





ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Navigating the path to authenticity: identity processes across various life domains

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BACKGROUND

Authenticity, characterized by internal coherence, fidelity to oneself, and resistance to external influences, may be considered as one of the consequences of resolution of identity dilemmas. This study investigated the identity-based underpinnings of authenticity, examining potential differences across life domains where individuals construct their identities.

PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

A sample of 562 individuals aged 18–36 years ($M = 28.10$ years, $SD = 4.91$; 52.5% female) completed the Polish version of the Authenticity Scale (assessing authentic living, accepting external influence, and self-alienation) and the Utrecht Management of Identity Commitment Scale (evaluating identity commitment, in-depth exploration, and reconsideration of commitment) in four identity domains: character/personality traits, relationships with friends and acquaintances, aims and plans for the future, and worldview. The structural modelling approach was used to picture the relationships between these variables.

RESULTS

Identity commitment emerged as a significant positive predictor of authentic living, while reconsideration of commitment was associated with lower levels of authentic living. Interestingly, the double-edged nature of in-depth exploration was also confirmed: while positively associated with well-being, it was negatively associated with authentic living in most identity domains, while promoting self-alienation and accepting external influence.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings underscore the importance of identity processes unfolding in different life spheres for the cultivation of authenticity. The results are discussed in the context of various identity domains.

KEY WORDS

identity; in-depth exploration; authenticity; self-alienation; identity commitment

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BACKGROUND

THE IMPORTANCE OF AUTHENTIC LIVING

The construct of authenticity has a long tradition, dating back to early philosophical reflections. This notion can be found in the works of ancient philosophers such as Aristotle (1925), who associated eudaimonia with acting in harmony with one's true self. The significance of authenticity has also been emphasized within humanistic psychology through the term *self-actualization* (Maslow, 1943), which is connected to human desire for fulfillment and becoming one's true self (Rogers, 1961).

Authenticity, often overlooked in empirical psychology, is one of the most crucial conditions for human well-being (Wood et al., 2008) and one of the most human strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Authenticity has been defined as: the unobstructed manifestation of one's true self in daily life (Kernis & Goldman, 2005), acting in accordance with one's true self, which is expressed in consistency between thoughts, emotions and behavior (Harter, 2002) or *being the author of one's own life* as Rogers viewed it (Joseph, 2016, p. 1). The most comprehensive explanation of this construct emerges from the person-centered approach based on Rogers's theory further developed by Barrett-Lennard (1998). In this model, authenticity is defined as consistency between the three levels of the person: a) their actual experience (true self), b) their awareness of this experience, c) the way in which this awareness is expressed in emotions and behavior.

Operationalized as a three-dimensional construct by Wood et al. (2008), authenticity encompasses: 1) *authentic living*: acting in accordance with one's own psychological states and emotions, as well as one's genuine, self-determined beliefs and values; 2) *accepting external influence*: the extent to which an individual believes they should conform to the expectations of others (negatively correlated with authentic living), and 3) *self-alienation*: a sense of lacking self-awareness and being out of touch with one's true self (also negatively associated with authentic living). Authenticity, rooted in self-awareness and self-acceptance, is also a key component of mental health (Grijak, 2017; Jahoda, 1958). It is associated with self-actualization (Maslow, 1943), maturity (Allport, 1961), sense of purpose and life satisfaction (Lutz et al., 2022), self-esteem (Davis et al., 2015), and psychological well-being (Wood et al., 2008).

AUTHENTICITY AS A POSSIBLE OUTCOME OF IDENTITY FORMATION

According to Joseph (2016), the key characteristics of authentic individuals include three important aspects: *knowing oneself* (gathering information about oneself,

making one's own choices), *owning oneself* (asserting oneself and taking ownership of one's life), and *being oneself* (acting in a way that is consistent with one's true self). It seems that these qualities may stem from a positively resolved identity crisis and can be linked to what Erikson (1950, 1968) termed the virtue or an ego strength of *fidelity*, defined as *the ability to sustain loyalties freely pledged in spite of the inevitable contradictions of value systems* (Erikson, 1964, p. 125).

Markstrom and Marshall (2007) described fidelity as adolescents' sense of genuineness, a quality that continues to develop throughout adulthood. Research also indicates that self-concept clarity, an identity formation outcome closely related to authenticity, is a significant predictor of well-being and purpose in life (Yuliawati et al., 2025). Despite these positive associations, the concept of fidelity remains relatively understudied and is often confined to the adolescent stage (Brittian & Lerner, 2013). Moreover, this concept does not fully encompass the broader notion of authenticity, which seems to be a much more complex concept. Answering the question "who am I?" is not only connected to authentic living and exploring one's true self, but is also important in relation to identity (Erikson, 1950, 1968). Therefore, a fundamental question we aim to address in the present research concerns the relationship between identity processes and authenticity.

