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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
RIVERSIDE

Understanding the True Self: The Effects of Self and Identity Processes on Authenticity

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Sociology

by

Emily Angelo

December 2021

Thesis Committee:

Dr. Jan Stets, Chairperson

Dr. Amy Kroska

Dr. Bruce Link

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The Thesis of Emily Angelo is approved:

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Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Understanding the True Self: The Effects of Self and Identity Processes on Authenticity

by

Emily Angelo

Master of Arts, Graduate Program in Sociology  
University of California, Riverside, December 2021  
Dr. Jan Stets, Chairperson

Over the last decade, the social psychological study of authenticity, or the idea of “feeling like ourselves” has seen a resurgence. This research aims to advance understanding about authenticity by examining the internal, external, proximal, and distal factors that influence one’s understanding of their true self. Using a sample of 470 emerging adults, this cross-sectional study examines how the external, distal factor of parental socialization and the internal, proximal factors of identity processes and self-esteem affect individuals’ overall feelings of authenticity. This analysis shifts the conversation on authenticity away from definitional debates and into territory more concrete and applicable. I find that a flexible parenting style is best for encouraging the development of the true self in children, that identity verification plays a key role in authenticity during emerging adulthood, and that higher self-esteem is related to greater feelings of authenticity overall. This work contributes to existing authenticity scholarship by providing a better understanding of the self and identity processes that shape authenticity throughout a person’s life.

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## **Introduction**

In July of 2021, the cover of Psychology Today magazine read “Your True Self: What it is and How to Embrace it.” Inside was a collection of essays from several authors expressing various views about what the true self is and how people might bring a greater sense of authenticity to their lives (Henderson et al. 2021). This is not the first time that authenticity has appeared in Psychology Today. A 2016 online article presents “7 Core Qualities of Authentic People,” which outlines behaviors exhibited by people who are the epitome of authenticity, as well as those shown by people who are inauthentic (Joseph 2016). An internet search of authenticity in recent online news yields articles about people’s search for and discovery of their true selves, articles and books offering advice on how to be yourself and how to address conflict between your true self and your social environment, and workshops offering advice on finding who you truly are. There is no shortage of discussion on this topic, and its prevalence in popular conversations indicates that authenticity is not only something people are acutely aware of, but that it is something that we as a society value and actively pursue.

Thus far, the literature on authenticity has addressed how it is defined, interpreted, and experienced. Early studies establish a framework for understanding what authenticity is, highlighting some of its most important elements. Authenticity is the notion of “being ourselves;” it is the deeply embedded essence of who we are, which we come to understand through self-reflection, and which we display in interactions with others (Peterson 2000; Van Leeuwen 2001; Vannini and Franzese 2008). Studies have distinguished the “true self” as a concept distinctly different from the self, and one that



people generally view positively (Baumeister 2019; Kovács 2019; Strohming, Knobe, and Newman 2017; Vannini and Williams 2009; Vess 2019). Previous work has also revealed multiple dimensions of authenticity, showing that our overall sense of true self is reflected in our ability and motivation to understand ourselves, to assess ourselves objectively and without bias, to behave in ways that reflect our core values, and to allow close others to see the “real” us (Kernis and Goldman 2006).

Additional research applies these findings to understanding the circumstances under which people feel most authentic. Work on state authenticity, or the experience of being in tune with one’s true self, examines what makes people feel authentic in everyday life. These studies show that authenticity is not something that one either does or does not possess; rather, it is experienced in varying degrees across various situations (Erickson 1995; Sedikides et al. 2019).

What the literature has not yet examined is an in-depth exploration of factors that affect a person’s ability to understand and experience their true selves. This is what the current project seeks to do. Building on foundational research in social psychology, socialization, and identity theory, I investigate the relationship between authenticity and self and identity processes; specifically, I examine how one’s parental socialization, identity processes, and self-esteem relate to their overall feelings of authenticity. This study contributes to work on authenticity and aims to address how people might better understand and embody the truest versions of themselves.

## **Self and Identity**

This work builds on the social psychological understanding of what authenticity is, but steps away from the debate over its definition and veracity to examine some neglected aspects, namely the ways in which self and identity processes affect overall feelings of authenticity. Using literatures of socialization, identity theory, and self-esteem, I explore the internal, external, proximal, and distal factors of self and identity that may affect an individual's understanding of who they truly are.

Authenticity has long been the subject of philosophical, psychological, and sociological contestation (Newman and Smith 2016). For most people, authenticity is synonymous with truth; it describes something real, genuine, or legitimate (Heynen 2006; Kovács 2019; Vannini and Williams 2009). For others, authenticity is uniqueness and resistance to outside influence (Kovács 2019; Pillow et al. 2017). In both of these definitions, authenticity is characterized as something concrete, a fixed entity that someone or something either is or is not (Vannini and Williams 2009).

As applied to the self, research on authenticity seeks to capture what it means to “be oneself,” that is, the ways in which individuals consider and experience their “true selves” in their lives (Lenton et al. 2013; Sedikides et al. 2019). The self is multifaceted (Jongman-Sereno and Leary 2019; O'Rourke 2012); there is the self that emerges with family and friends, that which presents itself in the professional environment, and that which surfaces when alone. While it might seem that the solitary self would be most authentic, the literature indicates that, just like the self, the “true self” is multifaceted as well.

Research indicates that we see and understand ourselves through our roles, values, goals, self-awareness, and social experiences (Goffman 1959; Jongman-Serano and Leary 2019; Strohminger et al. 2017; Vannini and Franzese 2008). It is possible for a person to experience feeling like their “true self” under a multitude of circumstances (Erikson 1995; Lenton et al. 2013; Lenton et al. 2016; Vannini and Franzese 2008). Research that examines the experience of authenticity has asked participants about specific times or events where they felt like their true selves, as well as captured how they experience the true self retrospectively and in real time (Lenton et al. 2016; Sedikides et al. 2017; Sedikides et al. 2019; Wilt et al. 2019). These approaches use participant responses to gauge how much individuals experience authenticity in their daily lives, as well as what types of situations prompt this experience (Lenton et al. 2013; Lenton et al. 2016). Current studies of state authenticity indicate that “triggers” for feeling authentic are universal and consistent, and that feelings of competency and positivity set the stage for one’s “true self” to emerge. Generally, the situations in which people report feeling most like themselves reflects the mundanity of everyday life, rather than extraordinary situations (Lenton et al. 2013; Sedikides et al. 2019; Wilt et al. 2019).

