Authenticity in Education: From Narcissism and Freedom to the Messy Interplay of Self-Exploration and Acceptable Tension

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Abstract The problem with authenticity—the idea of being "true to one's self"—is that its somewhat checkered reputation garners a complete range of favorable and unfavorable reactions. In educational settings, authenticity is lauded as one of the top two traits students desire in their teachers. Yet, authenticity is criticized for its tendency towards narcissism and self-entitlement. So, is authenticity a good or a bad thing? The purpose of this article is to develop an intimate understanding of authenticity by investigating its current interpretation and criticisms, its struggle with narcissism and relation to freedom. Examining authenticity as multilayered self-exploration reveals a composite of understanding, care, and acceptance. While a side current of acceptable tension shifts our understanding of authenticity from the security of self-determination to the messy interplay involved in being "true to one's self" and being "in-the-world".

Keywords Authenticity · Narcissism · Freedom · Sense of self · Identity

In my work as a teacher mentor, I have observed two types of knowledgeable teachers: teachers who display an instructional ease reflective of the respectful connection they have with themselves, and teachers who demonstrate an instructional artificiality reflective of the disconnect they have with themselves and their students. What distinguishes these individuals from each other is the topic of my research: authenticity—the idea of being "true to one's self".

The problem with authenticity is that its somewhat checkered reputation garners a complete range of favorable and unfavorable reactions. From one perspective, authenticity is lauded as one of the top two traits students desire in their teachers (Brookfield, 2006). A "strong identity and sense of being" are deemed as essential ingredients in transformative teaching and learning (Caine and Caine, 1997, p. 22). Yet, from another perspective,

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authenticity is rejected as narcissistic, self-absorbed, and self-entitled (Barry et al., 2011; Hotchkiss, 2002). Authenticity takes on criticism as the "nihilistic position according to which everything is equally good and beautiful and just as long as the individual's choice was authentic" (Aloni, 2002, p. 104). So, is authenticity a good or a bad thing? Would we be better off with or without authenticity?

The purpose of my research is to develop an intimate understanding of authenticity by examining its current interpretation, criticisms, and potential for development, focusing on how authenticity is situated and the connections it shares with other related concepts. To be more specific, I consider the historical and philosophical roots that have shaped the notion of authenticity; I examine its relation to narcissism and the Romantic ideal of self-determining freedom; I investigate authenticity's connection with the concepts of understanding, care, and acceptance; and I explore what might be referred to as a side current of "acceptable tension"—an ongoing exchange of conflict and agreement brought about by the individual's implicit and explicit, internal and external experiences. From this point of view, authenticity is not premised upon a solitary idyllic state defined solely by alignment and self-contentment without conflict or stress; authenticity involves dynamic adjustments that take into consideration the comforts, agreements, and acceptable tensions of life.

Authenticity From a Historical Perspective

In our most common usage, authenticity is understood as being "true to one's self". When someone is identified as being authentic, there is meaning in that statement, even though it may be difficult to specify what exactly that meaning entails. Somehow, in daily life, in work and recreation, in relationships with friends, family, community, in caring for others and for ourselves, we experience the meaning of authenticity. Even without an understanding of how the notion of authenticity became part of our communal language, or where our current vocabulary of authenticity comes from, we recognize, talk about, and include the notion of authenticity as being "true to one's self" in our everyday conversations,

The word *authentic* has origins in late Middle English via Old French from late Latin *authenticus* and Greek *authentikos* (Stevenson, 2010). During the fourteenth century, *authentic* entered into English language usage in reference to "firsthand authority" or "original". Four hundred years later, the word authenticity usurped the word "sincerity", therein reflecting the prevailing shift in human relations from formality or convention of human interaction towards human relations as a matter of being true to one's self (Trilling, 1972, p. 11). Synonymous with such terms as genuineness or realness, authenticity encompasses the matter of being true to oneself and connects notions of personal grounding, sense of self, and identity with the matter of self-alignment. In this respect, authenticity is distinguished by the consistency individuals have in aligning their actions or behavior with their "motivations or intentions" (Dickens, 2008, p. 194). Goldman (2006) took up a similar vein, affirming that authenticity is experienced in the "unimpeded operation of one's core or true self in one's daily enterprise" (p. 135). Authenticity is achieved "when people take hold of the direction of their own lives without the direction being determined for them by external factors" (Halliday, 1998, p. 598). Thus, when individuals are authentic, there is meaningful alignment between who individuals are and how they get on with their lives. Without authenticity, there may be a sense of incompleteness, a sense that the individual may not realize his or her full potential. With authenticity comes self-understanding, a sense of identity, and wellbeing.

From an historical perspective, the notion of authenticity has known various interpretations, each demonstrative of two critical factors as reflected in the historical context of its respective era. Firstly, the notion of authenticity always involves the individual's turning inward, and secondly, authenticity is always connected to its social context and how that social context takes its shape. In this way, the notion of authenticity is underscored by the playing out of such inward turning considerations as self-examination, self-redemption, or self-reflection, and such outward connecting considerations as religious dogma, cosmic order, or social conventions (Baumeister, 1986). Authenticity as we know it today is very much a reflection of the eighteenth-century Romantic ideal of the individual as independent and freethinking (Bendix, 1997, p. 16; Gergen, 1991, p. 11). Developments during the Romantic era were significant in that the notion of authenticity moved away from prior externally imposed classifications and social structures to embrace an interpretation of the individual as liberated and self-determining. At that time, the individual's natural inner voice of personal feelings and emotions emerged as the voice of personal authenticity (Rousseau, 1993). This inner voice was not the internal awareness of the voice of God previously envisioned in the Middle Ages; rather, the inner voice of the Romantic era exemplified the self-determined individual's feelings, thoughts, and actions.

