



I can, but I won't: Authentic people generate more malevolently creative ideas, but are less likely to implement them in daily life



Xiaobo Xu^a, Jingwen Zhao^a, Mengya Xia^b, Weiguo Pang^{a,*}

^a School of Psychology and Cognitive Science, East China Normal University, Shanghai, China

^b Department of Psychology, The University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, AL, USA

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ABSTRACT

The current study examined the relationship between authenticity and malevolent creativity (MC), as well as a potential mediating path. Two hundred and eighty-six Chinese participants (216 female; mean age = 21.20, SD = 3.56) were recruited via an online survey website, in which they were asked to complete the Authenticity Scale, Moral Disengagement Scale, an open-ended MC problem solving task, and the MC Behavior Scale. The results revealed discriminated correlation patterns between authenticity and different measures of MC. Specifically, authenticity was positively associated with the fluency and uniqueness scores of the MC problem solving task, but negatively associated with the frequency of MC behavior engagement in real life. Moreover, moral disengagement fully mediated the relationship between authenticity and MC behavior. These findings indicate that although authentic people generate more MC ideas, they are less likely to act on MC behaviors in daily life due to lower levels of moral disengagement. Implications and limitations are discussed in detail.

1. Introduction

Authenticity, referring to knowing one's true self and acting in congruence with the true self, is a concept rooted in humanistic psychology (Barnett & Deutsch, 2016; Wood et al., 2008). Related to its focus on living authentically and being self-concordant, prior studies have repeatedly documented positive associations between authenticity and a wide array of well-being indicators, including self-esteem, relationship satisfaction, and subjective well-being (Sheldon et al., 1997; Wood et al., 2008).

Theoretically, authenticity may also promote creativity. In general, creativity is defined as the ability to generate ideas or solutions that are both original and useful (Runco & Jaeger, 2012; Sternberg & Lubart, 1999). Mapping into the dual pathways of the creativity model (Nijstad et al., 2010), authenticity can fuel either the flexibility or persistence pathway to facilitate creative performance. Specifically, authentic individuals are usually more willing to freely express their opinions, embrace unexpected changes, and assimilate novel experiences (Hodgins & Knee, 2002; Kernis & Goldman, 2006), which make them more flexible in the scope of idea generation. In addition, authentic individuals are usually intrinsically motivated (Van den Bosch & Taris, 2018) and highly engaged (Reis et al., 2016), which can help them focus on problems in hand and explore possible solutions more persistently.

In line with these theoretical perspectives, researchers have recently begun to establish a positive association between authenticity and workplace creativity (Afridi et al., 2020; Montani et al., 2019). For example, Afridi et al. (2020) found that authentic employees reported higher levels of innovative work behavior. In addition, numerous studies have shown that authentic leadership can facilitate subordinates' creative performance (Černe et al., 2013; Rego et al., 2014; Ribeiro et al., 2019), thus offering indirect evidence for the positive authenticity-creativity association.

Each coin has two sides, so does creativity. Besides its typical manifestation that aims to increase individual welfare and facilitate societal progress, individuals' creative potential can also be intentionally utilized to harm people (e.g., others or oneself), property (e.g., bank), and processes (e.g., public transportation), known as malevolent creativity (MC) (Cropley et al., 2008; Harris et al., 2013; Harris & Reiter-Palmon, 2015; Lee & Dow, 2011; Reiter-Palmon, 2018). Broadly speaking, malevolent behaviors such as lying, cheating, bullying, theft, kidnap, sexual harassment, and terrorist acts, can all be viewed as MC as long as that behavior is also original to some extent. Therefore, MC can be clearly distinguished from typical/benevolent creativity given its inclusion of "harmfulness" in addition to "originality" and "usefulness" (Gutworth et al., 2018; Harris & Reiter-Palmon, 2015).

Relevant to the current study, an interesting yet unexplored

* Corresponding author at: School of Psychology and Cognitive Science, East China Normal University, 3663 North ZhongShan Road, Shanghai 200062, China.
E-mail address: wgpang@psy.ecnu.edu.cn (W. Pang).

question is: will the positive authenticity-creativity association be replicated when the latter is measured as MC? The answer to this question may partially depend on the type of MC measured. On the one hand, it seems reasonable to expect that authentic people have higher potential or ability to generate original ideas to solve malevolently oriented realistic problems, given that MC problem solving ability shares the “originality” characteristic with typical creativity (Hao et al., 2016; Hao et al., 2020). In other words, authenticity is likely to positively relate to the quantity and quality of MC problem solving performance. On the other hand, individuals' creative potential or ability does not always transform into actual creative behavior (Sordia et al., 2019), especially in cases when people cannot see the value of creative behaviors (Karwowski & Beghetto, 2019). In fact, a previous study suggested that the striving for self-understanding and consistent self-expression that characterizes authentic people may reduce their propensity to morally disengage (i.e., make excuses for unethical behavior), which in turn results in a lower tendency to engage in unethical behavior (Knoll et al., 2016). Following this, it seems that authentic people will be less likely to engage in MC behaviors in daily life, such as playing tricks, lying, betray, hurting people, and so on (Hao et al., 2020). Taken together, we predict that even if authentic people can generate more MC ideas in problem solving tasks, they may choose not to implement them in daily life due to lower levels of moral disengagement.

