

What is it Like to be Authentic? Exploring the Authenticity Spectrum

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Introduction

Human existence inevitably involves constitutive paradoxes, such as striving for connection together with independence, self-focus together with self-transcendence, and infinite choices in a finite being. The capacity to be aware and hold such tensions and dialectics in a coherent manner is encapsulated in the existential construct of authenticity. The art of living an authentic life in the face of life's inevitable limitations and complexities engages the full scope and aspects of being human. The ancient aphorism of "know thyself"—the human pursuit for self-knowledge and authenticity—has been explored through philosophy, art, and traditions, and has also pervaded popular culture, movies, literature, and music. Moreover, the idea of authentic human behavior and experience has pervaded contemporary society and discourse, from "reality TV" to self-improvement literature, targeting the meanings of "true" or "real" vs. "false" experiences and behaviors. However, it is important to note that authenticity in that sense is often associated with arguments about self-centered attitudes and reduced empathy for others (e.g., Hookway, 2018). This chapter attempts to frame the construct of authenticity, especially in terms of lived experience, and identify potential implications of this outlook in terms of psychotherapeutic interventions.

Authenticity: Approaches and Perspectives

Within the social sciences, the concept of authenticity has been explored along two different theoretical approaches. The first refers to the concept of authenticity as the self-alignment between one's inner inhibitions, thoughts, and behaviors that go beyond the expectations and dictations of the surrounding society. This is salient across various disciplines, rooted in the seminal writings of prominent scholars such as Soren Kierkegaard (1843/1983) and William James (1958). Central to this approach is the notion of *True Self*, which serves as the unified core and source for individual development and actualization (Spinelli, 1994). For example, in the philosophy of art, authenticity refers to art as an expression of the artist's self, rather than conforming to historical tradition or to that which is valued in the marketplace (Kivy, 1995). In psychology, descriptions of authenticity refer to living one's life according to one's inner core beliefs and values, rather than following society's norms or traditions, early conditioning, or habits (e.g., Fromm, 1942). This idea has been further developed by psychodynamic thought, especially by Winnicott (1965) and Horney (1999), which highlight the internalization of external influences as the primal cause of self-alienation and psychopathology. Rogers (1980) extends this view of authenticity to include the level of congruence between three components of actual experience, conscious symbolized awareness of this experience, and its behavioral and emotional expression.

Empirically, the importance of authenticity as defined above has been scrutinized both developmentally and as an essential component of healthy human functioning, coping, and thriving (Erikson, 1963; Horney, 1999; Maslow, 1968; May, 1981; Rogers, 1980). Recent empirical studies indicate the contribution of authenticity—operationalized as true self knowledge and alignment—to a wide range of positive outcomes, including self-esteem, self-

actualization (e.g., Lakey, Kernis, Heppner, & Lance, 2008), well-being (Ilies, Morgeson & Craig, 2005), and meaning in life (Schlegel, Hicks, King, & Arndt, 2011).

Alongside the more common perspective of authenticity as being true to one's self, a second approach, which has been less empirically explored, refers to authenticity as being true to one's existence (cf. Heidegger, 1962). This approach is the focal point of the current chapter, as it enables a systematic exploration of the lived experience of authenticity, or the question of "what is it like to be authentically human" (Algera & Lips-Wiersma, 2012).

Influenced by Heidegger's (1962) writings, authenticity has been typically postulated as achieved when a person confronts with and becomes mindful of the givens of existence, while inauthenticity is constituted by their denial (Cohn, 1993). These givens essentially include the idea that one's social context frames his or her lived experience ("thrownness"), together with the idea of one's inevitable death ("being towards death"). Yalom (1980) elaborates the notion of "existential givens" to include four universal concerns of death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness. Each of the concerns may reflect a potential source of anxiety for the individual. As Wong (2010) puts it, the four concerns may evoke death anxiety, freedom anxiety, isolation anxiety, and meaninglessness anxiety. Thus, being authentic may trigger enhanced anxiety and discomfort (Heidegger, 1962). Inauthenticity, on the other hand, can be understood as offering a sense of security and comfort, because it may shelter from the anxiety inherent to the authentic mode. However, in excess, it may also present a great deal of suffering and pain. For example, radical rejection of the givens might lead to psychopathology reflected in defensive guilt, confusion, existential vacuum, disorientation, and overall sense of stagnation in life (Cohn, 1993). In other words, authenticity as being true to the givens of life can be understood in relation to inauthenticity, as they are both part of a single whole.