Moving to the final decades of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century, there has been a push from contemporary philosophers for a reconceptualization of authenticity. These conceptual or theoretical philosophical responses have argued against the subjectivist and relativist distortions associated with authenticity, suggesting authenticity necessitates a moral and social orientation because it is impossible to become an authentic human being without a moral stance, without standing for something that has life-valuing importance in a community of meaning (Taylor, 1989). While maintaining the Romantic ideals of being true to the individual's "own originality", Taylor directs his attention to the anthropocentric blight of the twentieth century by superimposing a moral communitarian framework onto the notion of authenticity. Taylor's refashioned vision of authenticity goes beyond self-focus; it involves what he describes as "openness of horizons of significance" and the "dialogical character" of human interaction while staying true to the Romantic considerations of personal discovery and originality (Taylor, 1991, p. 66). Guignon (2004) also contributed to this contemporary reconceptualization of authenticity, arguing that authenticity necessitates a "social dimension" (p. 163). Guignon holds on to the Romantic predilection for the individual's "feelings, desires and beliefs", while emphasizing authenticity as operating within a framework of belongingness and social indebtedness.

What seems evident in contemporary theoretical conceptualizations of authenticity is the tension between ideals of Romantic independence and a contemporary philosophical craving for the stability of morally rigorous social structures. There is, in this tension, a reopening of the distrust between the individual and the individual's social context—a relationship negated by the Romantic ideal of self-determining freedom that favors the individual as complete in one's self (Rousseau, 1993). Under such terms, contemporary conceptualizations of authenticity struggle in their attempts to preserve the crucial concern of Romantic independence without taking on the debilitating impact of self-absorption and nihilism. There is a yearning for what often appears as moral and social elements embedded in the past—elements resolutely rejected over the past two centuries as oppressive and counter to the individual's fixation on self-determination.

While Romantic and contemporary conceptualizations of authenticity assume a self-determining position, postmodern critiques dispute the very existence of a "self" or "core" that individuals can be "true" to. Authenticity emerges as a "flawed concept" because

individuals can never fully understand themselves with certainty (Kreber, 2013). Under postmodernism, the processes of "individual reason, intention, moral decision making, and the like—all central to the ideology of individualism—lose their status as realities" (Gergen, 1991, pp. 241–242). Human beings can never constitute themselves as anything more than objects in the social systems of language, knowledge, and power beyond the individual's control or comprehension (Foucault, 1983, 1988; Lacan, 1988). For research into authenticity, the implications of postmodernism are immediately problematic, suggesting the impossibility of authenticity as the most likely outcome. For this reason, I do not take up arguments with postmodernism; rather, what seems important in the context of this article is that there are a number of conflicting narratives that exist in relation to the concept of authenticity.

Most notably, research into authenticity in educational settings has affirmed the importance of authenticity in its relation to competency (Brookfield, 2006), the essential role authenticity plays in transformative learning (Cranton, 2001), and the value of existential, critical, and communitarian perspectives of authenticity (Kreber, 2013). Furthermore, authenticity is recognized as an important and desirable educational element by North American scholars (Calderwood and D'Amico, 2008; Cranton, 2006; Dirkx, 2006; Grimmett and Neufeld, 1994; Palmer, 1998) and European academics (Halliday, 1998; Kreber, 2010; Kreber et al., 2007, 2010; Laursen, 2005; Malm, 2008). Thus, the challenge currently facing the notion of authenticity is how to move through a somewhat distrustful and uncharted environment while acknowledging that authenticity is something worth accessing and expressing in our lives. Inconsistent viewpoints within the philosophical and educational research literature indicate the need for a purposeful examination of issues that stem from the vantages of distorted subjectivism and Romantic freedom, namely: narcissism and self-determining freedom. To shed light on these issues, I examine the aspect of narcissism as it relates to the current characterization of authenticity as self-absorbed, self-serving, and self-isolating. Furthermore, I examine the experience of personal freedom in order to pull out an understanding of the relationship between authenticity and freedom, and consider how knowing more of this relationship can impact an understanding of authenticity.

The Story of Narcissus

Narcissism, the aspect of extreme personal self-centeredness, is frequently identified as an undesirable characteristic of personal authenticity. Dickens (2008) described the narcissist as someone who is "preoccupied with self, not because she or he has a clear sense of self to be imposed on the world, but because of a deep rooted anxiety and insecurity that comes from not having much of a self" (p. 189). Synonymous with such terms as egotism, vanity, conceit, selfishness, and self-absorption, narcissism is frequently considered problematic in regards to the individual's relations with his or her self and others. To get a better sense of what narcissism entails, I begin with a study of the story of Narcissus, the Greek character after whom narcissism is named.

