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From Synchronizing to Harmonizing: The Process of Authenticating Multiple Work Identities

By: [Brianna Barker Caza](#), Sherry Moss, and Heather Vough

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Abstract:

To understand how people cultivate and sustain authenticity in multiple, often shifting, work roles, we analyze qualitative data gathered over five years from a sample of 48 plural careerists—people who choose to simultaneously hold and identify with multiple jobs. We find that people with multiple work identities struggle with being, feeling, and seeming authentic both to their contextualized work roles and to their broader work selves. Further, practices developed to cope with these struggles change over time, suggesting a two-phase emergent process of authentication in which people first synchronize their individual work role identities and then progress toward harmonizing a more general work self. This study challenges the notion that consistency is the core of authenticity, demonstrating that for people with multiple valued identities, authenticity is not about being true to one identity across time and contexts, but instead involves creating and holding cognitive and social space for several true versions of oneself that may change over time. It suggests that authentication is the emergent, socially constructed process of both determining who one is and helping others see who one is.

Keywords: authenticity | multiple work identities | plural careerists | authentication | impression management

Article:

Be true to yourself. Be genuine. Be authentic. This is the advice often given by well-intentioned mentors, in management books and popular articles, and in commencement speeches. Such advice is justified by research that has established authenticity as a moral imperative (Harter, 2002), linked it to psychological, social, and organizational well-being (e.g., Erickson and Wharton, 1997; Kernis, 2003; Ryan, LaGuardia, and Rawsthorne, 2005; Cable, Gino, and Staats, 2013), and demonstrated its behavioral implications (Gino, Kouchaki, and Galinsky, 2015). Clearly, authenticity matters, but it is also often elusive, especially in the increasingly complex world of work in which individuals may play a variety of roles, each of which threatens to constrain or suppress the enactment of one's true self (Hochschild, 1983; Yagil and Medler-Liraz, 2013; Hewlin, Dumas, and Burnett, 2015).

Scholars have defined authenticity as behaving according to what one considers to be one's true self (Harter et al., 1996; Kernis, 2003; Gable and Haidt, 2005), with the assumption that one's true self is a singular, unified, and enduring force guiding life decisions (Rogers, 1961; Schlegel et al., 2009). But this assumption may be unwarranted. Decades of research have suggested that the self is a complex, multifaceted cognitive structure (e.g., Linville, 1987; Markus and Wurf, 1987) often comprising many different identities (e.g., James, 1890; Mead, 1934; Stryker, 1980; Burke and Stets, 2009), which are not always aligned and may be experienced as competing. An increasing number of people hold multiple work identities derived from engagement in multiple roles, workgroups, professions, jobs, or product brands (Ashforth and Johnson, 2001; Leavitt et al., 2012; Sliter and Boyd, 2014; Creary, Caza, and Roberts, 2015; Ramarajan, Rothbard, and Wilk, 2016). To keep pace with the increased complexity of the modern workforce, theories of authenticity need to consider how people cultivate authenticity when their true selves are crosscut by multiple identities.

The authenticity and identity literatures suggest divergent predictions about when and how people with multiple identities will experience authenticity at work. On one hand, an authenticity perspective suggests that consistency and stability are at the core: people who are authentic express themselves in the same way across time and contexts (Giddens, 1991; Sheldon et al., 1997; Kraus, Chen, and Keltner, 2011). Thus having multiple identities may pose a threat to authenticity because it leads people to fragment their selves to fit different role expectations and lose sight of "an authentic self with knowable characteristics" (Gergen, 2000: 7). This lack of authenticity then culminates in poor mental health (Rogers, 1961; Donahue et al., 1993). In one's career, failing to invest oneself entirely in a specific, focused line of work is labeled career indecision (Gati, Krausz, and Osipow, 1996) and is associated with identity confusion, lack of self-clarity, and discomfort (Duffy and Sedlacek, 2007). From this perspective, having multiple work identities may threaten or diminish one's sense of authenticity at work.

On the other hand, identity theorists have argued that because people naturally straddle multiple roles and groups, the self organically comprises multiple valued self-definitions or identities (e.g., Stryker, 1980; Thoits, 1983; Burke and Stets, 2009), and people often feel compelled to enact this complexity at work (Ramarajan, 2014; Creary, Caza, and Roberts, 2015). Because fitting within the bounds of a single work identity may require suppressing important parts of one's self (Lifton, 1993; Obodaru, 2012, 2017), striving for authenticity to a single identity may paradoxically result in people feeling inauthentic because they are not fully expressing their true selves. For some, accepting and expressing their multi-dimensional nature may be fundamental for authenticity (Erickson, 1995; Kernis and Goldman, 2006).

Furthermore, while identity scholars have recognized that rather than being stable, components of the self are frequently formed, repaired, and actively maintained, often times through interactions with others (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003), the authenticity literature has neither adequately considered nor empirically examined the dynamic, ongoing, and socially dependent nature of self-construction and identity (Corley and Harrison, 2009). Moreover, decades of identity scholarship have suggested that people's understanding of their true selves is likely shaped through their interactions with others (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934; Tice and Wallace, 2003), yet currently there are discrepant theories about the role of others in one's experience of authenticity. Thus our understanding of authenticity at work can be enhanced by a process

perspective that takes into consideration the complex, dynamic, and socially constructed nature of the self.

This is an especially important issue in the current “gig” economy, which provides platforms to allow people to monetize multiple passions and interests (Davis, 2016), enabling the self-directed and proactive modern workforce (Arthur and Rousseau, 2001; Sullivan and Baruch, 2009) to make holding multiple jobs “the new normal” (Waldorf, 2016). This has resulted in many workers straddling multiple work identities rather than being squarely defined by a single, focused occupation or role. Yet current theory cannot explain how the enactment of multiple jobs may affect people’s understandings of their selves and sense of authenticity. How do individuals with multiple identities cultivate and sustain authenticity at work? To address this question, we conducted a five-year inductive study of 48 plural careerists—people engaging in two or more jobs simultaneously for identity rather than financial reasons. Our aim is to build a process-based understanding of authenticity that takes into account the modern worker’s self-complexity.

Authenticity in the Context of Multiple Work Identities

Authenticity is defined as the enactment of one’s true self, derived from inner experiences, needs, and preferences (Kernis and Goldman, 2006), in daily activities (Harter, 2002; Kernis, 2003). A primary outlet through which people can express their true nature is their work roles (Ashforth and Tomiuk, 2000; Sullivan and Baruch, 2009). Yet despite growing evidence that aligning one’s internal sense of self with one’s external presentation (Ibarra, 1999; Roberts et al., 2009) is critical in work contexts (e.g., Cable, Gino, and Staats, 2013; Yagil and Medler-Liraz, 2013; Van den Bosch and Taris, 2014), we lack clarity about the process by which people cultivate authenticity (Corley and Harrison, 2009). This may be due in part to definitional inconsistencies and contradictory findings about the nature of authenticity at work.

Authenticity has been construed as being both a general, enduring sense of alignment of one’s actions with one’s true, actualized self (Maslow, 1968) and, alternatively, as a situated feeling of congruence between one’s self-expression and immediate experiences (Rogers, 1961). Organizational scholars have been similarly divided: some have conceptualized authenticity as a relatively enduring state of being one’s true self through work (e.g., Ibarra, 1999; Harter, 2002), while others have focused on authenticity as a transient, in-the-moment feeling (e.g., Creed and Scully, 2000; Yagil and Medler-Liraz, 2013). Supporting the notion that authenticity involves an enduring sense of self-expression through one’s career, research has shown that people feel more satisfied and less conflicted about their occupational choices if they attribute these choices to their true selves (Nakao et al., 2009; Nakao et al., 2010). People are often encouraged to choose work roles, and thereby develop and internalize specific role-based identities (McCall and Simmons, 1978; Burke, 1980; Thoits, 1991), based on what they consider to be their true selves (Baker and Aldrich, 1996; Svejenova, 2005).¹

¹ Because what we do is closely connected to who we are (Pratt, Rockmann, and Kaufmann, 2006), work roles are a critical part of self-definition. We focus specifically on identities derived from work roles, recognizing that work roles represent not only individuals’ expectations and obligations associated with a role, but also their perceptions of self and others derived from enacting the role.

Yet individuals are also encouraged to continually express their true selves when enacting their work roles (e.g., Hochschild, 1983; Hewlin, 2009; Hewlin, Dumas, and Burnett, 2015), meaning that authenticity is also believed to result from a more immediate appraisal of the degree to which one's true self is expressed. Authenticity research has examined how people express their true thoughts and feelings when enacting particular occupational roles in customer service (e.g., Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993; Erickson and Wharton, 1997; Ashforth and Tomiuk, 2000; Yagil and Medler-Liraz, 2013) and call centers (Cable, Gino, and Staats, 2013), as well as when enacting leader and follower roles (Gardner et al., 2005).

Scholars have also diverged concerning the role of others' perceptions in authenticity. Wood and colleagues (2008) suggested that acting authentically involves not accepting external influence or being concerned with meeting others' expectations (see also Golomb, 1995; van den Bosch and Tavis, 2014). Yet other scholars have suggested that authenticity is not exclusively internally determined, because how we see ourselves is closely connected to how others see us (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934; Tice and Wallace, 2003), and we come to know ourselves through our interactions with others (Sluss and Ashforth, 2007). Thus some researchers have defined authenticity as being inherently relational (Goldman and Kernis, 2002; Lopez and Rice, 2006), pointing out that one's true self can be either accepted or rejected by others (Peterson, 2005; Clair et al., 2012), and people's feelings of authenticity often depend on external role validation (Swann, 1983, 2011; Xu, Huang, and Robinson, 2015).