Authenticity as a Potential Pathway to Positive Development

In light of the challenging nature of authenticity as viewed by the second approach, a question arises—is such authenticity a desired goal in psychotherapy? In the current chapter, we will argue for an affirmative response to this question, following Wong's (2010) suggestion, that only by confronting those concerns can a person transcend into a better way of living his or her life and thus attain an enhanced overall well-being. In line with Frankl's (1984) idea of tragic optimism as "the capacity to hope in spite of and because of tragic experiences" (p. 162), Wong extended this idea further as part of his existential positive psychology (EPP) theory, suggesting that each of the universal concerns can be leveraged into positive force or virtue when confronted successfully. For example, death anxiety might be transformed into death-acceptance and self-transcendence; freedom anxiety might be transformed into a quest for responsibility; isolation anxiety might be transformed into the quest for community; and meaninglessness anxiety might be transformed into the quest for meaning and purpose. In other words, to some extent, the discomfort and increased anxiety stemming from confronting life's "givens" may serve as a path to greater well-being, self-transcendence, and increased vitality in life. This emphasizes the importance of some level of discomfort and anxiety as contributing to positive change and development, assuming responsibility over one's way of being in the world, an idea that has also been voiced by other scholars (e.g., Cohn, 1993; May, 1981; van Deurzen, 1997; Yalom, 1980). Much like a medicine—the right quantity of exposure to authenticity may heal a person; the wrong one might poison him. But how does such balance manifest on the spectrum of authentic and inauthentic experiences?

Spectrums of Authenticity and Inauthenticity

Authenticity and inauthenticity as modes of being are more complex than zero-sum, binary structures. In fact, they can be represented along a spectrum, ranging from extreme denial to chronic or neurotic response to each of the universal givens (Yalom, 1980). This section proposes a conceptual map of the spectrum of potential responses to each of the “givens”, where authenticity serves as the “golden mean” between possible responses on both ends. As such, the spectrum may convey the manner in which one responds to each given and how that response is situated in relation to the authentic way of being in the world.

