

INTRODUCTION

I began this study because being authentic is important to me. Life experiences have led me to seek and express my authenticity.

As a Latin American living in the UK, constantly navigating cultural nuances, I became curious about authenticity within UK culture. I was trying to understand therapists' 'lived internal experience' of their 'true selves' in the therapeutic setting, and its relevance to the therapeutic work, whilst at the same time, understanding my own.

BACKGROUND

Current research suggests that the experience of authenticity concerns inner and outer aspects, and a true self (Burks and Robbins, 2012; Ryan, 2012; Bachand, 2023). Additionally, perceived authenticity has a positive impact on therapy progress (Nienhuis et al., 2016; Fuertes et al., 2018).

This study substantiates current research; expanding on it by presenting detailed accounts of internal processes of authenticity and differentiating between authenticity as a personal experience and professional authenticity. It also extends on the impact on the therapeutic relationship.

METHOD

Approach Grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006).

Participants five (5) qualified therapists, in supervision and members of a professional body.

Methods Data collected by online, 60-minute semi structured interviews, audio recorded, transcribed. Data analysed by coding and categorizing themes.

FINDINGS

1 Personal perspectives on Authenticity

Personal construct of Authenticity

- A way of being, namely: real; open
- Experience of self such as: true self; imperfect self; multiple parts of self; sharing self to others
- Including others

The good, the bad and the ugly

Being aware of how I may affect others

Personal Journey towards Authenticity

- Developing self-awareness to be authentic
- Different stages of authenticity development: feeling less aware vs. more aware

Authenticity changes with self awareness

2 Dual Process of Authenticity

Internal experience

- Becoming aware of Authenticity**
Namely: feelings; thoughts; values; opinions; nervous system; triggers; reactions
- Evaluating against social considerations**
 - Social awareness
 - Impact on others
 - Communication: such as phrasing; words
 - Appropriateness: timing; context

Information gathering about my own process

I am being socially vigilant

I do calculate the risk to others

Outer expression and behaviour

- Choosing an appropriate way of communication**

I have a choice about how I display it

3 The Experience of Authenticity

Being Authentic

Internal experience

- Feelings and sensations, such as: all spectrum of emotions; vulnerable; safe; connectivity; regulated
- Reduced internal dialogue

OPPOSED TO

- Fearful; anxious; tense.
- Heightened internal dialogue

Not so much of a debate

My thoughts are racing

Outer expression and behaviour

- Being partially authentic: awareness of internal process "measuring or filtering" it whilst still being authentic; addressing it later
- Being entirely authentic

Awareness is enough to be authentic

I express wholeheartedly

Being Inauthentic

Internal experience

- Stressed; fearful; defensive
- Heightened sensory experiences such as dysregulated; tense
- Increased internal conflict

OPPOSED TO

- Safe; calm
- Minimal sensory experiences and internal dialogue

More of an internal battle

It's a calm feeling. I'm not struggling thinking

Outer expression and behaviour

- Containing internal experience, such as: keep it in a box; hiding; escaping
- Not being themselves, namely: masking; misleading; putting others first

Adjusting myself so they think I am someone different

4 Professional Authenticity & the Therapeutic Relationship

The experience of Professional Authenticity

Internal experience

- Guided by intuition such as: gut feelings, goosebumps

Evaluation guided by the Ethical Framework.

- Professional boundaries: putting clients first
- Non-maleficence, client autonomy

Clients emotional wellbeing comes first

Outer behaviour

- Personal material contained; addressing it later

Self-disclosure to express Authenticity

- Personal information & experience
- Feelings & internal processes

I've cried with clients

I share my quirks (Neurodiversity)

Impact on the Therapeutic Relationship

- A foundational aspect, such as: integral or core

Being Authentic - Positive impact

- Encourages human connection
- Enhances the relationship

Being seen as a real person rather than a therapist

Negative impact

- Risk of crossing professional boundaries

Being inauthentic - Negative impact

- Undermines the Ethical Framework
- Hinders the relationship

Blurring boundaries

I wouldn't be able to build connection

Positive impact

- Protects clients from judgement
- Being authentic or not, depends on the clients needs

I feel I lack integrity

Sometimes listening might be enough

CONCLUSION

This study highlights that authenticity is experienced in consideration of others, and there is room for acknowledgement of the potential influence of UK culture and social etiquette in the dual process of authenticity. It seems that authenticity was experienced in contrasting ways and has mostly a positive impact on the relationship.

My position at the beginning of the study was that authenticity has a positive impact on the therapeutic relationship and is essential in therapy. The former has remained; however, the latter has changed as I now find that therapy can occur without moments of authenticity, as other factors might have influence.

Personally, before conducting this research I believed that containing authenticity was to be inauthentic, however, now I find that awareness of internal experience is enough to be authentic, which can be addressed at a later time.

Implications

The study provides insight into the nature of the therapeutic relationship:

- The importance of self-awareness when being authentic.
- The impact of the consideration of others on our ability to be authentic, both with clients and in our personal lives.
- The significant influence of the Ethical Framework on authenticity.
- The role of self-disclosure in therapy.
- The risk of authenticity becoming an unspoken goal in therapy.
- The potential positive and negative impacts of being authentic & inauthentic.

Limitations and Recommendations

All participants were humanistic/integrative therapists who deemed authenticity as central to therapy. All participants were from the UK and Ireland. Suggested further research:

- Therapists of other cultures & therapeutic approaches
- Therapists views on authenticity as a goal in therapy.

Participants said that exploring their authenticity was enlightening. The study highlights the need to advocate for CPD both during training and for qualified counsellors.

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