The Metaphor of David

Happiness
Metaphor
n/a
Client
n/a

Goldman and Kernis define authenticity as "the unimpeded operation of one's core or true self in one's daily enterprise" (Goldman & Kernis, 2002, p. 18). An authentic person is aware of his inner world, is able to honestly consider information about the self, behaves in line with his values and needs, and is genuine in his close relationships. Put simply, authenticity means to know yourself and to act accordingly.

Authenticity is often perceived as the most fundamental aspect of well-being. Scholars have argued that authenticity is not just a component or prerequisite to well-being, but rather the very core of well-being (Wood et al., 2008). It has been suggested that a lack of authenticity is a primary cause of psychopathology and distress, as individuals feel unfulfilled or devalued when they engage in forced, unnatural behaviour (Leary, 2003).

High levels of authenticity, on the other hand, are suggested to reflect a clear and consistent sense of self and relate to higher well-being (Reich, Kessel, & Bernieri, 2013). In support of this notion, research has found a relationship between authenticity and life satisfaction. Interestingly, the nature of this relationship is unidirectional; authenticity can lead to life satisfaction, but life satisfaction does not necessarily lead to authenticity (Boyraz, Waits, & Felix, 2014). Other studies have found positive relationships between authenticity and higher subjective well-being at work (Ménard & Brunet, 2011), positive affect, low stress, positive relationship processes and outcomes, self-actualization, self-concept clarity, mindfulness, and adaptive coping strategies (Kernis & Heppner, 2008; Kernis & Goldman, 2006). In sum, research shows that behaving authentically promotes psychological growth and fulfilment.

During an individual's life, many factors can have a negative impact on authenticity. Examples include exposure to controlling strategies such as salient rewards and punishments (e.g. punishment for voicing one's opinion), the internalization of unhelpful beliefs (e.g., crying is a sign of weakness), working in an environment where expression management is the norm, etc. Over time, an individual's authenticity can become increasingly obscured, leading to a significant reduction in well-being. In this tool, a metaphor is described that illuminates how positive psychology interventions can help to increase authenticity.

Author

This tool was created by Hugo Alberts (PhD) (https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Hugo_Alberts).

Goal

The goal of this tool is to provide an analogy for the process through which positive interventions aim to increase authenticity.

Advice

- Practitioners may explain the metaphor to clients and ask them to reflect on the metaphor. What "layers of marble" does the client think are present at this moment? What caused these layers to be added to the statue? What does their "David" look like? Have there been times when they felt they were connected to their true "David"?
- When used in the context of education, the metaphor can be used to introduce the key principles of second wave positive psychology. Second wave positive psychology appreciates the ambivalent and complex nature of the field, by recognizing that seemingly negative experiences can contribute to positive aspects of human functioning and transformation, by recognizing that seemingly positive qualities and experiences can be detrimental to well-being under certain circumstances and by acknowledging the importance of coping with negative thoughts, experiences, and behaviour.

Suggested Readings

Boyraz, G., Waits, J. B., & Felix, V. A. (2014). Authenticity, life satisfaction, and distress: A longitudinal analysis. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 61,* 498-505.

Goldman, B. M., & Kernis, M. H. (2002). The role of authenticity in healthy psychological functioning and subjective well-being. *Annals of the American Psychotherapy Association, 5,* 18-20.

Leary, M. R. (2003). Interpersonal aspects of optimal self-esteem and the authentic self. *Psychological Inquiry, 14,* 52-54.

Kernis, M. H., & Goldman, B. M. (2006). A multicomponent conceptualization of authenticity: Theory and research. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology, 38*, 283-357.

Kernis, M. H., Lakey, C. E., & Heppner, W. L. (2008). Secure versus fragile high self-esteem as a predictor of verbal defensiveness: Converging findings across three different markers. *Journal of Personality, 76,* 477-512.

Ménard, J., & Brunet, L. (2011). Authenticity and well-being in the workplace: A mediation model. *Journal of Managerial Psychology, 26,* 331-346.

Reich, W. A., Kessel, E. M., & Bernieri, F. J. (2013). Life satisfaction and the self: Structure, content, and function. *Journal of Happiness Studies, 14,* 293-308.

Wood, A. M., Linley, P. A., Maltby, J., Baliousis, M., & Joseph, S. (2008). The authentic personality: A theoretical and empirical conceptualization and the development of the Authenticity Scale. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 55,* 385-399.