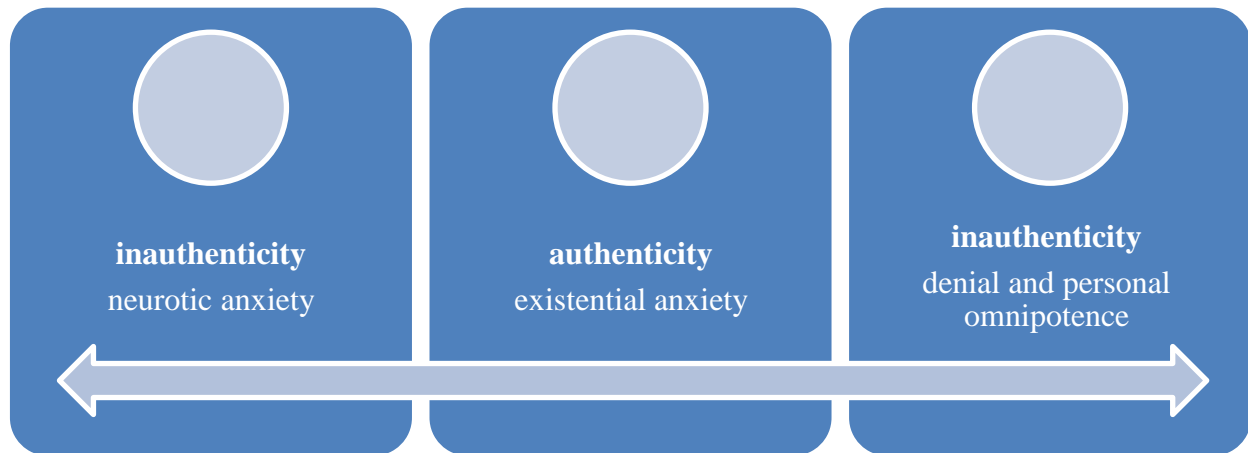
Death

Death has been considered to be at the forefront of the four ultimate concerns. Ernest Becker (1973, 1975), founder of terror management theory (TMT), argued that being human involves the unique paradox of the self-preservation instinct alongside with self-consciousness: humans are aware of their own mortality, and at the same time, are motivated to avoid the terror of death. Thus, according to this theory, the motivation to deny death is viewed as a unifying concept for human behavior (Martens, Greenberg, Schimel, & Landau, 2004). This idea was also expressed by Yalom: “The fear of death plays a major role in our internal experience; it haunts as nothing else does; it rumbles continuously under the surface; it is a dark, unsettling presence at the rim of consciousness” (Yalom, 1980, p. 27).

In the face of such an unsettling given of life, humans develop various coping strategies that range from denial-based on one extreme to anxiety-based on the other. For example, denial-based strategies may include displacement, suppression, repression, belief in personal omnipotence, acceptance of socially sanctioned religious beliefs that reframe death, or personal efforts to overcome death through achieving symbolic immortality (see Kesebir & Pyszczynski, 2014; Tomer, 2014; Yalom, 1980). On the other hand, anxiety-induced coping strategies may include neurotic disorders such as self-sabotage, addictive behaviors, sexually acting out, infidelity, and engagement with risk or workaholic behaviors. Such behaviors may potentially afford individuals with an instrumental comfort buffer against potential threat of death and allow them to function in their everyday living. However, when unbalanced, they may represent an inauthentic manner of coping with the inevitable given of death and a source of suffering (Cohn, 1993).

When the fear of death is well-balanced, it might serve as an important source for well-being. As Yalom puts it, paraphrasing Edward M. Foster: “though the physicality of death destroys us, the idea of death saves us” (Yalom, 1980, p. 7). In other words, death acceptance has been viewed as carrying positive outcomes, such as positive life changes leading to a more meaningful life (Wong, 2009). Authenticity, thus, can be seen as an engagement with some degree of *existential anxiety* that could be tolerated by a person and positively affects his well-being. The following figure illustrates the spectrum of inauthentic and authentic reactions to the inevitable given of death.

Figure 1. Inauthentic and authentic lived experience of “being-towards-death”