Resolving this discrepancy may be particularly critical for understanding authenticity in organizational contexts in which individuals enact socially constructed, interdependent roles. Workers need to behave in ways that are consistent with role identity standards to achieve social validation for these identities (Katz and Kahn, 1978; Burke, 1991; Stryker and Burke, 2000; Ashforth, Schinoff, and Rogers, 2016). Prior research has highlighted that feeling aligned with role expectations is often critical for people's experiences of authenticity at work (e.g., Vannini and Burgess, 2009). Further, research on authentic leadership has suggested that authenticity at work is not just knowing who one truly is but acting in ways that others perceive as authentic as well (Avolio and Gardner, 2005). Thus conforming to expectations of a deeply valued work role can make people feel like their true selves (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993), but acting in line with role expectations may not always be consistent with the way an employee is feeling (Hochschild, 1983; Hewlin, 2009; Yagil and Medler-Liraz, 2013) or with his or her core values (Hewlin, Dumas, and Burnett, 2015). In this situation, failing to convey role-consistent impressions may threaten a worker's legitimacy in a valued role (Leary and Kowalski, 1990; Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993), but conforming may threaten one's feelings of fidelity to oneself (Golomb, 1995; Ibarra, 2015). Thus, when pursuing authenticity, people often face a double bind and have to negotiate between honoring their role-based commitments to others and their personal commitments to self (Roberts, 2005). The confusion about what authenticity means and how individuals experience it at work becomes amplified in the context of multiple identities, in which there is a much broader repertoire of behavioral expressions that are "true."

Authenticity, Multiple Identities, and the Self

The concept of the self is central to both the authenticity and identity literatures (Erickson, 1995), but their core assumptions about the nature of the self differ. While the authenticity

literature largely assumes a unified, single, and stable true self (Giddens, 1991; Kraus, Chen, and Keltner, 2011; Strohming, Newman, and Knobe, 2017), the identity literature highlights the dynamic, multifaceted nature of the self: our selves comprise multiple identities from which we draw meaning (James, 1890; Markus and Wurf, 1987; Burke and Stets, 2009). Even though the terms “identity” and “self” are often used interchangeably, there are important distinctions between them (e.g., Gecas, 1982; Pratt and Kraatz, 2009). Identities are subjective claims about oneself (Ashmore, Deaux, and McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004) that can be derived from personal characteristics (Turner, 1982), social memberships (Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Oakes, 1987), and role categorizations (Stryker, 1980; Stryker and Burke, 2000). The self, in contrast, is considered to be the whole that encompasses someone’s various identities (Mead, 1934). Thus, although the organizational literature points out that authenticity “involves acting in ways that reflect an individual’s true self as a person” (Yagil and Medler-Liraz, 2013: 475), it is not clear what this entails when people have selves that comprise multiple distinct and equally valued identities.

Currently, most identity research assumes low levels of self-complexity, focusing on the effects of a single identity rather than the additive or multiplicative effects of several identities (Ramarajan, 2014; Creary, Caza, and Roberts, 2015; Ramarajan, Rothbard, and Wilk, 2016). Yet people vary in their levels of subjective self-complexity based on the number of identities they hold closely and the degree to which these identities overlap (Linville, 1985, 1987; Roccas and Brewer, 2002). Those with low self-complexity have only a few identities, and these identities overlap, whereas those with high self-complexity have many identities that do not overlap, allowing them to be both A and B (and often C and D) separately (Ashforth, Harrison, and Corley, 2008). Though identity theory suggests that one’s multiple identities are arranged in a salience hierarchy, with only one identity relevant at any given time (Stryker, 1980; Stryker and Serpe, 1994), there is mounting evidence that identities can be “coactivated” (Blader, 2007; Rothbard and Ramarajan, 2009; Ramarajan and Reid, 2013), such as when one is simultaneously aware of both his or her race and professional identities (Roberts, 2005). People do not experience identities discretely, so it is critical for scholars to attend to how people experience the relationship among their identities, especially when it comes to experiencing authenticity.

Although people are innately motivated to pursue authenticity, having multiple, disparate identities may complicate or even threaten their ability to do so. Several scholars have argued that consistency and unification are key elements of authenticity (Heidegger, 1962; Giddens, 1991; Cross, Gore, and Morris, 2003; English and Chen, 2011), so people often struggle to feel authentic when they demonstrate different aspects of their self across contexts (Ashforth and Tomiuk, 2000) or across roles (Sheldon et al., 1997). People’s valued resources, including their own energies, are finite (Hobfoll, 1989; Baumeister et al., 1998), and when these resources are divided among multiple roles, it may lead to depletion (Goode, 1960; Thoits, 1991; Rothbard, 2001). Also, because enacting multiple roles leads to behavioral inconsistencies, one’s sense of self may become disorganized, fragmented, and even meaningless, further reducing one’s capacity to feel authentic (Gergen, 2000). Thus people may struggle to feel authentic when they have internalized multiple role identities because of the resource drain and cognitive fragmentation.

Having multiple identities can also constitute a social threat to authenticity, because it may prevent one from being easily understood and categorized by others (Tajfel, 1978; Turner, 1982). People are often rewarded by others for appearing consistent and specialized in a single category (Leung, 2014; Kang and Bodenhausen, 2015). Specialization signals excellence, and as a result, greater esteem is attributed to individuals pursuing a clearly defined niche (Ferguson and Hasan, 2013). One benefit of enacting a single, specialized role is that it facilitates categorization for oneself (i.e., “I am a photographer”) and for others (“He is a photographer”) (Hsu, 2006). By focusing on one identity and projecting that identity to others, people can align their own self-views and others’ views, which directly affects their experience of authenticity (Roberts et al., 2009). Thus people who have multiple identities may be pressured to suppress or even deny their identities in their interactions with others (Kang and Bodenhausen, 2015). To fit the prominent, accepted narrative of a single focused career, people often forgo one vocational passion, sometimes even one perceived as a “calling,” to focus on another (Berg, Grant, and Johnson, 2010; Obodaru, 2012, 2017). Thus societal pressures to be only one thing may, ironically, lead people to suppress parts of their true selves.

To cope with these obstacles, people purposefully manage the way they understand and the way they present their multiple identities (Ramarajan and Reid, 2013; Creary, Caza, and Roberts, 2015). Although some role theorists have portrayed multiple role engagement as inevitably contributing to conflict and strain (Goode, 1960; Katz and Kahn, 1978), other researchers have argued that the accumulation of multiple roles provides important resources such as status, security, and privileges that compensate for role strain (Sieber, 1974; Linville, 1985). People can use coping skills in ways that minimize role conflict and may even lead to role enhancement (Marks, 1977; Thoits, 1983; Greenhaus and Powell, 2006). The work–family literature has specified the types of tactics typically used to manage multiple identities as falling along a segmentation–integration continuum (e.g., Rothbard, Phillips, and Dumas, 2005; Kreiner, 2006). Segmentation involves demarcating boundaries to allow for greater separation (and in turn less conflict) between roles (Nippert-Eng, 1996), and integration focuses on taking down “mental fences” (Zerubavel, 1991: 2) and decreasing the contrast between roles (Ashforth, Kreiner, and Fugate, 2000). By highlighting boundaries, segmentation tactics may reduce the overlap between identities, while integration promotes overlap among identities (Ramarajan, 2014). Both tactics can help minimize conflict and promote identity enhancement (e.g., Rothbard, 2001; Greenhaus and Powell, 2006; Kreiner, 2006), but they have differing implications for one’s self-complexity.

Finally, people can also engage in impression management to help align their perceptions of their roles with those of their role partners (Roberts et al., 2009), which is important because failing to convey role-consistent impressions may compromise role legitimacy (Leary and Kowalski, 1990). But role conformity may also feel inauthentic. The literature on self-disclosure has identified a related tension: disclosing personal information allows people to feel as though they are fully being themselves but also opens them up to stigmatization and prejudice (Clair, Beatty, and MacLean, 2005). This may be particularly difficult for those who recognize that portraying themselves as having multiple identities may be met with resistance or confusion from others. Thus, because of the interdependent nature of work roles, people have to simultaneously manage the impressions others have of their multiple identities while also managing their own approach to holding multiple identities. The literature on multiple identities does not yet speak directly to

how these processes may affect people's experiences of authenticity. Our study thus investigates how individuals with multiple identities cultivate and sustain authenticity in their work.

Methods

We used an inductive, qualitative approach in which we followed the tenets of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Our initial open-ended design and constant iteration between our data and the literature allowed themes to emerge that dictated the subsequent data collection process (Charmaz, 2006; Suddaby, 2006; Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Though we were originally drawn to the context of multiple jobholding to identify the successful management of multiple work identities, it became clear that authenticity at work was critical to plural careerists' perceptions of success yet was a complicated issue for them. As we went back to the literature to understand this pattern, we found that our informants' experiences with authenticity were more complex than existing theories of authenticity or multiple identities could explain. Thus we refined our focus to elaborating an authentication process model explicating how plural careerists cultivate and sustain authenticity in the context of their multiple jobs.

Informants

Originally referred to as "moonlighting," holding multiple jobs involves working a second or third job in addition to a primary job. Early economic models of moonlighting suggested that people typically take on second jobs to supplement their primary income because they do not make enough money (e.g., Shishko and Rostker, 1976; Krishnan, 1990). But some may take on multiple jobs for other reasons: to gain flexibility in their work schedule, to enhance their skill portfolios, and even to increase enjoyment and find their passions at work (Mallon, 1998; Hipple, 2010). We did interview ten traditional moonlighters, but since we found they often did not identify with their supplemental work roles, we focus on the latter group here because internalizing a role is an important precursor to seeking authenticity in that role (Ashforth and Tomiuk, 2000; Creed and Scully, 2000). To differentiate these individuals from traditional moonlighters, we refer to our informants as plural careerists. For example, someone who works as a psychotherapist, a violin maker, and an author to express multiple facets of herself is a plural careerist. Plural careerists represent an ideal population through which to understand authenticity in the context of multiple work identities because they have more than one central work identity that they are intentionally pursuing.

