive validity in diverse populations and non-Western contexts, where the conceptualization of authenticity may differ.

The AI-3 is broad in scope and captures various aspects of authenticity. The inclusion of subscales like self-awareness and unbiased processing allows for a more detailed understanding of how individuals perceive and express their true selves. Additionally, the relational orientation subscale emphasizes the social dimension of authenticity, highlighting how authentic behavior impacts relationships (Kernis & Goldman, 2006). The scale's comprehensiveness also makes it suitable for exploring multiple facets of authenticity simultaneously, which can help identify specific areas where an individual may struggle with or excel in authentic self-expression.

The Authenticity Scale

Another scale that has been used to measure authenticity is Wood et al.'s (2008) Authenticity Scale. This scale was developed independently of Kernis and Goldman (2006), though it does have their influence. Wood et al. conceptualized authenticity as a dispositional aspect of an individual, and their scale is considered more of a trait scale as it measures relatively stable individual differences in authenticity and how this is reflected consistently across various situations and over time. It is a 12-item scale with 4-items per each of the three factors. The scale measures self-alienation which is feeling out of touch with one's true self (e.g., "I feel out of touch with the 'real me;'" Wood et al., 2008); authentic living which is acting in accordance with one's true self (e.g., "I live in accordance with my values and beliefs;" Wood et al., 2008); accepting external influence which is the degree to which an individual accepts external influence over themselves (e.g., "I always feel I need to do what others expect me to do;" Wood et al., 2008).

This scale is also a subjective measure assessing an individual's perceived authenticity that has high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.82$) and strong convergent validity, demonstrated by correlations with measures of well-being, self-concept clarity, and life satisfaction (Wood et al., 2008). The scale also exhibits test-retest reliability, suggesting that it measures a stable trait over time, which supports its use in longitudinal research (Wood et al., 2008).

This scale is brief, making it more practical for use in research and clinical settings where time is limited (Wood et al., 2008). Additionally, the scale's focus on dispositional authenticity allows for consistency in measuring authenticity as a stable trait, rather than a situational or transient state. The measure also integrates the concept of external influence, providing a nuanced view of how external pressures affect an individual's expression of their true self, which is critical in understanding how societal norms and expectations shape authenticity (Wood et al., 2008).

The Authentic Leadership Questionnaire (ALQ)

The Authentic Leadership Questionnaire (ALQ) is often the most used measure to assess the extent to which an individual is exhibiting authentic leadership qualities. It is a self-report measure, but it is often assessed by a third party, making a judgment on the leader's authenticity as opposed to the leader making their own judgment of their authenticity. The measure was developed by Walumbwa et al. (2008). It has 16-items with 4-items for each of the four dimensions, and items are usually rated on a Likert scale to measure the frequency or degree of agreement with each statement. The four dimensions of authentic leadership in the ALQ include: self-awareness (e.g., "I am aware of my strengths and weaknesses"), relational transparency (e.g., "I openly share my thoughts and feelings with others"), balanced processing (e.g., "I

carefully consider all relevant information before making a decision”) and internalized moral perspective (e.g., “I make decisions based on my personal values and beliefs”). The goal of the ALQ is to determine how well a leader embodies these authentic leadership qualities (Walumbwa et al., 2008). This is often perceived through the follower’s lens on the authenticity of the leader.

Additionally, the ALQ has demonstrated good reliability and validity. The overall internal consistency of the subscales is high (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.92$), and the measure correlates well with related constructs such as transformational leadership and ethical leadership (Walumbwa et al., 2008). Its external validity is also supported by its widespread use in diverse organizational settings, though it is acknowledged that further research is needed to examine its cross-cultural applicability.

The benefits of the use of the ALQ include its utility in organizational settings, where leadership authenticity can significantly impact team dynamics and organizational culture. Third-party assessments add a level of objectivity, reducing self-report bias that often accompanies other authenticity measures (Gardner et al., 2011). Additionally, the ALQ provides a clear framework for evaluating leadership behavior, making it useful for both leadership development and performance evaluations (Walumbwa et al., 2008).

The Authentic Leadership Inventory (ALI)

Another common measure is the Authentic Leadership Inventory (ALI; Neider & Schriesheim, 2011). There are 14-items in this measure, and like the ALQ, it can be used as both self-report and other-report, capturing how the leader is perceived by others. The ALI assesses each of the four dimensions and reflects the relative emphasis placed on each aspect of the measure through the slight difference in the number of items per dimension (Neider &

Schriesheim, 2011). In the ALI, self-awareness has 4-items (e.g., “I am aware of how my behavior affects others”); relational transparency has 4-items (e.g., “I am open about my feelings and thoughts when interacting with others”); balanced processing has 3-items (e.g., “I carefully weigh the pros and cons of a decision before making it”); and internalized moral perspective has 3-items (e.g., “I make decisions based on my personal values rather than external pressures”).

Taken together, the items aim to reflect how leaders show their authenticity through their interactions, their decisions, and through adhering to their values (Neider & Schriesheim, 2011).

The psychometric properties of the ALI are robust, with strong internal consistency (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.88$) and construct validity. The scale correlates well with related measures of leadership effectiveness and ethical behavior, and its reliability has been supported through test-retest analyses (Neider & Schriesheim, 2011).

A notable strength of the ALI is its adaptability for both self- and other-report use, allowing researchers and practitioners to capture multiple perspectives on leadership authenticity (Neider & Schriesheim, 2011). The scale is also shorter than the ALQ, making it more practical for use in time-constrained environments. Additionally, the ALI’s ability to provide differentiated insights into the four leadership dimensions makes it a valuable tool for leadership development and coaching (Neider & Schriesheim, 2011).

Quantitative Limitations

While self-report measures—such as the AI-3, Authenticity Scale, ALQ, and ALI—offer valuable insights into perceptions of authenticity in individuals and leaders, these quantitative approaches have notable limitations. A key criticism centers on their reliance on self-assessment or third-party evaluation, which may not fully capture the complex and multifaceted nature of authenticity (Kernis & Goldman, 2006). Both self-report and other-report measures, while

useful, face challenges in accurately representing authentic behavior, as they rely either on subjective self-reflection or potentially biased external judgments. By distilling authenticity into predetermined items, these measures often fail to account for the dynamic and context-dependent nature of authentic behavior.

One significant limitation is the tendency of self-report instruments to treat authenticity as a stable, trait-like construct. For example, measures like the AI-3 and the Authenticity Scale assess authenticity as relatively fixed, overlooking the ways in which an individual's authentic behaviors and self-expression fluctuate across different situations and environments (Wood et al., 2008). In reality, authenticity is often influenced by external factors, including cultural norms and relational dynamics, making its fluidity difficult to capture in static, one-time assessments.

Further, these scales often simplify the construct of authenticity. The Authenticity Scale, for instance, reduces the concept to just three factors. While brevity increases practicality, it comes at the cost of depth, potentially missing out on the full complexity of how authenticity manifests in diverse settings (Kernis & Goldman, 2006). The AI-3, although more comprehensive with 45 items, introduces challenges of time consumption and participant fatigue, which may compromise the accuracy of responses (Wood et al., 2008). This length, coupled with the inherent subjectivity of self-reports, makes it difficult for individuals to objectively assess their authenticity.

An additional relevant limitation is that both the AI-3 and the Authenticity Scale are not widely used in workplace or organizational settings. Their focus is more on personal and interpersonal authenticity rather than on how these constructs manifest in professional environments. Given that they are not designed for, nor often used in, the workplace context, their applicability to understanding authentic behaviors at work is limited. Researchers have

often critiqued that while these scales assess dimensions of personal authenticity, they lack relevance when it comes to the unique demands, pressures, and relational dynamics of the workplace (L. M. Roberts et al., 2009). Authenticity in professional settings may involve additional layers of complexity, such as navigating organizational cultures, power structures, and expectations for professional behavior, which these scales do not fully capture (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Thus, while the AI-3 and Authenticity Scale provide valuable insights into general authenticity, their utility in workplace studies remains constrained.

Another pervasive issue with both self-report measures and other-report measures is the influence of social desirability bias. Individuals may report higher levels of authenticity than they genuinely experience due to the desire to present themselves in a favorable light (Robins et al., 2001). This can distort results, particularly in contexts where maintaining a positive self-image is emphasized. Similarly, external evaluations, as used in the ALQ and ALI, carry the risk of bias from raters—followers may hold incomplete or skewed perceptions of a leader's authenticity due to power dynamics, favoritism, or incomplete understanding of the leader's inner experiences (Gardner et al., 2011). In other words, third-party assessments can be just as vulnerable to bias and misperception, highlighting that neither approach is foolproof.

Scales like the ALQ and ALI, which focus specifically on leadership authenticity, pose additional challenges. Their application is limited to leadership contexts, making them less useful for studying authenticity in non-leadership roles (Walumbwa et al., 2008). Additionally, these scales' reliance on external assessments introduces the possibility of bias, where followers' ratings may not accurately reflect a leader's authenticity. In hierarchical or high-pressure environments, these evaluations can be further distorted by power imbalances or workplace politics (Gardner et al., 2011).

Cultural variability also poses a challenge for self-report measures of authenticity. Constructs of authenticity may vary significantly across cultural contexts, meaning that scales like the AI-3 may lack generalizability when used across diverse populations (Kernis & Goldman, 2006). What is perceived as authentic behavior in one cultural framework may be interpreted differently in another, which quantitative instruments may not adequately capture. This limitation is particularly pertinent in studies seeking to understand authenticity in a globalized world, where cultural nuances can profoundly shape the perception and expression of authenticity.

Section Summary

This section reviewed the various common authenticity self-report measures. In summary, while quantitative self-report measures like the AI-3, Authenticity Scale, ALQ, and ALI provide valuable data on perceived authenticity, they face significant limitations. These include the treatment of authenticity as a static trait, oversimplification of the construct, susceptibility to social desirability bias, and challenges in cross-cultural applicability. Additionally, other-report measures such as the ALQ and ALI, while potentially offering a different perspective, are not immune to similar biases and limitations. As a result, these instruments may fail to fully encapsulate the dynamic, multifaceted nature of authenticity, highlighting the need for more nuanced approaches that can address these limitations (Gardner et al., 2011; Kernis & Goldman, 2006)

Inauthenticity

When considering authenticity, it is also important to consider inauthenticity. To better understand authenticity from a holistic view is to also include an understanding of inauthenticity.

Much of the authenticity research has primarily focused on the concept with reference to

inauthenticity. Whereas authenticity is defined as being true to oneself (Jongman-Sereno & Leary, 2018; Sedikides et al., 2019), inauthenticity, in contrast, is defined as acting in ways that are not true to oneself (Harter, 2002; Harter et al., 1996). Going back to the humanistic and psychodynamic psychologists as well as self-discrepancy theory, inauthenticity is also referred to as the false self; thus, highlighting that the inverse of the true self, is the false self (Harter 2002; J. A. Johnson, Kiviniemi, & Carver, 2004). Authenticity and inauthenticity can occur at the same time. It is not an either/or scenario in that either you are authentic or you are inauthentic.

Individuals aim to be aligned with who they are matching actions to their true selves, but they do manage social expectations and at times have to be inauthentic knowing that it is necessary for the context (Erickson & Wharton, 1997; Goffman, 1959; Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Sheldon & Kasser, 1995). The balancing act of authenticity and inauthenticity is transient and can also be done strategically when an individual knowingly is being inauthentic for a specific situation, since it aligns with their true self and personal goals in the grand scheme (Gunther et al., 2023; Harter, 2002; Lenton et al., 2013). The ways in which inauthenticity may appear are discussed below as well as additional outcomes.

Self-Monitoring

Self-monitoring to a certain degree can be seen as being inauthentic. It is how individuals take in the social cues of the environment and adjust their behavior accordingly to match the expectations of the situation (Gangestad & Snyder, 2000; Snyder, 1974). There are two types of self-monitors: high and low. High self-monitors are likely to be aware of their environment and adapt their actions to meet the social context, whereas low self-monitors act more consistently based on their internal states and dispositions regardless of the social context (Gangestad & Snyder, 2000; Snyder, 1974). Low self-monitors are less concerned about social adaptability. At

a moderate level, self-monitoring can be beneficial and coexist with being authentic. Kernis and Goldman (2006) highlighted the value of adaptive self-monitoring as it allows individuals to be aware and adjust their behavior while still being able to be true to their self. An example they provide is someone who may naturally present as casual and more laissez-faire in their demeanor may adapt their behavior to be more respectful and polite in a more formal setting to maintain social harmony while not being inauthentic (Kernis & Goldman, 2006). When self-monitoring can become inauthentic is when it becomes excessive. Excessively adjusting behaviors and over-relying on outside approval or validation can result in actions that are inconsistent with the individual's values and beliefs. This is often more likely to occur with high-self monitors who may be prone to more people-pleasing behaviors rather than staying true to their self, and this can result in feelings of resentment, emptiness, dissatisfaction, and lack of fulfillment (Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Snyder, 1987).

Impression Management

Impression management is more centered on how an individual tries to control how others will perceive them (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). It is done in a performative way such that individuals will intentionally present themselves in ways that are accepted by others (Goffman, 1959; Leary & Kowalski, 1990). It is related to inauthenticity because individuals are altering who they are at the core to conform to the expectations of others. They may do it to be more socially desirable and feel pressure to conform to social norms that may not be necessarily reflective of their true self and beliefs (Baumeister, 1982; Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Being inauthentic through impression management can result in increased levels of anxiety and low self-esteem (Schlenker & Leary, 1982) as well as experiencing lower satisfaction and a diminished sense of well-being (Sheldon et al., 1997). It can also create identity loss because

individuals lose their sense of self and are unsure of what they really value (Swann et al., 1987).

This can also lead to cognitive dissonance in which an individual is in conflict with their true self and presented self in terms of their actions and beliefs (Festinger, 1957).

Self-Verification

Self-verification is based on seeking feedback, both positive and negative, to help confirm an individual's self-concept (Swann, 1983; Swann & Read, 1981; Swann & Pelham, 2002). It is done so to maintain behaviors that match an individual's self-concept, as well as being able to maintain consistency. It can be beneficial to maintain authenticity in knowing that the feedback received around their behaviors does align with their true self (Swann & Read, 1981). Where it can hinder authenticity is when there is discrepancy in an individual's self-concept and feedback received leading to an individual to adjust their behavior and it might result in them acting inauthentically (Swann, 1983). Additionally, individuals may adopt specific social roles or identities that are not truly reflective of their self-concept and receive feedback that leads them to act in ways that are not true to who they are (Swann & Bosson, 2010). These individuals become inauthentic in their actions when they are conforming to specific social norms and role expectations. Being inauthentic through self-verification can increase psychological stress as well as decrease self-worth and satisfaction (Swann, 1996; Swann & Pelham, 2002).

Additional Outcomes

Generally, inauthenticity tends to involve negative outcomes related to overall well-being, as mentioned above. Other researchers have found that experiences of inauthenticity tend to result in negative experiences such as feeling evaluated or incompetent, not meeting one's own standards and viewing themselves as a failure, as well as behaving in ways to match others'

expectations (Jongman-Sereno & Leary, 2018; Lenton, Bruder, et al., 2013; Lenton et al., 2014; Lenton, Slabu, et al., 2013). Additionally, through a narrative identity approach, inauthenticity has also been found to have dimensions that include phoniness, suppression, self-denigration, and conformity (Wilt et al., 2019). It is another way to consider how to evaluate inauthenticity and how it relates to other outcomes, as mentioned previously. Finally, inauthentic behavior can impact the depth of and satisfaction in relationships (Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Reis et al., 2000) as well as prevent individuals from pursuing goals that are aligned with their desires, limiting the opportunities for self-development and fulfillment (Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Sheldon et al., 1997).

Alternative Arguments

Though much research underscores the negative outcomes of inauthenticity, it is crucial to consider alternative perspectives. Some scholars argue that acting inauthentically is not inherently detrimental and may even be adaptive in certain contexts. For instance, Leary (1995) proposed that conforming to social expectations, even at the expense of personal authenticity, can foster social harmony and relationship success. In this view, strategic inauthenticity allows individuals to navigate complex social environments where rigid authenticity might alienate others or disrupt important relationships (B. W. Roberts, 2007).

Moreover, Higgins (1987), in his work on self-discrepancy theory, suggested that minor incongruences between one's true self and actions may not always result in psychological distress. Instead, individuals often balance authenticity with societal roles and norms without feeling inauthentic, especially when their goals are longer-term and aligned with personal values. This idea challenges the traditional negative framing of inauthenticity and opens the door to

viewing it as contextually appropriate or even essential in achieving personal growth and well-being (Lenton, Bruder, et al., 2013).

While the general consensus links inauthenticity to negative outcomes, this perspective overlooks the nuance of human experience, where authenticity and inauthenticity often blend. Critics of the authenticity-inauthenticity dichotomy argue that extreme emphasis on authenticity can inadvertently create pressure to “perform” authenticity, which ironically may lead to inauthentic behavior itself (Kreber, 2010). In these cases, individuals might feel forced to present an idealized version of their “true self,” leading to paradoxical experiences of inauthenticity.

Limitations

Evaluating inauthenticity presents several methodological challenges and conceptual limitations. First, inauthenticity is inherently subjective. Individuals may vary significantly in how they define and perceive inauthentic actions, making standardized measurement difficult. For example, what one person might interpret as an inauthentic act may be viewed by another as a necessary adaptation to their environment (B. W. Roberts, 2007). This variability raises questions about the reliability and consistency of existing scales used to assess inauthenticity, as the context and personal interpretations of participants may influence their responses (Kernis & Goldman, 2006).

Moreover, authenticity and inauthenticity are often fluid and situation-dependent, challenging the assumption that these constructs can be easily categorized. The emphasis on binary categories (authentic vs. inauthentic) may oversimplify the complexity of human behavior, neglecting the possibility of intermediate or fluctuating states (Sheldon et al., 1997). Lenton, Bruder, et al. (2013) emphasized that inauthenticity is dynamic, with individuals often oscillating between authentic and inauthentic behaviors based on shifting external pressures and

internal motivations. This dynamic nature further complicates efforts to evaluate inauthenticity through cross-sectional studies or static measures, as individuals' feelings of authenticity can shift rapidly depending on context and time.

In addition, the focus on the negative consequences of inauthenticity may overlook cases where temporary inauthenticity could serve a functional purpose. As noted in research on self-presentation (Leary, 1995) and impression management (Goffman, 1959), individuals may choose inauthentic behaviors not because they are disconnected from their true selves, but because they are strategically aligning their actions with larger life goals or situational demands. Such instances call for a more nuanced understanding of inauthenticity that includes its potential benefits alongside its costs.

Section Summary

This section reviewed the various social mechanisms in which an individual can exhibit inauthentic behaviors. There are times in which inauthentic actions are appropriate and beneficial to an individual, and there are times in which they can have negative impacts. It is a balancing act and one that requires an individual to have awareness and choice when determining the social contexts to adapt, as well as having a reflection point to help the individual navigate these different circumstances while ensuring they are still being true to their self.

Additional Considerations

While in some of the authenticity definitions it is positioned to consider both positive and negative aspects, authenticity is generally viewed as a positive concept. This may be because self-judgments are often influenced by positivity, leading individuals to perceive positive actions as more authentic than negative ones (Jongman-Sereno & Leary, 2019; Sheldon et al., 1997). For instance, people might view helping a stranger (e.g., positive action) as a more genuine

reflection of their true self, even if it does not align with their usual behavior. In contrast, expressing anger (e.g., negative action) might be seen as less authentic, even if it is more consistent with their self-concept. Research further shows individuals often judge positive behaviors that are incongruent with their self-image as more authentic than negative behaviors that are congruent (Jongman-Sereno & Leary, 2016, 2019). For example, someone who typically sees themselves as introverted may feel that acting extroverted at a social event is more authentic if it is viewed as a positive behavior. On the other hand, someone who usually avoids conflict may view their act of confrontation as inauthentic, even though it aligns with their sense of self, simply because it is a negative action.

Additionally, individuals who are in an upbeat, positive mood are likely to judge themselves as more authentic (Lenton, Slabu, et al., 2013). This is related to individuals having a tendency to self-enhance through exaggerating their strengths and overlooking their weaknesses or potential opportunities for growth (Guenther et al., 2023). This focus on positivity is reinforced by societal norms that reward positive behaviors and emotions, while discouraging negative ones. Research on positivity bias, such as work by Guenther et al. (2023), highlights how we tend to focus on and exaggerate the positive aspects of our behavior and experience, which contributes to the perception that positive actions are inherently more authentic.

Another consideration is around authenticity being good when there are times when it can be detrimental to a situation. Staying true to one's self can lead to social rejection and impact an individual in a social or professional setting in which they are not conforming to the norms and expectations (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). This can also impact career opportunities and advancement, especially if an individual is unfiltered in their views or speaking up often with many ideas (Goffee & Jones, 2006). Authentic individuals are likely to be open and transparent

with who they are, expressing vulnerability, and this could open up the door to being manipulated as well as being judged by others around them (Brown, 2012). At times, being authentic can be too much of a good thing. Additionally, individuals may feel pressure to be authentic given the rise in the demand for authenticity in various contexts, and they may want to keep who they are private in certain settings (Rosenberg, 2021; Twenge & Campbell, 2018). The growing emphasis on authenticity in social media, workplaces, and personal relationships can create an internal conflict between wanting to be genuine and protecting one's privacy, especially when the cultural expectation is to share more of oneself than one might be comfortable with. This pressure can result in discomfort or burnout as individuals feel compelled to consistently align their public persona with their true self (Hochschild, 1983; Gonzales & Hancock, 2011).

A final consideration is around the temporal order of authenticity. Going back to self-enhancement, it is thought that individuals believe that they become more authentic over time, across the lifespan (Seto & Schlegel, 2017). They tend to feel that their future selves will be more authentic and experience more happiness and satisfaction (Robinson & Ryff, 1999). However, the present self is believed to be happier and more successful than the past self (Robinson & Ryff, 1999; Ross & Wilson, 2003; Seto & Schlegel, 2017). Considering temporal order is important because it reflects how authenticity is not static but rather a dynamic process that evolves with time and experience. As individuals encounter new life challenges, they refine their self-concept and learn what truly aligns with their values and identity, which can result in a greater sense of authenticity over time (Seto & Schlegel, 2017). This temporal progression helps explain why people often view their future selves as more authentic than their past or present

selves, suggesting that authenticity is something that can be developed and achieved through growth and reflection (Robison & Ryff, 1999; Ross & Wilson, 2003).