The story of Narcissus, as told in Book III of the ancient writer Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (2001, 2005), is more than the tragic account of a boy falling in love with himself (Anderson, 2005; Graves, 1984). It is a story that reveals Narcissus' destiny with many subtle and illuminating details. Narcissus, son of the river god Cephisus and the blue nymph Leiriope, was born out of the act of rape. In ancient mythology, the meaning in parentage and the instance of birth can be taken as significant—in this case indicating an

unsettled instability and inherent vulnerability in the fluid nature of Narcissus' parentage and the unwanted act of his conception that sets up a mysterious realm. When Narcissus' mother Leiriope consults the prophet Teiresias, the renowned seer predicts that Narcissus will live to an old age, provided he never knows himself. At first glance, Teiresias' prophecy catches us off guard; it seemingly contradicts the Greek maxim 'Know thyself' famously inscribed on the temple at Delphi. However, it is possible that Teiresias' strange prediction is not a warning; rather, it is a foretelling of what will happen when Narcissus comes to know his true self.

Narcissus is so attractive that anyone might fall in love with him, but Narcissus' pride in his own beauty results in the heartless rejection of countless lovers. Intent on no one knowing his true self, Narcissus repels all love by taking on the hard shield of pride and vanity. He demonstrates the need to protect the fragility of his own true self underneath the armor of disarming beauty. Through such defensive actions, Narcissus may successfully protect himself from others, from himself, and more significantly from the outcome of Teiresias' strange prediction.

A lovely mountain nymph, Echo, falls hopelessly in love with Narcissus, but he will have nothing to do with her advances. In an outcry of revenge, Echo prays to the gods that Narcissus might also know the pain of unrequited love. Rhamnuse, the goddess of vengeance, answers the prayer by luring Narcissus to a pool of clear, inviolate water situated in a dark grove of trees. Narcissus is to be punished for his pride through revenge and retaliation. Catching sight of his own image as he leans towards the water, Narcissus falls in love with the reflection. It is an image of marble and ivory that affirms the hardness of his own prideful behavior. Nonetheless, it is an image that instills profound changes in the young man. Firstly, the reflected image (which he does not recognize it as his own) ignites Narcissus' capacity for love and agitates his desire to be loved in return. Later, when he recognizes the image in the pool as his own reflection, he realizes that what he sought from the reflection already exists within his own self. He declares, "The thing I seek is in myself; my plenty makes me poor", a paradoxical observation because in recognizing his own capacity for love, Narcissus acknowledges his own true self, not the hardened face of conceit and vanity. Knowing his self in this authentic way, Narcissus condemns his own self to die and fulfills Teiresias' prediction that knowing himself will prevent him from living to an old age. Consumed by the gravity of his discovery, Narcissus succumbs to the power of Cupid's love and his spirit crosses over to the underworld, his body transformed into the delicate textures of a narcissus at the pond's edge. The story and its mysteriousness comes to an end, Narcissus having abandoned the destructive pride of narcissism in order to take on the tragic flowering of his own true self.

The story of Narcissus makes it clear that while narcissism may give the outward appearance of vanity and egotism, underneath a hardened façade lies the potential burdens of personal "vulnerability and inadequacy" (Barry et al., 2011, p. 151). Ovid's account of Narcissus indicates that his beauty stirred the hearts of both young men and women, a natural enough reaction to beauty. However, treating Narcissus' beauty as the magnet to all metal could have led the young man to despise those who considered his value or worth as solely related to his beauty. It is possible that Narcissus' vanity was the only available protection in fending off the unwanted and intrusive advances of others. From this perspective, it is possible to interpret narcissism not as an overblown ego or personality defect, but as a manifestation of self-protection. Narcissism may be a sign that the individual's sense of self, which includes the ego, is in a perceived state of jeopardy, even to the level of crisis. This approach to narcissism suggests the response of compassion as an alternative to scorning the ego as a negative aspect of an individual's sense of self. As Moore (1992) has

indicated, "The ego needs to be loved, requires attention, and wants exposure. That is part of its nature" (p. 67).

In Narcissus' case, I propose that he rejected the advances of others because they objectified his beauty, ignoring the significance of his true sense of self. Rejecting their advances, Narcissus's own sense of self suffered in making space for the armor of narcissism necessary to protect his internal vulnerability. Something in encountering the image in the pool stirred Narcissus' capacity for love and his need to be loved, as if on the one hand awakening his heart and on the other hand agitating his ego. Narcissus' narcissistic behavior had protected his self from others' advances, closing off both his heart and his ego. All that changed when he realized that recognizing and accepting the image in the pool was a matter of recognizing and accepting his self. It was a matter of knowing himself and therein knowing where his heart and his ego could potentially take him.

Theorists pursuing the topic of narcissism have identified three types of narcissism: the grandiose type whose manipulative intentions are characterized by anger and power; the fragile type of whom Narcissus is an example; and the exhibitionistic type whose charming manner is motivated by the individual's need for attention (Barry et al., 2011, p. 151). The problem associated with these narcissistic tendencies is not the implications of conceit or vanity; it is the difficulty in juxtaposing the individual's pride in his or her own abilities or talents with the socially desirable trait of personal humility. Narcissus' narcissistic pride could be interpreted as a protective shield that eventually brought on the bitter act of revenge. However, responding to narcissism with retaliation may serve to augment, rather than resolve, the individual's narcissistic behavior. Dealing with narcissism is more about recognizing the cause of narcissism than attempting to alter its symptoms or outcomes. Moore (1992) suggested, "The secret in healing narcissism is not to heal it at all, but to listen to it" (p. 73). Arguably, there is the need for an understanding of narcissism that asks where it comes from and why narcissism is considered so problematic in our contemporary society.