While both psychological and sociological scholarship has advanced our understanding of the meanings and experience of authenticity, it has not yet investigated which social factors might affect a person’s ability to understand and experience being their true selves. This research aims to provide a social psychological look at the internal, external, proximal, and distal factors that influence one’s feelings of authenticity. Using authenticity as an outcome, this work examines the influence of self and identity

processes, specifically childhood socialization, identity salience, prominence and verification, and self-esteem.

## **Socialization**

The way we see ourselves is constantly developing due to the experiences we have and the social roles we assume (Gore and Cross 2011). Socialization is one way to understand the potential origins of that development. Socialization is the process by which individuals learn to participate in social life, and the self begins to take shape (Lutfey and Mortimer 2003; O'Rourke 2012). It is particularly critical during the early years of childhood and adolescence, when individuals first have opportunities to learn about themselves through interactions with others. At these early stages of life, the majority of socialization takes place by interacting with one's parents (Vannini and Williams 2008).

Parenting styles can be especially influential on a child's socialization and formation of identities (Baumrind 1971; Kernis and Goldman 2006). There are three primary styles of parenting that relate to these concepts: permissive, authoritarian, and authoritative/flexible styles. Each style can affect children differently. Permissive parents tend to be warm and indulgent of their children. They are non-controlling, make few demands, and impose little punishment. The environment that permissive parents create for their children is largely unstructured with loose rules and restrictions, and children are most often left to their own devices. Though this type of parenting does allow children to explore on their own, this exploration often lacks parental guidance. Authoritarian parents are near polar opposites of permissive parents; they use a highly directive style of

parenting that emphasizes obedience and punishment for disobedience. While far more structured than permissive parenting styles, authoritarian parenting can suppress children's autonomy and self-exploration.

Authoritative or flexible parenting incorporates elements of both permissive and authoritarian parenting; flexible parents are supportive of their children's independence, expressiveness, and exploration of social life as they grow. They do not restrict their children's behaviors with punishment, but rather guide them through direction and communication. This style of parenting fosters children's autonomy and self-exploration. Flexible parents contrast sharply with authoritarian parents, who exert power and dominance over their children rather than nurturing their autonomy (Baumrind 1971; Kernis and Goldman 2006). Overall, one might consider these three parenting styles on a continuum with permissive parenting on one end, authoritarian parenting on the opposite end, and flexible parenting somewhere between these two poles.

Previous research recognizes the significance of parental socialization in the development of the self over time (Vannini and Williams 2008). However, there has not been as much investigation on how early life socialization shapes authenticity. The current research considers socialization as an external and distal factor influencing the development of one's true self. Parental socialization is a distal factor because, at the time of this research, its greatest impact occurred years ago (through the early years of childhood through adolescence), and it is an external factor because it examines the outside influence of one's parents on the internal aspects of their self. Prior research has shown that there is a correlation between parenting styles experienced in childhood and

authenticity felt in young adulthood. It is possible that each style of parenting provides more or less support for children's autonomy and self-exploration, and that this support is key to authenticity in emerging adulthood (Kernis and Goldman 2006; Vansteenkiste et al. 2005).

Permissive parenting is marked by unstructured indulgence, and while this does not seem detrimental to the development of the authentic self, boundless support without guidance or direction might leave children without a strong sense of who they are. On the opposite end of the spectrum, it is clear that authoritarian parenting has the potential to suppress children's autonomy and self-exploration through restrictions and sanctions. When deviation from rules and standards of behavior set by parents is met with consequences, children may sacrifice self-exploration and understanding in the name of obedience and avoidance of punishment (Kernis and Goldman 2006; Vansteenkiste et al. 2005). As a middle ground, flexible parenting seems most likely to promote the development of authentic understanding and allow it to flourish beyond childhood; flexible parents are neither loose nor directive in their approach, but are structured and methodical, implementing gentle guidance for their children to explore themselves in a safe environment (Baumrind 1971; Kernis and Goldman 2006).

While studies have established correlations between parenting and authenticity, these connections merit further examination by studying their impact while controlling for other relevant factors associated with authenticity. Given the above discussion, I hypothesize that:

*H<sub>1a</sub>: Permissive parenting will be negatively related to authenticity.*

*H<sub>1b</sub>: Authoritarian parenting will be negatively related to authenticity.*

*H<sub>1c</sub>: Flexible parenting will be positively related to authenticity.*

## **Identities**

While the true self has been discussed in the context of identity theory (Erickson 1995; Stets and Burke 2014), previous research has not yet examined how identities and identity processes relate to one's understanding of their true self. The current research examines identity prominence, salience, and verification as internal proximal factors affecting authenticity. These are internal processes because they occur within the self, and proximal because, at the time of this research, they are taking place in the present.

Identity theory states that individuals have multiple identities that correspond with their social roles, groups, and characteristics that make them unique (Burke and Stets 2009; Stets 2018; Stets and Burke 2014). One of the most central elements of identity theory is that identities have meanings to those who hold them. Meanings are the ways in which individuals understand and describe themselves as a person, in a role, and as a member of a group or category. An identity is activated when its meanings are invoked in a given situation (Burke and Stets 2009; Stets 2018). The set of meanings associated with an identity is one's identity standard, which guides individuals' behavior in situations (Burke and Stets 2009). While individuals have multiple identities and meanings associated with those identities, it is possible that the meanings of some identities feel more authentic to individuals than others. Through the lens of identity theory, this work introduces a new concept of the true self as the identity or identities that best represent who one truly is, or how they see themselves authentically. I will hereafter refer to these

authentic identities as true-self identities. This concept is distinct from authenticity; where authenticity represents an individual's general understanding of who they truly are, true-self identities are components that might contribute to a person's overall feelings of authenticity. This work aims to understand how the concepts of true-self identities and authenticity are connected.