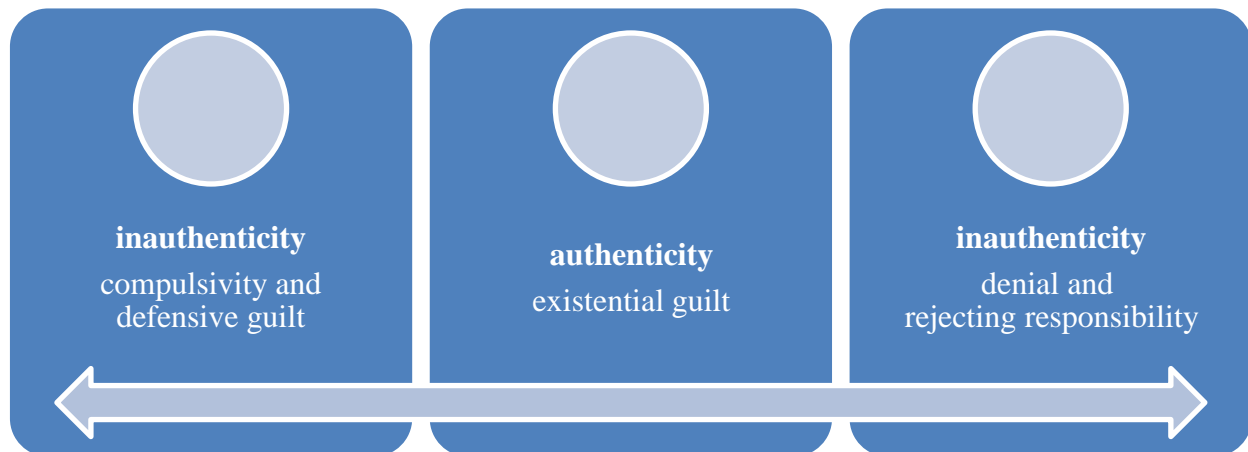
Freedom

Existential freedom refers to an absence of external structure, which may involve anxiety due to the sense of self-responsibility for co-creating one's reality. Yalom (1989) described this idea as "It is here, in the idea of self-construction, where anxiety dwells: we are creatures who desire structure, and we are frightened by the concept of freedom which implies that beneath us there is nothing, sheer groundlessness" (p. 8). In an attempt to cope with the anxiety intrinsic to the sense of "groundlessness" existential freedom and responsibility involve, a spectrum of defensive mechanisms has been identified, running from denial to neurotic defenses to distract the potential debilitating awareness of freedom and responsibility. Such defenses may be functional as they provide a comfortable inauthentic "safe haven" from the anxiety inherent to freedom and groundlessness (Sartre, 1956), but they also carry the risk of psychopathology and maladaptive coping (Cohn, 1993). For example, denial-based coping strategies may involve renouncing responsibility for actions and embracing an external locus of control, assuming a "bad faith" position (Sartre, 1956; i.e., "I didn't have a choice" or an "I can't help it" position). On the other hand, neurotic defenses aiming at providing an illusion of control may include, for example, defensive guilt, compulsivity, irrational behavior, excessive eating or shopping, and espousing fatalistic worldviews or superstitions (e.g., Carlson, Mowen, & Fang, 2009; Yalom, 1980). These manifestations are even more evident in contemporary society, when individuals face the challenge which emerges when "no instinct tells him [the individual] what he has to do, and no tradition tells him what he ought to do; sometimes he does not even know what he wishes to do. Instead, he either wishes to do what other people do (conformism) or he does what other people tell him to do; totalitarianism" (Frankl, 1984, pp. 128-129).

When confronted authentically, freedom is experienced as involving existential guilt, due to the realization that for every choice, there are a thousand relinquishments (Bugental, 1981). In other words, when a person authentically confronts the gravity of the full meaning of freedom, which entails responsibility for the consequences of one's choices, she/he must be willing to carry some degree of guilt inherent in such responsibility. Yet, humanistic and existential thinkers, such as Heidegger (1962), Bugental (1981), Maslow (1968), and May (1981) would emphasize the positive quality of existential guilt which may enable one to gain awareness and clarity, as well as to take ownership over one's own life story, ultimately contributing to one's ability to change her/his way of being in the world.

The following figure illustrates the spectrum of inauthentic and authentic reactions to the inevitable given of freedom. Authentic reaction to freedom is situated at the center in between denial and neurotic strategies.

Figure 2. Inauthentic and authentic lived experience of freedom.



Isolation

Existential isolation refers to the unbridgeable gap between oneself and other beings, as well as the world. Given that “we were all born into this world alone and we will leave this world alone; our attachment to others is at best impermanent” (Wong, 2010, p. 6), individuals’ existence is characterized by the tension between utter isolation and our striving to belong. Isolation has two manifestations in lived experience: interpersonal and intrapersonal. In terms of interpersonal isolation, loneliness and social isolation may be associated with maladaptive social skills and difficulties in maintaining intimacy in relationships. Intrapersonal isolation may be reflected in fragmentation of the self, dissociation, and a sense of self-alienation (e.g., Rogers, 1980; Yalom, 1980).