To identify plural careerists, we used a snowball sampling technique because they are a hard-to-access hidden population (Faugier and Sargeant, 1997). After accidentally discovering this population in a larger study, we began purposefully sampling plural careerists by identifying informants through conversations and e-mails with colleagues and friends. Also, at the end of each interview with a plural careerist, we asked informants to put us in contact with other people voluntarily holding multiple jobs based on personal interest. Over a five-year period, we gathered first-person accounts of work from 48 plural careerists living and working in four countries. In the Online Appendix (<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/suppl/10.1177/0001839217733972>), see table A1 for descriptions of informants and table A2 for self-reported work roles from each informant. To protect the anonymity of the informants, we refer to them by pseudonyms.

Data Collection

Interviews

The main source of data was audio-recorded, semi-structured interviews collected between 2011 and 2016. We conducted 101 interviews in person, by phone, or by electronic communications, each of which lasted 20 to 135 minutes. Over the study period, the majority ($N = 37$) of informants were interviewed at least twice, and some informants were interviewed up to five times. Informants who were originally interviewed at the start of the data collection period (between April and December 2011) were invited for subsequent interviews each year, as our research focus was refined and new themes emerged.

About three years into our data collection, we began to notice a change in how some of our informants described their approach to authenticity in their work. Initially, we did not know how to interpret this change, but analysis of our memos suggested experience in multiple jobholding was an important element, so we began theoretically sampling (Corbin and Strauss, 2008) people who had held multiple jobs for a longer period of time than our current sample at that time. We also began to look at whether our informants' approach to authenticity changed over time.

Our interview protocol evolved as our analysis proceeded and new themes emerged (Spradley, 1979; Charmaz, 2006). After each wave of interviews, we identified emerging themes and revised our interview protocol so that subsequent interviews could further develop these themes; see Online Appendix B for sample interview questions. Our first interviews did not ask informants about authenticity directly; this theme emerged naturally from our discussions about motivations for holding multiple jobs. In later interviews, however, we asked informants directly about their definition of authenticity, experiences of authenticity and inauthenticity, and practices they used to achieve authenticity.

Additional data

We collected supplemental data from informants to further understand how they thought about and presented their multiple identities over time. Annually, throughout the data collection period, we sent them electronic questionnaires. Though the specific questions varied according to the themes emerging from our data collection and analysis, they followed a similar structure. We first asked informants to provide any updates on their work since we had last talked to them. The second set of questions asked them to list and describe all of the jobs they were currently engaged in. Then we asked open-ended questions related to the emerging themes we saw from our analysis of interviews. For example, in 2015, when we were working to better understand how individuals thought about the relationship among their roles, we asked informants to articulate the boundaries and linkages, if any, among their jobs (e.g., "Are your jobs related in any way? Do your multiple jobs ever conflict with one another? Do they complement each other?").

We further triangulated our findings by examining data provided by informants, such as their online public profiles, blogs, notes, public interviews, presentations, and client materials. Most of

our informants had profiles on professional networking sites, and several had an online presence and/or businesses through which they presented themselves to potential and existing clients. We tracked changes in the “bio” sections of these pages over the course of the study to see if their impression-management strategies shifted as they became more experienced at holding multiple jobs. In addition, we asked informants who wrote blogs about their work for permission to analyze these data. These multiple sources of data increased our confidence in the trustworthiness of the findings (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Data Analysis

In our data analysis, we followed grounded theory guidelines (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Charmaz, 2006), working iteratively between our data and the literature. In each iteration, we used a similar analysis procedure. After each interview was conducted, we followed an abductive process (Locke, Golden-Biddle, and Feldman, 2008) in which we wrote memos to each other to record emerging observations, share our intuitive beliefs about what might be happening, and build some preliminary understanding of what we were learning from each informant. Then, once a set of interviews was transcribed verbatim, we began an open coding procedure, breaking the transcripts into events, perceptions, and descriptions and categorizing them along these dimensions (Locke, 2001). In an early iteration of coding, we searched across transcripts for descriptions of authenticity experiences. Examples of first-order codes (Van Maanen, 1979) that emerged were assertions about aligning career behavior with multiple work passions through holding multiple jobs and enacting one’s inner voice. When we had an initial list of first-order codes, we moved to using NVivo software as a way of keeping track of these codes and categorizing the transcript text. We added codes when new themes emerged: as we developed and agreed on a new code, we defined it as a new “node” in NVivo, setting initial, flexible parameters that we revisited as new data were placed under each node.

As we progressed, we identified similarities and differences across first-order codes that we used to create second-order, more theoretical categories. For example, we combined statements about aligning career behavior with one’s multiple work passions, enacting one’s inner voice, and being one’s true self under the code “being me” to represent the different actions our informants took to align their behavior with their inner sense of self. Ultimately, these second-order themes were combined into aggregate dimensions that formed the basis of our emergent model. For example, the second-order theme of “being me” was aggregated with “feeling me” and “seeming me” to represent “authenticity struggles.” Figure 1 illustrates the relationships among first-order, second-order, and aggregate themes, following the recommendations of Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton (2013). During this coding and interpretation process, we consulted the literatures on careers, identity, meaning of work, and authenticity.



Figure 1. The relationship among first-order codes, second-order categories, and aggregate dimensions in data analysis.

When our subsequent interviews with the same informants suggested that the meaning and experience of authenticity was morphing over time, something that the prior literature could not explain, we reanalyzed all of our data and collected additional data to understand how and why these changes happened. This led us toward building a process-based model of authenticity. In our analysis of the data from the fifth and final round of data collection, we found that the data could be well categorized using codes from the first four rounds, indicating that we had reached theoretical saturation (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). At this point, we engaged in member checking (Marshall and Rossman, 2011) by sending summaries of our emerging findings to a subset of our informants to get feedback on how well our model depicted their experiences.²

² We mostly received extremely positive responses in our classification of key themes during regular member checks; for instance, one informant, Kelley, wrote us an e-mail with the subject line "nailed it!" But in the rare cases

Findings

Concerns with authenticity emerged from our early interviews with plural careerists. It was clear that our informants' desire to express their true selves through their careers led them to hold multiple jobs, but in doing so, they faced challenges in experiencing authenticity. Although each informant's career experience was unique, as we followed our informants over time, our data revealed common authenticity building blocks: three categories of authenticity struggles (being, feeling, and seeming me), two targets for authentication (roles and selves), and the authentication practices informants used to address their authenticity struggles to these two targets at specific points in time.

Struggles with Authenticity

Informants consistently reported that their experiences of authenticity were characterized by trying to sort through competing pressures and tensions. In a reflective e-mail to her clients, Holly described her experiences in pursuing authenticity in her career as "chasing my discomfort zone." Despite being drawn to multiple careers, our informants experienced struggles with acting in line with who they believed they were, feeling authentic once they began holding multiple jobs, and dealing with others' perceptions of their various roles. We label these three concerns "being-me," "feeling-me," and "seeming-me" struggles, respectively. Importantly, being-me struggles compelled plural careerists to begin holding multiple jobs, but after they did so they struggled with feeling and seeming authentic in their work.

Being me

Reflecting on their motivation for holding multiple jobs, many of our informants reported that having only one job did not fully capture who they considered themselves to be. Brittney explained that, even when she had a stable job she enjoyed, she found herself continually searching for something else to fill a void:

When I was trying to focus my career on, say, working for my father, I don't think I was completely happy at all. I always kept searching for something else. You know, my husband will say, "You just need to focus on one thing." Every time I have tried to do that, I'm not happy. It's like something in my makeup is not being fed and therefore I don't think I do the job that I'm focusing on well.

Thus holding one job threatened informants' experience of "being me": the perceived alignment of their outward career expressions and their internal experience of their true selves. To address this tension, they voluntarily took on more jobs to "scratch the itch" (Aida) that pulled them toward additional passions. Eliza captured this innate drive to do multiple things by echoing the words of one of her favorite authors, Barbara Sheer: "Asking me to pick just one of my jobs to do is like asking a mother to choose just one of her children to feed." And, as Rose explained:

when we received disconfirming feedback, we went back to rethink our analysis and examine possible boundary conditions.

It wasn't until I became an attorney for the government and had time to develop these other aspects of myself that I realized how much I'd been missing exercise and the community of a group class or team. Being an attorney alone wouldn't fulfill me the way that teaching barre alongside it does. Being an attorney is my intellectual satisfaction, barre teaching is physical, and blog writing is emotional. I need all of them.

As Rose's comment illustrates, the reward for those who chose to hold multiple jobs was greater alignment between their day-to-day actions and who they felt they were. Through holding multiple jobs, plural careerists enacted what they believed was their true nature, but it also brought forth new authenticity struggles.

Feeling me

As a result of "being me" and having multiple valued work roles, some informants expressed a lack of understanding and confidence in who they were when enacting specific roles. Brenda said she had questioned her authenticity as a business owner: "I was unsure how to be that kind of professional. . . . Somehow I'm a doctor, an expert, a business owner. I've got all this stuff going on. Some of which I'm not very good at. I'm having to take classes and learn more about business. So, all of that just challenges all of my insecurities." Gary expressed ambivalence about his feelings of authenticity as a writer, a relatively new role he had taken on in addition to being a musician and artist: "I am not comfortable enough with [my writing] to qualify myself as a writer. . . . I like doing it, and I am committed to doing it, but. . . ." Despite receiving revenue from his published book, Gary still felt somewhat inauthentic in his new identity. Jeanne also explained that she felt having multiple roles—being a community college professor, a children's book author, and a soap opera writer—constrained her ability to feel fully authentic to any one:

I am not a trained teacher. I don't have time for the professional development that full-time faculty are expected to do. I write children's books but don't have time to read widely in the field. Likewise, I write for TV but barely have time to watch TV. In fact, I feel more and more disconnected from both of these writing communities as the years go by. In short, I would describe my overriding feeling about my multiple jobs as the classic "Jack of all trades, master of none."