A Contemporary Culture of Narcissism

In the last several decades, theoretical researchers (Barry et al., 2011; Hotchkiss, 2002) and social commentators (Lasch, 1979; Wolfe, 1976) have argued that a liberal, affluent, secular, and consumer-oriented North American culture has increasingly engendered the narcissistic qualities of individualism and self-absorption. Beginning in particular with the 1960s and continuing into the 1970s in response to the baby boomer generation's aspirations for social change, an increasingly youth-dominated culture began to turn inward, focusing on the only thing they could hope to control—their own selves (Hotchkiss, 2002, p. xvi). Here was the "Me Decade" (Wolfe, 1976), a derogatory reference to the self-involved qualities of a generation whose attempts to alleviate the anxieties of an uncertain world were perceived as an overblown preoccupation with self-fulfillment and self-realization.

As a continuation of the Me Decade, the self-esteem movement of the 1980s encouraged an approach to personal development in which self-esteem was considered the cure-all to a "plethora of social, academic, and mental health problems" (Barry et al., 2011, p. 146). In this approach to personal development, self-esteem and personal value "became equated not with *doing* good but simply with *feeling* good" (Hotchkiss, 2002, p. 177). Personal growth was not so much a matter of personal initiative as it was a matter of individual entitlement and inherent superiority. So it is not surprising that Twenge's 2008 meta-analysis of narcissistic personality indicators in American college students found that

narcissism has risen substantially over the past thirty years, a result that underscores the mutually influential relationship between individuals and their social context with "societal changes driving increases in narcissism and vice versa" (Twenge et al., 2008, p. 892). Examining the past 50 years of narcissistic development, what seems apparent is the individual's ongoing love-hate with the very notion of self. Is the self good or bad? Is the individual authentic or narcissistic? What are the boundaries?

To a certain degree, it is not possible for an individual to function in daily life without some kind of investment in his or her self. That is why, on the one hand, narcissism can be interpreted as a good thing. Narcissism, in this simplistic reference to a focus on self, meets the individual's fundamental need to maintain feelings of self-worth, experience a full range of emotions, and enjoy a person's own accomplishments or achievements. Rooted in the conflicts and resolutions of early childhood, narcissism is the natural investment of energy in self that eventually flourishes in the individual's experience of adulthood as productive, rewarding, and satisfying. Where narcissism differs from personal authenticity is in its mode of self-perception. Narcissists see themselves through the lenses of power, vulnerability, or exhibitionism—lenses that tend to isolate the self and limit the individual's ability to get a full or accurate picture of his or her self. That is not to say that narcissistic persons do not have a sense of their authentic self. Rather, just as Narcissus' capacity to recognize his own true self was limited by the flatness of his reflected image in the pool of water, the narcissistic individual's perception is correspondingly limited. Narcissism is not about getting the full picture of one's self. It is about magnifying the selective and exclusive boundaries of self-investment no matter the cost to a person's self or their relations with others. In contrast, personal authenticity is all about getting the entire picture of one's self, and that includes acknowledging the security and danger that come with narcissism.

For its part, narcissism pushes the notion of self-determining freedom to its limit by refusing to recognize any boundaries to the Romantic ideal of individual self-determination. Because narcissism regards the individual's investment in self-determining freedom both as its starting point and its destination, the insular circuit of self-determining freedom sets up a relentless and somewhat incestuous cycle of self-inflation and isolating self-promotion augmented by a continual return to emancipatory, self-determining freedom. Here, the only possibility is a one-dimensional outcome of personal identity, similar to Narcissus' flattened reflection in the pool of water and the contemporary distortions of entitlement, superiority, and self-involvement. In this context of self-determining freedom, narcissism emerges fully supported and full-blown as the natural, inevitable, and somewhat unhealthy outcome of Romantic self-determining freedom—an observation that brings into question the problematic nature of the relationship between authenticity and freedom. Is it possible that authenticity and freedom are incompatible? Or that authenticity has survived its relationship with the Romantic ideal of self-determining freedom because of the ongoing remnants of previous social structures and constraints? What seems certain in this investigation is that a deeper understanding of authenticity requires a rigorous examination of the individual's personal experience of freedom. Without such an understanding of personal freedom, our understanding of authenticity is incomplete.

Freedom

The significance of freedom and authenticity as embedded in educational and developmental processes can be traced through the history of natural, child-centered, and humanist

approaches to education evident in Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Dewey, Rogers, and Aloni. Yet, an understanding of the fundamental relationship between freedom and authenticity in educational research literature is limited (Bonnett and Cuypers, 2003; Halliday, 1998; Jarvis, 1992). The concept of freedom is frequently interpreted as synonymous with such terms as independence, autonomy, or liberty—terms that emphasize the emancipatory quality of freedom evident in the Romantic ideal of self-determining freedom. However, given the historical significance of emancipatory freedom associated with the contemporary subjective distortions of authenticity, I examine freedom from an intimate perspective, from a perspective of the individual's experience, from the perspective of personal freedom. Exploring personal freedom in this way, I draw attention to three particular aspects: the individual's inner state, the significance of self-expression, and the outcome or result of personal freedom.