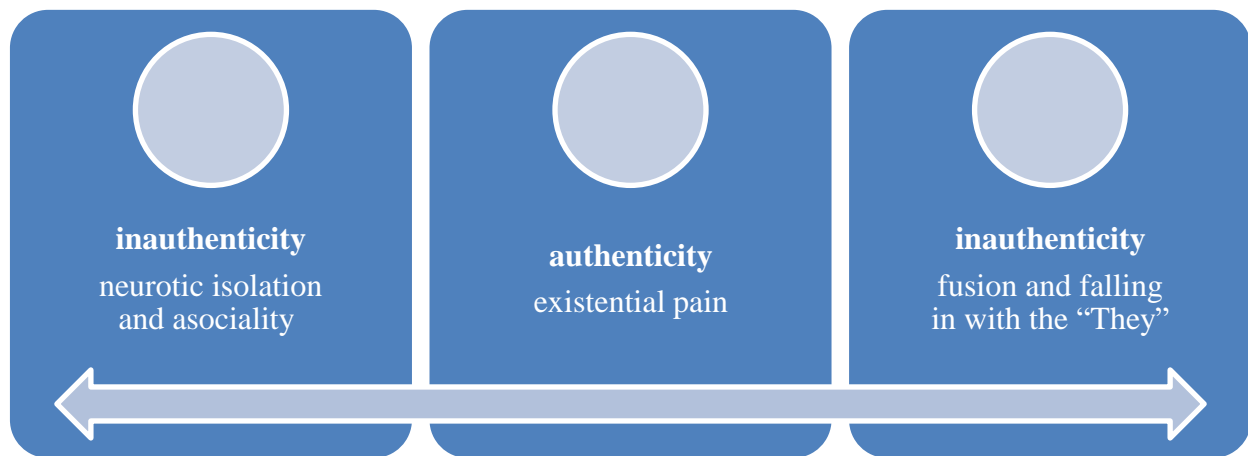
Existential isolation generates an uncomfortable experience that might even escalate into dread, when coupled with the given of death and/or the groundlessness inherent to existential freedom (Josselson, 2008). To deal with such unsettling experience, inauthentic strategies are utilized. Such strategies may range from denial of isolation or fusion (i.e., “falling in with the They”; Heidegger, 1962) to neurotic defenses of extreme isolation and alienation. Fusion may be reflected in conformism, a constant need for affirmation and self-sacrifice for the sake of the needs of others. Neurotic defenses may involve using others as means to an end, which poses challenges to forming mutually enriching relationships and leaves the person in a constant asocial position of extreme isolation and alienation. In other words, such relationships are based on survival and control rather than growth, reflected in fleeing from commitment, such as for example those in constant search for love or compulsive sexuality which offers a temporary relief to the lonely individual without obligation (Cohn, 1993; Yalom, 1980).

On the other hand, when confronted authentically, isolation evokes the anxiety embedded in the nothingness and groundlessness of existence. Yet, the capacity to contain a measure of such anxiety may allow an opportunity to experience genuine intimacy. Such

intimacy is always tangled with existential pain derived from the realization that there will always be some kind of an unbridgeable gap within relationships, even the closest ones (cf. van Deurzen, 1997).

The following figure illustrates the spectrum of inauthentic and authentic reactions to the inevitable given of isolation. Authentic reaction to isolation is situated at the center in between fusion and extreme neurotic isolation reaction.

Figure 3. Inauthentic and authentic lived experience of “isolation” given



Meaninglessness

Meaninglessness stems from the first three existential givens, suggesting that if individuals are doomed to die, construct their own lives, and remain ultimately alone, then what meaning is there to life? As Yalom (1980) puts it: “human beings constitute themselves, their world, and their situation within that world... there exists no ‘meaning,’ no grand design in the universe, no guidelines for living other than those the individual creates” (p. 423). The lack of meaning may lead to boredom, anxiety, disengagement, described as an existential sickness (Frankl, 1977). This may be reflected in hopelessness, futility, emptiness, fragmentation of personal identity, mental health problems, depressiveness, and overall adjustment disorders (e.g., Batthyany & Guttman, 2005; Bruce, Schreiber, Petrovskaya, & Boston, 2011; Damon, 2008).