Different dimensions of an identity may inform one's conceptualization of their true self. According to identity theory, identity prominence refers to the importance of a particular identity, identity salience indicates the likelihood that an identity will be invoked across situations, and identity verification indicates congruence between one's view of themselves and how they perceive others view them within a given identity (Stets 2018; Stets and Burke 2009; Stets and Serpe 2013; Yeung et al. 2003). True-self identities are likely important to the individuals who hold them. Additionally, the fact that individuals aim to experience the true self in everyday life suggests that true-self identities may be likely to be invoked across situations (Sedikides et al. 2019). Research shows that people's feelings of authenticity are elicited by situations they encounter in their everyday lives, and that people are motivated to feel authentic frequently as opposed to rarely (Erickson 1995; Lenton et al. 2013; Sedikides et al. 2019; Wilt et al. 2019). A true-self identity also might be one that is more likely invoked in multiple social contexts, thus maintaining the consistent experience of authenticity that people seek.

Further, true-self identities are likely those that we recognize in the same way as we perceive others recognize them. A person's understanding of who they are develops in part by imagining how others perceive and understand them. While a person's sense of



authenticity hinges on their understanding of who they truly are, it also depends on their commitment and ability to show that true self to others (Erickson 1995). Authenticity is as much about self-reflection as it is self-representation. In this way, it is possible that the identities we see as our true self are also those that we feel are seen and understood by others. Based on these aspects of authenticity and identity prominence, salience, and verification, I hypothesize that:

***H<sub>2a</sub>**: True-self identity prominence will be positively related to authenticity.*

***H<sub>2b</sub>**: True-self identity salience will be positively related to authenticity.*

***H<sub>2c</sub>**: True-self identity verification will be positively related to authenticity.*

## **Self-Esteem**

Apart from parental socialization and identity processes, self-esteem is another internal and proximal social factor that may impact one's experience and understanding of their true self. It is internal based on its intimate location as a self-process, and proximal because it is a fairly stable quality of self that can be measured in the present. Self-esteem is the positive or negative attitudes that one takes toward the self (Stets and Burke 2014). In the current research, I look at self-esteem as the degree to which individuals have a positive view of themselves and the degree to which they feel capable of impacting their environment (Stets and Burke 2014). Prior research has shown that there is a relationship between self-esteem and authenticity, but this connection has not yet been investigated when controlling for other factors associated with authenticity. These two concepts are similar in that people are motivated to increase both their self-esteem and their feelings of authenticity (Erickson 1995). Research also indicates that self-esteem, life-satisfaction, well-being, and feeling like oneself are concepts that are

positively associated with one another (Lenton et al. 2014). Thus, this work advances a third hypothesis:

*H<sub>3</sub>: Self-esteem will be positively associated with authenticity.*

## **Methods**

### **Sample**

I survey 470, 18–25-year-old students in undergraduate sociology classes at a southwestern university in 2020. Study participants were recruited from the age range of emerging adulthood, a unique stage of life course development that is characterized by a lack of structure and certainty, a prevalence of transition and change, an emphasis on self-exploration, and feelings of being “in-between” chapters of one’s life (Arnett 2007). I recruit emerging adults because it is at this point in life where individuals spend more time thinking about their innermost self (Arnett 2000; Arnett 2007; Burke and Stets 2009; Vignoles et al. 2011). Further, sampling from a population of students is beneficial because like emerging adulthood, college epitomizes a period of change, transition, and self-exploration. Students have an opportunity to simultaneously reflect on who they have been in the past and explore who they are in the present. It is a point at which contemplation of the meanings of one’s “true self” may be most frequent. Overall, a sample of emerging adult college students provides a good place to test my hypotheses. Emerging adulthood captures the elements of exploration, self-reflection, and meaning that are central to authenticity of self, providing a window into a time at which true-self meanings begin to solidify.

## Measures

The measures used in this study include authenticity, respondents' parenting styles, respondents' identities, the dimensions of respondents' identities, and self-esteem. Background characteristics are also obtained regarding age, gender, income, race, and mental health. Age is measured in order to ensure that the age range for the sample reflects that of emerging adulthood (ages 18-25). This is also to control for the potential impact of age on authenticity, as research indicates that people tend to believe that they are becoming more authentic as they get older (Seto and Schlegel 2018). Mental health is measured to control for the possibility that anxiety and depression affect individuals' understanding of their true self. It is possible that people who are particularly anxious or depressed are not able to see their true selves as clearly as those who do not experience such issues.

While there is no established relationship between income and authenticity, I include this control because it is possible that children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may not have had as much encouragement, time, or as many resources to devote to self-discovery. These children may be more concerned with helping their families financially than with exploring what makes them feel most like themselves. The literature also does not speak to the relationship between authenticity and gender or race. These characteristics are included to explore whether they are associated with authenticity.

To measure authenticity, I use the short form of the Kernis and Goldman Authenticity Index (KGAI-SF). This 20-item measure assesses four components of

authenticity: awareness, unbiased processing, behavior, and relational orientation (Bond et al. 2018; Kernis and Goldman 2006). Awareness items assess respondents' awareness of and trust in their own strengths and weaknesses, emotions, personality, and how each of these affects their behavior (e.g., "I understand why I believe the things I do about myself"). Unbiased processing items examine whether respondents objectively acknowledge both positive and negative aspects of themselves (e.g., "I try to block out any unpleasant feelings I might have about myself").

Behavior items determine whether respondents act in accordance with their own values, preferences, and needs, as opposed to acting to please others, get rewards, or avoid punishments (e.g., "I rarely if ever, put on a 'false face' for others to see").

Relational orientation items indicate whether respondents value being open, honest, and genuine with close others, and want close others to see their true self (e.g., "I want close others to understand the real me rather than just my public persona or 'image'") (Bond et al. 2018; Kernis and Goldman 2006).