In one sense, personal freedom involves the power or ability to be aware of one's self as an inner state, an attitude, a frame of mind, or sense of self. Personal freedom is experienced in the individual's "capacity to pause" (May, 1981, p. 54), in the individual's conscious awareness of his or her self, in a person's ability to take hold of their state of mind, and at that moment—whether determined, spontaneous, or fleeting—to consider possibilities. Rogers (1969) considered personal freedom as "essentially an inner element, something that exists in the living person" (p. 260). It is the capacity of mind and spirit demonstrated by Frankl (2006) in his response to the psychic and physical horrors of World War II concentration camps when he wrote, "everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's own attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way" (p. 66). As self-consciousness, personal freedom focuses on the individual's inner condition of life. It underscores the individual's sense of possibilities, senses of imagination and hope, sense of discovery about self, the world, and what living in the world might possibly bring. This inner aspect of freedom opens up the prospect for change, the opportunity to dream and imagine. While recognizing the individual's inner considerations as crucial, this interpretation also acknowledges Bauman's (1988) interpretation of freedom as a "social relation", as a "quality pertaining to a certain difference between individuals" (p. 7). In this sense, personal freedom does not occur in a vacuum; it occurs within the individual's relations of life. In order for the individual to recognize or be aware of freedom, there must be another—whether the other is one's self, another person, or the structures of life. Thus, individuals experience personal freedom as something that exists within themselves and something relational, something personal rather than impersonal.

Secondly, personal freedom involves the individual's identity and the significance of intentional self-expression. May (1981) described this aspect of personal freedom as "throwing one's weight" (p. 54) wherein the individual moves in a direction that matters to his or her self, in a direction that is reflective of the individual's identity and the intimate value individuals associate with their sense of self. Bergmann (1977) proposed that we think of "a person as free to the extent to which his actions correspond to the identity, or to the self" (p. 90). In other words, personal freedom is the vehicle through which the individual expresses his or her self or identity. This aspect of freedom is evident in the two-year old child's passion for the word "No". It is evident in artists whose style is a symbolic expression of their own particular voice. Here, we witness a seemingly universal yearning for personal freedom specifically enacted in the individual's doing as one wishes—in doing things "my way". So when the two-year old child cries out "No", this declaration is not only against the influence or control of parents, it is purposefully directed at the wish to decide for his or her self in a manner that is reflective of the child's own self. As Berlin

([1969](#)) asserted, personal freedom is "the wish on the part of the individual to be his own master" (p. 131). The individual's wish is to be somebody who decides, not someone being decided for. In this way, personal freedom is directly related to a person's own identity, to personal expression and autonomy, to the creation of space in which the individual can act out, express, and be true to one's inner self.

Thirdly, I draw attention to a final aspect of personal freedom that is the outcome—the result of freedom. Personal freedom results in the individual's transformative experience of release. This aspect of freedom is often experienced as relief or transcendence. There is a giving-over or a letting go, a naturalness and spontaneity to this release, a feeling of complete synchronization with one's self. On occasion, the individual experiences an inexplicable state of wonder or mystery. The idea of release proposed here is not a matter of passive compliance; it is not forced on the individual, but is a dynamic representation and recognition of the individual's self and the value associated with expressing his or her self.

What stands out in this exploration is not so much a change in the description of freedom as it is a critical shift in the relationship between freedom and authenticity. Here, freedom distances itself from the limitations and self-imploding nature of the Romantic emancipatory conceptualization, especially in the sense that it has led us so decidedly into narcissism and distorted subjectivity. Instead, authenticity acts as the spark to freedom's flame. Authenticity takes on the role of precursor, the prerequisite, the thrust to freedom, therein usurping the role formerly played by the emancipatory ideals of liberation or independence. In this conceptualization, freedom and authenticity shift from a place where they both shared a grounding in self-determination, to a place where authenticity emerges as the impetus to personal freedom. The individual's personal identity—rather than the emancipatory ideals of independence, autonomy, and liberty—acts as the catalyst or pivotal element towards freedom. As an outcome of authenticity, personal freedom emerges dependent upon and open to the complexities of the individual's true self.

By examining authenticity's historical and theoretical roots, in addition to issues concerning narcissism and self-determining freedom, this investigation has revealed important considerations for an understanding of authenticity. Firstly, in regards to the issue of narcissism, this exploration has uncovered a disturbing link between self-determining freedom and distorted subjective outcomes such as narcissism. It appears that narcissism may be the natural and perhaps unavoidable outcome of the centuries old commitment to self-determination. Persisting with this self-deterministic attitude will most likely result in increasingly isolated and self-serving individualization. Secondly, regarding issues associated with freedom, this investigation proposes that the Romantic ideal of self-determination may be past its prime. Personal freedom as characterized by the emancipatory qualities of independence, autonomy, or liberty may have little to offer in terms of going forward. Whereas, the conceptualization of freedom as anchored in authentic self-expression has yet to be fully explored. Prioritizing authenticity as precursor to freedom takes people away from the projection of freedom as absolute independence, indiscriminate choice, and absence of constraint to a place where freedom connects with knowing one's self as a person, where freedom is experienced in being "true to one's self".