Meaninglessness is considered as the most prevalent existential anxiety that negatively impacts every aspect of individuals’ lives (Wong, 2010). To cope with the inevitable anxiety born from this given, individuals develop a spectrum of inauthentic strategies. Those strategies range from existential vacuum—which is characterized by a subjective state of boredom—apathy, depression, and emptiness, to existential neurosis—which is manifested by forms of radicalism, including fundamentalism, totalitarianism or hedonism—as well as narcissism, obsessive behaviors, or delinquency in an attempt to avoid the vacuum involved with lack of meaning (e.g., Frankl, 1984; Wong, 2010).

On the other hand, a clear sense of meaning constitutes the key to positive mental health (Wong, 2010). The conceptual and empirical challenge of understanding the abstract and multifaceted construct of meaning (e.g., George & Park, 2016; Martela & Steger, 2016) is reflected in the numerous definitions. Although their details diverge, they all convey that

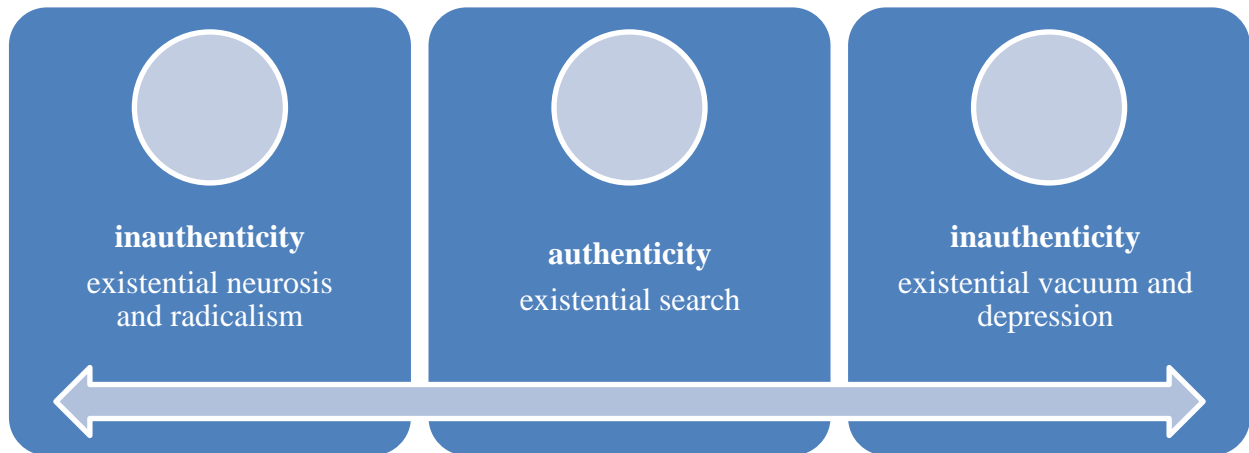
meaning involves motivational, cognitive, and emotional/evaluative components (Steger, 2012). In particular, meaning in life “may be defined as the extent to which one’s life is experienced as making sense, as being directed and motivated by valued goals, and as mattering in the world” referring to these three dimensions respectively (George & Park, 2016, p. 207). An authentic strategy involves the realization that meaning is always constructed and reconstructed in a dynamic manner throughout the various situations and experiences individuals’ lives comprise, thus entailing a measure of constant existential search. In the words of Elisabeth Lukas (1986):

If we would reach the meaning of life, any living beyond would be meaningless. Beyond reach, it would have no significance for us. The meaning of life is neither reachable, nor unreachable; not repeatable or replaceable. The meaning of life lies in its pursuit. (p. 79)

Although it may arouse greater anxiety and rumination (e.g., Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, & Lorentz, 2008), searching for meaning is considered a fundamental and natural motivation to human life (i.e., “will to meaning”; Frankl, 1984). In this sense, search for meaning may reflect a general state of mind, or attitude, towards life, which allows for the possibility of enhanced well-being (e.g., Russo-Netzer, 2018).

Illustrating this position, the following depicts the spectrum of inauthentic reaction to the core belief of meaninglessness. Authentic reaction to meaninglessness is set at the center in between existential vacuum and existential neurosis.