Participants respond to each item on a scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" (coded 1–5) (Kernis and Goldman 2006). Factor analysis was performed for the entire scale, and a test of internal reliability revealed that the scale was reliable with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .80. Factor analysis was also performed on each dimension of the scale. Each showed one underlying dimension and yielded reliable alpha coefficients of awareness = .65, unbiased processing = .52, behavior = .65, and relational orientation = .63. The factor analysis results for authenticity are in Table 1. The

items were summed, and high scores indicate that an individual conceives of themselves as more authentic.

To measure parenting styles, I use the Parental Authority Questionnaire (PAQ). This 30-item measure determines the degree to which individuals experienced permissive, authoritarian, and authoritative/flexible parenting during their childhood (Buri 1991). Prior to filling out this measure, participants were asked to indicate which parent they were closest to between the ages of 6 and 14, which marks their childhood and pre-adolescent years. Thereafter, participants were presented with questions about the parent they selected.

Permissive parenting items present statements such as “As I was growing up, my mother seldom gave me expectations and guidelines for my behavior.” Authoritarian parenting items present statements such as “As I was growing up my mother let me know what behavior she expected of me, and if I didn’t meet those expectations, she punished me.” Authoritative or flexible parenting items present statements such as “As the children in my family were growing up, my mother consistently gave us direction and guidance in rational and objective ways” (Buri 1991).

Participants responded to each statement on a scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” (coded 1–5) (Buri 1991; Kernis and Goldman 2006). Factor analyses of items for each parenting style yield single underlying dimension and high reliability coefficients (permissive = .75, authoritarian = .88, flexible = .86). These results are presented in Table 2. The items assessing permissive, authoritarian, and flexible

Table 1: Factor Analysis for Authenticity (N = 474)

Items	Loadings
Awareness	
I am often confused about my feelings.	.59
I understand why I believe the things I do about myself.	.36
I am not in touch with my deepest thoughts and feelings	.55
I frequently am not in touch with what's important to me.	.58
I often question whether I really know what I want to accomplish in my lifetime.	.48
Behavior	
I frequently pretend to enjoy something when in actuality I really don't.	-.42
I try to act in a manner that is consistent with my personally held values, even if others criticize or reject me for doing so.	.56
I find that my behavior typically expresses my values.	.57
I rarely if ever, put on a "false face" for others to see.	.53
I am willing to endure negative consequences by expressing my true beliefs about things.	.52
Unbiased Processing	
I find it very difficult to critically assess myself.	.33
I try to block out any unpleasant feelings I might have about myself.	.11
I often deny the validity of any compliments that I receive.	.63
I find it difficult to embrace and feel good about the things I have accomplished.	.68
If someone points out or focuses on one of my shortcomings I quickly try to block it out of my mind and forget it.	.21
Relational Orientation	
I make it a point to express to close others how much I truly care for them.	.58
It is important for me to understand my close others' needs and desires.	.65
I want close others to understand the real me rather than just my public persona or "image."	.42
The people I am close to can count on me being who I am regardless of what setting we are in.	.41
My openness and honesty in close relationships are extremely important to me.	.50
$\alpha = .80$	

parenting were summed with a high score indicating that the individual experienced that style to a greater degree during their childhood years.

To measure identity, I provide respondents with a list of 12 role, group, and person identities: student, athlete, friend, romantic partner, worker, racial/ethnic, religious, LGBTQ+, family, political, dominant, and moral identities. I then ask them to select those identities that they feel best reflect their true self. Respondents then chose the one identity that they feel comes closest to their true self and respond to questions about its prominence, salience, and verification. Prominence items include: (1) “How much is this identity an important part of how you see yourself?” (2) “How much is this identity an important reflection of who you are?” and (3) “How much do you think of yourself as this identity?” Salience is measured using the following items: (1) “In general, how much do you find that this identity influences or guides how you behave?” and (2) “How many hours during an average day is this identity relevant to what you are doing?” Finally, verification is measured using three items: (1) “Think about how you see yourself in this identity. How much do you think close others see you this way?” (2) “How much do you think close others accept you as this identity?” and (3) “How much do you think others criticize you as this identity?” Each of these items is measured on a scale from “Not at all” to “Completely” (coded 1–10).

Strong correlations were found between all three prominence items. Items 1 and 2 had the strongest correlation ( $r = .78$ ). Item 3 also had strong correlations with item 1 ( $r = .64$ ) and item 2 ( $r = .63$ ). All three items were summed, with high scores indicating higher prominence of one’s true-self identity. The two salience items have a weaker

Table 2. Factor Analysis for Parenting Styles (N = 362)\*

Items (as worded for mothers)	Loadings
<b>Permissive</b>	
While I was growing up, my mother felt that in a well-run home, the children should have their way in the family as often as the parents do.	.64
My mother has always felt that what children need is to be free to make up their own minds and to do what they want to do, even if this does not agree with what their parents might want.	.72
As I was growing up, my mother did <i>not</i> feel that I needed to obey rules and regulations of behavior simply because someone in authority had established them.	.53
As I was growing up, my mother seldom gave me expectations and guidelines for my behavior.	.14
Most of the time as I was growing up, my mother did what the children in the family wanted when making family decisions.	.60
My mother feels that most problems in society would be solved if parents would <i>not</i> restrict their children's activities, decisions, and desires as they are growing up.	.54
As I was growing up, my mother allowed me to decide most things for myself without a lot of direction from her.	.63
My mother did not view herself as responsible for directing and guiding my behavior as I was growing up.	.25
As I was growing up, my mother allowed me to form my own point of view on family matters, and she generally allowed me to decide for myself what I was going to do.	.67
As I was growing up, my mother did not direct the behaviors, activities, and desires of the children in the family.	.41
<b>Authoritarian</b>	
Even if her children didn't agree with her, my mother felt that it was for our own good if we were forced to conform to what she thought was right.	.66
Whenever my mother told me to do something as I was growing up, she expected me to do it immediately without asking any questions.	.64
As I was growing up, my mother did not allow me to question any decision she had made.	.72
My mother has always felt that more force should be used by parents in order to get their children to behave the way they are supposed to.	.70
My mother felt that wise parents should teach their children early just who is boss in the family.	.63
As I was growing up, my mother would get very upset if I tried to disagree with her.	.71
As I was growing up, my mother let me know what behavior she expected of me, and if I didn't meet those expectations, she punished me.	.65
My mother has always felt that most problems in society would be solved if we could get parents to strictly and forcibly deal with their children when they don't do what they are supposed to as they are growing up.	.57
As I was growing up, my mother often told me exactly what she wanted me to do, and how she expected me to do it.	.58
As I was growing up, I knew what my mother expected of me in the family, and she insisted that I conform to those expectations simply out of respect for her authority.	.62