Interestingly, Vanier ([1998](#)) provided an eloquent interpretation of the relation between freedom and authenticity that perfectly captures the results of this study thus far.

> To be free is to know *who we are*, with all the beautiful, all the brokenness in us; it is to love our own values, to embrace them, and to develop them; it is to be anchored in

a vision and a truth but also to be open to others and, so to change. (Vanier, 1998, p. 117)

In these eloquently phrased statements, Vanier echoes the results of this investigation thus far: that freedom is anchored in personal authenticity—in knowing *who we are*. Furthermore, he provides insight into authenticity as captured in radiance and fragility, the individual's relationship with his or her values, openness to other individuals and to transformation. He envisions authenticity as expressed in the dynamics of a meaningful and purposeful exploration that centers around the notion of being "true to one's self". In this instance, a number of questions rise to the surface—If authenticity is not grounded in freedom, what is the precursor to authenticity? What is the backdrop or the foundation of personal authenticity?

Authenticity as Self-exploration

Removing self-determining freedom as the precursor to authenticity sets up the necessity for investigation into the grounding of authenticity. I begin with authenticity as being "true to one's self" and use the research of Cranton (2001; 2006) to act as a launching pad.

We must first understand our Self…. We must separate our sense of Self from the collective of community and society, to know who *we* are, as differentiated from others. This process, called individuation leads to empowerment. (Cranton, 2001, p. vii)

In these few sentences, Cranton describes personal authenticity as anchored in individuation, what I call the idea of self-exploration—an intimate exploration that centers around being "true to one's self". I use the expression self-exploration as an overarching term because it opens the possibility for an interpretation that goes beyond Cranton's suggestion of self-understanding to include the implications of self-care (Frankfurt, 2004; Palmer, 1998), and self-acceptance (Jersild, 1955; Tillich, 1952). While the literature on authenticity has tended to prioritize each of these solitary dynamics to the exclusion of others, I incorporate understanding, care, and acceptance as the composite overlapping and interpenetrative features of authenticity in keeping with Vanier's vision of meaningful and purposeful personal exploration.

Research into personal authenticity has supported the significance of self-understanding in its relation to the individual's self-perception (Brookfield, 2006; Bugental, 1965; Cranton, 2001; Taylor, 1989). The aspect of self-understanding in relation to personal authenticity refers to the individual's capacity to make sense of one's self, the ability to "make sense of reality" and find ways to conceptualize, recreate, or conceive of the "universe within" one's mind (Turok, 2012, p. 4). Self-understanding is a matter of meaning making that considers who we are and how we understand ourselves as matters of constant adjustment. It is about being aware of the interruptions and discrepancies that shake up the individual's personal sense of wellbeing. In this respect, the individual's self-understanding is constantly being validated and challenged by a plethora of external and internal experiences that work in confirmation and disagreement with the individual's authentic sense of self.

An issue commonly associated with self-understanding relates to the individual's purely personal understanding of self. This is an issue that demands to know how the individual can engage in self-understanding without falling into the trap of narcissism or other distorted subjectivities. It has to do with the question of whether human existence is an

individual or communal phenomenon. While it might be tempting to say that human existence is "both" individual and communal, the descriptor "both" carries with it a trivialized fusion that stultifies the individual in a sort of postmodern paralysis. What I suggest is that the relationship between individual and community is a matter of unstructured interaction, an ongoing relation of negotiation, conflict, and agreement. This interactive relationship is not a sanitized version of give and take. It carries with it the interruptive complexities associated with the individual's connection to self and the individual's social context. As an aspect of self-exploration that grounds the notion of personal authenticity, self-understanding overlaps and shares commonalities with self-care and self-acceptance.

The aspect of caring for one's self in relation to personal authenticity refers to the individual's capacity to fundamentally connect with his or her self and participate in the evolving direction of their own life. Self-care involves making conscious choices and personal decisions that contribute to the individual's interests, goals, and ambitions. Caring for one's self plays a role in fostering the individual's sense of stability and multilayered wellbeing. In caring for one's self, the individual establishes the "framework of standards and aims" within which the individual endeavors to conduct his or her life (Frankfurt, 2004). Its significance is not defined by the aggressions of self-preservation or the illusions of self-aggrandizing, but by genuinely considering what it means to cultivate or care for one's own life. The individual who participates in self-care is guided, as one's attitudes and actions are shaped, by one's interest in and concern for the outcome of his or her life. Insofar as the individual cares about certain things, this determines how we think it important to conduct our own lives.

To a certain extent, one of the problems associated with the idea of self-care relates back to the individual's susceptibility to narcissistic tendencies. The problem with narcissism is not only an issue of the distorted focus on one's self, but also involves the tension associated with an absence of caring for others or having no concern for others' welfare that is the primary objection to narcissistic tendencies. In the case of narcissism, caring for one's self is seen as an impediment to caring for others. The challenge with the rejection of self-care is that, in the literature, the aspect of caring for one's self is generally acknowledged as a pre-condition for caring for others (Apps, 1996; May, 1981). This means that the individual with the experience of caring for his or her self is predisposed to care for others, although there is no guarantee that caring for one's self automatically results in caring for others. The individual who does not care for his or her self or who has no experience of being cared for is severely ill equipped to care for others.