Other informants echoed this sentiment and even talked about feeling like imposters in their work roles as a result. Jerry explained that working multiple roles made him prone to the imposter syndrome, which he described as "when you are suddenly in a position or role where you don't quite feel like you belong there, in your own head." Eliza explained the problem this way:

As [someone who holds multiple jobs], you're bound to experience imposter syndrome from time to time. With multiple interests, a variety of passions, and a whole bunch of creative pursuits on the go, you're going to feel like a fraud sometimes. As if you've got it all wrong and that any day now you will be exposed as an outsider, as someone who doesn't know what they're doing.

Thus being-me struggles gave way to feeling-me struggles. Feeling me represents the psychological aspect of authenticity that involves an in-the-moment situated sensation of being connected to the present, feeling like one's actions express one's true self. As Eliza emphasized, enacting multiple work identities could lead people to feel like imposters in specific roles.

Another aspect of feeling me was being fully engaged in a role at a given point in time. Sometimes intrusive thoughts of other work roles could distract someone from the present role, leading him or her to feel inauthentic to that role. Aida, a childcare educator, specialty shop owner, and fashion designer, explained:

It can feel like a bit of a tug of war inside because sometimes your passion about one thing can take you out of the moment you are in when doing something else. Like, when I first opened the shop, I sometimes would feel guilty when I was at my job with the children. I would be in an activity with them and they would be learning, and then I would hear my phone ping with an e-mail about the shop, or I would start thinking about an order I needed to place that night and I would be not there for that moment with the kids. And that part was a real struggle because I am very much a present person with children. That is who I am as an educator.

Zoe described a similar struggle:

I just feel like when you have your hands and head in so many different pots it delays progress in any one, and it also makes you unfocused. You often find that you switch your brain regularly, your thought processes regularly. At times, it is quite debilitating to what you are trying to do. . . . I have a harder time really owning what I do, and how that is valuable. . . . I think of the word imposter. That's it to a T. Because it is true, sometimes I don't feel like an expert in any one category.

These sentiments demonstrate that authenticity at work is not guaranteed when people take action to align their careers with their passions, especially when they have plural passions. In fact, this action can threaten someone's ability to feel fully present and authentic to a given role.

Seeming me

Plural careerists also struggled with how others perceived them in their roles, which in turn influenced their experiences of authenticity. Our informants expressed that holding multiple jobs often seemed like a counter-normative act that led them to feel misunderstood and discounted by others, which in turn prevented what they considered to be their true selves from being known by others. As Emma put it: "I definitely do not fit into the normal box. . . . I start to struggle with people not really understanding me and who I am." Eliza explained in a blog post struggling with how to convey her real self to others when holding multiple jobs:

FOR YEARS I have HATED and DREADED the "what do you do in life?" question. I couldn't figure out why, I just knew that the question was not fit for my answer. Or that the expected answer was not who I felt I was inside. I've ALWAYS hated labels!!!

Because they are so restrictive and a label is not who I am. I am a billion labels. All of them. None of them.

Such socially based authenticity struggles can be understood as individuals' fight toward seeming me, which refers to people's perception that others see them as they see themselves. Our informants reported struggling to find ways to help others understand and accept their engagement in multiple roles, which in turn influenced their own ability to see themselves as authentic in those roles. Seeming-me concerns were about more than an inability to fit a specific label; informants also felt that people underestimated their abilities in any one role because they were engaged in more than one job:

And in the social aspects of it, if you do multiple things, they think you're not grounded. They think that you're scattered. They think that you're not able to perform. . . . They look down on you a lot. They think you can't do what you do very well if you're doing more than one thing. And I think that is a social issue that we have in Western society. We're expected to be X, Y, or Z. And if you vary from that, you can't be X, Y, and Z or everybody gets all twisted up. And sometimes this can actually start making you doubt yourself and wonder if you really can do all of this. (Jerry)

As Jerry indicated, others' judgments often led plural careerists to question their own abilities, especially in the early stages. Informants reported that they felt others questioned their commitment to specific roles when they had more than one. Ezra pointed out that being known in one field was a barrier for establishing himself as legitimate in new fields:

On one hand I've got [Job A] that is sort of an entity in itself, and it just is a self-generating, automating, you know, moneymaking machine. And people know me as that. But I'm also this guy who does [Job B]. And that's my expertise, too, but not many people know me as that yet. And I'm also this person who does [Job C], and I've been very successful in that business and made a lot of money. So I'm in these three different places that I work and want to teach. But I have to work up to being able to have people really see me as all of those. . . .

Thus plural careerists were concerned with others' perceptions not only because inconsistent perceptions were uncomfortable but also because they felt their true career intentions were misunderstood, contributing to feelings of illegitimacy in each valued work role.

Targets of Authenticity

As they discussed their struggles and how they dealt with them, plural careerists indicated that they experienced authenticity in two distinct ways. At times, they strived to be authentic when enacting each of the work roles they had taken on, and at other times they sought authenticity to their broader work selves. Thus their authenticity at work had two different targets: work roles (i.e., each of their identities captured by their individual work roles) and work selves (i.e., who they were overall).

Work-role authenticity

Work-role authenticity consisted of in-the-moment feelings of being engaged and immersed in a role, while simultaneously meeting the role expectations of others. Kelley captured the essence of work-role authenticity as the degree to which she fully infuses herself into the particular role she is enacting:

In a sense, almost any job can be done “authentically.” It’s how you show up to it. Were I to have a job cleaning toilets (which I’ve done in the past), I would do it as “me.” I wouldn’t bitch and moan that toilet cleaning doesn’t express the special awesome snowflake that is my majestic self. I’d show up and clean the hell out of those toilets using the “me-ness” of me, whatever that is.

When asked to describe what authenticity in a particular role feels like, Mina focused on a situated moment: “I am so happy. I feel like it is effortless. You might call it a constant state of flow.” Other informants connected this affective experience directly to interpersonal interactions with others in the role. Caroline said, “When I’m [at one of my jobs], I’m very energized and I love what I do because I can see I make people feel better.” Bill explained that his sense of authenticity came directly from knowing his clients “get him,” and Sophia emphasized the connection she felt to her patients. Authenticity to any particular work role allowed informants to feel “at home” (Veronica) when enacting it.

Our informants emphasized that experiences of authenticity in one work role were independent from experiences of authenticity in another. Aida explained, “I have more than one happy place.” Lori described her ability to feel authentic in multiple different work roles using a hat metaphor: “I know I am wearing multiple hats, and that can be hard at times, but they are each important. It is like I have my sun hat, rain hat, baseball hat. I need them all at different times.” Lori emphasized that she felt authentic in each of her “hats,” as they were all true representations of who she was and what she valued.

Work-self authenticity

Plural careerists also indicated that authenticity could be targeted at a more global sense of self that transcended specific roles. Louise depicted her interpretation of authenticity at this more global level through the metaphor of a rotunda:

I like to fully understand all my work together. I think it’s also the way I view knowledge, and truth, and understanding. I don’t see it as compartmentalized in my own mind. I see it as kind of like a rotunda, and different disciplines are like doors into one [space]. I feel like you can approach those big universal things from sort of different doorways, different pathways, and like me, I am now doing the big picture thing. I’m coming at it through different doorways at different times, but it doesn’t feel like switching boxes to me. It feels like more of the same goal in a way, but different specific experiences.

Work-self authenticity involved an overall meaning and purpose from enacting the “ideal work self through multiple means” (Lola).

Plural careerists' statements of work-self authenticity focused on who they were across roles, rather than on self-expression in any one particular role. Lori, who described role authenticity via the hat analogy above, also captured self authenticity when she described in a later interview how she had begun to look beyond specific roles to a broader "original self": "To me, the key is to form an un-templated life (for lack of a better word) by combining roles that may well have rigid templates. That allows you to be your original self but still helping others see you as they expected when within certain roles." Thus as plural careerists sought authenticity in their work, they focused both on authenticity within specific work roles and authenticity to a more general work self enacted through those roles.

How Plural Careerists Cultivated Authenticity

Our analysis revealed that how our informants cultivated authenticity in their work in response to authenticity struggles depended on which target they were focused on. To address their struggles with authenticity to both work roles and their work selves, plural careerists engaged in three broad types of practices: (1) cognitive practices to internally manage their multiple identities; (2) social-cognitive practices to understand where they do and do not belong in relation to their social world; and (3) image management practices to help shape the image others have of them. All three practices were used interdependently and complemented one another, but cognitive and social-cognitive practices were primarily aimed at addressing struggles with feeling me, whereas image management practices were aimed at managing seeming-me struggles.

Practices that authenticate work roles

A central concern for plural careerists was how they could bring themselves fully into each of their work roles simultaneously. Though their actions toward plural careerism were internally motivated, these actions led them to struggle with feeling and seeming authentic to each work role because taking on new jobs, even ones that were aligned with one's sense of self, might compromise the enactment of existing jobs. To establish both feeling and seeming authentic to each work role, our informants protected each of their multiple roles through segmenting, detaching from others, and shorthanding. We describe these practices here and provide additional examples in table C1 in the Online Appendix.

Segmenting

Though plural careerists often resisted the idea that their work investments were bound to a traditional 40-hour week and insisted they could hold multiple jobs, they also recognized that their time and energy resources were not infinite. As Ed explained:

You know, if you wanted to be a professional musician and still work a normal job then your time is split, you know, in two. Pretty much, I work 40 hours a week at my day job and then 30 hours a week doing the band. I mean being a musician is a big part of your life. It's like having three extra girlfriends who also are splitting your time.

To deal with the fact that each work role consumed much time and energy, many informants engaged in segmenting practices: they compartmentalized and isolated individual roles to allow for exclusive and intensive cognitive focus on each one separately. As Emma explained, both of her work roles were important to her, “but you have to recognize that that makes you divided—not fully present in either. I can’t consolidate both roles in the same day so I have to divide my time to be fully focused.” Division of time and focus helped our informants feel as though they were authentically enacting each role.