Authoritative/ Flexible	As I was growing up, once family policy had been established, my mother discussed the reasoning behind the policy with the children in the family.	.53
	My mother has always encouraged verbal give-and-take whenever I have felt that family rules and restrictions were unreasonable.	.60
	As I was growing up, my mother directed the activities and decisions of the children in the family through reasoning and discipline.	.18
	As I was growing up, I knew what my mother expected of me in my family, but I also felt free to discuss those expectations with my mother when I felt that they were unreasonable.	.74
	As the children in my family were growing up, my mother consistently gave us direction and guidance in rational and objective ways.	.59
	As I was growing up, my mother took the children's opinions into consideration when making family decisions, but she would not decide for something simply because the children wanted it.	.55
	My mother had clear standards of behavior for the children in our home as I was growing up, but she was willing to adjust those standards to the needs of each of the individual children in the family.	.66
	My mother gave me direction for my behavior and activities as I was growing up, and she expected me to follow her direction, but she was always willing to listen to my concerns and to discuss that direction with me.	.83
	As I was growing up, my mother gave me clear direction for my behaviors and activities, but she was also understanding when I disagreed with her.	.77
	As I was growing up, if my mother made a decision in the family that hurt me, she was willing to discuss that decision with me and to admit it if she had made a mistake.	.67
$\alpha = .92$		

correlation ( $r = .21$ ). While the correlation is not very strong, both items address identity salience. Item 1 examines how relevant an identity is to one’s behavior, and item 2 assesses then frequency of that relevance in hours. The items were summed with higher scores indicating higher salience of one’s true-self identity.

The three items for verification varied in the strength of their correlations. Items 1 and 2 have a strong correlation ( $r = .54$ ). Item 3 has weak correlations with item 1 ( $r = -.01$ ) and item 2 ( $r = -.24$ ). Due to their strong correlation, items 1 and 2 were summed to create a measure for verification, where higher scores indicate that one’s true-self identity is more likely to be verified. Item 3 was dropped due to its weak correlation with items 1 and 2. Correlations for prominence, salience, and verification variables are provided in Table 3.

Table 3. Correlations among Identity Variables (N = 470)

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
1) Prominence Item 1	1.00							
2) Prominence Item 2	.79*	1.00						
3) Prominence Item 3	.64*	.63*	1.00					
4) Salience Item 1	.55*	.58*	.46*	1.00				
5) Salience Item 2	.26*	.22*	.22*	.21*	1.00			
6) Verification Item 1	.46*	.45*	.49*	.37*	.19*	1.00		
7) Verification Item 2	.34*	.35*	.38*	.25*	.14*	.55*	1.00	
8) Verification Item 3	.10*	.06	-.06	.08	.07	-.01	-.25*	1.00

\* $p < 0.05$

To measure self-esteem, I ask about worth and efficacy-based esteem (Stets and Burke 2014). Worth-based esteem measures the degree to which individuals feel that they are good and valuable people, and that they view themselves in a positive way (e.g., “I take a positive attitude toward myself”). Efficacy-based esteem measures the degree to

which individuals feel that they have influence over what happens to them in their lives (e.g., “I have little control over the things that happen to me” (Stets and Burke 2014). For each item, respondents answer from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” (coded 1–4). Factor analysis of these items yielded one underlying dimension with a high alpha score of .89. The factor analysis for self-esteem can be found in Table 4. The items were summed with higher scores indicating that a respondent has higher self-esteem.

Table 4. Factor Analysis for Self-Esteem (N = 479)

	Items	Loadings
Worth	I feel I am a person of worth, at least on an equal basis with others.	.70
	I feel that I have a number of good qualities.	.74
	I take a positive attitude toward myself.	.83
	On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.	.79
	I usually feel good about myself.	.76
	I feel I have much to offer as a person,	.69
	I have a lot of confidence in the actions I undertake in my life.	.74
Efficacy	There is no way I can solve some of the problems I have.	.55
	I have little control over the things that happen to me.	.53
	There is little I can do to change many of the important things in my life.	.58
	I feel as if what happens to me is mostly determined by other people.	.53
	I certainly feel helpless at times.	.67

I measure mental health using scales for depression and anxiety, each of which measure how often individuals have experienced symptoms of depression and anxiety in the recent past. To measure depression, I use the depression module of the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9). This 9-item measure asks respondents how often over the last 7 days they have been bothered by certain problems, including little interest or pleasure in doing things, feeling tired or having little energy, and feeling bad about themselves or

like they have let themselves or their family down (Kroenke et al. 2001). Response categories include “Not at all” to “Nearly every day” (coded 0–3).

To measure anxiety, I use the Generalized Anxiety Disorder scale (GAD-7). This 7-item measure asks respondents how often they have experienced certain problems over the last 2 weeks, including feeling nervous, anxious or on edge, not being able to stop or control worrying, and having trouble relaxing (Spitzer et al. 2006). Response categories include “Not at all” to “Nearly every day” (coded 0–3).

Factor analysis of anxiety and depression items together shows a single underlying dimension with a high reliability coefficient of .94. The factor analysis results for the anxiety and depression scale are displayed in Table 5. I summed the items in both the anxiety and depression scales to create a single variable for mental health. Higher scores indicate more severe symptoms of anxiety and depression.

Background factors include age, gender, income, and race. Participants reported their age in years. They reported their gender as male, female, trans man or woman, or another gender category. A dummy variable was created for gender (female = 1, not female = 0). This sample contained 369 female participants, 105 male participants, and 8 participants who identified with a different gender category. Income was assessed in terms of one’s family income during their childhood years. Participants were provided with a list of 9 income bracket selections ranging from less than \$10,000 to more than \$150,000 per year and were to select the bracket that best represented their family’s income when they were between 6 and 14 years old.