1.1. The present study

This study aimed to explore the associations between authenticity, moral disengagement, MC problem solving ability, and MC behaviors in daily life. According to the above reasoning, we predicted that although authentic people could generate more original ideas in MC problem solving tasks (Hypothesis 1), they would engage in fewer actual MC behaviors in daily life (Hypothesis 2). In addition, we expected that level of moral disengagement would mediate the link between authenticity and MC behavior (Hypothesis 3). Through examining these hypotheses, the present study provided direct evidence for the association between authenticity and different measures of MC and the potential mediating path (i.e., moral disengagement).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Data were collected via a Chinese survey website (<http://www.sojump.com>). In total, 312 participants filled in the survey items, and we deleted eight participants who rated the same option on all items of the authenticity scale including reversed items, and 18 participants who did not give valid or malevolent responses on the MC task. The final sample included 286 Chinese adults aged from 17 to 47 years old ($M = 21.20$, $SD = 3.56$, 5 participants did not report their age). Among them, 70 were males and the remaining 216 were females; 270 were university students, and 16 were employed. The protocol of the study was approved by the University Committee on Human Research Protection (UHRP) of [blinded].

2.2. Measures

Authenticity was assessed using the 12-item authenticity scale developed by Wood et al. (2008). Following the translation and back translation procedures (Brislin, 1970), the authors of this study translated it into Chinese. This scale consists of three dimensions: self-alienation (four items, e.g., “I feel alienated from myself”), authentic living (four items, e.g., “I am true to myself in most situations”), and accepting external influence (four items, e.g., “Other people influence me greatly”). In this study, the confirmatory factor analysis indicated a good fit for the three first-order factors plus one second-order factor structure ($\chi^2/df = 2.46$; CFI = 0.94; TLI = 0.93; RMSEA = 0.07). All

items were rated using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (does not describe me at all) to 7 (describes me very well). For ease of understanding, we reverse-coded self-alienation and accepting external influence items, and calculated an average score combining all items as an indicator for overall authenticity, with higher scores indicating higher levels of authenticity. In our study, the Cronbach's α coefficient for this scale was 0.85.

Moral disengagement was assessed using the 8-item Moral Disengagement Scale (Moore et al., 2012). Example items are “Taking something without the owner's permission is okay as long as you're just borrowing it” and “People can't be blamed for doing things that are technically wrong when all their friends are doing it too.” Participants rated on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (totally disagree) to 7 (totally agree). The average score of all 8 items was taken, with higher scores indicating a stronger tendency for moral disengagement. This 8-item scale has shown good reliability and validity in Chinese samples (e.g., Yang et al., 2020). In our study, the Cronbach's α coefficient for this scale was 0.83.

MC problem solving ability was assessed using an open-ended problem, originally developed by Hao et al. (2020), in which “Ming (name) was taking a walk one day. Wei (name) was in a hurry and bumped into Ming, and Ming's computer dropped on the ground and broke. Wei criticized Ming and ran off without any apology, thus making Ming very angry.” Participants were instructed to help Ming propose as many original ideas as possible to take revenge on Wei secretly. During the generation of possible solutions, participants were repeatedly reminded to focus on the originality of solutions regardless of whether they were immoral or unacceptable to society.

MC behavior was assessed using the Malevolent Creative Behavior Scale (MCBS, Hao et al., 2016). This scale consists of 13 items that measure participants' frequency in engaging in three kinds of MC behaviors: hurting people, lying, and playing tricks. Participants rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (never) to 4 (usually) according to the frequency of these behaviors in their real lives. The average score of all 13 items was taken, with higher values indicating more frequent engagement of MC behavior in daily life. Prior studies showed good reliability and criterion-related validity of this scale (Hao et al., 2016; Hao et al., 2020; Malik et al., 2020). In our study, the Cronbach's α for this scale was 0.91.

2.3. Procedure

At the very beginning of our survey, all participants were informed that participation in this study was completely voluntary and confidential. Only those who gave online informed consent proceeded to the formal survey. After that, participants were instructed to complete the authenticity scale, the MC problem, the moral disengagement scale, and the MC Behavior Scale in a fixed sequence. A three minute time limit was set for the MC problem, in which participants were asked to type proposed solutions briefly into the text-entry box. The study took about 6 min to complete after which participants received ¥2 (about 0.29 dollars) as compensation for their participation.