Informants described two interrelated actions that helped them feel they were bringing their true selves into each role: creating temporal boundaries between roles and investing fully in each role separately. They meticulously planned their time in ways that created temporal boundaries, which allowed for cognitive separation between work roles. Emma explained, “It is easy to get swept away in your passion for your new venture when just starting out. So, I have set my hours so that Mondays and Thursday afternoons I only do fabric work. That way I don’t forget to make progress on that as well.” Other informants also emphasized the challenge they faced in trying to balance their time, attention, and resource allocation across jobs. Kim, who runs multiple blogs, co-owns a bakery, and provides nutritional counseling, explained that she maintains strict work routines to ensure she has time to devote to each of her jobs every week. Such planning frequently involves iteratively taking stock, prioritizing, and developing routines on a regular basis. Zoe pointed out that scheduling, along with focused work on each job, made it possible for her to succeed at multiple jobs:

I have learned that routine is super key. I now know to give myself buffer time when I know I will be transitioning between work roles. You know, you have to give yourself time in between tasks or projects to really make it smooth and get focused. The buffer time is critical to getting in role in your own head.

The second facet of segmentation is making full use of the cognitive space that was created. Plural careerists talked about finding ways to completely immerse themselves in each job as it was enacted, while still maintaining space to focus on other personally meaningful work pursuits at other times. Our informants pointed out that intense role engagement was critical, especially when introducing a new job into the fold. Ezra stated, “You know the concept fake it until you make it? I like to say ‘be it until you see it.’” Though increased input into specific work roles might seem to exacerbate the demanding nature of holding multiple jobs, our informants did not report experiencing it that way. Holly explained that an increased investment of time and resources into a new job was a prerequisite to successfully adding a new venture to the mix of current jobs. In a blog post she wrote, “Ironically the time to double-down the most is when you’re just getting started. . . . People who are successful treat their passion project like it is legit from the get-go.” Such intense and focused engagement from the start of a new job led our informants to treat all their jobs, no matter how new, like valued work identities. Unless they jumped in, their new jobs could easily be sidelined and overlooked, making it difficult to justify the time spent away from other work roles. Segmenting allowed informants to fully invest in their work roles, supporting the in-the-moment feeling of authenticity they were seeking.

Detaching from others

Plural careerists struggled with being recognized and understood by others when holding multiple jobs, which affected their feelings of authenticity. They frequently felt that because they held more than one job, people outside of their work roles—friends, family members, and acquaintances—did not understand or appreciate their career choices, and that the people they interacted with inside a particular work role—coworkers and clients—questioned their commitment and legitimacy in that role. As Jerry stated, “It is a social problem because people see you as one thing and if you are not just one thing you must not be very good at what you are doing.”

To deal with this struggle, they reported detaching themselves from certain others. Detaching is a social-cognitive practice our informants used to create psychological distance from others in a way that disconnected their sense of work authenticity from outsiders’ judgment of holding multiple jobs. They used detaching to keep certain others—primarily people outside of work roles—at arm’s length while exploring new roles. Through detaching, plural careerists gained space to experiment with their unconventional way of working without judgment. They shifted the “problem” from something that has to do with them to something that stems from society’s biases. In so doing, they invalidated the perceptions of skeptical others, were able to be more engaged when enacting roles, and as a result felt more authentic to these different work roles. Jerry explained the motivation for detaching this way: “It’s like any other ‘perception’ problem—if people don’t like who you are it’s their issue, not yours.” Kelley similarly discounted others’ judgments in an e-mail she sent to us: “My parents, love them dearly, have what I consider antiquated notions about work. (And I get to say that because I’m in my 40s so it’s not like I’m some 20-year-old dipshit who just discovered Marx).” This statement highlights that she respected her parents but did not want their feedback on her career decisions.

Caroline explained her detached mentality by noting that some people are too narrow-minded to understand what she does and why she does it. She pointed out that her ex-husband constantly tried to get her to “focus” on a single job and that he just “couldn’t understand me.” As a result, she minimized talking to him about her varied work pursuits. Other informants talked about discounting what their perhaps well-intentioned friends thought about their work because they just “didn’t get it.” In a blog, Holly emphasized that she had learned to tune people out: “What someone thinks about me is not my business. Byron Katie says it the best: ‘What I believe about me is my business. What you believe about me is your business.’ I can never hope to control how I am perceived. I will make myself miserable trying.” Kylie explained how she distances herself when she senses someone questioning her ability to successfully enact her multiple jobs: “In layman’s terms—big breath, chest out, eyelashes up! Try hard to rise above it, and look for the small things to remind myself of the authentic part of my job.”

Shorthand

Detaching helped our informants to distance themselves from the judgment of naysayers about their choice to engage in multiple work roles, but our informants still sought social validation to legitimize their role enactments. As Eliza articulated, “How do you communicate what you’re capable of without coming across as a dilettante?” Other informants similarly highlighted that being understood and accepted as legitimate in their roles was a critical component of work-role

authenticity, but they felt their career plurality undermined others' perceptions of their authenticity to each role.

To address this issue, informants reported engaging in shorthanding, an impression-management practice that condensed their work selves into a socially acceptable package to address seeming-me struggles. As Ed explained, when presenting himself to others, "I simplify it. I just say I am a musician. A shorthand." And as Zoe put it,

Over time I have learned to become less forthcoming and more conservative with how I present myself and what I share to others. . . . I mean, societally you feel pressured to "get bucketed" in your own head even. So, I have learned it is best to "bucket" it for them by saying I am simply an "entrepreneur" or I say "digital media strategist."

Shorthanding took a slightly different form when our informants were interacting with in-role partners (e.g., coworkers or clients) than when they were interacting with out-of-role partners (e.g., acquaintances or family). Outside of work, informants tended to draw on existing occupational labels to simplify their multiple jobs. When asked about what kind of work she does, Kelley, who holds seven roles, explained, "I really struggle—I tend to, like, get a deer in the headlights look at that point. So, the shorthand that I come up with is I'll say, 'I'm a nutrition coach.' And that's something that people can understand, you know?" Lola, who reported holding six different jobs, said, "I always just say I'm a nurse. It's too complicated to explain any more. My husband says that I'm always selling myself short—I say I'm saving their time and mine!" This form of self-categorization allowed social partners to easily classify the plural careerists with well-known labels that prevented further discussion of their jobs. Further, in some ways it complemented detaching practices because it allowed people not to have to deal with the confusion or judgment caused by detailing their multiple jobs. Informants did not believe that shorthanding fully encapsulated all of the jobs they held; it involved isolating one aspect of their work in a way that was easily palatable to their audience and allowed them to avoid explaining why they have more than one job. It worked as a form of "social lubrication" (Greg), giving informants space to become more confident over time in their unconventional careers.

When interacting with partners inside of a particular work role, our informants reported selectively presenting themselves in a manner appropriate and consistent with the role they were currently enacting. As Aida told us:

I've just learned that people don't want to hear the whole story. They just want you to tell them that what they see you doing is what you do. So, while I know that later, when I leave my childcare job that I will go to my shop and take stock, order products, and essentially be my other self, the mom of the child I'm caring for does not care about any of that stuff. And that is fine because I know that is just one of the things I do and I'm happy for her to think it is all I do.

This form of shorthanding, emphasizing specific, context-dependent roles rather than the entirety of what they did, allowed plural careerists to genuinely describe their work to in-role partners in ways that did not compromise their role legitimacy.

Though it may seem that shorthanding would compromise someone's sense of authenticity, our informants claimed that they felt authentic when using this practice because they were presenting a valued part of their work identity and because it is the part salient in the moment, particularly when dealing with a client for that job. As Emma pointed out, "In that moment, I am 100 percent in that role. It is a true identifier." Similarly, Lori explained that "others see you as they expected when within certain roles. It is not an inauthentic performance, but instead a slice of yourself—it is who you are at that moment of time." Zoe confirmed that shorthanding helps her to feel more authentic because "people then seem to get what you do and are not confused." Our informants felt authentic when presenting slices of themselves within each role because they were not using a façade; each role was a true expression of their role identities, and they felt fully invested in each role performance.

Practices that authenticate work selves

Although they reported similar categories of struggles (feeling and seeming authentic), plural careerists used a different set of practices to respond when they felt these struggles were threatening the authenticity of their generalized sense of self at work: aggregating, attaching to others, and longhanding. We describe these practices here and provide additional examples in table C2 in the Online Appendix.

Aggregating

Our informants searched for ways to understand their work selves as more than a collection of individual roles. After working in several jobs for years, Mary was compelled to sit down and, as she put it, "figure out what my core message was, and then how I could deliver it into different modalities, like speaking or a consultancy business, or writing books, or running this [business]." Zoe similarly reported being driven to figure out the relationship among her multiple work identities:

I feel excited to be doing these things, and I love all the things I am doing, but I struggle to understand all of these jobs together and to say "this is who I am and this is what I do." I am constantly like, "Okay, pick a lane, and be focused and go down that lane." But then at the same time I really don't want to pick a lane. . . . It is definitely something that I stress myself out over, for sure. How can I be all these things and own each one fully?