Section Summary

This section looked at the positivity bias in authenticity. Feeling positive and acting with positive intent is seen to be more authentic, as well as experiencing positive moments. Often, the negative is discarded as not being true to self or ignored when both positive and negative are built into the authenticity definition. This is done so as to capture the complexity and dynamism of the human experience. Focusing on the positive or always being authentic can also have negative implications. Additionally, individuals are able to reflect in the present to determine if they are authentic and that with time and experience, their authenticity will continue to evolve and grow.

Gaps in the Research

Given the literature review and the context provided around the concept of authenticity, this study aims to address the gaps across the fields of research that have been explored, particularly focusing on how authenticity is demonstrated in the work context. These gaps include the lack of consistency and consensus on the definition of authenticity as well as how it has been operationalized. Authenticity and authentic leadership have often been measured using either self-report or third-party judgment-based questionnaires to determine the authenticity of an individual, primarily employing quantitative approaches. Additionally, the reliance on predetermined definitions by researchers limits our understanding of authenticity as it overlooks individual perspectives of how it is expressed within the professional domain and on what authenticity means. Furthermore, inauthenticity is frequently examined, but often merely as a reflection of authenticity, rather than as a distinct construct worthy of exploration.

To bridge these gaps, the goal of this study is to re-ground authenticity through qualitative inquiry. By understanding how authenticity is demonstrated at work and how individuals perceive authenticity, we can gain valuable insights into what authenticity truly means in contemporary professional settings and how it can manifest in diverse ways. This exploration will provide clarity and context for the forthcoming research questions, enhancing our understanding of authenticity in the workplace.

Chapter Summary

This chapter reviewed the historical background of authenticity as well as the different contributions to the evolution of the concept of authenticity. How it has been defined and measured have been discussed as well as the implications authenticity has on psychological and work outcomes. Inauthenticity has been discussed, as well as other considerations, as it relates to authenticity. The themes that have been consistent as it relates to the concept of authenticity are that being true to one's self is important, and it is awareness and having agency in choice in terms of displaying authentic behaviors. As a result of the literature review and highlighted themes, gaps in the research have been identified that help further support the research questions and the purpose of this study.

Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology

Chapter Overview

As mentioned in the previous chapter, research on authenticity has been more focused on specific, outlined dimensions prescribed by quantitative researchers, with very little research exploring the process of what being authentic truly means. Additionally, there is a lack of consistency in the definition of authenticity, which could also be a contributing factor in the lack of focus in understanding what enacting being true to self really entails. The purpose of this qualitative research was to employ a constructivist grounded theory approach to explore the experiences of authenticity in individuals and as it relates to their work context. The focal research question of this study is: How do people demonstrate authenticity at work? And is further grounded by the following two sub-questions: How do they understand authenticity? And what does it mean to be authentic?

This chapter focuses on the research questions that guided the selected research design by providing the background and description of grounded theory. Additionally, the constructivist grounded theory method will further be elaborated on in terms of how this methodology will be used in this study (e.g., recruitment of participants, data collection, coding, and analysis). This chapter finishes with an overview and considerations around research quality, a discussion around ethical assurance, and ends with the final summary.

Research Worldview

When considering the research approach to evaluate authenticity, the researcher had two potential avenues in deciding on methodology: phenomenology and grounded theory. Phenomenology is rooted in philosophy, as is authenticity, and focuses on the conscious, lived, human experience (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Creswell & Poth, 2016; Ellis & Hart, 2023). It is

more of the embodied experience and gets at the identified phenomenon of what it is to be in that moment of experiencing that event—the ‘essence’ of that experience (Aguas, 2022; Ellis & Hart, 2023; Finlay, 2011). In this case, it does initially align to the sub-question referencing what it is to be authentic and experiencing what that phenomenon means and is in that very moment. This approach would have provided a solid foundation to guide the direction of exploring authenticity; however, the researcher needed to focus on the primary research question in terms of understanding the process of authenticity and to do so involves considering the collective views in the research on authenticity in addition to her personal worldview guiding the research questions when coming to the decision to choose grounded theory as the methodological approach.

Grounded theory is used when constructing a theory, and given the context around the concept of authenticity, this approach made more sense as the researcher took note of the callout that this concept needed re-grounding (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Creswell & Poth 2016). More specifically, the chosen methodology was constructivist grounded theory. This approach allows the research, from their perspective, to construct a theory or model based on the participants’ experiences of demonstrating authenticity in a professional context, as well as defining authenticity (Charmaz, 2006). Essentially, in the constructivist view, the reality we construct is based on the personal experiences—both past and present—concerning the observed phenomenon of interest (Charmaz, 2006). This allows both the researcher’s and the participants’ realities when interpreting the data and shaping the theory of authenticity. Constructivist grounded theory fits more to the researcher’s inner compass as it allows the researcher to take passion for constructing something new out of the collective shared interpretations and experiences around the concept of authenticity.

Background and Description of Grounded Theory

Grounded theory is a systematic qualitative research method that aims to develop a theory grounded in data (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Mills et al., 2006; O'Connor et al., 2018). This method was introduced in 1967 by two researchers, Glaser and Strauss, and has also been an evolving methodology with many iterations and debates over which form is the best approach to the research (Charmaz, 2000; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Mills et al., 2006; O'Connor et al., 2018). It is particularly suitable for exploring complex social phenomena and uncovering the processes and meanings underlying individuals' actions and interactions (Charmaz, 2000; Kenny & Fourie, 2015). It takes these processes and meanings to create an explanation that is shaped through the views of the individuals in the study. Ultimately, the goal of grounded theory is to generate or discover a theory for a process or action (Corbin & Strauss, 2007; Creswell, 2007).

There are three variations of grounded theory that are widely used: Classical, Straussian, and constructivist. All three of these variations take the approach of developing a theory that is grounded in the data without a hypothesis guiding the research (Creswell, 2007). The data is allowed to emerge naturally from the patterns present in the data. As these patterns or themes emerge, they are then categorized into concepts which are then refined into a theoretical framework to explain the studied phenomenon (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Each of these three approaches aims for this outcome on theory development, and while there are some similarities across the three, there are some points of divergence: philosophical positions, use of literature, coding procedures, and memo writing (Kenny & Fourie, 2015; Mills et al., 2006). These points of divergence will be discussed throughout this chapter from the constructivist grounded theory approach, as this is the selected methodology that is guiding this study.

Constructivism

It is imperative that a researcher selects a research paradigm that is congruent with their worldview, as touched upon at the beginning of the chapter. Much of grounded theory in general aims to remove the positivist philosophy of an absolute, objective reality and find compromise with being an objective observer and having a relativistic view (Kenny & Fourie, 2015; Mills et al., 2006; O'Connor et al., 2018; Suddaby, 2006). This allows grounded theory to take empirical data and describe it through the subjective experience of the participants. Constructivism moves it one step further by positing that reality is socially constructed through individuals' interactions and interpretations of their experiences (Mills et al., 2006). It denies an objective reality and assumes a relativist ontological perspective that many realities exist (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Mills et al., 2006). From an epistemological standpoint, constructivism emphasizes that knowledge is viewed as subjective and context-dependent, emphasizing the importance of understanding the diverse perspectives of research participants, and the interrelationship between the researcher and participant in the meaning making (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Mills et al., 2006). Constructivist grounded theory, as proposed by Charmaz (2006), is particularly suited to this study as it allows for the in-depth exploration of individuals' subjective experiences on authenticity and the construction of what this means within their social context.

Use of Literature Reviews

The area of literature and how it is used across the three main types of grounded theory methodology varies, with some debate. While classical grounded theory does not start with a review of the literature prior to the study, the constructivist approach does in an attempt to establish what is known and has been studied around the concepts the researcher is seeking to explore (Charmaz, 2014; Kenny & Fourie, 2015; Mills et al., 2006; O'Connor et al., 2018;

Ramalho et al., 2015). There is concern around theoretical sensitivity and being able to extract the elements relevant to the emerging concepts and theory without it being reduced through contamination of bias through a literature review (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; O'Connor et al., 2018). However, the constructivist approach to reviewing the literature before data is collected helps inform the research as well as to identify gaps and other considerations that are made during the data collection phase (Charmaz, 2014; O'Connor et al., 2018). This enhances theoretical sensitivity based on the familiarity of the relevant literature and leads to sensitizing concepts that are exploratory tools that help frame the research and how data is collected (Charmaz, 2014; O'Connor et al., 2018).

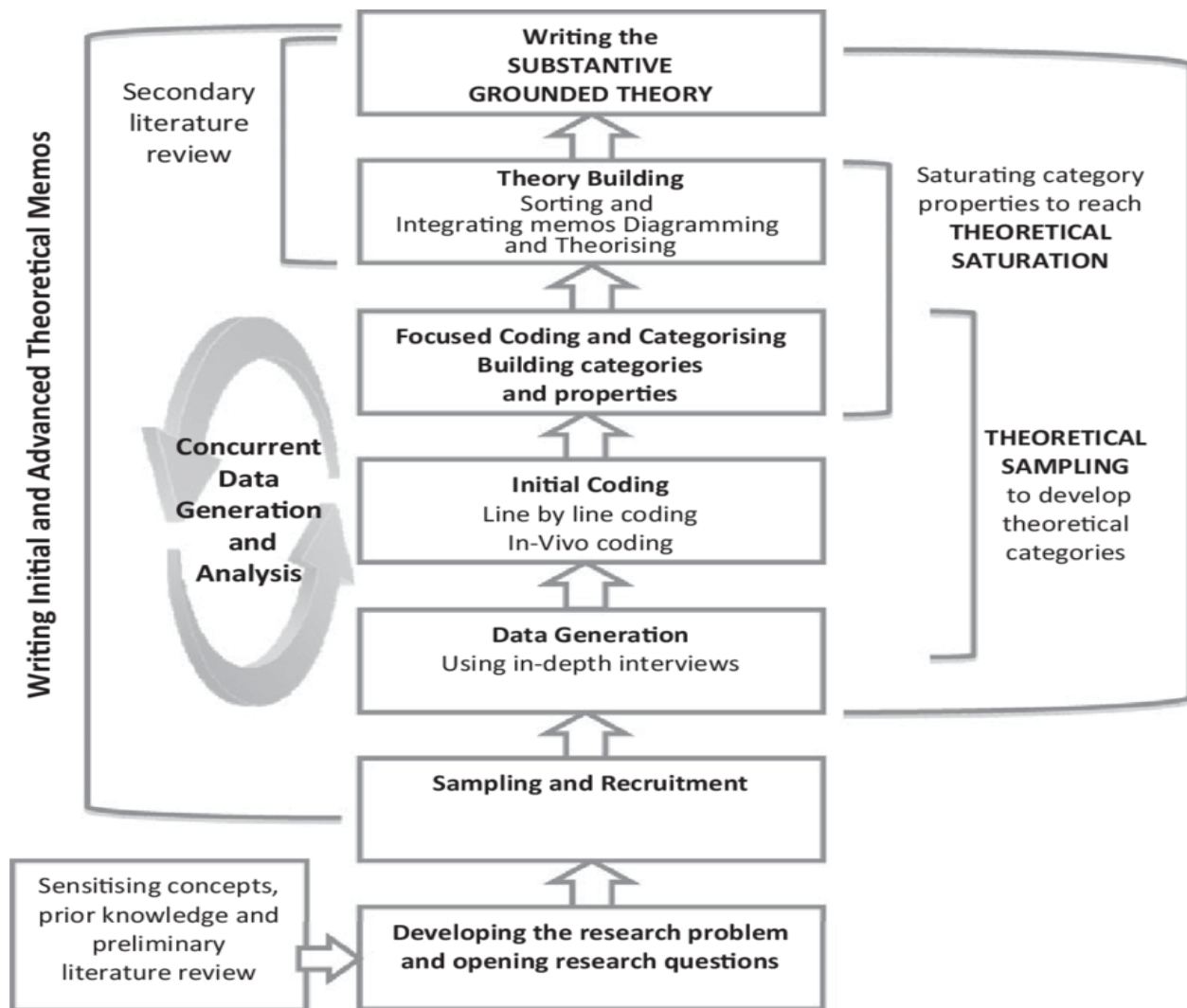
As it relates to the current study, the literature review identified gaps in the authenticity research in terms of what it means and how it is experienced. The research question is related to how individuals experience their true, authentic self in their work domain. The terms authenticity and inauthenticity are sensitizing concepts, as these were generated from the literature review as the place to begin exploring, and with an understanding that every participant may have been exposed to this concept and have some idea about what it means to them as it relates to their individual self.

Constructivist Grounded Theory Process

Constructivist grounded theory research employs a flexible process provided by Giles et al. (2016), adapted from Charmaz's (2000) description of the process, as shown in Figure 2. The research questions were already presented, and the remaining portion of this chapter is structured in the order of the remaining process: recruitment and sampling, data collection and analysis, model development, trustworthiness, and closing with ethical assurances.

Figure 2

A Visual Representation of a Constructivist Grounded Theory



Note. From (Giles, de Lacey, & Muir-Cochrane, 2016)

Procedure

This section describes how participants for this study were recruited and the method in which data were collected. The interview process is outlined, including a discussion of how theoretical sampling may occur in constructivist grounded theory to enhance conceptual development (Charmaz, 2014). Although follow-up interviews are an option to deepen theory, alternative methods for theoretical sampling and ensuring research quality are discussed later in

the chapter. Interview logistics and materials, including the final interview protocol, are also presented.

Eligibility Criteria

There were specific requirements that needed to be met in order for a participant to be considered eligible to take part in the research study. A qualified participant was (a) a working professional with more than one year of experience, (b) either working for an organization or self-employed, (c) currently working in the United States, and (d) over the age of 18 years old. This length of time in the workforce was intended to ensure that individuals had developed a sense of understanding of how work expectations differ from their personal expectations. Additionally, the reasoning behind casting a wider net allowed for individuals across various industries, roles, and experiences to reflect on how authenticity is understood and demonstrated in the professional domain. These eligibility criteria supported theoretical sampling by allowing for new participants to contribute different experiences and perspectives related to emerging categories (Charmaz, 2014).

Sample Size

In terms of sample size, it is unclear what the specific number of participants required is in constructivist grounded theory. The goal in grounded theory is to reach theoretical saturation, in which no new information is emerging from the data, as it relates to the constructivist view. Charmaz (2014) did not place a number of specific participants as she views this as limiting the intersubjective experience from fully emerging. However, others have provided recommendations for sample size. Creswell (2007, 2013) noted that typical grounded theory studies involve 20 to 30 participants in order to help achieve theoretical saturation.

Given that this research focused on a more specific domain—how individuals demonstrate authenticity in the professional setting—a smaller sample size was appropriate. The study reached theoretical saturation within a targeted range of 15 to 18 participants, as the focused nature of the inquiry allowed for depth and repetition in emergent themes across a diverse yet contextually bounded group. In this study, 18 individuals initially responded to the recruitment posting. Of those, 16 scheduled and completed interviews. Two participants did not respond to scheduling follow-up, and one additional response was received after data collection had concluded. These 16 completed interviews formed the final sample, with theoretical saturation reached by the end of the interview process.

Participant Recruitment and Screening

Participants were recruited using virtual flyers posted on Instagram and Facebook. A few acquaintances also shared the flyer with their networks, increasing the pool of potential participants. The recruitment flyer can be found in Appendix A. Interested individuals contacted the researcher via email or text message. In total, 18 potential participants reached out. The researcher responded to each inquiry with a brief screening process (see Appendix B) to determine eligibility and to schedule an interview. The screening questions were as follows:

- Are you currently working in the United States?
- Are you over the age of 18?
- Have you worked for at least one year in any profession?
- Are you either currently working for an organization or running your own business?

Those who did not meet the eligibility criteria received a response thanking them for their interest and explaining their ineligibility. Those who qualified and confirmed their interest were

scheduled for a Zoom interview. Interviews were conducted within a two-week window, and all 16 participants completed their interviews within one month of initial outreach.

Interview Procedure

Data for the study were conducted through individual interviews virtually via Zoom. Note-taking was performed alongside the audio and video recording of each session. Participants were informed prior to the start of the interview that the researcher would be taking notes and that the interview would be recorded. The intent behind recording the interview was to capture nonverbal cues, tone, and meaning behind silence in the conversation, as well as putting the pen down to focus on the individual in portions of the conversation that may require it (Charmaz, 2014). This process helped establish rapport and created an environment in which the individual felt at ease in sharing their responses to the questions, knowing that the researcher was fully engaged and actively listening.

Verbal consent was obtained twice—once to confirm permission to record, and once through reading a scripted oral consent form at the beginning of the recorded interview. See Appendix C for the scripted oral consent form. Additionally, the consent form was sent to the participant to review and to have on hand for their records prior to the interview. The virtual interviews were conducted at the participant's location of choice, while the researcher conducted her portion of the interview from her home working space. As mentioned, interviews were scheduled through email or text, and upon confirmation, the researcher will send a Zoom invite for the selected interview time. Zoom invites were sent out through the researcher's student email account associated with The Chicago School, and the interviews lasted between 60 and 75 minutes.

The virtual interviews were conducted using the recording and transcription software included with Zoom. Note-taking was done through paper and pen on a sheet of paper. The participant was made aware that when the researcher looked away it was for note-taking. The use of note taking was helpful with the in-vivo coding process that included code creation using the participant's own words or phrases (Charmaz, 2014).

The interview consisted of 13 questions. The interview was expected to last approximately 60 to 75 minutes. This amount of time allowed for introductions, time to respond to the questions, time for the participant to ask any questions, and time to wrap up and close out the interview. Background information was also taken during the interview at the start as part of the introductions. This included years of working, their current role, and their current industry. Additional demographic information was also collected, such as age and pronouns. To note, inclusion into the study was contingent upon the individual meeting the eligibility criteria mentioned previously.

Additionally, the development of the interview questions for this study was guided by the need to explore the process of authenticity in the work domain, as current research lacked a consistent definition and relied heavily on quantitative measures that did not capture the depth of authentic experiences. While a conceptual framework typically directs the formulation of interview questions, in this study, the framework primarily served to highlight gaps in the literature and the problem of inconsistency in defining and measuring authenticity. Thus, the interview questions were crafted to focus on how authenticity is demonstrated in the workplace, aiming to provide richer insight into what authenticity looks like in action. The intent behind the questions was to explore how individuals perceived and enacted authenticity in their professional lives, offering a qualitative perspective that could add nuance and context to the concept. This

approach guided the construction of the 13 interview questions designed to delve into the lived experiences of participants, with the goal of uncovering the complexities and processes underlying authentic behavior at work.

Prior to submission of the research study and design to the Institution's Review Board, a field test was conducted with two people who did not meet the eligibility requirements. These individuals were interviewed with the focus on testing the interview structure and questions to determine if any modifications and updates were needed to the interview protocol (e.g., length of interview time and interview questions). This was also done to ensure that potential participants are not overlooked. As a result of these two pilot interviews, the number of interview questions was revised from 10 to 13 questions, and the anticipated interview time was adjusted to approximately 60-75 minutes.

Interview Protocol

The interview protocol is presented below. This consists of both demographic and interview questions. Demographic information was collected prior to interview questions.

Demographic Questions

1. What is your current age?
2. What are your pronouns?
3. What is your current role?
4. How long have you been in your current role?
5. What is your current organization?
6. How long have you been at your current organization?
7. What is the overall tenure that you have been working

Interview Questions

1. Tell me about a time when you demonstrated authenticity at work.
2. Based on that experience, what is your understanding of being authentic?
3. Tell me about another time when you were not being authentic at work.
4. Based on that experience, how would you explain your understanding of being inauthentic?
5. Tell me about a time when you were authentic at work and experienced a negative/positive outcome as a result.
6. Tell me about a time when you were being inauthentic at work and experienced a positive/negative outcome as a result.
7. Have there been times in which you have been both authentic and inauthentic at the same time? Describe the situation and how that felt.
8. When challenged at work, how do you anchor yourself back into your authenticity?
9. Have there ever been times where you might have felt pressure to be authentic?
10. Have there ever been times where you might have felt pressure to be inauthentic?
11. Do you feel like there is an unrealistic expectation to be authentic at work? Or that it is an unrealistic ask of the organization?
12. What are the steps that you take to ensure you are being authentic?
13. How does your experience of being authentic at work compare to how you express your authenticity outside of work?

Data Processing and Analysis

The interviews were recorded at the time of the event with the transcription initially generated through Zoom. Additionally, to make sure all portions of the interviews were captured, a second transcription was produced through transcription software. These transcriptions were

completed immediately after the interview and ensured that both recordings and transcriptions were available to the researcher.

The next step involved coding. While constructivist grounded theory typically encourages concurrent data collection and analysis to support theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2014), this study followed a modified timeline. Because the interviews were scheduled and conducted in quick succession over the course of one month, coding and review of the transcripts began after all 16 interviews were completed. Although this deviated from the traditional iterative approach, returning to the transcripts after a brief delay did not hinder the analytic process. The researcher had documented reflections through voice memos and written notes during the interview period, and shared early observations with the dissertation chair, allowing for meaningful reengagement with the data once coding began.

The transcriptions were uploaded into MAXQDA, which is a qualitative coding software recommended by The Chicago School. This software was used for initial and focused coding. The full dataset was reviewed and coded systematically to identify emerging patterns, with the analysis grounded in participants' language and experiences (Charmaz, 2014; Thornberg et al., 2015).

Coding

Data analysis followed the iterative process outlined in constructivist grounded theory methodology. Initial coding involved open coding, where data were systematically examined and categorized to identify key concepts and patterns (Charmaz, 2014). This was followed by focused coding, where the initial codes were refined and organized into higher-level themes and categories. Throughout the analysis process, constant comparison was used to compare data within and across interviews, identifying similarities, differences, and relationships between

concepts (Charmaz, 2014). Memo writing was used to record the researcher's reflections and interpretations throughout the data analysis process. This helped maintain transparency and rigor in the process, allowing for the researcher's responsivity and adaptability to be incorporated into the emerging theory (Charmaz, 2014; Thornberg et al., 2015). The full coding process is detailed below.