CONTEMPORARY CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF IDENTITY PROCESSES

Identity is conceptualized as a complex structure composed of our beliefs, attitudes, goals, and values (Marcia, 1966). It provides us with adjustment in many areas of life, self-assurance, stability, and well-being (Branje et al., 2021; Karaš et al., 2015; Lyckx et al., 2013; Negru-Subtirica et al., 2016), thus leading a person to achieving Erikson's (1968) virtue of fidelity and authentic living.

Crocetti et al. (2008a) expanded Marcia's model by introducing three identity processes: *commitment*, *in-depth exploration*, and *reconsideration of commitment*. They defined *commitment* as the choice made in an identity-relevant domain and the extent to which an individual identifies with that choice. *In-depth exploration* is the degree to which an individual actively copes with existing commitments, reflected in making choices, seeking new information, and discussing their commitments with others. *Reconsideration of commitment* is the process of comparing current commitments to other options and the effort to change existing commitments when they become unsatisfying for the individual. Research indicates the adaptive nature of identity commitment (Hofer et al., 2007; Karaš et al., 2015) and the maladaptive nature of reconsideration of commitment (Beyers & Luyckx, 2016; Hirschi, 2012; Karaš et al., 2015).

However, the implications of in-depth exploration of identity are less clear, as it can be seen as a double-edged sword, having both positive associations with well-being and also some negative consequences (De Lise et al., 2024; Hatano et al., 2016; Karaś et al., 2015).

In terms of the three characteristics of authentic individuals mentioned above (Joseph, 2016), identity exploration may facilitate expanding self-knowledge, identity commitment may promote owning oneself, and identity integration, understood as high commitment, based on one's own identity explorations, can contribute to being oneself.

INTEGRATING IDENTITY FORMATION AND AUTHENTICITY: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Authenticity can be considered as the consistency between individuals' experience, internal self-awareness, and behavioral expression of one's needs and values. Thus, we argue that this state – closely connected to Eriksonian fidelity – can be achieved based on identity processes. Particularly, identity commitment can be viewed as the process of defining and stabilizing self-knowledge associated with authentic living, because when an individual identifies strongly with their choices it provides the “safe base” for three key aspects of authenticity: knowing, owning, and being oneself. This stability allows for higher congruence between an individual's inner values and outer actions, thereby fostering authentic living and reducing self-alienation. In contrast, reconsideration of commitment, associated with questioning and doubting, may lead to the experience of self-estrangement, increasing self-alienation. The lack of a consolidated identity may also increase susceptibility to accept external influence (as the individual lacks an internal compass to resist social pressure). Finally, as previous research (Karaś et al., 2015; Karaś & Ciecuch, 2018) indicates that in-depth exploration is primarily an adaptive process contributing to well-being, we posit that it also facilitates authentic living while reducing self-alienation and the acceptance of external influences.

By integrating identity and authenticity models, we move beyond viewing these as separate constructs. Instead, we conceptualize authenticity as a directly associated outcome of how effectively an individual navigates forming their identity.

PRESENT STUDY

OBJECTIVES

This research aimed to examine the relationships between identity processes in various life spheres and authenticity, viewed as a possible outcome of

identity development. Adopting the widely accepted domain-centered approach toward identity in the literature (Crocetti et al., 2008a, 2008b; Goossens, 2001; McLean et al., 2016), we selected four domains that may be crucial for young and middle adults, during the period when identity is forming (Karaś & Ciecuch, 2018): worldview, character/personality traits, relationships with friends and acquaintances, and aims and plans for the future.

HYPOTHESES

Given that authentic living is an adaptive dimension with positive and significant associations with various aspects of well-being and a well-lived life (Wood et al., 2008), whereas acceptance of external influence and self-alienation are quite maladaptive, and identity processes are also known to relate to well-being (De Lise et al., 2024; Hatano et al., 2016; Karaś et al., 2015), we expect the following relationships between identity processes and authenticity:

1. *Commitment*: We hypothesize that commitment is a positive predictor of authentic living and a negative predictor of self-alienation and accepting external influence.
2. *In-depth exploration*: Similarly, we expect in-depth exploration to be positively associated with authentic living and negatively associated with self-alienation and accepting external influence.
3. *Reconsideration of commitment*: In contrast, we anticipate that reconsideration of commitment will be negatively related to authentic living and positively associated with self-alienation and accepting external influence. Reconsideration of commitment, often characterized by uncertainty and questioning of identity choices, may lead to feelings of self-doubt, diminished authenticity, and increased susceptibility to external influences.

PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

PARTICIPANTS

The study was conducted in 2024 by the Polish nationwide research panel Ariadna, operating in compliance with applicable ethical standards and data protection regulations (GDPR). Anonymity and personal data confidentiality standards are verified annually by independent auditors. Participants were free to withdraw at any stage, and their personal data are not available to the authors of this study. Participants receive non-monetary rewards (which are considered more appropriate than financial ones, which could increase the tendency for insincerity during the study). Data were collected and analyzed only in aggregate, maintaining full confidentiality. No missing data oc-

curred, as all responses were mandatory within the panel’s structured survey system. According to Ariadna representatives, data collected through the panel are representative of the Polish population.

Participants ($N = 562$), aged 18-36 ($M_{age} = 28.10$ years, $SD_{age} = 4.91$, 52.5% females), were residents of various regions of Poland. The dataset used in this study is available through the following link: https://osf.io/wz39c/overview?view_only=ee979bdf90754492b26066988dc202ce. The socio-demographic characteristics of the examined sample are presented in the Supplementary materials.

MEASUREMENT INSTRUMENTS

Authenticity Scale (AS; Wood et al., 2008; Jastrzębski et al., 2025). The self-report tool consisted of 12 items, each with a Likert-type response scale ranging from 1 (*does not describe me at all*) to 7 (*describes me very well*). The test items constitute three scales: authentic living, self-alienation, and accepting external influence. The Cronbach’s α reliability of the scale ranged from .82 to .87.

Utrecht Management of Identity Commitment Scale (U-MICS; Crocetti et al., 2008a; Karaś et al., 2015). A self-report questionnaire composed of 13 items was used to assess the three identity processes. Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from *completely untrue* to *completely true*. Four versions of the questionnaire were employed, examining identity processes in four life domains: character/personality traits, relationships with friends and acquaintances, goals and plans for the future, and worldview. The Cronbach’s α reliabilities of the scales ranged from .81 to .94.

RESULTS

A structural model was proposed in which three identity processes (in-depth exploration, commitment, and reconsideration of commitment) predict three aspects of authenticity: authentic living,

self-alienation, and accepting external influences. The model allows for correlation between one pair of measurement errors, derived from items 9 and 10 of the U-MICS (9. *I often try to find out what other people think about...* and 10. *I often talk with other people about...*). The scheme of the model is presented in the Supplementary materials. As can be seen in Table 1, the model demonstrated acceptable fit to the data across all examined identity domains meeting the cutoff criteria indicated above.

The correlations between latent factors and factor loadings of all the observed variables used in the examined models are presented in the Supplementary materials. Identity commitment was reported to be significantly positively correlated with in-depth exploration (with r ranging from .52 to .79) and negatively (with r ranging from $-.14$ to $-.33$) with reconsideration of commitment. In-depth exploration was reported to be positively associated with reconsideration of commitment (.13-.30). Original research on U-MICS (Crocetti et al., 2008a) showed a positive correlation between in-depth exploration and reconsideration of commitment, while subsequent studies have shown both positive (Hatano et al., 2016) and negative associations (Karaś et al., 2015). Regarding the interrelationships among the remaining dimensions, the findings align with previous research, except for the friends and acquaintances domain, where this relationship is non-significant. The correlations between the authenticity dimensions are similar to those reported by the authors of original AS method (Wood et al., 2008): authentic living was significantly negatively correlated with both self-alienation (with r ranging from $-.17$ to $-.39$) and accepting external influences, and both maladaptive dimensions were correlated positively (with r ranging from .56 to .65).

The standardized β coefficients, standard errors, 95% confidence intervals (CIs), and R^2 values for all endogenous variables are presented in the Supplementary materials. The results showed that commitment, as predicted, promotes authentic living across all examined domains, while reducing self-alienation. Moreover, in the worldview domain, commitment decreases accepting external influence. Also, as ex-

Table 1

Model fit coefficients

	χ^2 (df)	CFI	RMSEA [90% CI]	SRMR
Character and personality	863.76 (259)	.944	.056 [.052-.061]	.073
Friends and acquaintances	735.20 (259)	.947	.057 [.052-.062]	.073
Worldview	685.25 (259)	.949	.054 [.049-.059]	.057
Aims and plans for future	698.48 (259)	.950	.055 [.050-.060]	.065

Note. CFI – comparative fit index; RMSEA – root mean square error of approximation; SRMR – standardized root mean square residual; CI – confidence interval.

pected, reconsideration of commitment – emerged as a dimension that undermines authenticity – in all domains predicts high self-alienation and accepting external influence, and in most domains (except for the character and personality traits domain), it also decreases authentic living.