This questioning led many of our informants to identify a common thread or theme that allowed them to aggregate their work roles. Aggregating involves creating linkages among multiple identities, while still maintaining the distinctions among them (Pratt and Foreman, 2000). The themes that informants generated about their jobs when aggregating centered around specific skills, a purpose, and/or shared content. Below are examples of each:

Specific skill: Every piece of what I do requires me to be a writer. I have to do blogs, I have to write papers. I have to do all that for IT. I have to do the public relations work and the scripting for the entertainment business. . . . Again, it goes back to that being, sort of, the hub of everything. So it's completely authentic because it's determined that that is an absolute necessity. I can't be anything else unless I'm a writer first. (Jerry)

Overarching purpose: I say something like, “I help people who have a lot of different interests find ways of integrating all of their interests into their lives.” Other examples would be things like, “I help businesses tell their stories,” or “I help empower youth.” It doesn’t say anything about HOW I empower youth. Maybe I am a dance teacher, maybe a motivational speaker, maybe I work at a non-profit, maybe I do all three. When all of it fits under one umbrella, it is okay to have different formats. (Eliza)

Shared content: We still have to learn how to brand ourselves. And, you know, rather than them treating our jobs as, you know, sort of a generic role, “I’m the exercise and sports science professor. And therefore, you know, I’m smart,” I’ve come to realize that I’ve got to create a brand. And for me, part of my brand is being, you know, the [professional organization he heads]. I mean that’s really what I do. Everything I do revolves around, you know, sports, nutrition, or exercise. (Joe)

Identifying connections among work roles enabled informants to create a sense of coherence that persisted across roles, facilitated movement between roles, and still allowed each work role to occupy its own space in their work-self schema. Kylie pointed out that though her jobs all share a focus on physical health, each role has a unique way of enacting that focus. In one of her jobs she is a business owner and manager, in another she is a clinician, and in a third she is a researcher and teacher. Eliza described this aggregation of her work roles as a “group hug approach” that allowed her to efficiently address her dueling desire for both variety in her work pursuits and a sense of coherence.

Attaching to others

Because plural careerists do not belong to any one occupational group, it was difficult for our informants to identify squarely with a single, specific profession. Trying to do so often left them feeling like a “perpetual outsider,” as Eliza explained. This feeling of isolation threatened their feelings of authenticity at work. To deal with this struggle, they began identifying with others who held multiple jobs—who “swim in the same waters I swim in” (Kelley). Unlike detaching, wherein plural careerists actively distanced themselves from friends and family who did not understand holding multiple jobs, informants attached themselves to others who “got” them, enabling them to feel part of a collective. Our informants talked about finding their “circle” (Ralph; Zoe), “tribe” (Gemma; Mary; Aida), “family” (Lola), “team” (Kelley), or “my people” (Nora; Holly). They credited these groups with helping to validate their decision to hold multiple jobs and providing much-needed support: “The biggest difference is knowing that there are others like you. When people join my community, they realize there are lots of people with multiple passions, and that is okay! They are successful too” (Eliza). Further, these communities helped plural careerists gain greater insight about their own meaning:

I have a community which brings people together who work in all different disciplines who are all into doing multiple things . . . coming together for what they think, not who they actually are. And we just synthesize and find the meaning and purpose beyond discussing budgets and key performance indicators within their jobs. (Mary)

Finally, these communities often provided labels, which helped individuals form a shared identity around their self-complexity. Some of our informants talked about being a “Renaissance worker” (Peter), “slasher” (Jerry), “thought leader” (Mary), or “multipod” (Zoe). Attaching to others who fit under the same label allowed our informants to address their social affiliation needs by helping them develop a social identity around their involvement in a plural career. In doing so, it offered them a safe space to be their whole selves, which Lola described as “coming home,” and in turn this fostered feelings of authenticity across multiple roles.

Longhanding

Plural careerists who were focused on their overall work selves struggled to fully convey the combined value of their work endeavors to others. Kylie explained, “I want the people I value to value the things I do for a living.” To address this, our informants sought alternatives to shorthanding in interactions with others. Through longhanding, informants presented themselves in ways that allowed for elaboration around who they were rather than shutting conversations down. Louise talked about “putting a feeler out there” when introducing herself to see if people are interested enough for her to elaborate on her multiple roles. When introducing himself and his work to others, Chip highlighted his purpose in this succinct statement: “My true skill set is creating something out of nothing.” Other informants talked about highlighting their work’s purpose in a more elaborated way. Russ explained,

I tell them I’m a family medicine physician who focuses on lifestyle medicine and preventative medicine. And I also mention in there that I try to promote evidence-based knowledge and try to fight misinformation and media sensationalism and pseudoscience via the Internet as my platform. I try to make it so I’m not just a run-of-the-mill doctor that only does strictly the medical. I try to say how I go above and beyond [traditional practice] and do a lot of other [nontraditional] work as well.

Notably, Russ actively distanced himself from the occupational category of “doctor.” Unlike shorthanding, longhanding allowed informants to highlight how they diverged from prototypical occupational members. Russ did this by explaining that although he was a doctor, he also held other role identities that enriched this identity. In a similar vein, Mina explained, “I tell most people I am an accounting professor who researches happiness. I have a mission to help all accountants become happier. I might also mention I do educational research that helps students develop more resilient mindsets. Once I get into the discussion, other areas might come up.” These statements can be considered “elevator pitches”: rhetorical devices that efficiently but comprehensively described plural careerists’ careers and purpose. These pitches became important signaling tactics through which informants experimented with conveying both their purpose and complexity by summarizing the range of identities they held and the theme that united them. As such, longhanding involved being more transparent than shorthanding about all the roles that individuals held. Longhanding was also apparent in informants’ social networking profiles and client information materials. For example, many informants who reported longhanding also began to freely list all of their jobs on LinkedIn, Facebook, or their business cards.

Authenticating Multiple Work Identities over Time

Our informants also provided insight into the longer-term authentication process in a plural career. When plural careerists first began holding multiple jobs, they focused on overcoming the authenticity struggles they faced in each of their work roles individually. We labeled this phase “synchronizing” and considered synchronous work identities to be a set of multiple identities enacted by the same person at the same time but that do not yet have a clear connection to one another. Over time, however, our informants’ focus shifted to “harmonizing”: authenticating their work selves across their work roles. Plural careerists in this phase found ways to understand how roles worked together to produce an overall sense of self. In table C3 in the Online Appendix we provide examples of four informants discussing their experiences in the synchronizing and harmonizing phases.

While the shift between phases became clear to us as interviews progressed, the informants were also keenly aware that their approach to authenticity had changed over time. In a late interview with Kendra, which took place five years after the first interview, she explained that she now thinks of her work role identities in a more global, holistic fashion:

One thing I’ve also learned since you first interviewed me is that now all of my careers have morphed. . . . It used to be a few things I did separately and now they’ve grown into an umbrella. I was fine with having several projects going at once and running them all separately. We didn’t force it or sit down and plan it. It happened naturally. My career is still interdisciplinary as well, but it is cohesive so you can kind of see your main goal if that makes sense.

Kelley similarly observed that her experiences of authenticity had changed over time: “It’s a dynamic process. It’s not like there’s this ‘me’ and all you have to do is find ‘the right job’ that maps onto the static image of ‘me,’ like a tracing. You’re continually bringing ‘authenticity’ into being, creating it in an ongoing and constantly changing way.” The process of authentication to multiple role identities that informants described led them to develop new understandings of their work selves, which in turn shaped later authentication practices. Identity resources played a central role in this process.

How Identity Resources Shape the Process of Authenticity

Identifying the shift between synchronizing and harmonizing led us to ask what drives individuals to move from focusing on authenticating work roles to a focus on authenticating work selves. Identity resources are positively valued elements of one’s self-representations that help people achieve valued ends (Creary, Caza, and Roberts, 2015). Individuals’ identities can function as resources that help them respond to threats and enable them to accumulate other important resources. In our data, we uncovered two identity resources generated in the synchronizing phase (identity authorship and plurality ownership) and two generated in the harmonizing phase (identity fluidly and identity synergy) that contributed to plural careerists’ experience of authenticity.

Identity resources catalyzing the transition between phases

The two identity resources generated in the synchronizing phase that promoted a shift from the synchronizing to the harmonizing phase are identity authorship and plurality ownership. Identity authorship refers to individuals' increased efficacy in grappling with, developing, and authenticating multiple identities, allowing for an increased sense of agency over their career paths. As Sam explained, "I am always working on projects that resonate with me. There's never anything I am working on that I don't want to work on, because I'm the one who created the work." As their confidence in handling multiple identities grew, plural careerists seemed more able to define themselves on their own terms:

If I am completely honest, there is something very freeing when you wake up and realize that you fit so many different categories and labels. I mean, when you are so many things, it is almost like there become no rules for you because you can begin to transcend categories. It feels like you don't have to try to be confined to any particular roles when you have more than one. It is like wide open spaces. (Lori)

Through engaging in multiple jobs and proving to themselves that it could be done, informants felt that they had more control over who they were and that they were not at the mercy of society's expectations. This was particularly apparent in our interviews with Holly. Early on, she expressed that her family was concerned about her nontraditional career choices. But in later interviews, and in her coaching blog, she talked about her pursuit of "unapologetic authenticity," explaining that "acting out of 100% ownership of who I am in the world" allowed her to avoid censoring and seeking approval in her career actions. She explained, "Authenticity and author have the same root word, and to be authentic is to literally be the author of our own lives." Over time, after successfully holding multiple jobs, informants no longer felt constrained by others' perceptions of what a career should look like, and they felt empowered to craft their work lives according to their passions and skills.

Developing a sense of identity authorship helped our informants move from synchronizing work identities to harmonizing a work self. Our informants reported feeling that their cognitive and affective resources were taxed as they engaged in the authentication process with a new role while at the same time juggling responsibilities to other current roles. They were preoccupied with compartmentalizing and meeting role expectations. But as they came to feel secure in their authenticity to each work role, they developed a sense of personal volition, feeling more secure and able to take responsibility for authoring their careers. In turn, identity authoring helped reduce some of the cognitive load that comes with holding multiple jobs, freeing cognitive space that individuals allocated to forging connections between roles rather than simply focusing on the roles themselves. Supporting this idea, in a late interview, Zara talked about when things started to feel easier as a plural careerist: "Once you get over this idea that you are not a fraud because you are not specializing, that being good at one thing does not make you bad or unqualified in another, then you gain space and energy to focus on the you that is underlying those things you are doing."