2.4. Assessment of MC problem solving performance

To avoid possible subjective bias, this study used two objective indicators to assess individuals' performance in MC problem solving: fluency and originality (Runco, 2011; Runco & Albert, 1985). At the beginning, the first and the second author reached an agreement to exclude ideas that were not malevolent, and counted the number of valid solutions (i.e., MC fluency) for each participant. They then created a comprehensive response pool that included all the solutions. Synonyms were identified and then collapsed. After that, two raters independently evaluated the originality score of each idea based on their statistical infrequency. Specifically, we allocated scores of “2”, “1”, “0” to ideas generated by < 1%, 1%–5% or > 5% of all the participants,

Table 1
Descriptive and correlation analyses of all the variables (n = 286).

	M	SD	Range	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Gender	1.76	0.43	1–2	–					
2. Age	21.20	3.56	17–47	0.00	–				
3. Authenticity	4.60	0.86	1–7	0.01	0.10	–			
4. Moral disengagement	2.42	1.02	1–7	–0.12*	–0.05	–0.32***	–		
5. MC fluency	2.63	1.55	1–9	0.02	0.08	0.13*	–0.17**	–	
6. MC originality	2.36	2.16	0–14	0.07	0.10	0.15*	–0.18**	0.82***	–
7. MC behavior	1.22	0.77	0–4	–0.18**	–0.12*	–0.12*	0.47***	0.05	0.03

Note: Gender: 1 = male, 2 = female.

* p < .05.

** p < .001.

*** p < .001.

respectively. The inter-rater agreement of all the originality scores was satisfactory (ICC = 0.95). Finally, we averaged two raters' scores and calculated an aggregate originality score for each participant.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive and correlation analyses

Table 1 presents the descriptive characteristics (e.g., mean, standard deviation) and the Pearson's correlation of all the variables. In this study, multicollinearity seems not to be a serious problem (e.g., variance inflation factor ranges from 1.00 to 1.18). As expected, authenticity was associated with higher level of MC fluency and originality, and lower level of moral disengagement and MC behavior. In addition, both gender and age were significant correlated with MC behavior, in which male and younger participants reported more MC behavior. Therefore, we included these two demographic variables in the following mediating effect analysis.

3.2. Test of mediation

Hayes macro PROCESS 3.3 (Hayes, 2018) was used to examine the mediating role of moral disengagement in the association between authenticity and MC behavior. The results show that moral disengagement fully mediated the relationship between authenticity and MC behavior (see Fig. 1). In addition, Table 2 illustrates the details of indirect effects and confidence intervals of mediation analyses, controlling for gender and age.

3.3. Additional analyses

Considering that some items in the MCBS do not relate to originality explicitly (e.g., How often do you have ideas about how to pull pranks on others), it is difficult to determine whether these items actually measure creative behavior. To examine the robustness of our findings, we calculate a new MC behavior score that only includes five (out of 13) items that explicitly refer to the usage of original or unconventional methods while engaging in MC behaviors, and repeated the

Table 2

Indirect effects and confidence intervals of mediation analyses, controlling for age and gender.

Indirect pathways	Effect value	SE	95% CI	
			Lower	Upper
Authenticity - moral disengagement - creative behavior	–0.14 ^a	0.03	–0.20	–0.08

^a 95% CI does not overlap with zero.

correlational and mediational analyses with this new MC behavior score. The results were consistent with the findings using the 13-item MC behavior score. Specifically, authenticity was negatively correlated with MC behavior (r = –0.13, p = .02), and moral disengagement fully mediate this relationship (effect value = –0.13, SE = 0.03, 95% CI, –0.19 to –0.07). This indicates, our findings regarding MC behavior are quite robust.

4. Discussion

Although researchers have recently begun to explore the association between authenticity and creativity, they focus predominantly on how authenticity promotes typical creative behavior/performance in the workplace (Afridi et al., 2020; Montani et al., 2019). The present study focuses on another interesting dimension of creativity—MC, and further differentiates MC problem solving ability and MC behavior in daily life. Specifically, we examined the association between authenticity and these two distinct facets of MC, as well as the mediating role of moral disengagement. As expected, authenticity was positively associated with MC problem solving ability, but negatively linked to the frequency of MC behavior. In addition, moral disengagement fully mediated the negative link between authenticity and MC behavior.