Initial Coding

In constructivist grounded theory, initial coding is the first phase of coding. The data were collected from the participants' responses in the interview, and these individual statements were categorized to see what the emerging data is saying (Charmaz, 2014). These patterns guided the researcher in comparing the analyses across each interview and informed further development of categories (Charmaz, 2014; Thornberg et al., 2015). Although theoretical sampling typically allows for ongoing adjustments to interviews and recruitment, in this study, all interviews were completed prior to coding, as previously noted. Nevertheless, the researcher remained open to what emerged in the data and engaged in reflective comparison throughout. Charmaz (2006) recommended questions to be asked to help guide this process, such as:

- “What do the data suggest? Pronounce?”
- “What process is at issue here? How can I define it?”
- “How does this process develop?”
- “How does the research participant think, feel, and act while involved in this process?”
- “When, why, and how does this process change?”
- “What are the consequences of the process?” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 54)

Throughout this coding process, the constant comparative method was applied, which involved the researcher in collecting and comparing new data with previous data, data with codes, codes with codes, all in an effort to find similarities and differences in what was emerging through the initial coding process (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Thornberg et al., 2015).

Constructivist grounded theory has three methods to approach initial coding: word-by-word, incident coding, and line-by-line coding. In word-by-word coding, every single word of the data is analyzed and compared against the pronounced individual meanings coming out of the data. It is tedious and time-intensive, and was not the method used by the researcher in this study. Incident coding categorizes individual incidents as recalled by the participants within the data (Charmaz, 2014; Thornberg et al., 2015). Incident coding allows for a more focused and flexible approach. Additionally, it allows comparisons of incidents across all of the data while comparing similarities and dissimilarities (Charmaz, 2006, 2014; Thornberg et al., 2015).

The final coding incident is line-by-line coding. This type of coding allows the researcher to code every line of text in the data. Labels and codes are assigned to each line of the data that is transcribed from the interview with a focus on the meaning and action that is described in that specific line (Charmaz, 2006, 2014; Thornberg et al., 2015). This coding is nuanced and allowed the researcher to focus on smaller details that might have been missed or overlooked in the incident coding process (Charmaz, 2014; Thornberg et al., 2015). This method of coding helped the researcher identify new leads to pursue with the participants in the study. Based on the coding presented, the researcher employed a combination of incident and line-by-line coding which is further discussed in Chapter 4.

Focused Coding

Focused coding occurred when the researcher identified the initial codes that appeared most often or made the most analytical sense to what was emerging from the data (Charmaz, 2014; Thornberg et al., 2015). This is the stage of coding in grounded theory where it shifts into a theoretical direction (Charmaz, 2014). The researcher took these focused codes and synthesized the data to develop main categories and themes that formed the foundation of the emerging theory (Thornberg et al., 2015). This phase was a more selective and conceptual process, and it was where the researcher's perspective had the most influence on the research process (Charmaz, 2014).

Theory Building or Model Construction

The goal of constructivist grounded theory is to develop a theory that is grounded in the data and that reflects the individual's experiences and takes into account the researcher's role in constructing a theory out of that data (Charmaz, 2014). This theory is not to be seen as an objective truth, but to be seen as reflective of the specific social context in which it was developed (Charmaz, 2014; Thornberg et al., 2015). As such, the final step in theory or model construction involved synthesizing the core categories into a coherent theoretical framework.

In this study, the researcher constructed the final framework by synthesizing and integrating the main categories that emerged from the data to explain how people demonstrate authenticity at work and what it means to be authentic. The data collected from the 16 interviews were sufficiently rich and detailed to support model construction. Memo writing, coded data, and the categories developed from those codes all contributed to building the emerging model. As patterns and categories began to emerge in the process, it became clear to the researcher what information was missing and what was needed to explore and resolve these gaps. This is

theoretical sampling and it is an important indicator to reach saturation in constructivist grounded theory.

Saturation occurs when no new information or patterns are emerging from the data (Charmaz, 2014). Theoretical sampling guides the process of saturation in that it highlights the gaps and where the researcher will need to make refinements to either the interview questions or the recruitment guidelines of the participants. The point of saturation is highly subjective, and there is no specific way to predict before the research process begins when a category has reached this saturation point. That said, once saturation is reached through theoretical sampling, a model or theory on how participants enact the process of being authentic may start to form through the fully developed categories of the data (Charmaz, 2014; Thornberg et al., 2015). Once the theory is recognized or saturation is complete, the theory or model will be co-constructed between the researcher and the participant (Charmaz, 2014).

Trustworthiness and Research Quality

Much like other qualitative research, grounded theory requires trustworthiness to ensure quality. This also means that it must be planned ahead of the research, implemented in the research, and continuous checks to ensure quality is found throughout the study findings. There are various criteria for ensuring quality in qualitative studies, to which this section will focus on work by Creswell and Poth (2018) that prescribes general guidelines, as well as Charmaz's (2014) approach to ensuring quality in constructivist grounded theory. The criteria were used to guide the study and evaluate the quality of the final research product.

Creswell and Poth (2018) outlined four dimensions as criteria for ensuring trustworthiness drawn from the work of Lincoln and Guba (1985) that include strategies for each: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Additionally, these

researchers recommend that qualitative researchers should apply a minimum of two of the following strategies from the four dimensions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The dimensions and the strategies are outlined and discussed.

Credibility refers to the confidence in the truth of findings and addresses how well the participants' experiences have been represented (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, credibility was supported through prolonged engagement with participants during one-on-one interviews, allowing for deep exploration of each participant's views. Member checking was used informally during the interviews to confirm understanding and clarify meaning. Peer debriefing occurred regularly with the researcher's dissertation chair and committee, offering additional insights and helping ensure analytic integrity. Triangulation of themes across participants further strengthened the credibility of the results.

Transferability refers to the extent to which findings can be transferred to other settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To enhance transferability, the study employed thick description, providing detailed context and direct participant quotations to illustrate the findings. These rich narratives enable readers to assess the relevance of the findings for their own contexts.

Dependability refers to the consistency of the research findings over time and ensures the process is logical and documented (Creswell & Poth, 2018). An audit trail was maintained throughout the research process, including memos, coding logs, decision points, and documentation of the analytic process. This ensured transparency and allowed for an external review of how conclusions were reached.

The final dimension, confirmability, ensures that findings are shaped by the participants and the data as opposed to the researcher's personal bias and motivations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To support confirmability, reflexivity was built into the research process through memo

writing and regular consultation with the dissertation committee. The use of an audit trail, as well as data triangulation, helped ensure that the study's findings were grounded in the data rather than shaped by preconceived notions.

In addition to these general criteria, Charmaz (2014) listed the following questions for constructivist grounded theory to help researchers increase their research's quality:

- “Has your research achieved intimate familiarity with the setting or topic?”
- “Are the data sufficient to merit your claims?”
- “Have you made systematic comparisons between observations and between categories?”
- “Do the categories cover a wide range of empirical observations?”
- “Are there strong logical links between the gathered data and your argument and analysis?”
- “Has your research provided enough evidence for your claims to allow the research to form an independent assessment – and agree with your claims?” (pp. 337–338)

Considering the above criteria presented by both authors, the following agreement amongst the two lists emerges:

- Adequate time and engagement with the participants
- Consistent check-ins with outside perspectives to increase reflexivity
- Sufficient data collection and analysis to provide merit
- Co-construction of theory between researcher and the participants

Regarding this study and the criteria from these lists, the researcher promoted high quality throughout the process. This was done by the researcher spending enough time with the participants to gather all the pertinent data to support any claims. All data was logged and

tracked for auditing purposes. Each participant was provided enough time to thoroughly answer each question to the best of their ability, and using nonverbal cues and affirming vocals as needed. Reflexivity was increased through the researcher's approach in presenting and sharing the final analyses with outside perspectives, such as her advisor and members of the researcher's dissertation committee. As a result, the grounded theory generated from this research was a co-construction of knowledge and data between the researcher and participants (Charmaz, 2014; Thornberg et al., 2015). In doing so, the quality of this research was reinforced.

Reflexivity

Constructivist grounded theory requires high reflexivity throughout the research process (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). Reflexivity from the constructivist approach is described from the researcher's point of self-examination and taking into account their thoughts, bias, views, interests, assumptions, and how these have contributed to the researcher's reason behind why they chose their research (Charmaz, 2014; Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). It also took into account the why and how behind their approach in conducting their research and interactions with participants, all the way to the final output in how they wrote up and presented their findings. Reflexivity is not meant to control for bias as it is more about awareness and acceptance, and building in constant check-points to see how who they are might be impacting the data. This is the part of co-construction of the constructivist grounded theory between researcher and participant. There is an integration of the researcher's interpretation of the participant's experiences that formed the emerging theory and what it means.

Memo writing has been touched upon throughout the chapter as being a part of the research process and data analysis. It is also a method that was used to increase reflexivity in the present study. Memo writing is an analytical tool that occurs at the beginning of the research,

even before the first participant was interviewed. Memo writing allowed the researcher to explore what was coming out of the data, the data and categories themselves, as well as personal reflections during the process (Charmaz, 2014; Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). It helped aid in the creation of codes and to make sense of what was coming out of the data. It is a form of free writing which allowed for additional thoughts and ideas to emerge when collecting the data. As a result, future drafts of this work contained memos, especially as it related to data collection, the analysis, the participants, thoughts in general, and the process itself.

Assumptions

In regard to the present study, the researcher took into account several assumptions. The researcher assumed that the participants would be open and honest during the interviews. The participants had the ethical assurance of confidentiality, and so there was little reason to think the participants would limit their responses and not be honest. While there may have been a risk of the participants not being fully honest, a key consideration was around theoretical plausibility, which is a criterion for theory construction that insists that the content of the data is more important than accuracy (Charmaz, 2014). The researcher also assumed that the participants were aware of their authentic and inauthentic experiences and would be able to recall these experiences forward as they relate to both the professional domain, in order to be studied in more depth. Additionally, it was assumed that the description of what it means to be authentic and the process that goes into understanding and enacting authenticity did exist. Based on the research presented on how authenticity has been evaluated previously, it was assumed that grounded theory was the best fit methodologically for this study to help further clarify what being authentic means.

Limitations

As with risks, there were also limitations to this research. This research had a possible limitation in the availability of participants. It required time to identify and recruit individuals into the total sample pool. Availability and time constraints played a factor. The use of theoretical sampling may have limited the diversity of perspectives as participants were selected based on emerging concepts rather than representativeness. Another limitation was the time-intensive nature of the iterative process of data collection and analysis and which could have limited the scope of this research as well as the number of participants. There was also the complexity of the data analysis, which could have led to difficulties in maintaining consistency. Additionally, there could have been a limitation in participant narratives as these may have been incomplete or influenced by social desirability. To help mitigate some of these limitations, documenting and providing transparency in any methodological decisions was emphasized throughout the discussion of the research section.

Ethical Assurances

It is imperative that there are ethical protections in place for any study design. The ethical assurances that took place in this study included informed consent, confidentiality, data storage, and the risks and benefits to participants. These are further discussed below.

Informed Consent

All participants were virtual participants and were given consent twice: once to be recorded and then again when the recording starts. The participants were read the oral consent script (Appendix 3) by the researcher at the beginning when both researcher and participant signed in to the scheduled Zoom session. This gave the participant the opportunity to either accept or reject their role as a participant in the research. All participants were required to provide consent prior to their participation. If a participant did not provide their consent, they

were not allowed to participate. Additionally, a participant could withdraw their participation at any time in the process, and any data that was collected from them would have been discarded. It was imperative that informed consent occurred. Consent to participate ensured that the individual had a full understanding of the purpose of the research, the procedures, and their right to voluntarily withdraw their participation at any time. This was an ethical assurance that fostered trust and transparency while also enabling the participants to be authentic in their engagement in this research.

Confidentiality

For this research, the researcher collected information from the participants regarding their authentic and inauthentic meanings and experiences. Additional information was collected as a requirement for inclusion of the study, such as having a year of professional experience and information regarding their current role and industry, such as specific title and the organization itself. There was demographic information that was collected, such as age, pronouns, time in role, and time in industry. Each participant was assigned a numeric identifier for the purposes of citations within this work. The participant's personal identity was not identified or used outside of the interview. When scheduling the interview, the person's name, email, and phone number were collected. This information was discarded after the interviews were confirmed. Events and people that could potentially identify the individual were sanitized as much as possible in order to maintain the participant's confidentiality and anonymity. The researcher's records may be reviewed by agencies that protect human subjects participating in the research, and may include representatives from The Chicago School Institutional Review Board that oversees research.

Data Storage

All information and data were collected and stored on the researcher's personal computer. The information was encrypted and access to the researcher folder was password protected. Information stored included the recorded interviews, the transcriptions of those interviews, and the coded data from those transcribed interviews. Only the researcher had access to their personal computer. Additionally, identifying information was collected to schedule the interview, but it was not requested as a component of data collection, and it was kept separate from the data and the reporting of the results. The data collected and materials used will be kept for a minimum of five years after publication in line with the guidelines set by the American Psychological Association. There is a possibility that the participant's data may be used for future research or distributed to another researcher without their consent. However, all personal identifying information was destroyed at the conclusion of the study. Once the five-year deadline is up or in the event the data needs to be destroyed, the researcher will delete all information pertaining to the study from her personal laptop.

Risks and Benefits

There were no physical risks to participation in this research. The participant was being asked to share personal experiences with a researcher they were not familiar with, which may have led to hesitation. That being said, there were no emotional risks from participation in this research. Should these feelings have presented at any time to the point where they discomforted the participant, they had the opportunity to stop the interview at their own discretion and could have chosen to continue at a later time or not at all. Additionally, the participant had the option to terminate their participation in the study altogether as a result, and could have done so if these feelings occurred post interview. They were made aware of this prior to conducting the interview.

There could be a risk to revealing the participant's identity as a result of participating in this research. However, the individual's name was not included as any part of the answers and events provided. As mentioned previously, any possible identifying information was sanitized in a way to ensure the participant's anonymity. The only record of participation was the verbal oral consent in the recorded interview, to which these interviews were saved in a locked folder under the numeric identifier on the researcher's personal laptop.

As it relates to the benefits of the research, it is unlikely that a participant will personally benefit from the study. However, the results of this study can be used to improve the research community's understanding of what authenticity really means and provide better ways to study and encourage an individual's personal growth. This understanding of the process that goes into understanding one's true self could potentially be used to help develop and coach a broader group of individuals and help make the connections of when one is or isn't being their authentic self.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented a brief background on grounded theory and provided the justification for choosing the constructivist grounded theory approach for the present research. There is a lack of consensus and clarity around what authenticity means and how it presents in an individual. Grounded theory allows for exploration of this topic because it focuses on describing a process through the experiences of the individual and creating a theory that emerges from the data (Charmaz, 2014). It allowed for flexibility and for the researcher to move where the data took her, and to where the story forms and led into. Thus, grounded theory was the appropriate choice for this study.

Additionally, this chapter described the details of the methodology. This includes recruitment of participants, data processing and analysis, theory construction, and research quality. The interview questions have also been included, and the approach to how they were asked or refined in the interview process. All pertinent methodology topics were covered in how they were woven into the research process, with the chapter concluding on the review of ethical considerations that were applied throughout the research.

Chapter 4: Results

Chapter Overview

The chapter presents participant demographics, the data analysis process, and the results of the study. The data analysis process offers an explanation of the steps using different kinds of coding (open, focused, and theoretical) and sample memos that captured potential theoretical insights along the way. The results are presented in a conceptual model that explains what it means to be authentic and how participants demonstrate authenticity at work.

Participants

The study drew on interviews with 16 participants from varied professional backgrounds, industries, and career stages. This diversity allowed for a rich exploration of how authenticity is expressed, experienced, and negotiated at work. While not statistically representative, the participant sample offered a meaningful cross-section of lived experiences that helped shape the grounded theory. Table 1 summarizes key demographic and role-based characteristics.

The collective experiences of these participants provided a robust and varied foundation for generating theoretical insights. Their reflections helped uncover both the visible behaviors and the internal processes tied to authenticity in the workplace. With this context established, the following section introduces the conceptual framework that emerged through iterative coding and analysis.

Table 1*Participant Demographics*

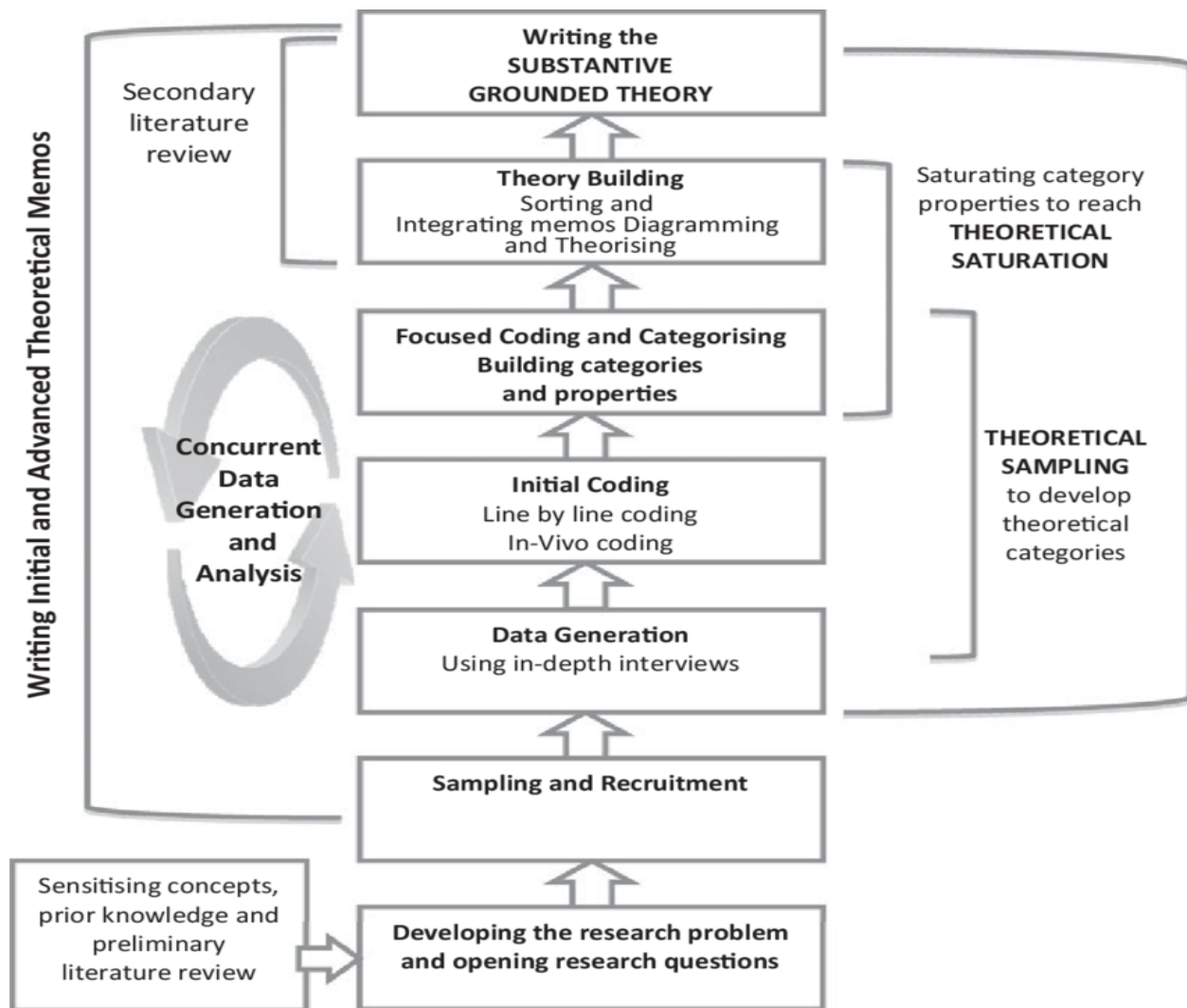
Gender Identity	Age Range	Work Experience	Job Level	Industry/Sector
10 Women, 6 Men	30–54	All had 10+ years; some 20–40+ years	3 Individual Contributors; 9 People Leaders (Supervisor–VP); 4 Entrepreneurs	Healthcare, Government, Mental Health, Education, Manufacturing, Real Estate, Professional Services, Entrepreneurship
		Some careers started in teens; one resigned post-interview; one had 3-week tenure in new role	Some held dual roles (e.g., therapist + practice owner)	Career paths ranged from linear to major pivots (e.g., teaching to workforce planning)

Constructivist Grounded Theory Process

Constructivist grounded theory research employs a flexible, iterative process of analysis that simultaneously involves data collection, coding, memo writing, and theory development. This study followed the process as described by Giles et al. (2016), adapted from Charmaz's (2000) description of the process as shown by Figure 3. This visual representation was previously introduced in Chapter 3 as part of the methodological framework, and it now serves to guide the structure of the analytic process outlined in this chapter. What follows is a deeper explanation of how each component of the grounded theory process unfolded during data analysis, ultimately leading to the construction of the conceptual model that captures the phenomenon of strategizing authenticity at work.

Figure 3

A Visual Representation of a Constructivist Grounded Theory



Note. From (Giles, de Lacey, & Muir-Cochrane, 2016)

Initial Coding

Initial coding served as the foundation for grounded theory development by breaking down the data into discrete, meaningful units. This phase involved conducting line-by-line coding of interview transcripts using participants' own language, where possible, known as *in-vivo* coding (Charmaz, 2014). The goal was to remain open to the data, to avoid forcing preconceived categories, allowing emergent meanings and actions to guide early interpretations.

This process will be discussed further in the chapter to showcase the range of processes, experiences, and dilemmas related to demonstrating authenticity in the workplace. These initial codes form the base for deeper exploration and abstraction that occurred in later phases of the coding.

Focused Coding and Categorizing

Focused coding marks a shift from data fragmentation to data integration by concentrating on the most significant or frequently occurring open codes (Charmaz, 2014). The use of constant comparison will show how related codes were synthesized into broader, focused codes that captured the more abstract themes. These focused codes are then clustered into conceptual categories, each reflecting key dimensions of the participants' strategies for navigating authenticity. This analytic step lays the groundwork for the final theoretical integration that creates coherence across the evolving categories.

Theory Building

Theory building in constructivist grounded theory involves a process of abstraction, integration, and conceptualization, grounded in both the data and the interpretative lens of the researcher (Charmaz, 2014; Thornberg, 2012). In this study, theory building culminated in the construction of a conceptual model rather than a formal theory, aligning with the goal of producing a process-oriented framework that explains how individuals *strategize authenticity* at work. Memos were incorporated when necessary, and the process is discussed in more detail below. Additionally, theoretical sampling, although limited in scope, was used to further refine category properties and explore gaps in emerging patterns. The final conceptual model presented towards the end of the chapter integrates the focused categories into a holistic framework that

explains not only what authenticity looks like at work, but how individuals actively manage, protect, and adapt their authenticity in context-specific ways.