Over time, our informants also exhibited "plurality ownership," meaning they came to see their multiple identities as a central and positive self-defining attribute, rather than a problem or flaw. As Lola told us, "I am a multifaceted person, I need to express these facets in different ways." Again, this resource was the result of engaging in the authenticity practices. Only after our

informants jumped in and successfully enacted multiple work roles did they incorporate plurality as a positive feature of their selves—a source of positive distinction. Doing so promoted an enhanced view of the self and led them to make their plurality a central feature in their career narratives. Peter explained that he simply had to create his own multidimensional career:

I'm good at and deeply interested in what are seemingly unrelated things. Like, for example, I always loved literature, film, photography, art, architecture, more arty disciplines, humanities. But I was fascinated by engineering, math, logic, computer science, all of these things. . . . I'm not a single, focused type of person.

Through the process of authenticating multiple work identities, our informants recharacterized the plural nature of their self-concept from being a liability or “social problem” to being a central, positive resource.

Once informants made the identity claim that holding multiple jobs was self-defining, their sense of positive self-meaning was no longer constrained to individual, contextualized roles. As the act of having multiple defining work roles became a positive feature of the self, individuals shifted from a focus on the concrete details of their various roles to a focus on more-abstract conceptualizations of their selves. For example, Nora emphasized the transformative nature of accepting her plurality in this way: “I’ve given myself permission to say ‘it’s okay that I work like this’ [and now] I’ve been able to dig into themes that connect my various jobs. In that sense, the authenticity has gone from a square to a cube.” Dan explained that once he realized he intrinsically had multiple career goals and accepted them, he began to focus on his different jobs collectively rather than individually: “I now feel I have a better perspective of my ‘career’ path than ever before. Previously, I often felt like I was jockeying several horses at once and trying to see if one would take the lead. Now I feel like I have a team that pulls together instead of racing one another.” Thus, in combination, identity authorship and identity plurality facilitated the move from synchronizing into the harmonizing phase of the authentication process by changing our informants’ perceptions of their own agency and sense of self.

Identity resources sustaining and reinforcing the authentic work self

We also found evidence of two additional identity resources that helped sustain individuals in the harmonizing phase: identity fluidity and identity synergy. Identity fluidity refers to recognizing that who one is changes over time and becoming comfortable with this dynamism. Many of our informants talked about holding multiple jobs as increasing their comfort with the “shifting priorities” (Eliza) that are a natural part of one’s career but are often at odds with traditional, static notions of authenticity as a single, true “me.” Kelley highlighted this tension when she explained, “I think the authenticity concept, in certain ways, kind of presumes that there is this platonic essence that you have . . . it’s kind of like that colonialist discovering somewhere that already existed, and all I had to do was find it, and for some people that might be true, right? I think that the authentic self also evolves.” Ezra also homed in on this idea that one’s authenticity naturally evolves alongside organic identity changes:

People think: how do I find my passion? I don’t know because my passion has changed so dramatically. My passion is an evolving process, and as long as I am focusing on it, it

brings me to these new identities. So it is sort of this step-wise process of chasing my evolving passion and purpose, this evolving thing rather than this one thing that stays the same.

Identity fluidity was apparent when plural careerists talked about their future plans and were more focused on self-expression through multiple roles than the specific roles themselves. Zara demonstrated a sense of identity fluidity when she said, “I don’t know what my work will look like in ten years, or even five years. And that is okay because I am open to where my passions take me.” Our informants indicated that their comfort with identity fluidity over time and space helped them to effectively pivot in the face of inevitable change. As Eliza stated, “I’ve become more comfortable with the shifting itself. Complexity, nuance, and adaptability. Isn’t that what it’s all about?” In other words, their fluidity became a resource for helping them to adapt to change in their careers. Through identity fluidity, plural careerists expressed openness to career change and agility.

Identity synergy, the second identity resource stemming from authenticating the work self, allowed plural careerists to capitalize on the energy and insights they gained from holding multiple jobs at once. When talking about transitioning between jobs, Nora told us, “This is actually the feeling I’m looking for from the get-go. I like switching my brain and my being between multiple roles. It’s a rush; it’s a high.” Brittney stated, “Honestly, all of these things kind of make up who I am, and I feel like they all help each other. I really do. I’m not tired because a lot of them are different. So I focus different parts of my energy and brain and power on one thing, and then I switch it to another thing. And it’s actually refreshing.” Thus having multiple roles allowed each role to feel fresh and as a valued complement to other roles. Mary pointed out that finding her core message, and identifying her work roles as being different modalities through which she could deliver it, helped her to feel energized and passionate: “And then you just get up every morning so excited you can’t wait to get out of bed.”

Besides the energy gained from switching between jobs, informants also described how doing one job gives one insights about new ways to enact other jobs. Of his multiple jobs, Bill said, “I get balance from my intellectual and arts sides by doing it all.” Nora said that once she accepted how her roles fit together, she noticed that “in my brain, everything informs the other pieces. The work with children’s business education sometimes sparks an idea for a client; or a freelance piece might give me an idea for a dentistry client.” Jordan also talked about the positive synergy among her work roles when she noted, “I think I am a better teacher for being a professional writer, and I think I write better dialogue in my novels because of my scriptwriting experience.” Our informants found that developing an overarching sense of self that linked the distinct work roles enhanced their capabilities in any one job, rather than diminishing or jeopardizing them, because it allowed them to move across work roles fluidly while capitalizing on the positive connections.

The synergy that arose from the connections our informants formed among their multiple jobs allowed them to stay motivated and inspired by their jobs, supporting a multifaceted, loosely coupled work self. Identity fluidity, in turn, contributed to sustaining an authentic work self because it helped them adapt and evolve as their interests changed, leaving them open to new connections between jobs, as well as new jobs. In fact, plural careerists with identity

fluidity *expected* their roles to change as they progressed in their careers. Focusing on authentication at work as an ongoing process allowed them to see new roles and even the loss of old roles not as a threat to authenticity but as a welcome opportunity to learn and grow.

Overall, the identity resources cultivated in the synchronizing phase (identity authorship and plurality ownership) helped to propel the authentication process into the harmonizing phase, while the identity resources gained in this latter phase (identity fluidity and identity synergy) reinforced and sustained the harmonized experience of authenticity. Table C4 in the Online Appendix provides additional examples of these identity resources.

Discussion

Through our multiyear investigation of plural careerists, we identified building blocks of authenticity—struggles, targets, and practices—that helped them move from synchronizing multiple work roles to harmonizing the self. The drive to be authentic motivated our informants to take on multiple jobs, but in doing so, they experienced struggles with feeling and seeming authentic to both their work roles and their selves. By examining how individuals grapple with and ultimately cultivate authenticity within and among multiple work roles over time, our study explains why and how they move from a focus on practices that synchronize identities toward those that harmonize the self. Drawing on our data, we theorize that emergent understandings of oneself promote cognitive shifts from focusing on being in the moment when enacting one specific work role identity to zooming out to reflect on the connections between identities and forging an overall sense of self-coherence.

Figure 2 presents the process model of authentication based on our data. We propose that identity and authenticity interact recursively over time. As it shows, we suggest that identity resources generated in the authentication process are key drivers in the transition to the harmonizing phase, and that identity resources later reinforce and sustain the harmonizing phase.

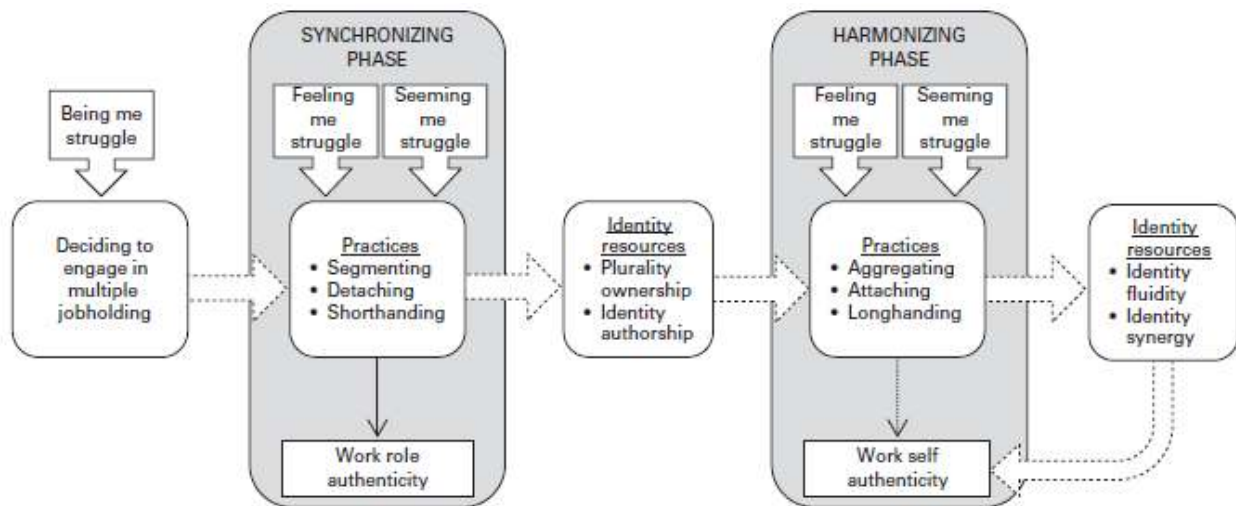


Figure 2. Phase model of authentication.

