

# Being true to yourself: Psychologist publishes new research on being authentic

October 13 2010, By Cheryl Walker

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Staying true to yourself and not changing your personality to fit different situations is highly valued in Western culture. Shakespeare's famous line "to thine own self be true," has been echoed across the centuries by parents, pop singers and motivational speakers.

But, in a new study published in the *Journal of [Personality](#)*, Wake Forest University psychologist William Fleeson found "being true to yourself" often means acting counter to your own personality traits.

Fleeson discovered that introverts feel more true to themselves or "authentic" when they are acting extroverted. For example, if a shy person attends a party and acts like a social butterfly, he is likely to report that he feels like he is showing his true self at that time in that situation.

Acting out of character in this way, some would say, suggests people are faking it. Fleeson says the study, co-authored by former Wake Forest graduate student Joshua Wilt, shows that is not the case.

"Authenticity is consistently associated with acting highly extraverted, even for those who characterize themselves as introverts," he says. "Despite the cultural assumption that consistency with one's traits would predict authenticity, it did not."

He also found that people who think of themselves as disagreeable and rude feel more true to themselves when they are agreeable, considerate,

polite and kind. And, people who consider themselves careless feel more true to themselves when they are conscientious.

In addition, his research showed that authenticity or feeling like you are being the real you, is consistently associated with acting emotionally stable and intellectual, regardless of the actor's traits.

“Being flexible with who you are is okay,” Fleeson says. “It is not denying or disrespecting who you are. People are often too rigid about how they are and stick with the comfortable and familiar. Adapting to a situation can make you more true to yourself in some circumstances.”

This research can help people see they have so many options and choices for how they behave, he says.

Because authenticity predicts a variety of positive psychological outcomes, Fleeson says one implication of these findings is that “it might be possible for individuals to improve their mental health by acting against their personality traits.”

The multi-part study involved several groups of college-aged students. One hundred-forty three participated in multiple 50-minute sessions in a laboratory setting where they engaged in different activities, such as playing Twister and discussing medical ethics. Researchers recorded observations. The participants evaluated their own behavior and made judgments about whether their current actions expressed their true selves. The researchers then tested their findings with a sample of adults ranging in age from 18 to 51. The participants also filled out questionnaires assessing personality traits.

Provided by Wake Forest University

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