Memo Writing

Memo writing was a vital tool throughout this constructivist grounded theory study. Memo writing is a bridge between initial coding and theory development, helping the researcher reflect on emerging concepts, ask analytical questions, and trace the evolution of categories (Charmaz, 2014). Beyond this analytic function, memo writing plays a role in supporting reflexivity, which is another core component of constructivist grounded theory. Reflexivity entails a conscious examination of how the researcher's background, values, and position may shape the research process and influence the construction of meaning (Charmaz 2014; Finlay, 2002). It invites transparency in interpretation and acknowledges that knowledge is co-created between the researcher and the participants. Reflexivity enhances trustworthiness by making visible the subjective lens through which data are analyzed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

I approached memo writing with this dual purpose in mind: as a space for early theorizing and as a discipline for reflexivity. My prior professional experience in the consulting industry, where I conducted behavioral-based leadership assessments, strongly influenced this approach. Over the years, I have interviewed hundreds of leaders across roles and industries. A core principle in my assessment work was to enter each interview without assumption—focusing on understanding the individual in front of me rather than drawing comparisons or prematurely forming conclusions. When conducting multiple interviews for a single role, I intentionally avoided cross-interview comparisons until all interviews were complete to reduce bias and preserve the integrity of each conversation. I carried this same discipline into the analysis for this study. I treated each interview as well as the transcript as a standalone narrative and engaged

with the data inductively, remaining open to what was emerging before attempting to compare across cases. This process reflects a reflexive stance in which I continually evaluated my positionality and potential influence on interpretation (Finlay, 2002).

Memo writing occurred primarily during the open coding phase. Most memos were either created at the code level—documenting how a specific concept was being expressed across participants—or written directly within individual documents in MAXQDA to capture analytic insights while coding. These memos helped me remain close to the data, document preliminary patterns, and raise questions to pursue in focused coding. Rather than using these memos for personal opinion or emotional reaction, I oriented them toward the analytic process and data patterns. However, I did compose a high-level integrative memo that I shared with my dissertation chair to summarize initial emergent themes. This memo provided early direction, noted the time-intensive nature of the process, and acknowledged the fluidity of finding – reflecting both reflexivity and analytic rigor.

Analytic Memo – Open Coding Observations (Shared with Advisor)

I have found open coding to be time intensive with not just line by line coding but also memos and note taking. I have to go in and consolidate a lot of these codes down since some of them mean the same. I have quite a bit of cleaning up and organizing before I move into the focused coding. What I can share high level is that demonstrating authenticity is coming through in the work product in terms of where an individual likes to showcase their output (e.g., using their tone of voice in a presentation; collaborating with clients), there is a gender difference starting to show with women people pleasing in terms of inauthenticity and men tending to be more off the cuff/no filter. To note I only had 6 men to 10 women. Also, age and life stage is showing some nuances as well as

entrepreneur vs. working in an org. The definition is really coming out to be one's self. Also, to be inauthentic has a cost to the self in terms of a negative consequence. The process to be authentic is starting to show self-reflection and finding ways to ground/anchor back into one's self. This is just what the data is expressing right now and this can all change the more I go in and code and then ultimately categorize to emerging concepts.

This memo illustrates how I used analytic writing to distill patterns while remaining cautious not to overinterpret the data prematurely. It also reflects my ongoing reflexivity in balancing early insight with openness to change. Notably, the early observations I captured—such as gender differences, the cost of inauthenticity, display of work output as a marker of authenticity, and distinctions between entrepreneurs and organizational employees—were all confirmed and carried forward into the final conceptual model. Memo writing throughout the study allowed me to track the development of concepts over time, question my interpretations, and remain accountable to the data rather than personal bias. It helped preserve the integrity of each participant's voice while supporting analytic clarity as I moved from initial coding toward category development.

MAXQDA

To support the systematic coding and organization of my qualitative data, I selected MAXQDA as the primary software tool for analysis. The program offered the flexibility and functionality needed to conduct iterative, in-depth coding consistent with the constructivist grounded theory (CGT) approach. I found MAXQDA to be easy and straightforward to maneuver and found its ability to manage the large volume of my interview transcripts, memos, and codes to be the appropriate fit in meeting the demands of the grounded theory methodology.

I was able to use MAXQDA to facilitate the full progression from open coding to focused coding, while also supporting memo-writing, visual mapping, and category development throughout the analytical process.

Prior to engaging deeply with my data, I did devote a considerable amount of time in learning both the CGT methodology and the technical use of MAXQDA. This included understanding the distinct phases of constructivist grounded theory—open coding, focused coding, memoing, and theoretical integration—and how to translate those steps into the software's functionality. While MAXQDA does offer robust capabilities, I did find that aligning its features with the philosophical underpinnings of CGT did require thoughtful adaptation. This process was not linear; I had to continuously review the literature on grounded theory, consult the available webinar tutorials and technical manual, and iteratively refine my coding strategy to remain grounded in the data while honoring the interpretive and co-constructed nature of the methodology (Charmaz, 2014).

From Initial Coding to Preliminary Categories

Open coding, also referred to as initial coding, marked the beginning phase of data analysis in this constructivist grounded theory study. This phase is essential to grounded theory methodology, as it enables the researcher to examine the data closely and analytically from the outset. Initial coding helps break down the data into manageable parts while encouraging researchers to remain open to multiple interpretations and emergent meanings (Charmaz, 2014). Additionally, beginning with open coding allows the researcher to stay grounded in the participants' language and avoid imposing any preexisting concepts too early in the process (Birks & Mills, 2015). These principles guided my approach as I sought to remain attuned to what participants were conveying both explicitly and implicitly in their narratives.

Initial Coding Process

As a researcher new to constructivist grounded theory methodology, I approached open coding with a strong commitment to remaining grounded in participants' language and meanings, while also navigating the learning curve of applying grounded theory techniques in practice. According to Charmaz (2014), open coding ideally begins with gerund-based codes to capture action and process in a way that supports theoretical development. However, I did not begin my analysis using gerund codes. Instead, I initially coded descriptively using phrases or keywords that reflected the content of each segment. These included examples of "org culture," "authentic – positive outcome," "in the body," and "life stage." This approach allowed me to stay close to the data and identify key ideas, even as I was still learning how to apply theoretical coding principles.

Line-by-Line and Incident-by-Incident Coding

I used both line-by-line and incident-by-incident strategies during open coding to best capture the nuances of participant responses. The line-by-line approach supported a fine-grained, analytical read of each sentence or phrase, often useful when participants shared descriptive or reflective content in shorter responses (Charmaz, 2014). In contrast, the incident-by-incident approach was more suitable when participants shared extended narratives that included multiple actions, reactions, or outcomes within a single experience. These dual strategies provided a complementary framework for exploring both the depth and structure of what participants communicated.

The following two interview questions illustrate how each coding strategy was applied:

Question 1: Tell me about a time when you demonstrated authenticity at work.

Question 2: Based on that experience, what is your understanding of being authentic?

The first question elicited an in-depth personal account that unfolded over several lines or paragraphs, requiring incident-by-incident coding to capture key moments, shifts, and emotional tones embedded in each story. The second question, however, often produced shorter, reflective responses in which participants named specific traits, feelings, or definitions. These pithier responses lent themselves to line-by-line coding, allowing for a precise examination of how participants conceptualized authenticity in their own words.

Using both approaches to open coding served two main purposes in this study. First, they facilitated a systematic and grounded analysis that honored both the complexity and individuality of participants' accounts. Second, they supported the emergence of conceptual patterns that would be later developed through focused coding. This close attention to language, meaning, and process is consistent with the constructivist grounded theory's emphasis on co-constructing knowledge with participants and remaining analytically engaged with the data from the earliest stages of interpretation (Birks & Mills, 2015; Charmaz, 2014).

Initial Coding Results

I generated a total of 231 open codes across the full data set of 16 interviews, which spanned 1,876 coded segments. This volume of codes, while reflective of the richness of the data, quickly revealed the need for further consolidation and synthesis. I conducted a comprehensive review of all open codes to identify redundancies, overlapping meanings, and opportunities for collapsing similar ideas. This iterative process resulted in a set of 43 open codes, which represented a more manageable and conceptually meaningful coding structure. Additionally, I had a separate category labeled "demographics," used to capture background and contextual information from participants' introductions. This was not considered an open code,

but it is important to note that this is an additional data point that comes up in the discussion later in this chapter.

Once I made this consolidation of the open codes and continued to gain familiarity with grounded theory methodology, I returned to the 43 open codes to refine them in alignment with Charmaz's (2014) guidance on action-based gerund coding. During this refinement phase, I began translating original labels into more dynamic, process-oriented codes such as "org culture" into "navigating org culture," "authentic – positive outcome" into "engaging in authenticity – positive outcome," "in the body" into "sensing in the body," and "life stage" into "adapting across life stages." This shift marked a critical transition from descriptive coding to coding that captured interaction, movement, and participant agency—an essential feature of theoretical coding in constructivist grounded theory.

To support transparency and provide an overview of the scope of coding work, Table 2 lists the 43 open codes and their respective frequencies which are included in this chapter. While the table is not intended as a primary analytical tool, it serves as an informational reference to demonstrate the range and focus areas that emerged through open coding and later informed the development of focused codes and conceptual categories.

Table 2

Breakdown of Initial Codes

Code No.	Code Name	Frequency	Code No.	Code Name	Frequency
1	Being Authentic - definition	242	23	Engaging in authentic communication	27
2	Demonstrating Authenticity	119	24	Experiencing inauthenticity – the result	27
3	Navigating Org Culture	93	25	Navigating work environment	25
4	Being Inauthentic – definition	78	26	Evolving authentically	25
5	Experiencing the cost to self	77	27	Engaging in authenticity – negative outcome	25

Code No.	Code Name	Frequency	Code No.	Code Name	Frequency
6	Grounding into authenticity	76	28	Anchoring back into authenticity	24
7	Responding to outside others	62	29	Demonstrating inauthenticity	23
8	Strategizing authenticity	61	30	Assessing the situation	22
9	Reading others	60	31	Navigating the push/pull of authenticity	22
10	Sensing in the body	56	32	Managing others	22
11	Implementing boundaries	50	33	Engaging in inauthenticity - negative outcome	21
12	Responding to role expectation	47	34	Engaging the human component	18
13	Adapting across life stages	44	35	Navigating imposed authenticity	18
14	Being me authentically	40	36	Engaging in inauthenticity – positive outcome	17
15	Relating to others	39	37	Ensuring authenticity	16
16	Protecting the self	35	38	Experiencing authenticity – the result	16
17	Responding to societal expectations	34	39	Just being authentic	12
18	Caring for/taking care of people	34	40	Identifying a common thread	11
19	Navigating gender differences	32	41	Navigating the pressure to be inauthentic	8
20	Creating connection	32	42	Navigating the pressure to be authentic	8
21	Engaging in authenticity – positive outcome	29	43	Navigating cultural differences	6
22	Maintaining autonomy – self	29			

Emerging Patterns

During the open coding phase, several early patterns began to shape across the 1,876 coded segments. While this stage of the analysis was primarily exploratory, certain recurring concepts quickly emerged, offering a glimpse into how participants were making sense of authenticity in their work lives. Notably, the language of emotional and physical embodiment appeared more frequently than anticipated. Some participants described authenticity as something they could “feel in the body” or recognize somatically, signaling that authenticity was

not solely a cognitive or behavioral phenomenon, but also an internalized, sensory experience. In parallel, authenticity was frequently linked with specific actions—speaking up, leading with integrity, or expressing one’s tone of voice in presentations—which began to suggest how participants demonstrated authenticity in practice, aligning with the first research question. Importantly, these expressions often materialized through the work product itself—in how participants wrote, presented, managed, or created—revealing authenticity not only in behavior, but embedded within the work they produced.

Another emergent pattern was the emotional and internal toll of inauthenticity. Several participants shared feelings of exhaustion, regret, or internal dissonance when describing moments where they felt unable to be themselves. These reflections often emphasized a disconnect between internal values and external behavior, leading to frustration, burnout, or a diminished sense of self. In contrast, moments of authenticity were associated with emotional clarity, pride, and fulfillment. These emotional and psychological responses began to shed light on the second research question, pointing to authenticity as a deeply intrapersonal experience tied to identity, well-being, and alignment.

A particularly interesting early distinction was the presence of gendered patterns. Although the analysis had not yet advanced into comparison or category-building, initial impressions suggested that women participants more frequently described people-pleasing, self-monitoring, or withholding strategies to navigate expectations, while men participants described being more direct or unfiltered in their self-expression. These observations were noted cautiously as this stage, to be explored more fully in later phases of analysis, but they hinted at potential socialized differences in how authenticity is permitted or constrained across gender lines.

Finally, some codes reflected the dynamic and context-dependent nature of authenticity. Participants described how their willingness to be authentic shifted depending on organizational culture, psychological safety, positional authority, or even life stage. These early themes highlighted authenticity not as a stable personal trait but as something negotiated, regulated, and enacted—an insight that would become central in later stages of coding and conceptual development.

These preliminary insights were not yet fully conceptualized, but they began to guide the analytical thinking as I prepared for the next stage of focused coding. They pointed to areas of conceptual richness around emotional impact, behavioral expression, internal conflict, and contextual negotiation; all of which offered early indications of how participants were both demonstrating authenticity and defining what it means to be authentic in their own terms. This foundation helped inform the condensation of my open codes and provided direction as I transitioned into identifying and developing open codes.

Emerging Preliminary Categories

Following completion of open coding and the consolidation of 231 initial codes into 43 streamlined open codes, I proceeded to examine how these codes could be meaningfully grouped together. Rather than discard any of the remaining codes, I made the deliberate decision to retain and work with all 43, believing that each one offered valuable insight into the lived experiences of authenticity in the workplace. While Charmaz (2014) acknowledged that researchers often make early analytic decisions in grounded theory by emphasizing and de-emphasizing certain codes, my approach emphasized inclusion over reduction. I believed that retaining the full range of codes would more accurately capture the complexity and nuance of what was being expressed by participants in the interviews.

To bridge the open coding phase and the development of focused codes, I began categorizing the 43 open codes into eight emergent thematic groupings. See Table 3 to view the 43 open codes that match these themes.

Table 3

Open Codes to Emerging Themes

Open Codes	Emergent Code
Navigating Org Culture Navigating Work Environment Responding to Role Expectation Responding to Societal Expectations Managing Others Responding to Outside Others Navigating Cultural Differences Navigating Gender Differences	Navigating Workplace Expectations
Strategizing Authenticity Navigating the Push/Pull of Authenticity Assessing the Situation Reading Others Ensuring Authenticity Navigating the Pressure to Be Authentic Navigating the Pressure to Be Inauthentic	Strategizing Authentic Expression
Anchoring Back into Authenticity Grounding into Authenticity Implementing Boundaries Protecting the Self Maintaining Autonomy – Self Sensing in the Body Just Being Authentic Evolving Authentically	Reconnecting with Self
Demonstrating Authenticity Engaging in Authentic Communication Caring for and Taking Care of People Relating to Others Creating Connection Engaging the Human Component	Relating Authentically to Others
Being Authentic – Definition Being Me Authentically Adapting Across Life Stages	Clarifying Identity
Being Inauthentic – Definition Demonstrating Inauthenticity Navigating Imposed Authenticity Engaging in Inauthenticity – Negative Outcome Engaging in Inauthenticity – Positive Outcomes	Managing Internal Conflicts
Experiencing Authenticity – Result Experiencing Inauthenticity – Result Experiencing the Cost to Self	Feeling the Impact

Open Codes	Emergent Code
Engaging in Authenticity – Positive Outcome	
Engaging in Authenticity – Negative Outcome	
Identifying a Common Thread	Integrating Experiences

These groupings were not intended as final categories, but rather as analytical stepping stones to begin organizing the data conceptually and to surface potential thematic patterns that reflected recurring ideas and relationships that were visible across multiple participant interviews. The titles used for these groupings are slightly more general and descriptive in tone, as they functioned to frame the data prior to the naming and refinement of focused codes. It is also important to note that each of these codes supports the three research questions in some capacity. Table 4 highlights where each of the eight emergent categories falls and the description of the emergent category.

Table 4

Research Questions and Corresponding Emergent Categories

Research Question	Emerging Categories
Research Question 1 (focal question): How do people demonstrate authenticity at work? (Focus: processes, behaviors, strategies, and environmental navigation)	<u>Navigating Workplace Expectations:</u> How participants adjusted or withheld authenticity in response to organizational norms, roles, or cultural pressures. <u>Strategizing Authenticity Expression:</u> The conscious decisions and contextual judgment calls participants made about when and how to show up as their authentic selves. <u>Relating Authentically to Others:</u> Expressions of authenticity through communication, vulnerability, and genuine relationship-building in the workplace. <u>Reconnecting with Self:</u> Ways participants grounded themselves emotionally or physically to return to a sense of inner alignment during challenging moments.
Research Question 2 (Sub-question): How do they understand authenticity? (Focus: conceptualization, self-definition, and reflective awareness)	<u>Clarifying Identity:</u> The ongoing process of defining the self and developing a personal understanding of what it means to be authentic. <u>Managing Internal Conflicts:</u> The internal tensions between personal values and external expectations that shaped how authenticity was understood or suppressed.

Research Question	Emerging Categories
Research Question 3 (Sub-question): What does it mean to be authentic? (Focus: meaning, interpretation, and consequences)	<u>Integrating Experiences</u>: The process of weaving together insights, values, and lived moments into coherent understanding of authenticity. <u>Feeling the Impact</u>: The emotional consequences – both positive and negative – of being authentic or inauthentic at work.

These eight emergent groupings were instrumental in organizing the open codes and surfacing analytic patterns that would inform the next phase of coding. In many ways, they served as a bridge between open coding and focused coding, allowing for an initial clustering of data without overcommitting to final interpretations. By documenting this stage, my goal is to provide transparency into the analytic process and demonstrate how initial themes emerged and were systematically refined through grounded theory methods.

Memo writing was also essential during this transitional phase. I used memos to capture interpretive insights, compare across participants, question assumptions, and test conceptual boundaries. These memos helped to surface tension in the data, track the evolution of emerging categories, and document early analytic direction. For example, I wrote the following memo after clustering several codes around authentic behaviors in meetings and presentations:

Analytic Memo – Early Authentic Expression Themes

I'm seeing repeated instances where participants describe using their voice, tone, or presence to convey authenticity; especially in meetings or presentations. What is standing out is the intentionality behind it. It is not just being themselves, rather it is choosing how to show up in a way that reflects what appears to be their values – even if it is subtle. This seems different from emotional transparency in that it seems more of a strategic projection of the self.

This insight later contributed to the focused codes Calibrating When and How to Be Real and Authenticity as Self-Protection, both of which fed into the broader conceptual category Strategic Authenticity.

Additionally, when thinking about the impact of authenticity, I wrote another memo that addressed the internal consequences of suppressing authenticity:

Analytic Memo – Internal Cost of Suppressing Self

Multiple participants talk about feeling “drained,” “off,” or even “disconnected” when they could not be authentic. It is more than frustration. It is internal dissonance. One person said they felt like they were “watching themselves from the outside.” This might be more than just emotional exhaustion. It might speak to identity fragmentation or tension between public and private selves.

This memo helped inform the development of the *Emotional Consequences of Authenticity* conceptual category, specifically the focused code *Residual Toll of Inauthenticity*.

By capturing these reflections, the memos allowed me to stay grounded in the data while beginning to theorize, leading to focused codes that were both empirically supported and conceptually rich. These focused codes and their relationships to one another laid the foundation for the higher-level conceptual categories that structured the final model. In the next section, I describe how the focused codes were constructed, refined, and integrated to represent key aspects of how individuals demonstrate authenticity at work and how they understand what it means to be authentic.

From Focused Coding to Conceptual Categories

With the eight emergent categories from the open coding phase established, the next stage in the analysis involved elevating these thematic groupings into more refined and

analytically cohesive conceptual categories. This was accomplished through the process of focused coding, which involved systematically identifying the most significant and recurrent codes from across the dataset and clustering them into higher-level groupings. Focused coding is a key analytic phase in constructivist grounded theory as it allows the researcher to move beyond initial description and begin developing categories that are conceptually rich, grounded in the data, and capable of supporting theoretical development (Charmaz, 2014).

This stage was deeply iterative and relied on constant comparison, which involves examining the data within and across participant interviews, across open codes, and across emergent groupings to determine conceptual boundaries, overlaps, and distinctions. I repeatedly revisited earlier memos, code summaries, and coded segments to interrogate the relationships between codes and the strength of their connection to the evolving conceptual categories. Focused coding really allowed me to sift and sort through large amounts of data in a way that began to reveal the underlying patterns and conceptual framework embedded in the participants' experiences (Charmaz, 2014).

During this process, I maintained the integrity of the original eight emergent groupings, as they continued to serve as a meaningful organizing structure. However, through careful analysis and refinement, the groupings were elevated into nine finalized conceptual categories. These final categories were adjusted in title and scope to more accurately reflect the nuances of the data and the themes that had emerged through open coding and memoing. Within these categories, 21 focused codes were developed, each grounded in the original open codes and shaped by the analytic insights gained throughout memo writing and constant comparison. See Table 5 for the emergent codes and their corresponding focused codes title adjustments.

Table 5*Emergent Codes to Focused Code Categories*

Emergent Code	Focused Coding Category
Navigating Workplace Expectations	External Forces Shaping Authenticity
Strategizing Authentic Expression	Strategic Authenticity
Reconnecting with Self	Grounding the Self
Relating Authentically to Others	Interpersonal Expression of Authenticity
Clarifying Identity	Identity-Based Understanding of Authenticity
Managing Internal Conflicts	Inauthenticity as a Response to Context
Feeling the Impact	Emotional Consequences of Authenticity
Integrating Experiences	Integrative Meaning of Authenticity
<i>(Bridges Multiple Above)</i>	Tensions of Identity at Work

The focused codes represent the key actions, processes, tensions, and meanings that participants associated with authenticity at work. Some focused codes remained close to the participants' language, while others were more interpretative, developed through iterative analysis and synthesis of multiple data points. In each case, memo writing played a vital role in capturing analytic decisions and supporting the evolution from open code to conceptual category.