Figure 4. Inauthentic and authentic lived experience of “meaninglessness” given.



Discussion

The main goal of this chapter is to explore main issues surrounding the question of the lived experience of authenticity. It frames authenticity as referring to one’s capacity for mindful awareness of the universal givens of life. Based on existing literature, we delineate a possible conceptual “road-map” to illustrate the fact that inauthenticity and authenticity are not separated modes (i.e., Heidegger, 1962), yet reflect a range of possible responses to the givens of life across a wide spectrum (e.g., Cohn, 1994; Ortiz & Flórez, 2016; van Deurzen, 1997). This map locates authenticity as a “golden middle way” or “golden mean” (optimal level) to embracing life’s complexities, on a continuum ranging between the inflexible responses of excessive arousal to rejection. Authenticity in this context reflects a flexible and dynamic way of being in

the world, which allows one to get in touch with life’s givens, involving an awareness of one’s own concerns regarding mortality, freedom, loneliness, and meaningfulness. Although this may expose the person to some degree of anxiety, discomfort, and vulnerability, it also presents an opportunity to engage more fully with life and to take ownership of choosing one’s path in the world, thus becoming an active agent, rather than taking on a passive and reactive position.

An inauthentic way of being in the world represents either excessive arousal or rejection, and is associated with psychopathology in its extreme forms. It is “closed to the external world and unwilling to be affected by others... the [inauthentic] individual is more vulnerable to develop rigid response patterns and endorse problematic coping strategies” (Ortiz & Flórez, 2016, p. 62). The following table summarizes a possible range of responses for each given, ranging from the inauthentic coping strategies of rejection (i.e., “denial”) extreme to the excessive arousal (i.e., “neurotic”) extreme, as well as the “golden mean” of authentic possible responses.

Table 1. The lived experience of the four givens.

The four givens	Inauthentic extreme: Neurotic embrace	The lived experience of authenticity	Inauthentic extreme: Denial strategies
<i>Being towards death</i>	Neurotic anxiety	Existential anxiety	Personal omnipotence
<i>Freedom</i>	Defensive guilt and compulsivity	Existential guilt	Rejecting responsibility
<i>Isolation</i>	Neurotic isolation and a-sociality	Existential pain	Fusion and falling in with the “They”
<i>Meaninglessness</i>	Existential neurosis and radicalism	Existential search	Existential vacuum and depression

The presented roadmap can be seen as addressing Wong’s (2009, 2010, 2011) call for a balanced and integrative application of existential and positive thought to facilitate human development and growth. It can be used by practitioners to get closer to understanding the client’s lived experience and to evaluate and explore their range of authentic and inauthentic coping strategies. This may enable the practitioner to develop enhanced sensitivity and attunement to the various nuances and manifestations of the client’s way of organizing his or her experience. In general, if the client’s strategies to confront the universal givens encompass too much anxiety (neurotic) or too little (denial)—then he or she may employ inauthentic strategies to confront the givens, which may lead to psychopathological symptoms. In each case the practitioner can consult the suggested roadmap to deliberate the intervention needed to modulate and regulate the client towards a more authentic way of being in the world. If, for example, a client is exhibiting defensive guilt to negate the anxiety of freedom, a possible intervention may involve decreasing overuse of responsibility demonstrated in the client’s lived experience.

In sum, this chapter conceives the concept of authenticity as somewhat different from the widespread view of “being true to oneself” in popular culture as well as empirical literature. Rather, viewed as a human response to the universal givens, authenticity involves embracing discomfort, flexibility, effort, and the courage required to confront and leverage anxiety towards attaining a more integrative way of being in the world. The “road map” presented in this chapter offers a possible re-organization of this approach to authenticity in order make it more accessible

for clinical use. Such proposed “authenticity spectrum” may contribute to continued efforts to operationalize this construct for research and intervention purposes. This is especially relevant in a postmodern society, in which a multiplicity of choices and relativism prevail, an awareness of the “golden mean” of authenticity may provide an anchor and a potential compass to navigate one’s way through the uncertainties and ambiguity of our current human condition.

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