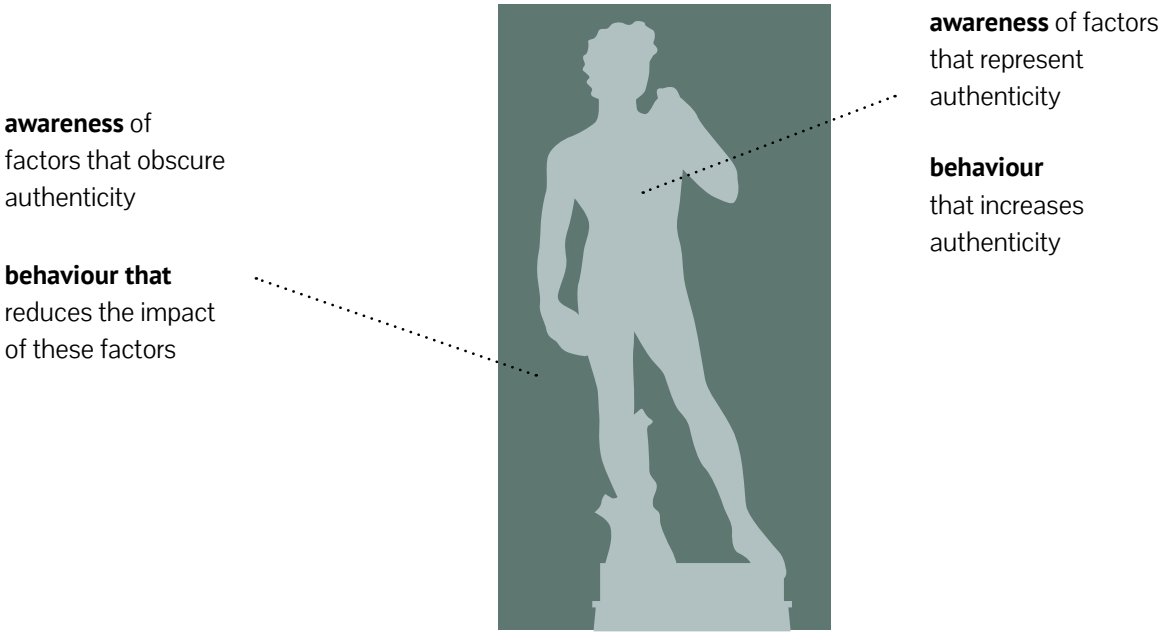
Tool Description

Instructions

The process through which positive interventions aim to increase authenticity can be represented by the tale of Renaissance artist, Michelangelo. When Michelangelo was asked about the difficulties he was assumed to have encountered in sculpting his masterpiece, David, he replied: "I saw this big piece of marble, saw David, and the only thing I needed to do was to remove the pieces that were unnecessary". In order to create the statue of David, Michelangelo relied on two essential skills: his ability to cut away the pieces that were unnecessary and his ability to see David through the layers of marble. In the same way, positive psychology can help people to:

1. remove the limitations that prevent them from being "David" (i.e., their authentic self)
2. see their "David" by connecting to their authentic self

Fig. 1 The statue of David as a metaphor for the process through which positive interventions aim to increase authenticity



1. Removing limitations

Just as Michelangelo used his chisel to chip away the unnecessary marble and let the beautiful image of David appear, positive psychology offers numerous techniques to transcend dysfunctional habits, beliefs, and emotions that allow the human potential to appear. The process of sculpting can be compared to the process of transformation in positive psychology interventions. Just like Michelangelo saw the image of David gradually appear as he removed each piece of marble, people can connect more and more to their authentic nature by seeing through the factors that impede their well-being.

From this perspective, becoming aware of the limitations that obscure or hide one's true potential is an important first step in the process of human flourishing (see fig 1). Examples of such limitations include:

- False ideas about what happiness means
- Negative, self-critical beliefs about the self
- Unrealistic expectations about the future
- A strong motivation guided by fear of rejection

Although it is important to become aware of the factors that reduce authenticity, this is not enough. In order to reduce their impact, or to "chip away layers of marble", one must engage in behaviour that contrasts the behaviour that obscures authenticity. For instance, the individual who is continuously pleasing people may begin to refrain from doing this, despite feeling a strong urge to do so. Another consequence of engaging in opposite behaviour is the possibility to connect to a different, more positive and helpful experience. Imagine a self-critical individual with a low level of self-compassion. His default way of coping with stress is to continue working and ignore his need to take some rest. Although actually taking some rest may initially feel unnatural or difficult, it allows the individual to connect to the experience of self-compassion, however small this experience may be in the beginning. In sum, dealing with limitations on both a cognitive and behavioural level can help to decrease their negative impact on authenticity.

2. Connecting to the authentic self

As discussed above, awareness can be used to illuminate problematic thoughts and behaviour. It allows the individual to see which parts of their "David" are not necessary and can be removed. It is important here to note that Michelangelo "saw" David. This allowed him to, while shaping the statue, also know which parts should remain. (Otherwise, all pieces of marble would be chipped off and no statue would have been created.) This means that is important to allow individuals to see and connect to their "David" as well. In more concrete terms, this connection means becoming aware of the characteristics of their true, authentic self. An important aim of positive psychology interventions is therefore to increase authenticity: to help individuals see both what is not "theirs" and what is. There are many different ways in which positive psychology interventions allow individuals to restore their connection with their authentic self. Typically, these interventions increase the individual's awareness of:

- personal values
- strengths
- activities that are guided by intrinsic motivation
- emotions that signal engagement and enthusiasm
- emotions that signal disengagement and resistance
- thoughts that promote well-being and self-care

A necessary next step that follows from becoming aware of the factors that represent one's authenticity is the translation of this awareness into action. This means that the individual starts to behave more in line with his personal values, consciously uses his strengths more, chooses activities that are guided by intrinsic motives, etc. This process of beginning to live more authentically can be referred to as "inside-out living". Inside-out living means that the individual's behaviour is guided primarily from within, rather than in response to the outside world. An individual who lives inside out:

- makes choices based on his personal experiences and values

- focuses on the development of his strengths and skills that raise energy
- levels and contribute to his well-being
- involves in behaviour that results in the achievement of personally valued goals
- chooses actions because of the direct enjoyment they provide