I present each of the final nine conceptual categories alongside the focused codes that comprise each in Table 6. Each category is introduced with a description, followed by a discussion of the focused codes it contains. Where relevant, supporting memo excerpts and participant language are used to illustrate the development and significance of each focused code.

Table 6*Focused Codes and Conceptual Categories*

Conceptual Category	Focused Codes
External Forces Shaping Authenticity	• Authenticity Under Constraint • Performing with Expectations • Gendered Expectations of Realness
Strategic Authenticity	• Calibrating When and How to Be Real • Authenticity as Self-Protection
Grounding the Self	• Returning to the Core Self • Protecting Authenticity Through Boundaries
Interpersonal Expression of Authenticity	• Relating Through Realness • Communicating with Integrity • Authenticity Through Action – Demonstrating Through Output
Identity-Based Understanding of Authenticity	• Knowing and Accepting Who I am • Living in Alignment with My Values
Inauthenticity as a Response to Context	• Compromising the Self to Meet Expectations • Performing Safety • Imposing Definitions of Authenticity
Emotional Consequences of Authenticity	• Liberation Through Realness • Emotional Fallout From Being Real • Residual Toll of Inauthenticity
Integrative Meaning of Authenticity	• Being Real as a Lifeline • Authenticity as a Daily Practice
Tensions of Identity at Work	• Negotiating Split Selves

External Forces Shaping Authenticity

This category encompasses the external pressures, systems, and social expectations that influence how individuals experience and express authenticity at work. While authenticity is often framed as personal or internal quality, participants repeatedly emphasized how much it was shaped by context. They described navigating expectations tied to organizational culture, role requirements, leadership tone, and especially social norms related to gender and professionalism.

In many instances, participants revealed a tension between how they wanted to show up and how they felt they had to show up—suggesting that authenticity was not always a free choice, but something modulated in response to external constraints. These constraints could be institutional, interpersonal, or structural, and often operated invisibly until challenged or reflected upon. This category is comprised of three focused codes: *Authenticity Under Constraint*, *Performing with Expectations*, and *Gendered Expectations of Realness*. These will be further examined below.

Authenticity Under Constraint

This code captures how participants described limiting or filtering their authentic selves in response to environmental signals such as hierarchy, politics, or perceived cultural norms. Many spoke of “holding back,” “reading the room,” or “masking,” depending on how safe or acceptable it felt to be authentic. Participant 7 observed, “Sometimes being real means being strategic. You can’t always say what you think—you have to pick your battles.” Likewise, Participant 5 reflected,

I think that some people feel like they can’t be authentic because of how they’re going to be perceived or judged. So then they choose to hide parts of themselves in order to survive or just not to be questioned.

For many, authenticity under constraint was not necessarily viewed as inauthenticity, but rather as a survival or navigation tactic in complex workplace environments.

Performing with Expectations

This code reflects the pressure participants felt to conform to professional norms or ideal worker behaviors. For some, this involved maintaining a polished image, avoiding conflict, or presenting in ways that felt performative rather than genuine. This idea of performance surfaced

repeatedly with participants describing situations where they were “playing a role” or “checking a box” rather than engaging from a place of authenticity. Participant 4 described the invisible boundaries at play, stating, “There’s a script sometimes—how to talk, how to lead, how to not rock the boat. It’s hard to be yourself when the rules are unwritten but very real.” Participant 14 similarly described the tension between self-expression and professionalism, noting, “I’ve been told to tone it down or be more ‘executive’—but this is how I connect.” These accounts underscore not only the behavioral shifts required to meet expectations, but also the emotional toll of suppressing one’s natural instincts to conform to unspoken standards. These experiences underscore how authenticity can feel threatened or diluted when rigid workplace expectations override individual expression, particularly when even positive traits must be adjusted to align with leadership norms.

Gendered Expectations of Realness

Participants—particularly women—spoke directly about the gendered dynamics that shaped their ability to be authentic. Some felt pressure to be likable, polished, or emotionally attuned, while also navigating assumptions about assertiveness or professionalism. Participant 5 shared,

As a woman, there’s always this dance. Like that saying, ‘be confident, but not too confident. Be honest, but don’t make people uncomfortable.’ It’s exhausting.” Participant 15 elaborated, “If I get passionate, it’s ‘too emotional.’ If I’m calm, it’s ‘not passionate enough.’ There’s no winning sometimes.

Similarly, Participant 9 reflected, “Sometimes I hold back because I don’t want to be labeled emotional or difficult. That’s a gendered thing—I see my male colleagues being blunt and it’s seen as strong.” These quotes illuminate how gendered scripts operate silently but

powerfully, often requiring women to walk a narrow behavioral tightrope to maintain credibility without being penalized for authenticity. These examples highlight the intersection of authenticity with identity—suggesting that one’s capacity to be authentic is filtered not only through context, but through the social location from which they speak.

Strategic Authenticity

This category captures the intentional and adaptive nature of how individuals choose to express authenticity at work. Rather than viewing authenticity as a fixed or static trait, participants described it as something they actively calibrated depending on the audience, context, risk, and organizational culture. Demonstrating authenticity was often framed as a strategic decision—balancing self-expression with professional norms, emotional safety, and broader workplace expectations.

Participants emphasized that “being real” did not mean full transparency or unfiltered expression. Instead, they described the form of authenticity that was responsive to their environment—where they maintained a core sense of self while adjusting how that self was presented. This framing aligns with the conceptual stance that authenticity is not a binary state, but a practice and contextualized behavior. This category is comprised of two focused codes: *Calibrating When and How to Be Real* and *Authenticity as Self-Protection*. These will be further examined below.

Calibrating When and How to Be Real

This code reflects the deliberate decision-making process participants described when choosing to be authentic in particular workplace moments. Many considered factors, such as psychological safety, positional power, the stakes of the interaction, and their relationship with

others, before sharing something personal or offering a dissenting perspective. Participant 6 described how she assessed the environment before opening up, stating,

If I know the room is supportive, I'm more inclined to say something personal. If it's tense or feels competitive, I hold back." Participant 9 emphasized the importance of timing and tone, explaining, "You can't always be 100% raw. Sometimes you show parts of yourself slowly—like testing the waters.

These strategies reflect not avoidance, but a skilled form of adaptation where authenticity is moderated in real time based on external cues and internal judgment. These reflections highlight authenticity as a skillful negotiation, requiring emotional intelligence as well as self-monitoring.

Authenticity as Self-Protection

This code captures the defensive and self-preserving reasons behind choosing not to be fully authentic in certain contexts. For some, holding back parts of their identity or views was a form of boundary-setting to protect their credibility, avoid conflict, or maintain a sense of control. Participant 3, who had previously been reprimanded for being too direct, shared, "I learned not to bring my whole self. It's safer to be neutral." This restraint became a way to maintain her professional role without compromising her values. Participant 12 echoed this protective stance, stating, "There are just parts of me that don't belong in this environment. I protect that by keeping them out of the room." These accounts illustrate that boundaries around authenticity can be protective rather than limiting. In some environments, restraint was experienced not as a loss but as an intentional act of self-preservation. These insights suggest that for many participants, authenticity was not always safe or welcome. Withholding was sometimes necessary to preserve emotional well-being or professional standing.

Grounding the Self

This category represents how individuals seek to remain rooted in their values, identity, and internal sense of direction while navigating the demands of the workplace. Grounding the self is both an active and reflective process – participants described needing to reconnect with who they are when they began to feel disconnected, overwhelmed, or pulled into inauthentic patterns. This sense of returning inward allowed participants to reestablish their equilibrium and act with greater clarity and alignment.

Participants frequently spoke about moments of reflection, internal conflict, and the importance of setting boundaries in order to maintain or recover a sense of authenticity. These actions were often described not as one-time events, but as ongoing practices necessary to sustain a sense of personal integrity. This category is comprised of two focused codes: *Returning to the Core Self* and *Protecting Authenticity Through Boundaries*. These will be further examined below.

Returning to the Core Self

Participants shared that when they felt they were straying from their authentic selves due to pressure, stress, or misalignment, they had to make a conscious effort to pause, reflect, and return to what mattered most to them. This “returning” often involved self-reflection, emotional regulation, or intentionally stepping back to reconnect with their values, identity, or purpose. Participant 3 described a moment after a difficult meeting: “I had to sit in my car and just breathe. I reminded myself who I am—why I do this work. I can’t lose that.” These moments of solitude or reflection served as powerful recalibrations, helping participants re-anchor themselves in their core identity. Similarly, Participant 15 shared, “When I feel off, I know I need to journal or talk it out with someone I trust. I need to check in with myself before I spiral

into something that's not me." This code reflects that authenticity is not static but an ongoing process of self-return—a way of realigning with one's internal compass.

Protecting Authenticity Through Boundaries

To preserve a sense of authenticity, many participants emphasized the importance of setting personal or professional boundaries. These included emotional boundaries (e.g., limiting people-pleasing), time boundaries (e.g., refusing to overextend), and interpersonal boundaries (e.g., knowing when not to share or engage). Participant 8 explained, "I've learned that just because I can say yes, doesn't mean I should. My authenticity suffers when I take on too much or try to please everyone." Setting boundaries was often described not as a constraint, but as an act of self-respect and a way to remain grounded amid competing demands. Participant 16 added, "Sometimes authenticity is knowing when not to engage. It's honoring my own limits instead of proving something." These quotes underscore the idea that authenticity is not only about expression, but also about discernment, self-respect, and the boundaries that allow one's true self to remain intact.

Interpersonal Expression of Authenticity

This category captures how authenticity is expressed through relational presence, interpersonal dynamics, and communicative integrity. For many participants, being authentic was deeply tied to how they connected with others—through actions, tone, listening, empathy, and alignment between what was said and how it was said. This is less about identity and more about congruence in interactions, such as being real in the moment, especially in the presence of others.

Participants described authenticity as something that emerged in the flow of conversation, in being direct and honest while remaining respectful, and in how they offered vulnerability and received it from others. Others highlighted that authenticity was not always verbal but could be

reflected in how they delivered work or showed up in team settings. This led to the identification of a subtheme within this category, *Authenticity Through Action*, which focused on how authenticity was expressed through work-related behavior and tangible output. This category is comprised of two focused codes: *Relating Through Realness* and *Communicating with Integrity*. As mentioned, this category also has the subtheme *Authenticity Through Action* with the code *Demonstrating Through Output*. These will be further examined below.

Relating Through Realness

Participants consistently emphasized the importance of forming genuine connections at work. This code reflects the ways individuals shared their humanity, admitted mistakes, or engaged with colleagues in ways that felt open and sincere. Participant 1 stated, “I build relationships by being myself first. If I’m too polished, people don’t know who I really am.” Participant 10 reflected, “Being authentic with others doesn’t mean over-sharing. It means meeting people where they are and being present, not guarded.” Participant 2 shared, “I try to lead with humility because I know I don’t know everything. I think this makes it relatable to others to do the same.” Relating through realness also involved a willingness to take interpersonal risks, trusting that vulnerability would foster connection rather than diminish credibility. These insights reflect the emotional resonance of authenticity in interpersonal exchanges—participants wanted to be seen and to create spaces where others could also show up as themselves.

Communicating with Integrity

This code captures the verbal side of authenticity—speaking honestly, aligning words with values, and choosing candor even when it is difficult. Participants highlighted that integrity in communication was one of the strongest ways they demonstrated who they truly were.

Participant 6 noted, “It’s not just what I say, but how I say it. I want people to feel like they can trust me to be real, not just say what sounds good.” Many emphasized that tone and timing were just as important as the content of their message, especially when navigating sensitive conversations or power dynamics. Participant 12 shared, “It takes courage to speak plainly. But if I can’t say what I mean, I don’t feel like myself.” Participant 7 added, “Even when I have to give tough feedback, I try to do it with honesty and respect. That’s who I am.” Communicating with integrity often required balancing honesty with diplomacy and was shaped by trust, power dynamics, and organizational culture.

Authenticity Through Action – Demonstrating Through Output

As coding progressed, it became evident that not all participants described authenticity solely through verbal or relational expression. Several individuals pointed to how they demonstrated authenticity in what they produced or led—through collaboration, creative choices, or delivering work that reflected their values and personality. Because this behavioral dimension did not fit neatly within the relational codes, a subtheme was created to capture this distinct form of expression. Participant 2 shared, “You can hear who I am in my voice when I present—but also in how I design the whole thing. That’s me on display.” This sentiment was echoed by others who viewed their contributions as extensions of their identity and values. Participant 13 similarly expressed, “My deliverables tell you what I stand for,” describing how even project outcomes or meeting facilitation became expressions of her authenticity. Participant 11 added, “When I lead a session or facilitate a workshop, people get a sense of who I am by how I approach the whole experience.” This subtheme complements the relational and communicative dimensions of authenticity by expanding the view of expression to include tangible, performative, and observable output.

Identity-Based Understanding of Authenticity

This category reflects participants' foundational understanding of authenticity as rooted in identity. For many, being authentic was not just about behavior or interaction—it was about being oneself. This sense of self was shaped by experiences, values, life stages, and personal reflection. Participants described authenticity as something they grew into over time, often through self-discovery, setbacks, or intentional introspection.

Authenticity, in this view, was framed as both knowing who you are and having the courage to live accordingly. These insights demonstrated that authenticity is not only situationally influenced—it is also deeply tied to internal clarity and personal evolution. This category is comprised of the two focused codes: *Knowing and Accepting Who I am* and *Living in Alignment with My Values*. These will be further examined below.

Knowing and Accepting Who I am

Participants often spoke about authenticity beginning with self-knowledge—understanding their identity, beliefs, and preferences—and accepting themselves fully, including their flaws and complexities. Many acknowledged that authenticity was easier once they had developed more confidence, self-trust, or emotional maturity. Participant 11 reflected on this growth, sharing, “I wasn’t always this way. I used to adapt constantly. But now I know who I am. I like who I am. That makes it easier to show up that way.” This shift toward self-acceptance often required unlearning patterns of over-adaptation and gaining comfort with imperfection. Similarly, Participant 6 noted the shift that came from inward reflection: “I had to stop performing for other people and get really honest with myself first. That’s when things shifted.” Additionally, Participant 3 added, “As I have gotten older, I know who I am and I am myself fully and I just don’t care what others think anymore.” This code reflects authenticity as a

byproduct of deep self-awareness and acceptance—a state participants arrived at through time, challenge, and internal work.

Living in Alignment with My Values

Building on the foundation of self-knowledge, participants described authenticity as making daily choices that reflected their core values. This alignment wasn't always easy. In fact, it was often described as a practice rather than a given. Participant 14 shared, "I ask myself, does this feel right? If I say yes to this, am I honoring my values or betraying them?" Participant 2 added, "Authenticity isn't just about being real in the moment—it's about staying true to what I believe in, even when it's uncomfortable." Participants consistently emphasized that values served as a compass, especially during moments of ethical tension, role conflict, or organizational change. This focused code highlights that authenticity involves intention and integrity—choosing to live in a way that reflects the internal self, rather than succumbing to external pressures.

Inauthenticity as a Response to Context

While participants shared rich accounts of striving to be authentic, they also candidly reflected on the circumstances that led them to suppress or compromise their authenticity. Inauthenticity in this context was not described as deception, but rather as a reaction to perceived threats, misalignment, or imposed expectations. These moments often involved self-protection, adaptation, or even resignation, particularly in environments where being authentic was not perceived as safe or valued.

Participants framed inauthenticity not as a fixed trait, but as a response to context—a form of emotional and professional management when the environment demanded conformity, caution, or masking. These dynamics evoked internal tension and were frequently rationalized as

necessary trade-offs to maintain stability, relationships, or employment. This category is comprised of three focused codes: *Compromising the Self to Meet Expectations*, *Performing Safety*, and *Imposed Definitions of Authenticity*. These will be further examined below.

Compromising the Self to Meet Expectations

This code reflects instances where participants felt compelled to alter, silence, or suppress aspects of themselves to meet perceived workplace norms or leadership expectations. These compromises were often framed as “doing what was necessary,” but carried emotional and identity-related consequences. Participant 9 admitted, “Sometimes I feel like I’m two different people. There’s me at the work—calculated, filtered—and then there’s the real me who comes out after hours. But it’s exhausting to keep switching.” Over time, this fragmentation led to a feeling of emotional fatigue and confusion about which self was truly authentic. Participants described these adjustments as subtle yet cumulative small compromises that eventually undermined their sense of personal integrity. Participant 6 echoed this internal conflict, stating, “There are moments when I know I’m betraying myself a little—saying yes when I want to say no, staying quiet when I disagree. That’s when I know I’m slipping into a version of myself that’s not really me.” These narratives illustrate that inauthenticity can result from repeated, often subtle accommodations that erode self-expression.

Performing Safety

Participants described engaging in protective behaviors—masking emotions, softening their language, downplaying opinions—as a way of maintaining psychological or professional safety. These performances were not about deceit but about self-preservation in environments that felt unpredictable or judgmental. Participant 1 shared, “I don’t lie, but I definitely manage how much I reveal. It’s like being authentic, but only within safe limits.” This careful curation of

self-expression allowed participants to maintain a sense of control, even when their full selves were not welcome. Similarly, Participant 7 explained, “You learn quickly where it’s safe to show up fully and where it’s not. In those other spaces, I put on my ‘professional mask’—just enough to get through.” This focused code captures the way individuals carefully curate their expressions in service of protection—demonstrating the tension between authenticity and perceived risk.

Imposing Definitions of Authenticity

Several participants noted that even the concept of authenticity was sometimes weaponized or misunderstood in the workplace. They described being told to “just be real” or “bring your whole self,” yet still feeling penalized for doing so. Others spoke of leaders or organizations promoting a narrow version of what authenticity looks like—often tying it back to extroversion, confidence, or likability. Participant 12 reflected, “They say they want authenticity, but only if it looks a certain way. If you’re not bubbly or outspoken, it doesn’t count.” Participant 13 added, “I’ve had leaders talk about authenticity, but what they really meant was ‘be yourself—within our comfort zone.’ That’s not real freedom.” This focused code underscores how authenticity can be co-opted or limited by dominant narratives, making it harder for individuals with different personalities, communication styles, or cultural identities to express themselves authentically.

Emotional Consequences of Authenticity

Participants frequently reflected on the emotional aftermath of navigating authenticity at work. This category captures the complex and sometimes contradictory emotional terrain described—ranging from the liberating effects of expressing the self authentically, to the distress that sometimes followed those disclosures, and the long-term psychological cost of suppressing authenticity altogether.

These consequences did not arise in a vacuum. They were shaped by workplace context, relational dynamics, and the perceived risks or safety associated with being real. Participants framed these experiences as emotionally consequential—often deeply so—regardless of whether authenticity was expressed or withheld. This category is comprised of three focused codes: *Liberation Through Realness*, *Emotional Fallout From Being Real*, and *Residual Toll of Inauthenticity*. These will be further examined below.

Liberation Through Realness

For many participants, moments of authentic expression brought a sense of emotional release, empowerment, and relief. Even when the outcomes were uncertain, simply being able to show up as themselves offered clarity and internal validation. These moments were described as “lightening,” “freeing,” or “centering.” Participant 2 described feeling like they could “breathe again” after being transparent in a tense meeting, stating, “It felt like I took my power back—even if no one noticed but me.” Participant 13 echoed this sense of emotional relief, sharing, “Once I finally started saying what I meant, even in small ways, I didn’t feel like I was carrying so much anymore. I felt lighter.” This focused code captures the emotional upside of authenticity—when being real aligns with one’s internal values, the result is often a sense of self-liberation.

Emotional Fallout From Being Real

Despite the benefits, participants also shared that being authentic came with emotional risks. Vulnerability was sometimes met with dismissal, misunderstanding, or awkward silence. Even when there was no backlash, participants admitted to overthinking or second-guessing their decision to be open. Participant 10 recalled, “I was honest about how I was feeling during a team call, and later I regretted it. I kept replaying it in my head, wondering if I sounded

unprofessional.” This kind of post-interaction rumination was common, reflecting the emotional toll of self-disclosure even in the environments that were not overtly hostile. Similarly, Participant 6 shared, “I felt exposed after speaking up—like I gave too much of myself. No one said anything wrong, but I still walked away feeling too raw.” This focused code highlights that even authentic moments—while courageous—can leave an emotional mark, particularly in contexts where support or reciprocity is uncertain.

Residual Toll of Inauthenticity

Participants who felt unable to be authentic over time described a slow-building emotional toll. These experiences were marked by depletion, disengagement, and disconnection. Participant 4 shared, “After months of keeping parts of myself hidden, I stopped recognizing who I was at work. It’s like I was in survival mode.” Participant 8 added, “I felt numb after a while. Every day I was performing. I started questioning if any of it mattered.” This focused code shows that sustained inauthenticity does not just affect momentary emotional states—it gradually drains energy, weakens motivation, and can cause individuals to lose sight of their core identity.

Integrative Meaning of Authenticity

For some participants, authenticity transcended workplace behavior and became a core part of how they understand themselves and move through life. These reflections pointed to a deeper integration of authenticity – as both a stabilizing force in moments of adversity and a mindful, repeated choice made across various settings. In these accounts, authenticity was not simply a trait or reaction, but an essential practice tied to identity, self-preservation, and growth. The category is comprised of two focused codes: *Being Real as a Lifeline* and *Authenticity as a Daily Practice*. These will be further examined below.

Being Real as a Lifeline

Participants described authenticity as critical to their well-being, particularly in difficult or isolating experiences. Being real was not just seen as ideal—but as necessary for psychological, emotional, and even spiritual survival. For these individuals, abandoning authenticity came at too great a cost. Participant 12 reflected, “I went through a period where I felt like I was disappearing. Speaking up, even a little, reminded me I was still here.” This act of reclaiming voice or presence, even in small moments, served as a vital reminder of one’s existence and worth. Similarly, Participant 5 shared, “Authenticity keeps me grounded. When things get chaotic or political, it’s the only way I know how to stay sane. It’s how I hold onto myself.” These insights reveal how authenticity served as a psychological anchor—a means to reclaim agency and maintain connection to the self amid pressure or disruption.

Authenticity as a Daily Practice

This code reflects how some participants described authenticity not as a static quality, but as something they had to revisit and recommit to regularly. They framed it as a continual process of reflection, choice, and alignment. Rather than a singular “authentic self,” they spoke of adapting while remaining anchored in values and truth. Participant 7 reflected, “Every day it’s a decision. I ask myself—am I showing up the way I want to? Did I stay true to who I am today?” Participant 15 added, “Being authentic doesn’t mean I’m always bold or outspoken. Sometimes it means checking in with myself before reacting—or knowing when to pause instead of perform.” This daily negotiation between self-expression and situational demands reinforced authenticity as practice rooted in intentionality. This focused code illustrates the intentionality behind authenticity for many participants. It’s a reflective act, shaped by context, but rooted in inner clarity.

