

Times we didn't act like ourselves can be helpful in the long run, study finds

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A new study is the first to provide evidence that autobiographical memories of authentic and inauthentic experiences serve specific purposes that might be highly beneficial in the long term. Credit: Unsplash

When we reflect on our past behavior and decisions, we can normally

identify both occasions where we have been true to ourselves, i.e. acted authentically, as well as times when we have done things in a way that doesn't align with who we believe we are. However, how do these recollections translate onto the story of who we are that we tell ourselves every day?

A new study, conducted at the University of Waikato (New Zealand) by Dr. Anna Sutton and Jason Render and published in the open-access academic journal *Social Psychological Bulletin*, is the first to provide evidence that [autobiographical memories](#) of authentic and inauthentic experiences serve specific purposes that might be highly beneficial in the long term.

In their research, the psychologists used data collected from a set of questionnaires in which people reflected on their [authenticity](#) at their workplaces. This particular context was selected due to earlier evidence pointing to the advantage of studying personal authenticity in an environment where the individual interacts with organizational constraints like job requirements or power imbalances, and hence might feel prompted to act against their beliefs in order to serve a larger purpose or achieve a specific goal.

Having analyzed the data, the researchers concluded that when we think about our past actions that were authentic, we use the memory to define or enhance our sense of identity and [self-knowledge](#). Authenticity can increase the level of our self-fulfillment, a phenomenon recognized by both psychologists and philosophers.

"Data from the past decades has provided strong support for this view by demonstrating that authenticity is positively related to engagement in work and to well-being in general, and is therefore of distinct value for individuals, employing organizations and society at large," Sutton explains further.

The team elaborates on their findings by pointing out that an individual uses memories of past experiences to develop continuity and coherence in their self-concept.

"For example, a memory of the past may be used to determine the extent to which one has changed or developed over time. This evaluation is seen as providing a link between 'who I am now' and 'who I was then,' creating a coherent developmental understanding of sometimes discrepant behaviors or attitudes."

However, memories of inauthentic actions—unlike the feeling of inauthenticity itself—do not necessarily translate into a negative experience. Quite the opposite; in fact, thinking about times when we haven't been true to ourselves has an adaptive function within the greater plot of our lives.

These recollections of inauthenticity serve a directive function, conclude the researchers. They help us navigate through subsequent situations, plan for the future and improve our problem-solving skills. These memories can prompt us to direct our future behavior towards a more authentic response.

"This is a [small-scale study](#)," says Dr. Sutton, "so of course we need to explore this area further. But it's very exciting that we're starting to see how we use memories of authentic and inauthentic experiences in quite different ways, and that both can be beneficial."

"By clarifying these [memory](#) functions, we hope to have provided the basis for developing future interventions that may improve authenticity and well-being," concludes the team.

More information: Anna Sutton et al, Memories of who we are: A preliminary identification of autobiographical memory functions in

recall of authentic and inauthentic events, *Social Psychological Bulletin* (2021). [DOI: 10.32872/spb.6553](https://doi.org/10.32872/spb.6553)

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