Table 5. Factor Analysis for Depression/Anxiety (N = 475)

Depression	Over the last 7 days, how often have you been bothered by any of the following problems?	Loadings
	Little interest or pleasure in doing things.	.80
	Feeling down, depressed, or hopeless.	.84
	Trouble falling or staying asleep, or sleeping too much.	.70
	Feeling tired or having little energy	.79
	Poor appetite or overeating.	.73
	Feeling bad about yourself—or that you are a failure or have let yourself or your family down.	.70
	Trouble concentrating on things, such as reading the newspaper or watching television.	.74
	Moving or speaking so slowly that other people could have noticed? Or the opposite—being so fidgety or restless that you have been moving around a lot more than usual.	.58
	Thoughts that you would be better off dead or hurting yourself in some way.	.50
Anxiety	Over the last 2 weeks, how often have you been bothered by any of the following problems?	
	Feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge.	.81
	Not being able to stop or control worrying.	.87
	Worrying too much about different things.	.84
	Trouble relaxing.	.82
	Being so restless that it is hard to sit still.	.71
	Becoming easily annoyed or irritable.	.68
	Feeling afraid as if something awful might happen.	.73
$\alpha = .94$		

To measure race, participants identified whether they were white, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latinx, Native American or Alaska Native, Asian or Asian American, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, or another racial category. Dummy variables were created for Asian and Latinx. The comparison group was the other races. This sample contained 101 Asian and 263 Latinx respondents.

## **Analysis**

I used ordinary least-squares (OLS) regression to assess the impact of internal, external, proximal, and distal social influences on the development of authenticity. The analysis includes the effects of parenting styles, identity processes, and self-esteem on authenticity. Specifically, it assesses whether the external, proximal factor of parenting styles and the internal, distal factors of identity processes and self-esteem are related to a one's feelings of authenticity. This model also controls for background characteristics that might affect the true self, such as age, gender, race, and anxiety/depression. These controls are used to rule out the potential influence of one's demographic characteristics on authenticity.

## **Results**

Table 6 presents the means and standard deviations for each of the variables in the model. I used a joint test of skewness and kurtosis to assess normality for each variable. The distribution for authenticity is approximately normal ( $\bar{x} = 3.42, p > .05$ ). The standard deviation for authenticity is low at .41, indicating that the data are highly clustered around the mean. Each of the parenting styles measured have distributions with slight negative skews (permissive ( $\bar{x} = 2.63, p < .05$ ), authoritarian ( $\bar{x} = 3.40, p < .01$ ), and flexible ( $\bar{x} = 3.22, p < .01$ ). The standard deviations for permissive, authoritarian, and flexible parenting styles are low ( $s = .66, s = .80, s = .76$  respectively), showing that the data fall close to the mean with a slightly wider spread than that for authenticity.

Table 6. Means and Standard Deviations (N = 470)

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.
Authenticity	3.41	.42
Parenting Styles		
Permissive	2.63	.65
Authoritarian	3.40	.79
Flexible	3.22	.76
Identity Processes		
Prominence	8.29	1.69
Salience	4.22	1.33
Verification	15.75	3.76
Self-Esteem	2.70	.40
Background Characteristics		
Age	21.40	1.55
Female	.77	.42
Income	4.05	2.08
Latinx	.55	.50
Asian	.21	.40
Anxiety/Depression	1.25	.75

For identity salience, the distribution has a slight positive skew ( $\bar{x} = 4.22, p < .01$ ) and a standard deviation of 1.33. Identity prominence has a slightly negative skew ( $\bar{x} = 8.29, p < .01$ ), with a standard deviation of 1.69, and identity verification has a more noticeable negative skew ( $\bar{x} = 15.75, p < .01$ ). The standard deviation for verification is 3.76, indicating a wider distribution than both salience and prominence. The distribution for self-esteem is normal ( $\bar{x} = 2.70, p > .05$ ) with a standard deviation of .40, which points to a narrower curve.

Table 7 displays the correlations between the variables. For authenticity, notable relationships can be observed for flexible and authoritarian parenting, identity prominence and verification, self-esteem, and anxiety/depression. Significant positive correlations are found for flexible parenting ( $r = .23, p < .01$ ), identity prominence ( $r =$

.17,  $p < .01$ ), identity verification ( $r = .28, p < .01$ ), and self-esteem ( $r = .48, p < .01$ ).

Authoritarian parenting ( $r = -.15, p < .01$ ) and anxiety/depression ( $r = -.34, p < .01$ ) have significant negative correlations with authenticity. These relationships reflect my hypotheses.

Other notable correlations include those between identity verification, self-esteem, and flexible parenting, self-esteem and verification, and anxiety/depression and self-esteem. Both identity verification ( $r = .18, p < .01$ ) and self-esteem ( $r = .28, p < .01$ ) have significant correlations with flexible parenting. The support and guidance from flexible parents may help children feel good about themselves, capable of affecting change in their lives, and facilitate allowing them to be seen for who they truly are. Self-esteem has a strong and significant positive correlation with identity verification ( $r = .27, p < .01$ ). This reflects identity theory literature, which notes that identity verification has a positive effect on self-esteem (Burke and Stets 2009; Stets 2018). Anxiety/depression and self-esteem have a strong negative relationship ( $r = -.54, p < .01$ ), indicating that symptoms of anxiety/depression are associated with lower self-esteem.

