

Making  
a difference  
with psychology



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# **MAKING A DIFFERENCE WITH PSYCHOLOGY**

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## CHAPTER 22. 'WHO AM I?' AT WORK AND AT HOME: AUTHENTICITY AND WELL-BEING IN DIFFERENT ROLES

*Anna Sutton*

When we think about the idea of 'personality', we often assume that people have a stable and consistent persona (e.g., you might be outgoing and friendly, or hard-working and anxious). However, for many of us, our personality differs according to what context we are in, so that we might appear quite different at home and work. In this research, I examined whether trying to maintain different personalities at work and at home could harm people's well-being, or whether feeling like we are being true to ourselves, regardless of how we behave in different contexts, is more important.

### **The Problem**

Anyone who has completed a personality questionnaire will know that it is sometimes hard to decide how to answer the questions. The instructions usually ask us to answer based on what we are "generally like", but for many people what they are like at work and at home are quite different. Researchers call this *role personality* and studies have found significant differences in how we behave when fulfilling different roles at work and home.<sup>1</sup> For example, we tend to be more hardworking and less outgoing at work than we are at home.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, while having different role

personalities seems to be widespread, the strain of maintaining this differentiation seems to have negative implications for our performance, satisfaction and well-being.<sup>3</sup>

These negative implications are significant in the context of the increasing importance being placed on well-being at a national, European, and even international level. There have been recent calls for measures of societal progress to include a consideration of the population's well-being alongside traditional measures such as GDP (Gross Domestic Product, i.e., national economic activity).<sup>4</sup> Well-being is also important to work organisations because of its links with performance.<sup>5</sup> But how can organisations promote well-being at work while still expecting certain professional behaviours from their employees that may well differ from their non-work personality?

The answer may lie in our sense of authenticity, that is, being *true to ourselves*, regardless of how different our work and home role personalities might be.

## **Rationale For The Project**

There is a lot of interest in the idea of authenticity at work. We tend to believe that if we are able to be ourselves at work, we will enjoy it more and be more productive. Previous work has tended to view *authentic* people as those who have *consistent* personalities across their various roles.<sup>3</sup> This study took a different view, that it might be possible to have quite different role personalities yet still feel authentic. By viewing personality consistency and

authenticity as two separate concepts, the effect of each of them on well-being can be better understood and we can develop better recommendations for individuals and organisations wishing to enhance well-being at work.

## **What Was Done**

The first phase of the study involved people in full time employment completing a questionnaire on two different occasions: once when they were at home and once when they were at work. Each time they completed the questionnaire, participants answered questions about their personality, how authentic they felt in that particular context, and their well-being. In asking people about their personality, the study looked at five key factors: (i) how hard-working or conscientious they are; (ii) how outgoing or extraverted they are; (iii) how open they are to new experiences; (iv) how emotionally stable they are; and (v) how friendly or agreeable they are.

A sub-group of people from the first phase of the study was invited to complete the next phase. We contacted people in each of four categories, made from a combination of the size of differentiation in their role personality between work and home (small versus large differentiation) and the degree to which they felt authentic (high versus low). This sub-group of participants was asked to reflect on a series of issues in an online questionnaire, once a week for six weeks. Reflections concerned how participants felt their personality differed in work and home roles; how feelings of authenticity and inauthenticity affected their work and

home lives; and the importance of authenticity for their work relationships.

## **What Was Found**

Statistical tests on the phase one data showed that, averaged across the group, work and home role personalities were very consistent, with the single exception of people reporting they were more conscientious at work than at home. However, when role personalities were compared for each individual, there was significant differentiation between the two roles on all five of the personality factors.

Comparisons between people's feelings of authenticity and the extent of their differentiation in role personality revealed that they were mostly unrelated. This means that being authentic is unrelated to how consistently we behave across different situations. In fact, it is perfectly possible to feel authentic even when behaving in a very different manner in different roles.

The study then took this a step further to find out whether it was authenticity or personality differentiation that had the most important effect on well-being and found that it was authenticity that was key to enhanced well-being. This indicates that to enhance our well-being we do not need to try to force ourselves to act more consistently at work and at home; instead we should focus on behaving in a way that feels true to ourselves. For some people, this will be by maintaining consistency while for others it could be by adapting to different situations.

Given that authenticity is so strongly related to well-being, what are the pressures that push people to act inauthentically at work? In the second phase of the research, participants reported having three main reasons for inauthenticity at work: avoiding conflict, acting professionally, and believing authentic behaviour would result in negative consequences: *"I acted this way because I still want to be in a job [...] In reality I would have liked to tell him what an idiot I think he is, but as I said, I need a job!!! I worked within the constraints of the role to survive."* These inauthentic experiences had negative effects on participants. The strongest consequences identified by participants included stress, a sense of discomfort, damaged self-esteem, detachment from work, and lower productivity.

In dealing with their work and home roles, some participants described having almost a 'double self'. For some, this meant that they were themselves at home and put on an act at work: *"...my true self comes out at home, whereas my work persona is often an act."* For others, it was the work personality that they were more positive about: *"...work is the priority and that being at work gives my life meaning [...]. I feel more alert and motivated at work than at home [...] I try to be a better person."* But when asked about their ideal situation, participants were unanimous in describing an ideal workplace as being one where they could be authentic, without being unprofessional: *"the ideal would be a work place that gives us space to be truly ourselves."*

## **Making A Difference**

This project has enabled a new approach to supporting well-being at work, by considering the role of authenticity. This study has shown that employees who feel they are being authentic, regardless of the extent of their role personality differentiation, are less stressed and more satisfied with their roles.

The findings from this study have been shared at academic conferences and research seminars to encourage other researchers to use more innovative and robust methods and to consider a more nuanced understanding of authenticity. The findings have also been used in workshops with human resources professionals as a basis for developing organisational strategies to enhance employee well-being. Key to this is the finding that the work role can be a positive influence on employees' sense of self and personal development. By encouraging personal development within the work context, organisations and managers can help employees to develop a sense of authenticity at work, with all the well-being and productivity benefits that brings.

## **Recommendations**

- Authenticity is perfectly compatible with having quite different work and home personas. Rather than feeling that we have to behave consistently at home and work in order to be ourselves, we can start to look for opportunities to 'be ourselves' in different ways
- It is normal and very common for people to maintain different role personalities. While this can be stressful,

developing a sense of authenticity in the midst of these differences can enhance our well-being

- Organisations can promote well-being at work by finding ways to help their employees to be their authentic selves at work. This can include activities that help to ‘bridge the gap’ between home and work, e.g., family fun days, or simply a recognition that a diversity of behavioural styles can be beneficial

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