Consistent with hypothesis 1, authenticity was significantly and positively related to the fluency and originality scores of MC problem solving tasks. This finding is in line with previous studies that reveal a positive association between authenticity and employee's innovative work behavior (Afridi et al., 2020; Montani et al., 2019), and extends

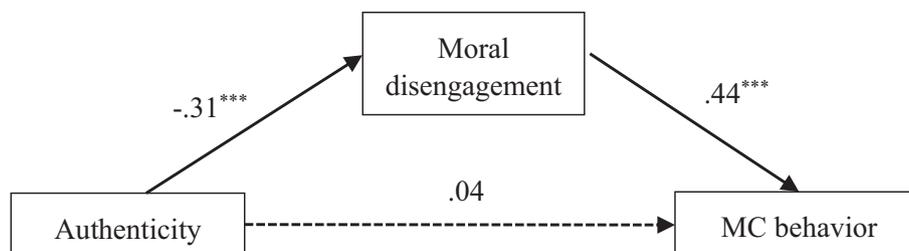


Fig. 1. Mediation effect of moral disengagement on the association between authenticity and MC behavior, controlling for age and gender. Path coefficients were standardized. Note: ***p < .001. Dashed pathways are not significant.

this relationship to the domain of MC. That is to say, highly authentic individuals are more capable of generating creative ideas to solve both typical and malevolently oriented problems. As mentioned earlier, the rationale for this positive association can be explained under the theoretical framework of the dual-pathway model of creativity (Nijstad et al., 2010). According to this model, authenticity may facilitate MC problem solving performance through either flexibility or the persistence path. On the one hand, authentic individuals usually have more behaviors of authentic disclosure (e.g., share any opinion freely and flexibly), and are more willing to embrace novel experience and assimilate them into self-structures (Hodgins & Knee, 2002; Kernis & Goldman, 2006), which makes them more flexible in the scope of idea generation, and thus leads to more original ideas in the MC problem solving task. On the other hand, authentic individuals are usually intrinsically motivated (Van den Bosch & Taris, 2018), highly engaged (Reis et al., 2016), and less restricted by external influences and conventional values (Wood et al., 2008), thus can focus on current MC tasks more persistently, which in turn, also leads to more original ideas in MC problem solving tasks.

Additionally, authenticity was associated with fewer actual MC behaviors, thus hypothesis 2 was supported. This result is consistent with past research that showed authentic people were less likely to engage in unethical behavior (Knoll et al., 2016). Interestingly, our study reveals a discriminated relation between the ability to generate MC ideas and the frequency of engaging in MC behaviors in real life. That is, although authentic individuals generate more original ideas (in MC problem solving tasks) to take revenge on others, they tend not to implement these ideas in daily life and thus are less frequently engaged in actual MC behaviors. Furthermore, in line with hypothesis 3, our results revealed that moral disengagement fully mediated the relationship between authenticity and MC behaviors, indicating moral cognition is an important mediator through which authenticity relates to fewer MC behaviors. In accordance with previous research, our study found authenticity could reduce an individual's propensity for moral disengagement (Knoll et al., 2016), which in turn results in less unethical behavior (including MC) in daily life.

There are some limitations to this study. First, when explaining the positive association between authenticity and MC problem solving performance, we cannot rule out the possibility that authentic people simply conscientiously took more time and therefore produced more ideas while unauthentic and morally disengaged people stopped after a few answers. To fill in this gap, future studies are encouraged to collect time stamped responses to further disentangle the effect of authenticity on MC idea generation. Second, the self-report measures of moral disengagement and MC behaviors may be susceptible to social desirability, given that both of them involve unethical judgement/behaviors. Future studies could consider using more objective evaluation methods, such as Kapoor's (2015) forced-choice measure of day-to-day MC behavior, to reduce the impact of such bias and examine the robustness of our findings. Third, the current study only examined one mediating path (i.e., moral disengagement) in the relation between authenticity and MC behavior. Future studies could explore other possible mediators such as the aggression trait (Pinto et al., 2012) or coping strategies (Tou et al., 2015) to further disentangle the underlying mechanism. Last but not least, participants included in our study were mainly comprised of university students; future researchers are encouraged to replicate our findings in more heterogeneous samples such as employees or community samples. Despite the above limitations, our findings provide valuable guidance for potential interventions aimed at decreasing individuals' MC behavior. For instance, developing an authentic mindset (e.g., Gan et al., 2018) could be considered a possible way to accomplish that goal. Additionally, techniques that aim at decreasing individuals' moral disengagement (e.g., Wang & Goldberg, 2017) could also be utilized to reduce the frequency of MC behaviors.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Xiaobo Xu: Conceptualization, Methodology, Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing - original draft. **Jingwen Zhao:** Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing - original draft. **Mengya Xia:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing - review & editing. **Weiguo Pang:** Supervision, Validation, Writing - review & editing.

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Competing interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical approval

The protocol of the study was approved by the University Committee on Human Research Protection (UChRP) of East China Normal University. All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2020.110431>.

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