Table 8 provides the regression results addressing each of my hypotheses. The  $R^2$  is .31, which indicates that the model explains approximately 31 percent of variance in authenticity. My first set of hypotheses focuses on the relationship between parenting and authenticity. I hypothesized that permissive and authoritarian parenting styles would have a negative relationship with authenticity, while the flexible parenting style would have a



Table 7. Correlations among the Variables (N = 470)

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)	(13)	(14)
1) Authenticity	1.00													
2) Permissive	.03	1.00												
3) Authoritarian	-.15**	-.59**	1.00											
4) Flexible	.23**	.53**	-.49**	1.00										
5) Prominence	.17**	-.01	.04	0.11*	1.00									
6) Salience	.08	-.10*	.07	-.05	.47**	1.00								
7) Verification	.28**	.04	.01	.18**	.53**	.23**	1.00							
8) Esteem	.48**	.14**	-.16**	.28**	.20**	.05	.27**	1.00						
9) Age	.11*	.01	.04	-.04	-.02	-.01	-.05	.10*	1.00					
10) Female	.04	-.09*	.03	-.08	.12**	.13**	.13**	-.09*	-.09*	1.00				
11) Income	.08	.04	-.09*	.12**	.02	-.04	.03	.00	-.06	-.08	1.00			
12) Latinx	-.13**	-.01	.09	-.07	.08	.11*	.02	.04	-.09	.08	-.32**	1.00		
13) Asian	-.02	.04	.01	.07	-.09*	-.12*	-.05	-.12*	-.01	-.16**	.17**	-.56**	1.00	
14) Anxiety/ Depression	-.34**	-.12**	.19**	-.18**	.01	.11*	-.12**	-.54**	-.17**	.15**	-.03	.05	-.04	1.00

\*\*  $p < .01$ , \*  $p < .05$

positive relationship with authenticity. All three of these relationships were significant. The effect of a permissive parenting style ( $\beta = -.15, p < .01$ ) and authoritarian parenting style ( $\beta = -.11, p < .05$ ) are negative and significant. Flexible parenting has a significant positive relationship with authenticity ( $\beta = .12, p < .05$ ). Thus, there is support for hypotheses 1a, 1b, and 1c.

Table 8. Standardized Regression Coefficients for Authenticity (N = 470)

	Independent Variables	Authenticity
Parenting Styles	Permissive	-.15 (.03)**
	Authoritarian	-.11 (.03)*
	Flexible	.12 (.03)*
Self-Processes	Prominence	-.01 (.01)
	Salience	.05 (.01)
	Verification	.14 (.01)**
	Self-Esteem	.35 (.05)**
Background Characteristics	Age	.07 (.01)
	Female	.09 (.04)*
	Income	.01 (.01)
	Latinx	-.17 (.04)**
	Asian	-.05 (.05)
	Anxiety/Depression	-.11 (.03)*
Constant		2.11 (.32)
$R^2 = .31^{**}$		

\*\*  $p < .01$ , \*  $p < .05$

Note: Standard errors in parentheses

The second set of hypotheses focuses on the relationship between the different dimensions of identity and authenticity. I predicted that more prominent, salient, and verified true-self identities would be positively related to one's sense of authenticity. For this, only the relationships between verification and authenticity reach significance. Verification of an identity that represents one's true self has a significant positive

relationship with authenticity ( $\beta = .14, p < .01$ ). Those who think that others recognize their true self as they do feel more authentic. Thus, I find support only for hypothesis 2c.

My final hypothesis relates to the relationship between self-esteem and authenticity. I predicted that self-esteem would have a positive relationship with authenticity. Results show that this relationship is positive and significant ( $\beta = .35, p < .01$ ) in a positive direction. This indicates that having higher self-esteem relates to greater feelings of authenticity. Therefore, I find confirmation for hypothesis 3.

Of the control variables included in this model, only gender, race, and mental health were significant. For gender, women tend to feel more authentic than men ( $\beta = .09, p < .05$ ). For race, individuals who identify as Latinx tend to feel less authentic than those who identify within other racial categories ( $\beta = -.17, p < .01$ ). Results indicate that there is a negative relationship between symptoms of anxiety/depression and feelings of authenticity ( $\beta = -.11, p < .05$ ). Those who feel more anxious or depressed tend to feel less authentic.

I estimated a structural equation model to determine the effect of particular identities on a person's authenticity. I investigated the four most frequently occurring identities that participants indicated made them feel the most like their true selves: the student, friend, family member, and moral identities. Frequencies for these as well as the other identities examined in this study can be found in Table 9. For this analysis, all parameters were constrained to be equal. A test of invariance revealed that the constraint of these parameters was appropriate, but that parameters for identity and age should not be constrained. After running the model for the student, friend, family, and moral true-

self identity groups, I observed no significant differences between the models in terms of identity. Thus, I find that this regression model for authenticity operates in the same way regardless of one’s true-self identity.

Table 9. True Self Identity Distribution (N = 480)

Identity	Participants
Student Identity	66
Athlete Identity	15
Friend Identity	114
Romantic Partner Identity	34
Worker Identity	14
Racial/Ethnic Identity	19
Religious Identity	7
LGBTQ Identity	4
Family Identity	80
Political Identity	1
Dominant Person Identity	14
Moral Person Identity	113

## Discussion

The results of this study foster a better understanding of the self and identity processes that guide and shape one’s feelings of authenticity throughout their lives, from early childhood into emerging adulthood. Beginning with parenting as a distal, external factor, these results both reflect and deviate from findings in previous research on parenting and authenticity. Authoritative, or flexible parenting was found to have a significant positive relationship with authenticity, which has been seen in correlations examined in prior work (Kernis and Goldman 2006). Thus, if a person has experienced flexible parenting during their childhood, they are likely to feel more authentic during emerging adulthood. The results for permissive and authoritarian parenting confirm my hypotheses yet contradict results of previous research. Where studies have shown a

positive correlation between permissive parenting and authenticity (perhaps due to the warm, supportive, and non-restrictive nature of this style), this work finds a significant negative relationship between the two. Permissive parents tend to leave children to their own devices; they provide children with care, warmth, and attention, yet maintain that children will learn and discover on their own (Baumrind 1971). It is possible that given this more *laissez-faire* nature of permissive parenting, children are given little guidance toward understanding who they truly are. While permissive parenting leaves room for exploration without boundaries, it also provides little direction. This might make it more difficult for children to conceptualize their own authenticity in the future.