The most interesting associations were observed for in-depth exploration. Contrary to the hypotheses, this dimension emerged as a factor that promotes self-alienation (in most domains, except for aims and plans for the future) and accepting external influences (the relationship was non-significant only in aims and plans for future), while reducing authentic living, but only in the character and personality traits domain.

DISCUSSION

This research tested hypotheses regarding the role of identity processes identified by Crocetti et al. (2008a, 2008b) in the formation of authentic living. We focused on the course of identity processes in four domains relevant to young adults: character/personality traits, relationships with friends and acquaintances, aims and plans for the future, and worldview.

COMMITMENT AND AUTHENTICITY

Our primary hypothesis posited that commitment would positively predict authentic living while negatively predicting self-alienation and acceptance of external influence. The results of our study supported this hypothesis. Specifically, commitment emerged as a significant positive predictor of authentic living in early adulthood across all examined domains. Notably, this effect was most pronounced in the domains of character/personality and worldview. Although somewhat weaker, a significant relationship was also observed in the domains of future aspirations and social relationships. These findings suggest that commitment – involving a decisive choice of identity domain and engagement in meaningful actions to realize that choice – is essential for developing authentic living in early adulthood. Authentic living, as defined by Wood et al. (2008), entails living in accordance with one's own beliefs, values, and perspectives.

Secondly, as expected, commitment emerged as a significant negative predictor of self-alienation. This finding indicates that forming a firm commitment to one's identity domain and engaging in meaningful actions to enact that commitment significantly reduce the subjective experience of self-estrangement and a sense of disconnection from one's true self (cf. Wood et al., 2008). Our results corroborate Crocetti's (2008b) findings, which suggest that self-concept clarity, the opposite of self-alienation, is positively associated with commitment.

Thirdly, also as hypothesized, commitment emerged as a significant negative predictor of accepting external influence, but only within the worldview domain. This suggests that in early adulthood, committing to a particular worldview significantly reduces both the tendency to conform to others' opinions and the belief that one must meet others' expectations (Wood et al., 2008). Our findings align with previous research (Jastrzębski et al., 2025), which demonstrated a negative correlation between accepting external influence and extraversion.

IN-DEPTH EXPLORATION AND AUTHENTICITY

The hypothesis that in-depth exploration would positively predict authentic living while negatively predicting self-alienation and accepting external influence was not supported by our findings. Contrary to expectations, it emerged as a negative predictor of authentic living, but only within the character/personality domain. This suggests that actively seeking information and discussing commitments with others (cf. Crocetti et al., 2008b) significantly decrease authentic living, defined as being true to oneself and living in accordance with one's values and beliefs (cf. Wood et al., 2008).

To better understand this pattern of results, it is necessary to adopt a more cautious and empirically grounded interpretation. From the perspective of the theoretical foundations of AS (Barrett-Lennard, 1998; Wood et al., 2008), authentic functioning reflects congruence between an individual's consciously experienced internal states and their behavior. In this context, in-depth exploration of identity issues may temporarily increase discrepancies between internal experiences and external actions, particularly when individuals are actively questioning or re-evaluating existing self-definitions. Such discrepancies may, in turn, manifest as lower levels of authentic functioning and higher levels of self-alienation.

Importantly, prior research indicated that in-depth exploration is not unequivocally adaptive. While it is associated with positive developmental outcomes under certain conditions, numerous studies suggest it may also be associated with increased uncertainty, emotional instability, and identity distress (Crocetti et al., 2008a; Hatano et al., 2016; Karaś et al., 2015). Specifically, Crocetti et al. (2008a) described the "searching moratorium" pattern, characterized by ongoing exploration while maintaining existing commitments, which is empirically associated with higher psychological tension and lower adjustment compared to achieved identity.