Tensions of Identity at Work

As participants shared their experiences of being (or struggling to be) authentic in the workplace, a distinct tension emerged around the negotiation of multiple identities. These were not only professional versus personal selves, but also public versus private personas, culturally shaped roles, and emotionally protective facades. These tensions did not fully reside within a single conceptual domain; rather, they echoed across the emotional, contextual, and behavioral dimensions of authenticity. This integrative theme sits at the intersection of *Inauthenticity as a Response to Context* and *Emotional Consequences of Authenticity*. It captures a subtler, yet powerful, cost of inauthenticity—the internal fragmentation that arises from managing competing selves over time. Participants described this experience as both emotionally taxing and systematically reinforced, often linked to broader workplace norms and expectations. The focused code, *Negotiating Split Selves*, is discussed below.

Negotiating Split Selves

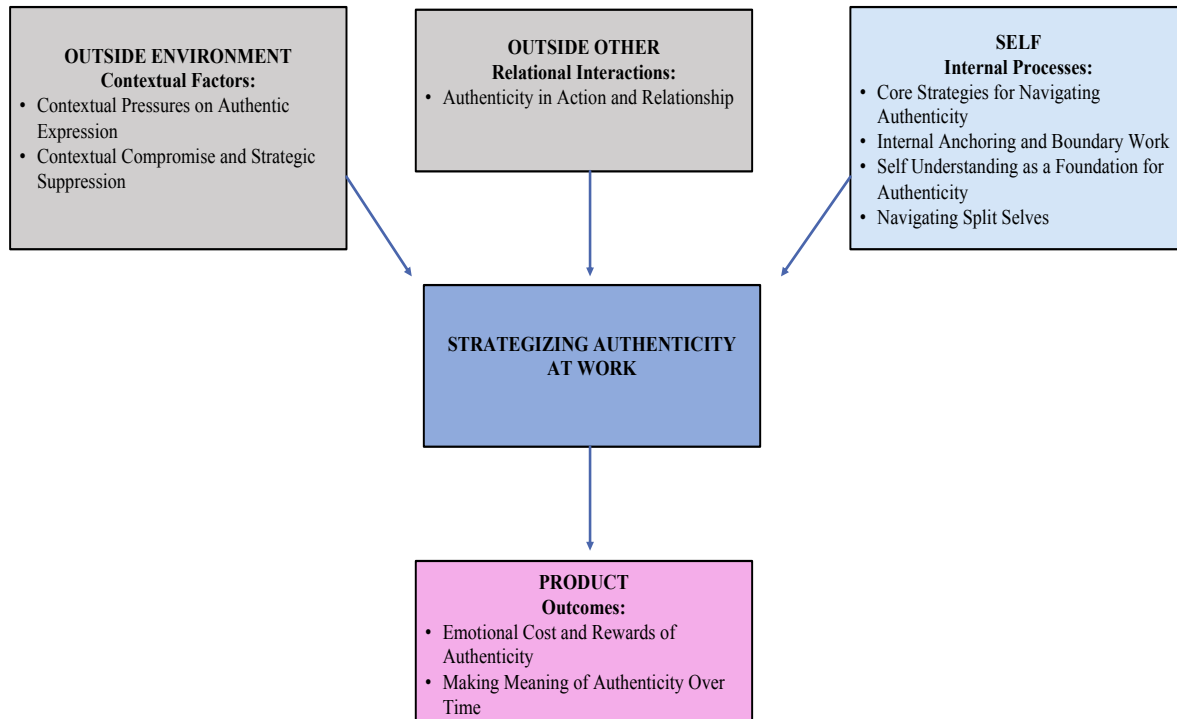
Several participants described the psychological and emotional dissonance of having to maintain different versions of themselves in different contexts. This included shifts in behavior depending on the audience, masking certain traits, or consciously suppressing values or identity markers to meet professional expectations. Participant 4 explained, “It’s like I have a work self and a real self. And the more time I spend being the work self, the harder it is to get back to who I really am.” Similarly, Participant 9 reflected on the constant self-monitoring involved in code-switching, sharing, “I’m always calculating – how I speak, how I dress, how much of myself I can bring. And that leaves me tired in a different way. Not physically tired, but identity tired.” The feeling of navigating multiple selves was not only mentally draining, but it also created long-term consequences for self-trust and personal integrity. Participants often expressed a desire

for wholeness but saw that goal as difficult within organizational cultures that privileged conformity or image over individuality.

Interpreting the Final Conceptual Model

After completing the focused coding process and mapping the relationships across 21 focused codes and nine core categories, the final stage of the analytic process involved elevating these findings into an integrated conceptual model. While the focused coded categories offered a detailed description of how categories emerged, the final conceptual model serves a different purpose: to abstract and synthesize these insights into a more process-oriented and theoretically cohesive framework. This evolution involved refining and renaming the categories to better reflect the dynamic processes, psychological mechanisms, and social negotiations embedded in participants' accounts. Whereas the focused coding phase retained a largely descriptive tone, the conceptual model reorients the categories around the interactive and functional roles within the central phenomenon of *Strategizing Authenticity at Work*. See Appendix D for a visual display of how open codes evolved into emergent categories, focused codes, and the final conceptual category title change.

In grounded theory methodology, this movement from descriptive to conceptual categories is a necessary and expected step (Charmaz, 2014). It enables the development of a theoretical narrative that not only reflects participants' experiences but also offers explanatory insight into how authenticity operates as a situated, adaptive process in organizational life. The new category labels clarify function, highlight intentionality, and emphasize the interdependence of conditions, actions, and consequences. See Figure 4 for the final model.

Figure 4*Strategizing Authenticity at Work***Core Conceptual Category: Strategizing Authenticity at Work**

The core conceptual category is *Strategizing Authenticity at Work*. This overarching construct captures the active, ongoing process by which individuals assess, manage, and navigate how authentic to be in professional settings. Participants did not view authenticity as fixed or binary; instead, it emerged as a fluid and context-dependent practice, shaped by role, relational risk, internal clarity, and organizational dynamics. Authenticity was often framed as a negotiation—between self-protection and self-expression, short-term safety and long-term alignment, or individual values and external expectations. This strategic process was described with nuance, adaptability, and, at times, emotional fatigue; often, revealing that being authentic at work is not always intuitive, but requires deliberate calibration and effort.

Overview of the Model Structure

The model is composed of nine conceptual categories arranged into four analytic domains, all of which support and inform the overarching theoretical process of *Strategizing Authenticity at Work*. These domains include:

- Contextual Factors (two categories)
- Relational Interactions (one category)
- Internal Processes (four categories)
- Outcomes (two categories)

Together, these domains represent the conditions, mechanisms, and consequences that shape how authenticity is evaluated, expressed, and adjusted in the workplace.

At the center of the model is *Strategizing Authenticity at Work*, the core conceptual category that integrates these domains into a unifying theoretical process. In this model, contextual factors, relational interactions, and internal processes flow into the central construct, highlighting the multidimensional influences that inform how authenticity is strategically navigated. In the core process feeds into the outcomes domain, illustrating how acts of authenticity or inauthenticity result in emotional, cognitive, and developmental consequences.

Description of Conceptual Categories

Each conceptual category is grounded in the participants' lived experiences and captures a key dimension of the authenticity process at work:

Contextual Factors

These categories describe the organizational and social structures that inform when and how authenticity is expressed *Contextual Pressures on Authentic Expression* considers external forces such as organizational culture, leadership norm, and power dynamics that influence when,

how, and whether individuals feel safe expressing authenticity. *Contextual Compromise and Strategic Suppression* considers the ways in which authenticity is intentionally withheld or reshaped in response to perceived risks or organizational expectations—often as a form of strategic compliance, protection, or emotional preservation.

Relational Interactions

This category captures how authenticity is enacted through interpersonal behavior. *Authenticity in Action and Relationship* includes how authenticity is embodied in communication, collaboration, and presentation—particularly through verbal expression, tone of voice, and professional work output.

Internal Processes

These categories capture the internal psychological mechanisms, decision-making processes, and emotional navigation participants relied on to sustain and calibrate authenticity. *Core Strategies for Navigating Authenticity* describes the moment-to-moment decisions individuals make about how, when, and whether to show up authentically in response to internal, relational, and environmental cues. *Internal Anchoring and Boundary Work* is the reflective and self-protective processes participants engage in, such as emotional regulation, boundary setting, and grounding in values to maintain internal integrity. *Self-Understanding as a Foundation for Authenticity* is the foundational process in which clarity around identity, values, and life experiences enables more authentic expression and more confident workplace decision-making. Additionally, *Navigating Split Selves* is the psychological tension participants felt when trying to reconcile competing or fragmented versions of themselves (e.g., personal vs. professional, ideal vs. acceptable). This process often involved emotional strain, reflection, and desire for integration.

Outcomes

These categories reflect the emotional and cognitive consequences of engaging (or disengaging) with authenticity. *Emotional Cost and Rewards of Authenticity* is the emotional responses that follow expressions of authenticity or inauthenticity, ranging from empowerment and clarity to exhaustion, self-doubt, and internal conflict. *Making Meaning of Authenticity Over Time* is a longitudinal, reflective category capturing how individuals revise and deepen their understanding of authenticity across roles, stages of life, and accumulated experience.

Relational Dynamics and Feedback

The final model illustrates how these categories interact as part of a larger system. This model is directional and systemic. Arrows flowing into the central process of *Strategizing Authenticity at Work* represent the interwoven influences of social context, interpersonal dynamics, and intrapersonal processing. Arrows flowing out from the core process towards the outcomes domain illustrate how acts of authenticity shape both emotional well-being and personal development. This structure reinforces that authenticity is not a fixed trait but a situated, strategic process shaped by multiple inputs and refined through lived experience.

Unlike in focused coding, where the focused coded category *Tensions of Identity at Work*, had the focused code *Negotiating Split Selves* sitting as a bridging category, the final conceptual model took the elevated conceptual category *Navigating Split Selves* and situated it within the internal processes domain to reflect its origin in personal identity tensions rather than a structural or relational positioning.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the full trajectory of data analysis, moving from initial open coding through focused coding and ultimately culminating in the construction of a final

conceptual model. Starting with 231 open codes generated from 16 in-depth interviews, the coding process was guided by constant comparison and iterative memo writing, resulting in 43 refined open codes. These codes were then grouped into eight emergent thematic categories, which served as a bridge to focused coding.

Through focused coding, 21 key codes were developed, each representing significant thematic patterns in how participants understood and enacted authenticity in the workplace. These were organized into nine core categories, each supported by participant experiences. The final analytic stage translated these insights into a conceptual framework: *Strategizing Authenticity at Work*. The model presents authenticity as a strategic, context-responsive, and emotionally consequential process shaped by four interdependent domains. This process-oriented theory lays the foundation for a deeper understanding and practical application. The next chapter will discuss these findings in the context of existing literature, highlighting this study's contributions to authenticity, identity management, and workplace behavior.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Recommendations, and Conclusion

Chapter Overview

This chapter provides an in-depth discussion of the results presented in Chapter 4 and situates them within the broader literature on authenticity, the self, and workplace behavior. Drawing from the constructivist grounded theory analysis of 16 interviews, the core theoretical contribution of this study is the concept of *Strategizing Authenticity at Work*—a dynamic, context-sensitive process in which individuals navigate how, when, and to what extent to be authentic in the workplace.

In this chapter, I interpret the significance of this core category and its surrounding conceptual components, exploring what these findings suggest about how people experience and demonstrate authenticity at work. I discuss how the results align with, depart from, or extend theoretical models, including those proposed by Kernis and Goldman (2006), Wood et al. (2008), and Avolio and Gardner (2005). In particular, I address how this study challenges static or overly individualistic views of authenticity, offering a more nuanced, interactional, and strategic perspective that is informed by both internal convictions and external constraints. This framing represents the most significant theoretical contribution of the study: the grounded theory of *Strategizing Authenticity at Work*. By advancing this process-oriented model, the study reconceptualizes authenticity not as a fixed or individual possession, but as a co-constructed, contextually responsive, and strategically managed phenomenon. While additional contributions are discussed throughout the chapter, the central advance lies in repositioning authenticity as a dynamic practice that is simultaneously shaped by the self, others, and organizational conditions.

This chapter is structured in the following sections:

- Discussion of Results: This section examines how participants described and enacted authenticity at work, integrating gender, life stage, and entrepreneurial versus corporate role differences that emerged in the data. This section also explores how participants actively managed their authenticity through self-regulation, situational discernment, and interpersonal engagement.
- Adherence to Existing Literature: This section identifies areas where findings are consistent with prior research and reinforce key theoretical constructs, while clarifying their practical implications in the workplace setting.
- Departure from Existing Literature: This section highlights the ways in which the findings challenge or complicate prevailing models of authenticity, particularly those that present authenticity as a stable trait or purely intrapsychic phenomenon.
- Addressing Gaps in the Literature: Key gaps identified in Chapter 2 are revisited, including definitional inconsistencies and an overreliance on quantitative methods. This section illustrates how this study helps fill those gaps with grounded, process-oriented insights.
- Implications for Theory and Practice: This section explores how the findings can inform future theory-building and practical applications, especially in leadership, organizational development, and employee well-being. Additional considerations include the implications of current sociopolitical trends, including the rollback of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) policies, on the expression of authenticity at work.
- Recommendations for Future Research: This section proposes new avenues of inquiry that stem from the study's results, including further exploration of identity intersectionality, contextual influences, and evolving meanings of authenticity.

- Study Limitations: I reflect on methodological and interpretative constraints, including the use of a relatively small, context-specific sample, the influence of the researcher's positionality in co-constructing the data, and the limited scope for broad generalizability, which is consistent with constructivist grounded theory's emphasis on theoretical rather than statistical generalization.
- Conclusion: Key contributions of the study are summarized, as well as emphasis on its theoretical, methodological, and practical significance in advancing the understanding of authenticity in contemporary work settings.

Taken together, these components offer a comprehensive discussion of the theoretical contribution of *Strategizing Authenticity at Work* and its relevance to the evolving landscape of work, identity, and human experience.

Discussion of Results

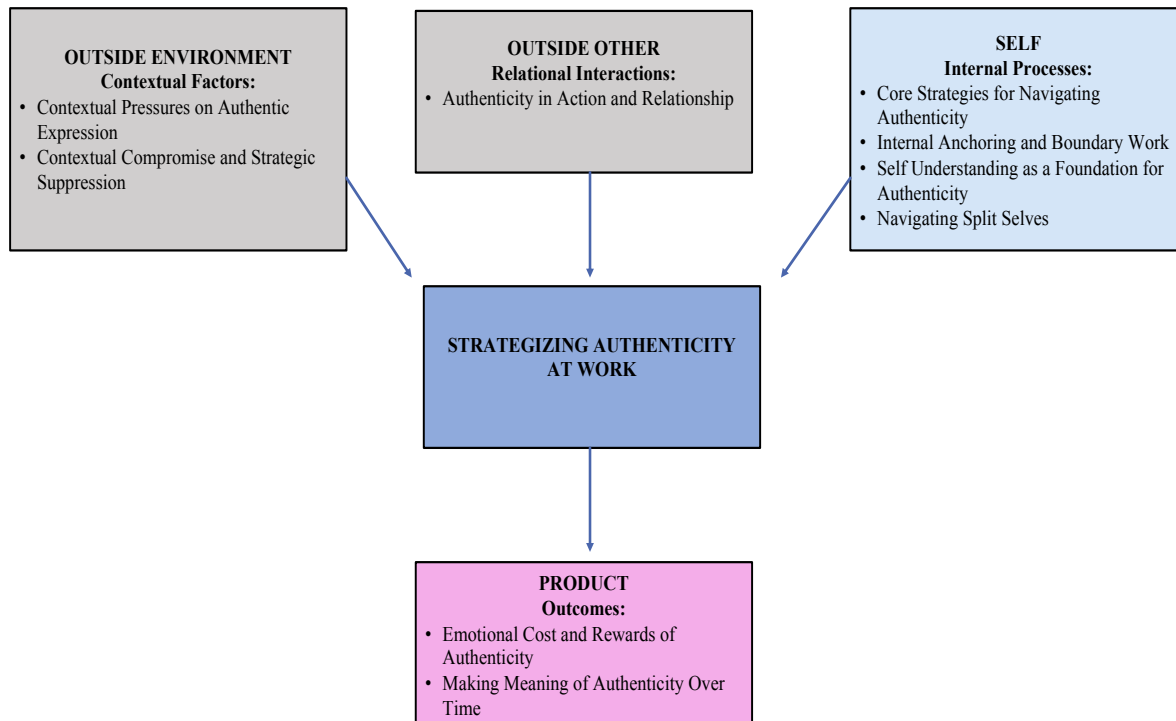
This section begins by exploring how participants described and navigated authenticity at work, drawing attention to the situational strategies, emotional labor, and identity dynamics embedded in their experiences. The findings are interpreted through the lens of the final conceptual model, *Strategizing Authenticity at Work*, and considered in relation to relevant theoretical frameworks and contextual variables such as gender, life stage, and professional role.

Authenticity at work, as revealed through participants' experiences, is neither static nor absolute. Instead, it unfolds as a deeply contextual and strategic process—an ongoing negotiation between internal values, external expectations, and the dynamic realities of professional life. This grounded theory, conceptualized as *Strategizing Authenticity at Work*, offers a more nuanced view of authenticity as something that is managed, adapted, and recalibrated rather than simply “expressed.” Participants did not treat authenticity as an innate trait or ideal to be fully

lived out in every context, but as a layered and emotionally intelligent practice shaped by identity, power, timing, and circumstance. Figure 5 is a reference to the remaining discussion.

Figure 5

Strategizing Authenticity at Work



The final conceptual model presents *Strategizing Authenticity at Work* as a dynamic process shaped by three key domains: the outside environment (contextual factors), outside others (relational interactions), and the self (internal processes), all of which ultimately lead to discernible outcomes, such as emotional consequences and making meaning of authenticity. This section explores each of the nine conceptual categories through this structure, showing how authenticity is co-constructed across these layers.

Contextual Factors

Across the narratives, participants described how workplace structures and cultures often created pressure to conform to specific behavioral norms or emotional scripts. These *Contextual Pressures on Authentic Expression* significantly influenced how, when, and whether individuals felt able to be authentic. Such pressures were heightened for those with marginalized or intersectional identities, who faced double binds when their values, communication styles, or cultural backgrounds diverged from the dominant professional structure (L. M. Roberts & Cha, 2014). Participants described modulating their tone, filtering language, or masking emotions as means of navigating these demands – not out of deception, but as protective strategies.

Many participants navigated *Contextual Compromise and Strategic Suppression* when authenticity threatened their psychological safety, advancement, or inclusion. Suppressing parts of their identity or adjusting their behavior was described not as falseness, but as an intentional act of survival, discernment, or professional navigation. For those from marginalized identities, suppression was a regular and often necessary tool. This nuance complicates traditional views of inauthenticity, instead offering a compassionate framing that aligns to L. M. Roberts' (2005) work on code-switching and the protective function of masking in identity-suppressing environments.

Relational Interactions

Relational dynamics further shaped participants' capacity for authentic expression. *Authenticity in Action and Relationship* was especially salient in trusted interpersonal environments where vulnerability and mutual respect were present. Participants emphasized that authenticity in relationships was not automatic—it had to be earned and co-created through safety and reciprocity. These findings support the relational framing of authenticity in organizational scholarship (Ibarra, 2015) and align with research showing that authenticity thrives when

interpersonal risk is minimized and trust is high (Brown, 2005; Edmondson, 1999; Goffee & Jones, 2005; L. M. Roberts, 2005).

Internal Processes

In response to these constraints, individuals actively employed *Core Strategies for Navigating Authenticity*. Rather than assuming authenticity required full openness, participants described adapting how much of themselves to reveal based on trust, risk, and role expectations. Trust played a central role in these calculations in that participants were more willing to express vulnerability, disclose personal values, or share dissenting views when they sensed psychological safety with colleagues or leaders. Conversely, the absence of trust often led to withdrawal, guardedness, or surface-level engagement. Risk was evaluated both emotionally and professionally: participants considered the potential consequences of being misinterpreted, labeled, or penalized, especially when their authentic perspectives diverged from dominant cultural norms or organizational expectations. Role expectations added another layer of complexity as individuals often felt pressure to conform to implicit scripts tied to leadership, service, or client-facing positions. Many described feeling constrained to perform professionalism in ways that muted personal expression or aligned with stereotypical images of competence. This strategic flexibility was often informed by previous experiences of being misunderstood, judged, or excluded. Their reflections challenge rigid models of authenticity, such as Kernis and Goldman's (2006) conceptualization of stable, self-congruent functioning. Instead, support an understanding of authenticity as a situationally responsive process shaped by context and intention, as participants consistently adjusted their expression in response to perceived social cues, relational dynamics, and the anticipated consequences of being real.

Participants' ability to make such discerning choices was closely tied to an inner sense of grounding. Many described *Internal Anchoring and Boundary Work*—relying on personal values, emotional regulation, and practices like mindfulness to maintain integrity even when outward behaviors had to shift. These inner resources helped participants avoid internal dissonance when their external actions were necessarily adapted. These practices echo Cranton and Carusetta's (2004) view that authenticity involves consistent self-reflection and emotional alignment, particularly in high-stakes or value-conflicting environments, and participants' use of mindfulness and internal boundary work reflects this ongoing process of reconciling internal values with external demands.

Many participants emphasized that knowing themselves—*Self-Understanding as a Foundation of Authenticity*—was a prerequisite to enacting authenticity. For some, this self-understanding was intuitive and longstanding; for others, it was forged through trials and error, therapy, feedback, or life transitions. Participants described, how earlier in their careers, they often conformed to external expectations, only later realizing that these performances eroded their sense of fulfillment. Over time, they refined their sense of who they were and what they stood for, supporting the idea that authenticity evolves through development of identity work (McAdams, 2001).

For some, authenticity was further complicated by *Navigating Split Selves*—the tension between how they saw themselves internally and the role they performed externally. Participants described carrying dual identities: one that was genuine but reserved, and another that was public-facing and acceptable to dominant cultural expectations. Rather than viewing this split as inauthentic, many saw it as necessary for maintaining emotional integrity across different social

environments. This illustrates that authenticity is not always about integration, but about navigating fragmentation with awareness and intention.