Finally, literature on the topic of personal authenticity has confirmed the significance of self-acceptance as the conduit to grasping the meaning in one's own inner life and in affirming meaningful connections with others (Jersild, 1955; Tillich, 1952). The aspect of accepting one's self in relation to personal authenticity concerns itself with what it means for individuals to accept themselves as who they really are—not as who they might think they should be or others want them to be—but as who they really are. Self-acceptance involves being comfortable with the dissonance and consonance that come with being a multilayered individual; it rejects the confines of exclusivity by acknowledging both the celebrations and frustrations of daily life. Self-acceptance is all-inclusive in the sense that it invites everything there is about the individual—including what a person might want to see in one's self, and what a person might not want to see in one's self.

The aspect of self-acceptance opens up the individual's potential to connect with others. As Jersild (1955) affirmed, "The person who can most fully accept himself is the one who can most fully accept others" (p. 130). What self-acceptance does is it empowers the

individual to participate in relationships without the restrictions of obligation, guilt, or personal denial. Self-acceptance equips the individual to understand another person's anger, need for affection, or independence because the individual can draw upon his or her own personal understanding and realization of what such experiences mean. Considering authenticity from a perspective of all-inclusive self-acceptance, there is a rejection of the absolute of perfectionism. As all-inclusive self-acceptance, authenticity has little to do with the ideal of perfection, because perfection most often represents the presence of only things the individual wants to see. In contrast, authenticity is not defined by a selective approach to personal identity, but by considering the individual in totality. Authenticity is about being open and receptive to the individual's inner complexity in contrast to itemizing the individual's desired self-description or creating a hierarchy of personal traits. It means that authenticity is not just recognizing who you are. Authenticity is about accepting who you are.

Acceptable Tension

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of authenticity as self-exploration is the subtle but undeniable thread of interruptive tension that seems to run alongside self-understanding, self-care, and self-acceptance. For example, in terms of self-understanding, tensions may arise when the experiences of an individual's life provide conflicting messages. Tensions emerge because in one respect, certain experiences validate or confirm the individual's self-understanding, while in another respect, other experiences deny or work in disagreement with self-understanding. Tension linked to self-understanding may also be accentuated by the limitations regarding an individual's capacity to learn about his or her self—the conflict between what is possible for an individual to learn about one's self and everything there is to know about one's self. Examining self-care in a similar light, tensions may arise because the intentionality associated with self-care embodies a complete range of intensities from self-indulgence to self-neglect. Other tensions come into play because self-care has emotional, ideological, economic, physical, and spiritual implications that may conflict with each other. Furthermore, in terms of self-acceptance, individuals may face tensions in the conflict between what they want to see in themselves and what they do not want to see in themselves—the dissonance and consonance of being a multilayered individual. All-inclusive self-acceptance recognizes the individual as complex and potentially conflicted. Notably, interruptive tensions create waves in contradictory directions that both foster and undermine the individual's sense of self. Tensions can take the individual away from and closer to being "true to one's self". Recognizing interruptive tensions is important for this investigation because they highlight the nature of self-exploration—namely, that self-understanding, self-care, and self-acceptance are not sanitized, isolated, or trouble-free modes of personal exploration. Self-exploration takes place within the messiness of comforts and tensions, alignments and misalignments, stabilities and uncertainties that come with real life.

To appreciate the position of interruptive tensions in regards to authenticity, a comparison with previous historical interpretations of authenticity is useful. Looking at the Romantic ideals of self-determination and independence, the tensions of externally imposed classifications or dogmatism have been pushed aside by the liberated individual who is a self-determined freethinker. Here, the individual as complete in self has mitigated any possibility of tension. Although contemporary philosophical conceptualizations argue against Romantic subjectivist and relativist distortions by promoting moral and social

frameworks, my impression is that such frameworks serve to shield the individual from tensions or conflicts rather than engage with them. In contrast, authenticity as a kind of messy self-exploration acknowledges that being "true to one's self" takes place within both the disruptive tensions and meaningful alignments associated with self-understanding, self-care, and self-acceptance. Authenticity occurs within an interactive state of personal exploration that juxtaposes who the individual is as a person and how the individual fits into the world, all without losing sight of the interruptive tensions associated with both being "true to one's self" and being in-the-world.

Previously in this article, I identified how the current challenge facing authenticity was concerned with moving through a somewhat distrusted and uncharted environment while acknowledging authenticity as something worth accessing and expressing in our lives. Moreover, the evidence of distrust regarding authenticity indicated the need for a purposeful examination of issues associated with authenticity. What is the reason behind the distrust of authenticity? Is it because of the independent individual's potential towards narcissism? Is it because the individual's social context necessitates a moral and social framework? I suggest the distrust of authenticity is linked to the inherent combination of comforts and discomforts associated with authenticity. Distrust surfaces because, on the one hand and in keeping with Romantic ideals and current moral frameworks, authenticity *feels* like the right thing to do; while on the other hand, being "true to one's self" involves a messy kind of self-exploration that may challenge or conflict with the very same Romantic ideals and current moral and social orientations. What this investigation seems to indicate is that being "true to one's self" comes with what might be referred to as an "acceptable tension"—an ongoing exchange of conflict and agreement brought about by the individual's implicit and explicit, internal and external experiences. Authenticity is not premised upon a solitary idyllic state defined solely by alignment and self-contentment without conflict or stress; authenticity involves dynamic adjustments that take into consideration the comforts, agreements, and acceptable tensions of life.