Viewed this way, our results may reflect a developmental phase in which ongoing exploration (though potentially adaptive in the long run) co-occurs with intensified self-doubt, greater reliance on environ-

mental feedback, and a temporary weakening of perceived self-coherence. This interpretation is consistent with findings suggesting that in-depth exploration may be associated with lower emotional stability and higher susceptibility to external influences (Crocetti et al., 2008a; Hatano et al., 2016). At the same time, it is important to note that due to the cross-sectional nature of the present study, this interpretation should be considered preliminary and requires further verification, preferably through longitudinal research.

RECONSIDERATION OF COMMITMENT AND AUTHENTICITY

Finally, the hypothesis that reconsideration of commitment would negatively predict authentic living and positively predict self-alienation and accepting external influence was supported by the present findings. As expected, reconsideration of commitment emerged as a significant negative predictor of authentic living in two domains: relations with friends and worldview. This indicates that actively comparing current commitments in domains such as relationships and worldview with other alternatives, while simultaneously taking steps to change existing commitments (cf. Crocetti et al., 2008b), significantly undermines authentic living, defined as being true to oneself and living in accordance with one's values and beliefs (cf. Wood et al., 2008).

Furthermore, as expected, reconsideration of commitment emerged as a significant positive predictor of both self-alienation and accepting external influence across all domains. This implies that among young adults, actively comparing current commitments with alternative options and taking steps to change existing commitments (cf. Crocetti et al., 2008b) significantly increase feelings of self-estrangement and a sense of being disconnected from one's true self, as well as the tendency to conform to others' expectations (cf. Wood et al., 2008). These findings align with Crocetti's (2008b) research, which demonstrated that reconsideration of commitment is negatively associated with self-concept clarity and all dimensions of the Big Five personality traits.

In conclusion, our findings shed new light on the origins of authenticity. The relationships we have identified between identity processes and the three facets of authenticity suggest that authenticity may emerge as a consequence of successfully navigating identity dilemmas.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

In practice, the obtained results may provide valuable guidance for counseling and educational interventions aimed at fostering identity development

and authenticity during emerging adulthood. Such interventions could involve supporting reflection on whether current commitments are experienced as congruent with one's internal personal structure or as externally imposed. Practitioners should attend not only to whether individuals are engaged in exploration but also to the quality and outcomes of this process. In other words, practitioners may facilitate significant beneficial changes by supporting clients in the consolidation of commitments when these are experienced as self-congruent and meaningful.

In an educational context, these findings can be applied to programs designed to balance opportunities for exploration with support for individuals in making life decisions, crystallizing personal values, and forming commitments.

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

While the relationships between identity processes and authenticity, and authenticity and well-being, have been explored, a more comprehensive understanding of the relationships between these three constructs is still needed. Joseph (2016) argued that authenticity is foundational to eudaimonic well-being, and identity formation has also been identified as a key component of a good life (Karaś et al., 2015; Karaś & Ciecuch, 2018; Waterman & Schwartz, 2013). Future research could explore the potential mediating role of authenticity in the relationship between identity processes and well-being, and this is the main aim of our next research.

It is also important to consider the cross-sectional nature of the study. Although identity processes were included in the model as predictors of authenticity, it is equally plausible that higher or lower levels of authenticity influence subsequent identity exploration and the formation of commitments. Future studies should employ longitudinal designs to explore how identity processes and authenticity reciprocally influence each other over time. Furthermore, incorporating potential moderators in future research – such as personality traits, emotion regulation, or perceived social support – could help identify the specific conditions under which in-depth exploration proves adaptive rather than detrimental to authentic living. Another limitation of the present findings is the high linguistic and cultural homogeneity of the sample, as the study only included native Polish speakers, which limits their generalizability to other cultural settings or societies with greater religious and ethnic diversity. According to Hofstede's (2010) categorization of culture (which is based on value preferences), the Polish cultural context can be characterized primarily by a high degree of individualism, coupled with indulgence, uncertainty avoidance, and pragmatism.

The specific constellation of values may influence identity processes. Thus, future research should investigate whether similar patterns of associations between variables emerge in other cultural settings with establishing invariance across different demographic groups to ensure broader comparability of the results.

Moreover, the data were collected through an online research panel. This might produce some self-selection bias, as individuals who participate in such panels might differ in certain psychological characteristics from the general population.

Finally, the reliance on self-report measures within cross-sectional design introduces the possibility of common-method bias. Although we implemented procedural safeguards to minimize this risk (e.g. by guaranteeing respondents anonymity and using only high-quality psychometric tools), subsequent research would benefit from incorporating some other methods and objective markers of examined variables.

Supplementary materials are available on the journal's website.

DISCLOSURES

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