Outcomes

The act of being authentic was not without cost. Participants frequently discussed *Emotional Cost and Reward of Authenticity*, with candid expression offering both empowerment and exposure. Authenticity sometimes fostered deep connection and a sense of alignment; other times, it resulted in vulnerability, exclusion, or emotional exhaustion. These dual outcomes illustrate that authenticity is not emotionally neutral. As Hochschild (1983) described her work on emotional labor, the process of regulating one's emotional display of professional purposes can take a toll—even when grounded in self-expression.

Despite these constraints, participants also described *Meaning Making of Authenticity Over Time*—a process of reinterpretation and narrative revision. As their careers evolved, so too did their understanding of what it meant to be authentic. Authenticity came to be seen not as being fully known by everyone, but as feeling at peace with one's choices in expression and protection. This meaning-making was shaped by experience, aging, career transitions, and shifting values, supporting life-span approaches to identity and meaning (McLean et al., 2016).

Additional Insights

These findings also reveal how life stage, gender, and role context influence authenticity. Women, especially in leadership roles, described heightened emotional labor, strategic tone management, and pressure to conform to stereotypical expectations of professionalism (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). Participants of color shared the emotional tax of managing stereotypes, racialized visibility, and identity performance. Entrepreneurs expressed more freedom and consistency in their authentic expression, often because they could shape their work

environments. In contrast, those in traditional corporate roles described greater restriction, surveillance, and impression management. Participants in later stages of life or career demonstrated more comfort and flexibility in their authenticity strategies, while those earlier in their careers voiced stronger concern about belonging, credibility, and navigating ambiguous expectations.

Collectively, these insights suggest that authenticity is not a static state or moral imperative—it is a complex, evolving, and situational process. *Strategizing Authenticity at Work* captures this multidimensionality, revealing that authenticity is both internally grounded and externally responsive. It involves continuous reflection, emotional labor, and identity negotiation. Strategic suppression and selective expression are not deviations from authenticity; they are expressions of it such that it is signaling agency, clarity, and resilience in the face of power, pressure, and risk. These findings not only expand prior conceptualizations of authenticity, but also raise important questions about how researchers and practitioners engage with authenticity theory and workplace policy in diverse and evolving contexts.

Addressing the Research Questions

The grounded theory, *Strategizing Authenticity at Work*, directly responds to the central and sub-research questions that guided this inquiry. The conceptual model and its nine interrelated components illustrate how authenticity is not simply a trait or fixed identity but a dynamic process of negotiation, discernment, and adaptation shaped by internal values, external conditions, and relational interactions.

Research Question 1 (Focal Question): How Do People Demonstrate Authenticity at Work?

Participants demonstrated authenticity through a range of strategic behaviors and internal processes. These included situational discernment, emotional regulation, boundary-setting, and

relational engagement. The findings revealed that authenticity was enacted differently depending on the level of psychological safety, professional role, and perceived identity risks. For example, in the category *Authenticity in Action and Relationship*, participants emphasized the importance of trust and reciprocity in choosing when and how to be authentic with others (Edmondson, 1999; Ibarra, 2015). Meanwhile, the category *Core Strategies for Navigating Authenticity* illustrated the importance of selective self-disclosure and adaptive presentation, particularly in high-stakes or exclusionary environments.

Research Question 2 (Sub-Question): How Do They Understand Authenticity?

Participants came to understand authenticity through an internal process of self-reflection, identity development, and reconciliation of inner tensions. The category *Self-Understanding as a Foundation for Authenticity* captured how participants clarified their values, priorities, and personal histories in ways that shaped their evolving sense of self and authenticity (Cranton & Carusetta, 2004; Kernis & Goldman, 2006). Rather than seeing authenticity as a fixed or inherent quality, participants described it as something discovered and clarified over time through intentional reflection. The category *Navigating Split Selves* further highlighted how participants made sense of authenticity in moments of internal conflict—particularly when facing competing versions of themselves across different contexts. These tensions prompted a deeper examination of personal congruence, leading participants to sharpen their awareness of when they felt most real or disconnected. Together, these categories show that understanding authenticity is a developmental and iterative process rooted in identity work and internal alignment.

Research Question 3 (Sub-Question): What Does It Mean To Be Authentic?

Authenticity, as described by participants, was not a static trait or moral ideal, but an evolving state of alignment between self-perception and situational behavior. The categories *Self-Understanding as a Foundation for Authenticity* and *Internal Anchoring and Boundary Work* demonstrated that authenticity begins with internal clarity, such that knowing one's values, limits, and identity. And this is maintained through ongoing reflection and boundary management (Cranton & Carusetta, 2004). Participants also engaged in *Making Meaning of Authenticity* over time, illustrating how authenticity was interpreted and reinterpreted across different life stages, roles, and experiences. This meaning-making process emphasized that authenticity is deeply contextual and must be continually negotiated in response to shifting personal and professional realities (Kernis & Goldman, 2006; McLean et al., 2016; L. M. Roberts, 2005).

These findings reinforce the view that authenticity is not merely expressed as a fixed truth of the self, but is continuously managed, adapted, and recalibrated in response to internal convictions, external expectations, and relationships. Rather than authenticity being a one-time act of disclosure, participants described a process of ongoing alignment in which they adjusted their presentations and decisions in ways that honored both personal values and situational demands. This reframing moves beyond essentialist or static definitions of authenticity and reflects the complex, strategic nature of being real in today's work environments (Ibarra, 2015; McLean et al., 2016; L. M. Roberts, 2005).

Adherence to the Literature

While this study introduces new dimensions to the understanding of authenticity, several findings align closely with existing research, offering validation for established frameworks. Most notably, the centrality of self-awareness as a precursor to authentic expression affirms one

of the foundational components in Kernis and Goldman's (2006) model of authentic functioning. Participants emphasized the importance of knowing their values, emotional boundaries, and identity markers before they could act in ways that felt authentic. This supports the idea that clarity of the self is a necessary foundation for navigating authenticity, regardless of role or context.

This study also reinforces findings from Wood et al. (2008), who framed authenticity as a state-like phenomenon—one that can fluctuate across time and settings—rather than a stable trait. Participants described “growing into” their authenticity or adjusting it based on environment, role, and life stage. Their narratives support the argument that authenticity is contextually and developmentally contingent, confirming that individuals do not either possess or lack authenticity, but instead engage in ongoing processes of alignment and realignment. The distinction between trait and state authenticity was further emphasized in participants' discussion of evolving strategies, where maturity and reflective practice led to more grounded, values-based decisions over time. These accounts echo Lenton, Bruder, et al. (2013), who described authenticity as an internal alignment that can emerge or recede depending on situational fit. Yet, this study goes further by embedding those fluctuations in sociocultural and organizational dynamics, highlighting that authenticity is not just transient—it is relationally and structurally shaped.

In line with prior research on value congruence, participants in this study experienced positive psychological outcomes—such as fulfillment, emotional ease, and clarity—when their workplace environment aligned with their personal values (Cable & DeRue, 2002; Schlegel et al., 2009). They also reported discomfort and internal conflict when that alignment was missing. These emotional markers echo SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which posits that authentic behavior is

linked to satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Several participants described increased motivation and well-being when they expressed themselves without fear of judgment or repercussion, especially in psychologically safe or supportive environments. This connection between authenticity and psychological safety echoes Edmondson's (1999) work on team learning climates, suggesting that environmental cues powerfully enable and suppress authentic expression.

Further, the finding that authenticity strengthens interpersonal trust and connection is consistent with literature emphasizing the relational benefits of authentic expression. Participants noted that being authentic allowed them to build deeper relationships, foster team cohesion, and model vulnerability when they were in leadership positions. This echoes Goffee and Jones's (2005) assertion that authenticity can be a form of "emotional resonance" in leadership, deepening trust and engagement. The category *Authenticity in Action and Relationship* exemplifies this relational dynamic and supports the idea that authenticity can enhance both individual and team performance when strategically enacted.

Additionally, the concept of boundary-setting as an authentic act aligns with feminist and relational authenticity frameworks, which recognize that protecting one's emotional, cultural, and psychological integrity is itself a form of authenticity (Brown, 2005; Cranton & Carusetta, 2004). Participants in this study frequently described authenticity not as a radical transparency but as the ability to discern what to share, with whom, and when—a form of "bounded authenticity" that reflects maturity, wisdom, and self-respect. This finding reinforces the view that authenticity is not synonymous with full exposure, but is often expressed through intentional boundaries that honor both the self and the context. This nuanced interpretation parallels Ghorbani et al. (2010), who found that individuals in collectivist cultures engage in strategic

boundary work that still aligns with authentic identity. It is also worth noting that research cautions that the full exposure model of authenticity may carry risks, including social backlash, professional costs, or the erosion of credibility when self-expression is not attuned to the context (Cable et al., 2013; Ibarra, 2015). Indeed, cultural discourses often label blunt disclosure as authentic as in the political rhetoric surrounding figures like the current sitting president of the United States, yet such cases highlight that perceptions of authenticity are socially constructed and can valorize exposure even when it is polarizing or strategically performative (Enli, 2015; Gaden & Dumitrica, 2015).

Finally, this study supports the growing research that highlights the role of emotional cues and embodied awareness in guiding authentic behavior. Several participants shared that their bodies often “knew” when they were being inauthentic—through sensations like tension, fatigue, or emotional heaviness—before they consciously recognized the dissonance. These insights parallel somatic research on authenticity (Price, 2017; Rivera & Tracy, 2014), where bodily awareness acts as an internal signal that something is misaligned. In this way, emotional and physical intuition serve as a feedback loop that informs authenticity strategy, consistent with embodied approaches to identity work. This somatic sensitivity complements the psychological model of “felt authenticity” (Goldman & Kernis, 2002), suggesting that bodily and emotional awareness may precede and shape cognitive clarity about one’s authentic stance.

Taken together, these points of convergence suggest that while authenticity is a complex and evolving process, it still rests on core psychological principles established in the literature—self-awareness, value alignment, emotional regulation, and relational integrity. This study builds on these foundations by adding nuance to how individuals enact and revise authenticity across contexts, and by demonstrating that strategic adaptation is not a contradiction of authenticity, but

often a necessary and sophisticated expression of it. In this way, the findings do not reject existing theory—they extend it, offering a more conceptualized and agentic account of how authenticity is practiced in diverse organizational environments.

Departure from the Literature

The findings from this study depart meaningfully from dominant frameworks that conceptualize authenticity as a stable trait or universal good. Traditional models, such as those proposed by Kernis and Goldman (2006), define authentic functioning through four components—self-awareness, unbiased processing, relational orientation, and authentic behavior—suggesting a relatively fixed internal state that guides consistent expression. Similarly, Avolio and Gardner’s (2005) model of authentic leadership emphasizes transparency, self-regulation, and moral perspective as consistent leader behaviors. Yet, across participants’ narratives in this study, authenticity was not experienced as a trait or moral position—it was described as a strategy, actively adjusted in response to role demands, psychological safety, interpersonal dynamics, and timing. This reconceptualization of authenticity as strategic and adaptive moves from fixed notions of trait authenticity, suggesting that individuals exercise discernment, not deficit, when choosing how and when to express their authentic selves.

Rather than suggesting a universal expression of the “true self,” participants revealed that being authentic often required selective expression, calculated withholding, and boundary-setting based on perceived risk and workplace norms. These findings suggest authenticity is not solely an individual possession, but a relational accomplishment to which it is the product of interaction in which the self is co-constructed with others and shaped by contextual expectations (Charmaz, 2014; Mead, 1934; L. M. Roberts, 2005; Vannini & Williams, 2009). This challenges the often-idealized notion of authenticity as “being yourself” in a pure and continuous manner. Participants

described an evolving and contextually responsive authenticity—one that required self-awareness, yes, but also discernment about when and how to express the self in different organizational settings. These findings suggest that existing trait-based or moralistic models may not adequately account for how authenticity is practiced—particularly by individuals navigating complex or inequitable workplace systems. Some state-based psychological models, such as Lenton, Bruder, et al. (2013), conceptualize authenticity as fluctuating inner experience triggered by specific self-expressive acts. While these models acknowledge momentary variation, they still underplay the structural and social forces that influence when and how people feel safe enough to be authentic, overlooking how authenticity itself emerges through interaction with others and the environment. The current study demonstrates that authentic expression is not only situational, but relational and power sensitive—further complicating both trait and state paradigms.

This study also diverges from much of the quantitative literature that emphasizes linear measurable relationships between authenticity and outcomes such as engagement, job satisfaction, or performance (Leroy et al., 2012; van den Bosch & Taris, 2014). In contrast, the qualitative accounts here demonstrate that authenticity is not always experienced as psychologically beneficial. Participants described emotional fatigue, fragmentation, or backlash when expressing their authentic selves in unsupportive environments—outcomes that complicate assumptions that authenticity is universally positive. These findings challenge Wood et al.'s (2008) claim that self-alienation is necessarily detrimental and instead suggest that strategic withholding of authenticity may at times be psychologically protective and professionally necessary. This reframes authenticity not only as a desired state, but as a conditional and risk-laden endeavor—one that can support or undermine well-being depending on context.

Furthermore, participants' experiences of *Navigating Split Selves* and *Contextual Compromise and Strategic Suppression* diverge from frameworks that treat inauthenticity as solely harmful or indicative of low integrity. Instead, inauthenticity was sometimes used deliberately to protect professional standing or emotional safety, particularly by women, people of color, and individuals from working-class backgrounds navigating dominant cultural norms. This aligns with L. M. Roberts (2005), who emphasized "identity negotiation" as a core function of workplace survival for marginalized employees. This disrupts the binary framing of authentic vs. inauthentic behavior and instead highlights the adaptive complexity of identity navigation at work. These findings resonate more closely with post-structural and critical perspectives (e.g., L. M. Roberts et al., 2009), which argue that authenticity must be understood in relation to power, social identity, and systematic constraints. Participants described a need to manage impression or code-switch to align with dominant organizational norms, further disrupting the assumption that authenticity is merely about self-expression.

The data also complicates the construct of authentic leadership by demonstrating that authenticity is not inherently granted by positional power. While some participants in leadership roles felt they had more freedom to be authentic, others felt increased pressure to mask emotions, regulate expression, or project confidence at the expense of inner truth. These realities underscore the limitations of idealized leadership models that overlook how authenticity is constrained by organizational culture, role expectations, and identity dynamics. This study thus extends critiques of Avolio and Gardner's (2005) model by showing that transparency and moral clarity may not always be safe and feasible in contexts shaped by hierarchy, politics, or cultural marginalization.

Finally, the evolving and time-sensitive nature of authenticity described by participants—especially in the category *Making Meaning of Authenticity Over Time*—departs from static models that suggest a development trajectory. Rather than assuming authenticity is achieved once self-awareness is present, these findings position authenticity as continually renegotiated in response to personal growth, shifting values, and changing work environments. This longitudinal, narrative-based view aligns with identity development theories such as McAdam's (2001) and Ibarra's (1999), which posited that authenticity is constructed through self-reflection, role experimentation, and meaning-making over time. Such framing acknowledges that people may not only express but also redefine their authenticity throughout their careers.

In sum, these findings depart from much of authenticity literature by revealing that authenticity is not merely about truth-telling or consistency—it is about strategic alignment, contextual judgment, and emotional management. This shift from viewing authenticity as a moral ideal to a practiced, dynamic strategy represents a significant theoretical advancement. It urges researchers to reconceptualize authenticity not as a fixed identity expression, but as a relational and reflexive identity work shaped by structural context. Importantly, this reframing accounts for identity complexity—how individuals carry multiple, intersecting identities that influence both their experience of authenticity and the strategies they employ to maintain or withhold it. Participants navigated tensions between race, gender, class, and professional identity, often needing to prioritize or suppress aspects of self depending on the setting, audience, or perceived risk. This multidimensional view of identity suggests that authenticity cannot be fully understood without attending to how identity categories interact with power, belonging, and vulnerability at work. They call for a reexamination of existing theory to better

account for the realities of navigating authenticity amid structural pressures, role constraints, and identity complexity.

Addressing Gaps in the Literature

Despite growing interest in authenticity as a workplace construct, the existing literature has long been marked by definitional inconsistency, conceptual ambiguity, and methodological limitations. One of the most significant gaps this study addresses is the lack of agreement of what authenticity actually means. Prior models have tended to define authenticity either as a trait rooted in personality (Goldman & Kernis, 2002), as a set of leadership behaviors (Avolio & Garner, 2005), or as a moral or psychological ideal (Rogers, 1961). Yet few frameworks have accounted for how individuals themselves understand, negotiate, or strategize authenticity within dynamic workplace settings. This study contributes a more grounded, contextualized, and flexible understanding of authenticity—one shaped by lived experiences, power dynamics, and evolving self-concepts.

By generating theory from qualitative data rather than imposing top-down constructs, this study responds to calls for empirically grounded, inductive approaches to understanding authenticity (Alvesson & Einola, 2019; Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Dey et al., 2021; Erickson, 1995; Ford & Harding, 2011; Gardner et al., 2011; Harter, 2002; Shamir & Eilam, 2005). Much of the existing literature is heavily reliant on quantitative, survey-based methodologies that treat authenticity as a static variable to be measured and correlated with other organizational outcomes. While such studies provide breadth, they often lack the depth necessary to capture the nuances, tensions, and contradictions of how people actually experience authenticity in the workplace. This study not only addresses methodological gaps by using qualitative inquiry, but also advances the field through its use of constructivist grounded theory, which centers the co-

construction of meaning between participant and researcher. Unlike traditional grounded theory, CGT acknowledges the researcher's subjectivity and uses reflexivity as a strength in theory-building (Charmaz, 2014). This approach was particularly well-suited to unpack the nuanced and evolving nature of authenticity, as it allowed emergent themes to remain close to participants' lived experiences rather than being forced into preexisting theoretical boxes.

This study also fills a critical void by exploring authenticity from a bottom-up, non-leader-centric lens. Much of authenticity literature, particularly in organizational contexts, has focused on leaders—often White, male, and positioned within corporate hierarchies—while neglecting the experiences of individual contributors, early-career professionals, and those navigating cultural marginalization. By including a diverse sample across identity, role, and career stage, this research broadens the discourse to reflect how power, privilege, and psychological safety influence the capacity to be authentic. In doing so, it responds to critiques that mainstream authenticity research lacks intersectional analysis and often ignores how social identity shapes the risks and rewards of self-expression (L. M. Roberts & Cha, 2014).

Moreover, this study captures a key nuance missing from past literature: that authenticity can be intentionally withheld or strategically compromised in ways that are not indicative of inauthenticity, but rather of discernment, power navigation, or professional survival. The participants' experiences reflect that authenticity is not a dichotomy of being “true” or “false,” but a constant balancing act shaped by perceived risk and social positioning. This adds complexity to the field's understanding of authenticity as both individual and relational act—one that is filtered through identity, access, and agency.

The study also addresses the lack of temporal and developmental perspectives in the literature. Few models have accounted for how authenticity evolves over time or in response to

personal and professional change. The conceptual category *Making Meaning of Authenticity Over Time* provides a direct response to this gap, showing how individuals revise and refine their understanding of authenticity through lived experience. This moves the field beyond binary notions of “authentic” vs. “inauthentic” toward a more nuanced view of identity development, strategic adaptation, and ongoing meaning-making.

In addition, this research contributes to the emerging critique of authenticity as universally positive or inherently empowering. While past studies have linked authenticity to well-being and engagement (Leroy et al., 2012; van de Bosch & Taris, 2014), participants in this study revealed emotional costs, relational risks, and contextual limitations of being authentic—especially in workplaces that lacked inclusion and penalized difference. The category *Contextual Compromise and Strategic Suppression* speaks directly to this, showing that inauthenticity is sometimes necessary and self-protective, rather than pathological or weak. This finding aligns with emerging scholarship that frames authenticity as situated, risky, and ethically complex, rather than unilaterally desirable (Costas & Fleming, 2009; Rivera & Tracy, 2014).

Finally, the model of *Strategizing Authenticity at Work* developed in this study offers a new theoretical contribution: a process-oriented, adaptive framework that emphasizes judgment, emotional intelligence, and contextual awareness. It reframes authenticity not as a personality trait or leadership brand, but as an active practice shaped by internal and external negotiation. This view aligns with relational perspectives of leadership, which conceptualize leadership as a social process co-created through interactions rather than a fixed property of individuals (Uhl-Bien, 2006). This strategic lens expands the field’s understanding of how people live out authenticity—especially in environments marked by role pressure, cultural dissonance, or institutional inequity. By addressing these limitations, this study not only fills theoretical gaps,

but also lays a foundation for future interventions in leadership development, organizational culture, and DEI strategy, where authenticity can no longer be treated as a one-size-fits-all construct, but must be understood through a contextual, relational, and adaptive lens.

In sum, this study helps fill important gaps in the literature by offering a participant-centered, development, intersectional, and emotionally grounded account of authenticity at work. It moves beyond simplistic or idealized models to show how individuals actively construct, suppress, and revise authenticity in response to the complexities of organizational life. In doing so, it provides scholars with an empirical roadmap for how authenticity is demonstrated in lived experience rather than assumed through theory.

Implications for Practice and Theory

This section explores how the grounded theory developed in this study can be applied in real-world organizational contexts and inform future theoretical development. It considers practical interventions, structural challenges, and conceptual shifts needed to support more authentic workplace experiences.

The emergent theory of *Strategizing Authenticity at Work* carries important implications for both practitioners and scholars. It reframes authenticity not as a static trait or aspirational state, but as a dynamic, adaptive practice shaped by internal awareness, social identity, relational context, and organizational culture. These findings call for a rethinking of how authenticity is understood, supported, and enacted within professional environments.

Implications for Practice

For practitioners—particularly organizational leaders, HR professionals, DEI strategists, and executive coaches—the study highlights that authenticity is not simply about bringing one’s “whole self” to work. Rather, it involves continuous negotiation, discernment, and emotional

regulation. Creating conditions that support authentic expressions begins with fostering psychological safety. Employees are more likely to engage authentically when they feel they will not be punished for vulnerability, difference, or value-based expression. Leaders play a crucial role in shaping this environment by modeling openness, consistency, and inclusive decision-making. Additionally, organizations must provide tools and spaces for identity reflection, especially as authenticity evolves across roles, life stages, and personal development. Coaching, mentoring, and inclusive leadership practices can help employees articulate and refine their own definitions of authenticity, empowering them to make more values-aligned choices in their daily work.

