



Brief Report

Individual differences in authenticity and
mindfulness as predictors of verbal defensiveness [☆]

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Abstract

We examined the extent to which individual differences in authenticity and mindfulness predicted verbal defensiveness. Participants first completed measures of authenticity [Kernis, M. H., & Goldman, B. M. (2006). A multicomponent conceptualization of authenticity: Theory and research. In M. P. Zanna (Ed.), *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology, Vol. 38* (pp. 283–357).] and mindfulness [Brown, K. W., & Ryan, R. M. (2003). The benefits of being present: Mindfulness and its role in psychological well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 84*, 822–848]. Within the next few weeks, participants completed the Defensive Verbal Behavior Assessment [Feldman Barrett, L., Williams, N. L., & Fong, G. T. (2002). Defensive verbal behavior assessment. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 28*, 776–788]. Their responses to potentially self-threatening experiences subsequently were rated for the extent to which they reflected openness and honesty as opposed to defensiveness. Our findings indicated that authenticity and mindfulness correlated positively and that higher scores on each related to lower levels of verbal defensiveness. Additional analyses revealed that the relation between authenticity and verbal defensiveness was indirect, mediated by mindfulness. These findings support the view that higher authenticity and mindfulness relate to greater tendencies to engage self-relevant information in a relatively non-defensive manner.

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1. Introduction

Why is it that some individuals readily accept personal responsibility for their behaviors while others are especially defensive? For example, some people willingly acknowledge the contribution of inadequate preparation to their poor academic performance, whereas others instead belittle the quality of the exam, class, and instructor. Defense mechanisms, as illustrated in the latter instance, represent motivated strategies that individuals utilize in the service of “decreasing their awareness of [a] threatening stimulus and distancing themselves from their emotional reactions to it” (Feldman Barrett, Williams, & Fong, 2002, p. 777). Importantly, individual differences exist in the extent to which individuals employ various defense mechanisms. For example, feeling autonomous and not pressured or controlled with respect to one’s own behaviors mitigates the extent to which individuals make self-serving attributions or engage in self-handicapping (Knee & Zuckerman, 1996, 1998). Likewise, when compared to those with unstable high self-esteem, individuals with stable high self-esteem do not become especially defensive in response to potential threats (Kernis, Cornell, Sun, Berry, & Harlow, 1993). In the current research, we sought to examine other variables that might relate to individual differences in the magnitude of defensive behaviors, specifically assessing the extent to which *authenticity* (Goldman & Kernis, 2002; Kernis, 2003; Kernis & Goldman, 2006) and *mindfulness* (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, in press) predicted *verbal defensiveness* (Feldman Barrett et al., 2002).

Authenticity can be defined as “the unobstructed operation of one’s true, or core, self in one’s daily enterprise” (Kernis, 2003, p. 13). More precisely, Goldman and Kernis (2002; Kernis, 2003; Kernis & Goldman, 2005, 2006) suggest that authenticity comprises four distinct, but interrelated, components: *awareness*, *unbiased processing*, *behavior*, and *relational orientation*. *Awareness* represents the extent to which individuals possess self-knowledge concerning, and trust in, their own self-relevant aspects, including their likes and dislikes, motives, and personal standards. *Unbiased processing* refers to the extent to which individuals objectively process internal and external self-relevant information. Individuals who are high in unbiased processing do not distort, deny, or ignore information pertaining to their strengths and weaknesses. *Behavior* entails the extent to which individuals engage in behaviors freely and naturally because they align with their core values, beliefs, and self-aspects (cf., Deci & Ryan, 2000; Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne, & Ilardi, 1997). Finally, *relational orientation* refers to the extent to which individuals desire that close others know who they really are, rather than a distorted or limited version. Goldman and Kernis (2004) developed the Authenticity Inventory (AI, Version 3) to assess these interrelated components of authentic functioning. Considerable research supports the validity of this measure, as high authenticity relates to various aspects of healthy psychological and interpersonal functioning (for a review, see Kernis & Goldman, 2006).

Goldman and Kernis’ (2002; Kernis, 2003; Kernis and Goldman, 2006) depiction of authenticity suggests that individuals who possess a coherent and nuanced integration of self-knowledge and self-related processes (i.e., are highly authentic) should function in a relatively autonomous fashion and with relatively low levels of ego-involvement (Hodgins & Knee, 2002). These qualities suggest that authenticity should relate to mindfulness, which is an experiential process variable that involves the extent to which one pays attention to the present moment (Kabat-Zinn, 2003) and is highly aware of immediate internal and external stimuli in a non-judgmental and unbiased manner (Brown & Ryan, 2003). In other words, mindfulness entails the ability to notice and attend to immediate stimuli,

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