My results for authoritarian parenting also diverge from those examined in previous work. Where past research has found no relationship between authoritarian parenting and authenticity, this work finds a significant negative relationship. Authoritarian parents tend to be a commanding presence in their child's life and place more emphasis on adherence to rules than on self-exploration. Rather than guiding children gently and allowing them to make decisions for themselves, authoritarian parents are more likely to make decisions for their children and discipline them when they do not meet their expectations. Where the lack of guidance in permissive parenting poses challenges to children in understanding their true self, the strictness of authoritarian parenting may actively suppress a child's freedom to explore what makes them feel authentic.

Overall, these results reinforce the significance of parenting in how we are socialized to discover and understand our true selves. They indicate that the style of

parenting we are exposed to as children plays a foundational role our ability to naturally explore various parts of ourselves and determine what makes us feel most authentic as adults. This study highlights flexible parenting as the most conducive style for raising children who know who they truly are. Further research on the intricacies of permissive and authoritarian parenting might reveal more about why these styles are not as conducive to children's understanding of their true selves.

Once children reach emerging adulthood, more proximal, internal processes become important for authenticity. These results show the significance of identity verification in feelings of authenticity, and the surprising insignificance of identity prominence and salience in understanding the true self. The significance of identity verification in this work is especially poignant, as it highlights the potential role of others in constructing and understanding authenticity. While prior research has found that people tend to feel more authentic when spending time in social settings and with familiar others (Lenton et al. 2013; Sedikides et al. 2017), studies have not yet examined the mechanisms driving such findings, nor have they approached this question using identity theory. This work suggests that identity verification enhances authenticity for true-self identities, and that we feel more authentic when we think that others see our true selves in the same way we do. This shows that authenticity is not only about recognizing our own true self, but knowing that others recognize it too. In this regard, authenticity is as much a process of self-understanding as it is about being understood.

Contrary to the hypotheses presented, these results do not indicate that the prominence or salience of a true-self identity is related to overall feelings authenticity.

This was unexpected, as I anticipated that true self-identities would be more important and frequently invoked for individuals. However, previous studies have not yet explored the relationships between these identity dimensions and the true self. These results serve as a first look at how identity processes influence authenticity in emerging adulthood, and indicate that it is verification, not prominence or salience, that may play a key role in one's feelings of authenticity. Future studies might build on this foundation and investigate how the prominence, salience, and verification of true-self identities affects one's authenticity individually or for different identities.

The final internal, proximal factor related to authenticity that I examine is self-esteem. These results show that, overall, self-esteem is positively associated with authenticity. In particular, this study measures worth-based and efficacy-based self-esteem, which focus on feelings about oneself and one's ability to impact their life. Thus, the results of this study show that we tend to feel more authentic when we feel good about ourselves and our ability to impact our environment.

While the relationship between self-esteem and authenticity was strong and significant and supported my hypothesis, the temporal order of this relationship merits further exploration. Since these data are cross-sectional, causal conclusions cannot be drawn as to whether high self-esteem leads to greater feelings of authenticity or vice versa. In order to determine whether these are causally linked, one would need to conduct a longitudinal study of factors affecting authenticity. Additionally, it is possible that self-esteem affects authenticity indirectly through identity verification. According to identity theory, one's self-esteem increases when one or more of their identities are verified

(Burke and Stets 2009). This work establishes a relationship between feelings of authenticity and the verification of a true-self identity, but does not examine whether this relationship can be attributed to self-esteem. It is possible that the verification of a true-self identity produces a larger increase in self-esteem, which leads to greater feelings of authenticity. Future research might explore this potential mediating effect of self-esteem on authenticity.

Although this model presents strong and reliable results, there are several limitations to this study that merit discussion and present opportunities for additional research. First, this study included a large number of female respondents, Asian and Latinx respondents, and heterosexual respondents. It is possible that the results of this study can be attributed to this large proportion of female and Latinx participants specifically, as both factors were significant with authenticity. Future research might seek a more balanced sample in order to make the potential impact of gender, race, and sexuality on authenticity clearer. Further, the cross-sectional nature of this work can only reveal so much about what shapes authenticity. As previously discussed, this research cannot make causal claims about how parental socialization, identity processes, and self-esteem impact one's true self. Future studies using longitudinal data may allow more causal conclusions to be drawn.

The relationship between mental health and authenticity is one that has not been heavily discussed in the literature, yet the results of this study indicate that it is worthy of further investigation. This study shows that those who experience more severe symptoms of anxiety and depression tend to feel less authentic overall. Future research on this



relationship might indicate the beneficial and detrimental effects of mental health on authenticity. Perhaps those who experience fewer mental health problems are able to better understand their true selves and experience feeling authentic more often. It also is possible that this relationship works in the opposite direction, where those who feel more authentic tend to experience fewer symptoms of anxiety and depression. Such findings might shed light on benefits that mental health services might provide in terms of authenticity and encourage individuals to take advantage of such services to feel more like themselves more of the time.

Finally, this work presented a limited set of identities for individuals to choose from when indicating their true-self identity. This is a unique challenge of a quantitative study involving identities, as allowing participants to choose an identity themselves means defining “identities” in a way that all participants will understand and apply to an appropriate response for the survey. In this study, a set of identities was provided for participants to choose from. Future research may want to explore the relevance of other identities to the true self.

Together, the results of this study present a better understanding of authenticity during emerging adulthood. Based on these data, people may feel most “themselves” when they are raised by flexible parents, when their true-self identities are verified, and when they have high self-esteem. As people become more invested in understanding and embracing their true selves, this work is beneficial; it helps create an understanding of how we might guide ourselves and others toward a better understanding of our own authenticity.

While we cannot change the external, distal factors that may have already impacted our feelings of authenticity, we do have more control over the internal, proximal factors: our self-esteem and the expression of our true-self identities during social interaction. We might use these findings to improve our self-esteem or change how we behave in order to ensure that others' perception of our true self is in alignment with our own. In terms of parenting, we might choose to raise our own children differently than our parents raised us, bearing in mind the aspects of flexible parenting that are beneficial to developing and recognizing the authentic self. Armed with information about these internal, external, proximal, and distal factors that affect authenticity, it is possible to foster a greater understanding of the true self for ourselves and for others in the present as well as the future.

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