The findings are particularly urgent in light of the current political climate, where recent government directives have encouraged organizations to scale back or eliminate DEI programs. Such rollbacks may have chilling effects on psychological safety and self-expression, particularly for women, people of color, disabled employees, and individuals from culturally marginalized groups. As this study shows, many participants already experienced constraints around self-expression in unsupportive environments. Weakening institutional support for inclusion may amplify these pressures and contribute to emotional exhaustion, strategic suppression, and organizational disengagement.

Practitioners must recognize that the erosion of DEI infrastructure is not merely a policy change—it is a cultural shift that may directly impact employees' ability to be authentic and psychologically well at work. This includes recognizing the risk of “performative authenticity,” where employees are expected to display vulnerability or personal truth without adequate support as well as shifting toward models that reward boundary-setting and emotional discernment as valid expressions of authenticity.

In addition, leadership development programs must move beyond one-dimensional definitions of authenticity. While transparency and moral clarity are often emphasized, this study reveals that authenticity also involves boundary-setting, situational discernment, and emotional intelligence. Leadership curricula should incorporate the complexities of relational trust, cultural difference, and ethical tension as core components of authentic practice. Similarly, organizations can learn from the contrasting experiences of entrepreneurs in this study, who described greater alignment between personal values and professional identity due to higher autonomy. This suggests organizational design and hierarchy also influence whether employees feel empowered to act authentically. Considering flatter structures, offering choice in role design, and allowing greater input into team norms can all serve to support authenticity in diverse ways. Creating more flexible, decentralized, or mission-aligned work structures may help cultivate a climate where authenticity is more attainable for a broader range of employees.

The shift to remote and hybrid work environments introduces new layers of complexity in strategizing authenticity. Participants in this study touched on how digital communication affects emotional expression, identity presentation, and interpersonal boundaries. Future practice should consider how platforms like Zoom, Slack, or email influence what forms of authenticity are legible, performative, or constrained. For example, tone is harder to interpret in text, while video calls may increase pressure to present a “polished” version of oneself. Leaders and teams will need to develop new norms of authentic communication in virtual spaces that balance professionalism with humanity. Training leaders to explicitly address communication levels with technology-mediated expression can support authentic connections across distance. Embedding rituals of relational connection, flexibility in self-presentation, and clearer expectations around emotional tone may support more authentic interactions across dispersed workforces.

Implications for Theory

From a theoretical standpoint, the study challenges dominant models that treat authenticity as a trait-based or leader-driven phenomenon. The findings call for a shift toward process-oriented models that emphasize meaning-making, contextual sensitivity, and identity negotiation. Traditional frameworks—such as those proposed by Kernis and Goldman (2006) or Avolio and Gardner (2005)—provide useful scaffolding, but often lack attention to social power, emotional complexity, and strategic adaptation. The model *Strategizing Authenticity at Work* adds a new dimension by showing how authenticity is constructed and revised in real time, as individuals assess internal signals, navigate external pressures, and weigh the emotional costs and benefits of being real. This suggests that scholars must move away from static or idealized understanding of authenticity and instead adopt models that emphasize adaptability, relational dynamics, and social location as key to understanding how authenticity unfolds.

Future theoretical development should also integrate embodied and narrative approaches, as participants in this study often described physical sensations, emotional cues, and retrospective storytelling as ways of recognizing authenticity. This aligns with emerging perspectives in somatic psychology and narrative identity theory, which argue that self-concept and authenticity are felt as much as they are known. Moreover, the study reinforces the need for authenticity models to incorporate intersectionality and systems thinking. Power, privilege, and social location deeply influence how authenticity is experienced, policed, or rewarded in organizational life. Any future theory of authenticity must contend with these dynamics if it hopes to capture the lived realities of today's diverse workforce. This also includes reexamining core assumptions in existing models. For example, the idea that authentic behavior is always prosocial or morally "good" may need to be revised to accommodate the nuanced strategies

individuals employ to protect themselves in inequitable contexts. Models of authenticity should account for both congruence and constraint—including when strategic inauthenticity is the most adaptive, self-preserving choice.

Finally, the study raises both practical and theoretical questions around how authenticity is promoted in organizational life, particularly the ethical tension between invitation and coercion. Encouraging authenticity must not become a managerial expectation that pressures employees—especially those with marginalized identities—to disclose personal truths in unsafe environments. Scholars and practitioners alike must attend to the fine line between inviting authenticity and exploiting it. Theorizing authenticity ethically means recognizing that it cannot be universally enacted or equally valued in all spaces. This calls for a critical examination of power dynamics and an understanding that silence, boundary-setting, or strategic inauthenticity may themselves be authentic responses to oppressive contexts.

Overall, the findings offer a revised lens on authenticity—one that is emotionally grounded, strategically enacted, and socially embedded. For practitioners, supporting authenticity requires more than encouragement; it demands structural inclusion, leadership accountability, and flexible work design. For scholars, advancing authenticity theory means rethinking traditional binaries and exploring complexity, contradiction, and adaptation as core elements of what it means to be real at work.

Recommendations for Future Research

As the findings of this study reveal the layered, strategic, and often constrained nature of authenticity at work, several directions for future inquiry emerge. The following recommendations propose ways to build on this work by deepening our understanding of

authenticity's complexity across identities, contexts, and evolving cultural conditions while also addressing critical gaps in existing literature.

The findings of this study suggest multiple avenues for future research aimed at deepening and expanding understanding of authenticity as a lived, strategic, and contextually influenced process. First, future studies should continue to explore authenticity as a dynamic and adaptive phenomenon, rather than a fixed trait or ideal state. Longitudinal qualitative research could examine how individuals' strategies for authenticity change over time, across roles, or in response to critical incidents such as promotions, burnout, or organizational restructuring. Such work could enrich theoretical models by incorporating the temporal and developmental nature of authenticity uncovered in this study.

Second, additional research is needed to investigate how social identity—particularly gender, race, disability status, sexual orientation, and cultural background—influences access to authentic expression at work. Participants in this study highlight how authenticity is often constrained for those navigating systemic barriers or operating in predominantly White, male, heteronormative spaces. Future studies could employ intersectional and critical frameworks (e.g., critical race theory, queer theory, feminist organizational studies) to better understand how authenticity is policed, interpreted, or rewarded differently across identity groups. Such research would provide a more inclusive and justice-oriented perspective on workplace authenticity.

The study's findings also indicate that organizational context and leadership practices play a major role in shaping whether authenticity is welcomed or punished. Future research could examine how psychological safety, inclusive leadership, or HR policies impact individuals' authenticity strategies. Specifically, researchers might explore whether certain cultures — such as startup cultures, mission-driven nonprofits, or high-bureaucracy corporations—

enable or constrain authentic behavior in unique ways. Comparative studies across industries or cultural contexts would provide a richer understanding of authenticity as both a psychological and a structural phenomenon.

A particularly urgent area for exploration involves the impact of political and institutional shifts on authenticity in the workplace, especially in light of recent calls to dismantle or reverse DEI efforts. Under the current U.S. presidential administration, guidance has been issued urging organizations to scale back or eliminate DEI initiatives—rhetoric and action that can directly threaten the emotional safety and expressive freedom of marginalized employees. Future research should explore how such political climates influence employees' willingness to be authentic, particularly those with historically excluded identities. Studies might examine how anti-DEI sentiment translates into cultural silencing, code-switching, or increased identity suppression, and how employees navigate those tensions in real time.

Additionally, there is an opportunity to investigate how entrepreneurial and self-employed professionals experience authenticity differently from those in corporate or institutional roles. This study found that participants who owned businesses or had flexible work structures described higher levels of authentic alignment. Future research could explore how autonomy, self-branding, and control over work environments shape authenticity strategies, and whether entrepreneurs face a different set of pressures around self-presentation, especially on public platforms or in client-facing roles.

Methodologically, future work should continue expanding qualitative, participatory, and narrative-based methods that center employee voices rather than impose external definitions of authenticity. Research that includes storytelling, photo elicitation, diary studies, or co-constructed meaning-making could yield deeper insights into the lived complexity of authenticity

across identities and settings. Additionally, integrating embodied and somatic perspectives could further illuminate how authenticity is felt and interpreted through physical, emotional, and intuitive channels.

Finally, theoretical development should continue to challenge idealized models of authenticity by incorporating ambiguity, contradiction, and strategy into conceptual frameworks. As this study shows, authenticity is often messy, iterative, and laden with ethical tradeoffs. Models that acknowledge emotional labor, contextual compromise, and internal fragmentation will offer more accurate and inclusive representations of the modern workplace. In summary, future research on authenticity should be intersectional, context-sensitive, politically aware, and emotionally attuned. This reflects the full range of experience that workers bring to the act of being real in complex and shifting environments.

Study Limitations

As with all research, this study's findings must be considered within the context of its design and scope. The following section outlines key limitations related to sample characteristics, data collection methods, and interpretative processes. Acknowledging these boundaries provides important context for evaluating the transferability of the findings and identifying areas for future methodological refinement.

While this research offers a grounded and context-rich understanding of how individuals strategize authenticity at work, several limitations warrant acknowledgment. First, the study's relatively small sample size of 16 participants—though appropriate for constructivist grounded theory—does not allow for statistical generalizability. Instead, consistent with Charmaz (2006, 2014), the aim was to achieve theoretical generalizability and resonance by developing analytic categories that extend beyond the immediate sample. A broader sample may have introduced

additional perspectives or revealed alternative patterns. The participant pool, while diverse in some respects, was primarily composed of educated professionals in the United States. Greater representation across racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, neurodivergent, and LGBTQ+ identities could have further illuminated how authenticity is shaped by intersectional experiences of marginalization or privilege.

Additionally, the voluntary nature of participation introduces potential self-selection bias. Individuals who chose to participate may have been more attuned to issues of authenticity or more reflective about their workplace experiences than those who did not, potentially skewing the findings toward those with higher identity awareness or interest in the topic. Another important limitation lies in the interpretative nature of the research itself. As the researcher, my own positionality, experiences, and assumptions inevitably influenced the coding, categorization, and interpretation of participant narratives. While reflexivity and memo writing were intentionally integrated throughout the research process, it is important to recognize that, consistent with constructivist grounded theory, the findings are not simply discovered, but co-constructed. This emerges from the interplay between the participants' accounts and the researcher's interpretive lens. This reflexive acknowledgement, while true of all qualitative research to some degree, is particularly salient in a study centered on authenticity where meaning is contextually and relationally negotiated.

Moreover, because the data were derived from retrospective narrative accounts, participants may have unintentionally reconstructed or reframed their experiences through the lens of their current understanding. While this meaning-making is a natural part of how people process complex events, it may also involve selective memory, hindsight bias, or the omission of

contradictory experiences. These are not methodological flaws, but they do remind readers that participants' stories represent interpreted experiences rather than objective chronology.

The study also relied exclusively on interview data without incorporating observational or multimodal sources such as workplace observations, written reflections, or feedback from colleagues. Although interviews provided deep insight into participants' internal strategies and emotional realities, additional data could have offered opportunities for triangulation and revealed how authenticity is perceived or enacted in real-time workplace settings.

Contextually, the data were gathered during a period of heightened attention to identity, workplace belonging, and political shifts regarding DEI policy. This specific socio-political climate may have influenced how participants made sense of authenticity and workplace safety. Their strategies and perspectives may evolve in response to future cultural or organizational changes. Finally, while the study focused on workplace authenticity, many participants spoke about broader life contexts—including family, spirituality, and community—that were not explored in depth. Future research may benefit from examining how authenticity manifests across domains and how individuals integrate or compartmentalize their sense of self beyond the boundaries of professional life.

Despite these limitations, the depths and richness of participant narratives, combined with the analytical rigor of grounded theory, offer a strong contribution to the evolving discourse on authenticity. The findings should be understood as contextually situated insights that invite further investigation, rather than universally prescriptive conclusions.

Conclusion

This study advanced a grounded theory of *Strategizing Authenticity at Work*, offering a nuanced understanding of how individuals navigate the complex, emotionally charged, and

socially contingent process of being authentic in professional settings. Rather than treating authenticity as a static trait or idealized moral state, participants reveal that it is a dynamic and strategic endeavor—shaped by internal awareness, contextual constraints, and identity-based discernment. Through nine conceptual categories, the study illuminated how people assess risk, set boundaries, experience emotional consequences, and revise meaning over time as they attempt to align their inner and outer selves at work.

By situating these findings within and beyond existing literature, this study responds to gaps in definitional clarity, methodological diversity, and intersectional insight in authenticity research. It reframes inauthenticity not as failure, but as a sometimes necessary form of protection; it elevates emotional cues and embodied signals as data in navigating realness; and it asserts that authenticity is much a function of context as it is of character. The emergent model challenges individualistic and leader-centric authenticity paradigms, urging scholars and practitioners to reconsider how authenticity is made possible—or impossible with organizational and sociopolitical systems.

At a time when DEI policies are being rolled back, workplace cultures are under scrutiny, and identity expression remains fraught, the ability to authentically exist at work is more than a personal preference; rather, it is a matter of psychological safety, dignity, and systemic equity. This study contributes to a more inclusive, flexible, and reality-based theory of authenticity – one that makes space for nuance, contradiction, and evolution. It invites future research to explore authenticity not as a single state to be achieved, but as a process to be continually navigated, shaped by who we are, where we are, and what is at stake.

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Appendix A

Recruitment Flyer

Research Participants Wanted

IRB Protocol: IRB-FY24-697

My name is Nicole Olbie, and I am conducting a research study to fulfill the requirements for a Doctorate in the Business Psychology program at The Chicago School.

The purpose of this study is to explore and define the process of authenticity as experienced and enacted by individuals in their professional lives within the United States. By examining how individuals demonstrate authenticity within the work domain and how they define authenticity, this study seeks to uncover the common threads that anchor individuals back into their authenticity. Specifically, this research aims to identify the characteristics, qualities, and actions that comprise the authentic individual in today's context, shedding light on how authenticity and inauthenticity manifests in professional environments across different industries and regions in the U.S.

You may participate in this study if:

- A working professional who has been in the workforce for more than one year
- Either working for an organization or have their own business
- Work within the United States
- Within the age range of 18-70 years old

During this study, you will be asked to share your experiences as they relate to being authentic in a 60-75-minute interview format. Interviews will be conducted virtually via Zoom and will be video and audio recorded. All participation is voluntary.

If you are interested and/or have any questions, please contact me or my dissertation chair as noted below. Additionally, if you are aware of others that match the criteria and would be interested in participating in the study, please share this flyer information.

Nicole Olbie

nolbie@ego.thechicagoschool.edu

Dr. Noelle Newhouse

nnewhouse@thechicagoschool.edu

Appendix B

Screening Questions

- Workforce Experience: “Have you been working professionally for more than one year?”
- Employment Type: “Do you currently work for an organization or run your own business?”
- Location: “Do you currently work within the United States?”
- Age: “Are you between the ages of 18 and 70 years old?”

Appendix C**Oral Consent**

Informed Consent



Investigator(s): Nicole Olbie

Study Title: Being Authentic: A Grounded Theory Approach in Demonstrating Authenticity at Work

Hello, my name is Nicole Olbie.

I am a student at The Chicago School. This study is being conducted as a part of my dissertation requirement for the Business Psychology program. I am asking you to participate in a research study about what it means to be authentic. You will be asked to participate in a Zoom interview to answer questions related to your experiences with authenticity. This will take 60-75 minutes and will be completed in one session. Your confidentiality may be at risk. Although you may not benefit, it will help to understand the process that goes into being authentic in the work context and provide researchers in the field a clearer definition on what being authentic means.

Please listen to the entire script and feel free to ask any questions before giving your verbal consent to participate.

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to explore and define the process of authenticity as experienced and enacted by individuals in their professional lives within the United States. By examining how individuals demonstrate authenticity within the work domain and how they define authenticity, this study seeks to uncover the common threads that anchor individuals back into their authenticity. Specifically, this research aims to identify the characteristics, qualities,

and actions that comprise the authentic individual in today's context, shedding light on how authenticity and inauthenticity manifests in professional environments across different industries and regions in the U.S.

Procedures: During this study, your interview will be conducted virtually via Zoom. The interview will be 60-75 minutes. As a participant, you will only need to meet with me once for the interview. This is an oral script that will be read to you to which you will either agree or disagree. All virtual interviews will be video and audio recorded using the software provided by Zoom. Additionally, I will be using either paper and pen or a blank word document on the laptop to take notes. The recording will still be the primary use of retention of the information collected from the interview. Also, the recording of the interview will be deleted immediately following transcription.

The interview questions are designed to explore your experiences and perceptions of authenticity and inauthenticity in the workplace. They begin by asking you to reflect on specific instances where you have demonstrated authenticity or inauthenticity and the resulting outcomes, whether positive or negative. The questions then delve into your understanding of these concepts based on your lived experiences and how you navigate challenges related to authenticity at work, including external pressures and internal strategies. Additional questions examine how you balance authenticity and inauthenticity simultaneously, compare your experiences of authenticity in work and non-work settings, and consider the feasibility or expectations of being authentic in a professional environment. These open-ended questions aim to gain rich, in-depth insights into the processes and complexities involved in demonstrating authenticity in the workplace.

Risks to Participants: The primary risk of study participation is the potential loss of confidentiality. To minimize this risk, the following measures will be implemented: All

interviews will be conducted in a private and secure location. Recordings of the interviews will be stored on a password-protected laptop to which only I and my dissertation chair will have access. Personal identifying information such as your name, email, and phone number will be securely discarded immediately after the interview. All data will be coded, with identifying information removed, prior to analysis. Additionally, all data will be encrypted and stored in a locked file on my laptop. These procedures are in place to ensure that your confidentiality is maintained to the fullest extent possible.

Benefits to Participants: You will not benefit from this study. However, we hope the information learned from this study may benefit society in our understanding of how people demonstrate authenticity in the professional setting and how authenticity is defined.

Alternatives to Participation: Participation in this study is voluntary. You may withdraw from study participation at any time without any penalty.

Confidentiality: During this study, information will be collected about you for the purpose of this research. This includes your name, email, phone number, age, pronouns, current role, current organization, tenure at the organization, and total years working. Personal identifying information, such as your name, email, and phone number, will be securely discarded post-interview. All data will be coded, encrypted, and stored on my password-protected laptop in a locked file. Only my dissertation chair and I will have access to the data. Additionally, research materials will be retained for a minimum of five years after publication per American Psychological Association (APA) guidelines.

It is possible that your data may be used for future research or distributed to another researcher without your consent. However, information that could identify you will be removed.

Your research records may be reviewed by federal agencies whose responsibility is to protect human subjects participating in research, including the Office of Human Research Protections (OHRP) and by representatives from The Chicago School Institutional Review Board, a committee that oversees research.

Questions/Concerns: If you have questions related to the procedures described in this document please contact Nicole Olbie via email nolbie@ego.thechicagoschool.edu or the dissertation chair, Dr. Noelle Newhouse via email nnewhouse@thechicagoschool.edu.

If you have questions concerning your rights in this research study you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB), which is concerned with the protection of subjects in research projects. You may reach the IRB office Monday-Friday by calling 312.467.2335 or writing: Institutional Review Board, The Chicago School, 325 N. Wells, Chicago, Illinois, 60654.

Consent to Participate in Research

You have been read the consent information and have received satisfactory answers to your questions. You understand the research project and the procedures involved have been explained to you. You agree to participate in this study. Your participation is voluntary, and you do not have to verbally consent if you do not want to be part of this research project. You will receive a copy of this consent form for your records.

Participant: Please state your name and date

Appendix D

Full Mapping of Coding Process

Open Codes	Emergent Code	Focused Coding Category	Focused Codes	Conceptual Model Category
• Navigating Org Culture • Navigating work environment • Responding to role expectation • Responding to societal expectations • Managing others • Responding to Outside Others • Navigating cultural differences • Navigating gender differences	Navigating Workplace Expectations	External Forces Shaping Authenticity	• Authenticity Under Constraint • Performing with Expectations • Gendered Expectations of Realness	Contextual Pressures on Authentic Expression
• Strategizing authenticity • Navigating the push/pull of authenticity • Assessing the situation • Reading others • Ensuring authenticity • Navigating the pressure to be authentic • Navigating the pressure to be inauthentic	Strategizing Authentic Expression	Strategic Authenticity	• Calibrating When and How to Be Real • Authenticity as Self-Protection	Core Strategies for Navigating Authenticity
• Anchoring back into authenticity • Grounding into authenticity • Implementing boundaries • Protecting the self • Maintaining autonomy – self • Sensing in the body • Just being authentic • Evolving authentically	Reconnecting with Self	Grounding the Self	• Returning to the Core Self • Protecting Authenticity Through Boundaries	Internal Anchoring and Boundary Work
• Demonstrating authenticity • Engaging in authentic communication • Caring for and taking care of people • Relating to others • Creating connection • Engaging the human component	Relating Authentically to Others	Interpersonal Expression of Authenticity	• Relating Through Realness • Communicating with Integrity • Authenticity Through Action – Demonstrating Through Output	Authenticity in Action and Relationship
• Being authentic – definition • Being me authentically • Adapting across life stages	Clarifying Identity	Identity-Based Understanding of Authenticity	• Knowing and Accepting Who I am • Living in Alignment with My Values	Self-Understanding as a Foundation for Authenticity
• Being inauthentic – definition • Demonstrating inauthenticity • Navigating imposed authenticity • Engaging in inauthenticity – negative outcome • Engaging in inauthenticity – positive outcomes	Managing Internal Conflicts	Inauthenticity as a Response to Context	• Compromising the Self to Meet Expectations • Performing Safety • Imposing Definitions of Authenticity	Contextual Compromise and Strategic Suppression
• Experiencing authenticity – result • Experiencing inauthenticity – result • Experiencing the cost to self • Engaging in authenticity – positive outcome • Engaging in authenticity – negative outcome	Feeling the Impact	Emotional Consequences of Authenticity	• Liberation Through Realness • Emotional Fallout From Being Real • Residual Toll of Inauthenticity	Emotional Cost and Reward of Authenticity
• Identifying a common thread	Integrating Experiences	Integrative Meaning of Authenticity	• Being Real as a Lifeline • Authenticity as a Daily Practice	Making Meaning of Authenticity Over Time
	(Bridges Multiple Above)	Tensions of Identity at Work	• Negotiating Split Selves (<i>bridging</i>)	Navigating Split Selves

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