A good example of "acceptable tension" is captured in the classical pianist's performance wherein various internal and external factors work in agreement and in conflict. Piano performance involves a complexity of acceptable tensions comprising the performer's physical, emotional, intellectual, intuitive, and spiritual commitment to performance in juxtaposition with the particularities of the musical score and the piano's tonal temperament, not to mention the attention of a listening audience. Of course, the pianist's tensions come in all sizes and shapes wherein debilitating tensions may make performance impossible, and negligible or benign tensions may render performance meaningless. Nonetheless, successful, satisfying, or meaningful performances are not merely concerned with getting rid of tensions; rather, successful performances allow for, tap into, and generate the dynamic interplay of acceptable tensions. The idea of acceptable tension is valuable because it highlights the characteristics of performance, often comprised of variable, changing, and oppositional elements such as feeling and thinking, tension and release, active and passive engagement, and impulsive and determined qualities.

Similarly, being "true to one's self" encompasses a complex playing out of acceptable tensions captured within the variable and oppositional messiness of self-exploration. Here, tensions and conflicts serve as intimate and fruitful avenues for exercising, experiencing, and exploring the meaning of authenticity. This is not to say that tensions and conflicts are the only avenues for meaningful personal exploration. Not in the least; rather, that by acknowledging tensions and conflicts, we get a particular picture of who we are. Who we are as persons is reaffirmed in the ways we respond to tensions and conflicts. By generating our own tensions and conflicts, we affirm what is important to our sense of self and what is

required in order to be "true to one's self". Perhaps that is why we commonly seek out challenging encounters as a way of testing or proving to ourselves that we can be authentic. Because in interrupting the comforts of our own self-designed independence, our own moral imperatives and social frameworks, we purposely reinforce the intimate value in being "true to one's self".

Acceptable tensions are significant in prompting, framing, and questioning the values we hold close to our hearts—for example: the value of learning about life and experiencing what life has to offer, the value of being "true to one's self". Acceptable tensions operate much like a team of whistleblowers that advocate and agitate the individual's sense of self, prompting the individual to pay attention to the meaning and purpose of his or her life. Here, the individual's relationships, social contexts, educational encounters, interests, and obligations take on the consonance and dissonance of acceptable tensions. Likewise, the stimulus of Romantic self-determining freedom and contemporary moral imperatives and social obligations have relevance, not as the foundation or anchor to authenticity, but as examples of dynamic whistleblowers or acceptable tensions that interrupt the alignment associated with being "true to one's self". In this respect, some tensions have greater value than others and not all tensions are necessarily impediments to being "true to one's self". And because tensions come in all sizes and shapes, certain conflicts and discomforts may be completely acceptable, manageable, and reasonable—while others occupy the extremes from benign to debilitating.

Conclusion

This investigation began by acknowledging authenticity in terms of the meaningful alignment between who individuals are and how they get on with their lives. An examination of various issues associated with authenticity has resulted in a repositioning of authenticity as the precursor to freedom. Research into the literature on authenticity has shed light on self-exploration as a matter of self-understanding, self-care, and self-acceptance wherein personal alignment occurs as a constant, yet spontaneously constructed, fluid, and interactive state. However, what seems most remarkable about this investigation is the impact of acceptable tension on the notion of being "true to one's self". Acceptable tensions shift our understanding of authenticity from the security and limitations of self-determining freedom to the messy interplay of internal and external dynamics that come with being a multilayered human being. Seen from this point of view, there is an acknowledgment that authenticity takes place within both the meaningful alignments and disruptive tensions associated with being "true to one's self" and being in-the-world. Authenticity is not premised upon a solitary idyllic state defined solely by alignment and self-contentment without conflict or stress; authenticity takes into consideration the dynamic adjustments associated with the comforts, agreements, and acceptable tensions of life.

Returning to the two types of knowledgeable teachers identified at the outset of this article—teachers who display an instructional ease reflective of the respectful connection they have with themselves and teachers who demonstrate an instructional artificiality reflective of the disconnect they have with themselves and their students—it occurs to me that while this investigation has revealed a more intimate understanding of authenticity, it also invites further research from an education perspective. Given that educational endeavors are amongst the vast number of acceptable tensions teachers encounter in being "true to one's self", such research would delve into teachers' relationships with

educational endeavors, in particular, examining how teachers' macro and micro educational perspectives take on consonant and dissonant positions.

Finally, what seems important about this investigation is the notion that being "true to one's self" is not defined by an uninterrupted trajectory of navel gazing, narcissism, or self-absorption. Authenticity survives in the messy interplay of self-understanding, self-care, and self-acceptance. Yet, being authentic also comes with a side current of acceptable tension that on the one hand routinely reminds and compels us to remember who we are; while on the other hand, such interruptive tensions also pull each of us to consider what we have yet to imagine about ourselves, about each other, and about life.

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