Theoretical Contributions

A key contribution of our process model is that it explicates the recursive and interdependent relationship between authenticity and the self over time, aligning our understandings of identity theory and authenticity theory and addressing deficiencies and inconsistencies in both literatures. Self and authenticity have long been assumed to go hand in hand (Erickson, 1995), but their relationship is often characterized as direct and unidirectional: individuals are authentic when they consistently enact their single, relatively stable true self. Our findings suggest a more complex and emergent relationship in which one's understandings of self are not static targets for the authentication process but instead serve as dynamic resources that are generated by early authentication practices and that shape later authentication practices. Thus our model theorizes about how people can come to know different aspects of their true selves, communicate these aspects to others, then progress from authenticating these various identities separately at first to authenticating the whole of their selves over time, moving from synchronizing to harmonizing their multiple identities. Previous organizational research has referred to both roles and identities as resources (e.g., Callero, 1994; Dutton, Roberts, and Bednar, 2010), yet there have been limited investigations linking these resources to authenticity or explaining how they operate empirically. Our process model proposes that identity resources can shepherd individuals between the two authenticity phases, as well as sustain authenticity over time. Gaining a sense of agency over one's work identities (identity authorship) can enable someone to be less concerned with the ability to enact specific work roles, therefore freeing up needed cognitive resources. Coming to define oneself in terms of one's plurality (plurality ownership) promotes a focus on the totality of who one is across roles. This resource motivates individuals to move beyond myopically focusing on felt authenticity within particular work roles and toward making sense of the cumulative meaning of work roles. Further, through an increased understanding of how the multiple parts of oneself enrich each other (identity synergy) and how to move seamlessly between valued identities (identity fluidity), many of our informants were able to sustain a sense of authenticity despite challenges and change. Contrary to advice to merely be yourself, these findings form the basis for a theory of the co-evolution of self, identity, and authenticity. The self is a dynamic driving force that influences work role choices and role enactments, but it is also shaped by the process of authentication.

The interdependent, evolving relationship between the self and authenticity calls into question the assumption that authenticity requires enduring identities and self-consistency across contexts (e.g., Sheldon et al., 1997; Kraus, Chen, and Keltner, 2011). Our findings resonate with those who claim that people often have multiple, closely held identities (James, 1980; Stryker, 1980; Burke and Stets, 2009), demonstrating that sometimes this can mean acting inconsistently across roles in order to cultivate authenticity to each. Varied role enactment was part of the appeal of holding multiple jobs for our informants because it allowed them to express the different, genuine "slices" of who they were in different ways. Our data suggest that authenticity is not about expressing and being true to the same single identity across time and place but about knowing how to hold cognitive and social space for multiple true versions of oneself.

Our findings also address the divergent views in the literature about the role of others in the authentication process. Some authenticity scholars have argued that others' perceptions are irrelevant or should be actively disregarded when individuals act authentically (e.g., Barrett-Lennard, 1998; Wood et al., 2008), and other scholars define authenticity as a product of social

interaction, suggesting that to be authentic, there must be alignment between one's self view and that of others (e.g., Ibarra, 1999; Avolio and Gardner, 2005; Roberts et al., 2009). Our findings provide evidence that both views have validity, but neither alone tells the entire story.

Prior research has shown that people often shape their self-presentation to meet the needs of their audience (e.g., Swann, Bosson, and Pelham, 2002; Swann, 2011). Our research demonstrates that this can be done in ways that facilitate rather than threaten one's sense of authenticity. When synchronizing role identities, plural careerists strategically managed their engagement with others in ways that promoted social validation of specific role identities in their interactions with some audiences but simultaneously shielded them from negative feedback about their selves from other audiences. This finding points to a counterintuitive aspect of the model: some researchers have thought of authenticity as resulting from connecting and sharing with others (Martinez et al., 2017), but we find that distancing and choosing not to disclose identities to particular audiences can also promote feelings of authenticity, especially in the early stages of the authentication process, within specific relationships. This suggests that complete transparency may not always be the path to authenticity; in fact at times, to some audiences, transparency may actually obstruct it. In particular, when people are first exploring new identities, authenticity may require actively seeking out and attending to in-role partners' expectations of oneself, while being more restrained with and sometimes disregarding the feedback of out-of-role others. Thus, while organizational members may strategically manage the presentation of their selves in ways that diminish authenticity, such as when they adopt a façade (Hewlin, 2009) or implant a false self (Harter, 2002) to be accepted, at other times tailoring the presentation of one's multiple identities and strategically moving between withholding and revealing can facilitate experiences of authenticity.

Our process model also challenges conventional wisdom about managing multiple identities. Much of the current research implicitly or explicitly assumes that one's approach to multiple identity management is predicated on individual or organizational differences that result in relatively persistent individual preferences (Pratt and Foreman, 2000; Ramarajan, 2014). In contrast, we find that as individuals become more experienced in multiple identity management, they come to see themselves differently, and as a result, the way they perceive and manage their identities changes. Segmenting early on helps people cultivate a sense of authenticity to specific work roles, ultimately setting the stage for later aggregating that generates a coherent sense of why they are engaged in multiple roles. It may not have been possible for informants to create a link among their work role identities if they had not authenticated each of them individually first. Accordingly, we suggest that there is value in moving beyond trying to understand *who* approaches their multiple identities in particular ways to focus on *when* they take various approaches and *why*. In doing so, we fill in the gap between previous conceptualizations of multiple identities as being either discordant and conflicting or harmonious and enhancing.

Also, while previous research has tended to focus on the identity management tactics of segmenting and integrating (e.g., Nippert-Eng, 1996; Ashforth, Kreiner, and Fugate, 2000), we find that plural careerists engage in aggregating identities. Pratt and Foreman (2000: 32) defined aggregating at the organizational level as being when an actor "attempts to retain all of its identities while forging links between them." While segmenting involves building cognitive fences between identities and integrating involves taking these fences down (Zerubavel, 1991),

aggregating can be seen as creating a permeable link between identities. By aggregating, identities are still distinct and separate, but a linking theme (“I am a writer”) allows people to fluidly move between them, as if walking through a gate. The fact that the boundaries between identities persist differentiates aggregating from integrating, while the existence of the linking theme distinguishes it from segmenting. Further, while the mental fences erected during segmentation minimize conflict and depletion, the simultaneous presence of both the fence and the gate facilitates synergy (Pratt and Foreman, 2000) or positive structural complementarity (Dutton, Roberts, and Bednar, 2010), which allows for enrichment among work roles. Because individuals are psychologically and socially driven to develop a sense of coherence and continuity (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010) but also may be innately complex, aggregating may serve as an effective identity management practice for those with multiple valued work identities. Thus future research should take into consideration when, how, and why aggregating happens at the individual level in addition to the organizational level.

A New Framework for Understanding Authenticity to Multiple Identities

Our process model also provides a revised framework for understanding authenticity at work. First, we suggest that individuals’ inherent complexity and social interdependence in the workplace lead to struggles with being, feeling, and seeming authentic, which determine the use of authentication practices. Second, we highlight that people alternately target both work roles and work selves in their authentication attempts. In addition to better aligning our scholarly understanding with individuals’ lived experiences of authenticity and self-complexity, explicating these integral authenticity components and conditions provides a cohesive framework to guide future research.

The majority of our informants saw the process of authentication as one characterized by tension and struggles. By identifying the types of struggles individuals face as they strive for authenticity at work, our findings provide a more nuanced understanding of the nature and experience of authenticity. Although being, feeling, and seeming struggles appear piecemeal in the literature (e.g., Ibarra, 1999; Creed and Scully, 2000; Harter, 2002; Avolio and Gardner, 2005; Roberts et al., 2009; Yagil and Medler-Liraz, 2013), placing them in an integrated model allows us to bridge existing approaches and more fully capture the experience of authenticity at work. Our findings help us see that authenticity at work requires aligning career actions with self-understandings (being me), experiencing transient, in-the-moment feelings of truly being oneself (feeling me), and expressing core identities to others (seeming me). But experiencing authenticity on all three of these levels is complicated, particularly in the context of multiple identities, prompting actors to wonder how they can be, feel, and seem each of their complex selves with different audiences. Our findings indicate that the cognitive, social-cognitive, and impression-management practices people use to negotiate these tensions ultimately facilitate the authentication process. These practices generate identity resources that enable plural careerists to navigate important developmental phases, helping them progress in their quest for authenticity. Also, in contrast to the trend in the literature to treat various identity- and image-management tactics as parallel and unrelated, our data suggest that individuals use the authenticity practices in tandem, as “bundles” that work complementarily at particular points in time. We hope that future work will build on these insights by being attuned to what types of authenticity struggles individuals are facing, the practices these struggles generate, and when and how multiple identity

work and image-management practices complement each other at the cognitive, social–cognitive, and social levels.

Our process model also highlights that authenticity is targeted and, at times, contextualized, which helps to clarify inconsistencies in the literature. Our findings suggest that individuals experience authenticity both at what Liberman and Trope (1998) labeled low and high construal levels. At a low construal level, they assess authenticity based on specific details of their roles, whereas at a high construal level, authenticity is a function of the degree to which they are able to be true to their abstract, overarching sense of self. What people are attempting to authenticate will determine which bundle of practices they will use. Authenticating work roles led our informants to engage in segmentation, which promotes feasibility, whereas authenticating work selves through aggregation cultivated a larger sense of purpose and meaning. Our informants' emphasis on authenticity to particular work roles diverges from previous research that has mainly viewed work roles as constraining self-expression because workers have to subordinate their self-expression to fit into such roles (e.g., Hochschild, 1983; Roberts et al., 2009; Hewlin, Dumas, and Burnett, 2015). Our findings indicate that people can achieve a sense of authenticity when they feel they are fully enacting a single work role, even if they are behaving in a way they may not outside the role. Further, in our data, rather than being a constraint, the socially constructed norms and expectations inherent in work roles became a conduit for self-expression, acting as a shared language through which our informants conveyed valued aspects of themselves to others. Importantly, how people engaged with authenticity to these two targets differed dramatically. Thus to thoroughly understand authenticity and its underlying processes, we need to consider to what one is being authentic.

Boundary Conditions, Limitations, and Future Directions

Though our findings are derived from individuals simultaneously working in various jobs, they may have implications for people who may not have multiple distinct jobs but do have multiple identities. Our findings may be most applicable to other contexts in which there are societal pressures to have a clear, definable identity within a particular domain. For instance, similar to our informants' experience of multiple work identities being a “social problem,” psychologists have documented that individuals who have multiple cultural or racial identities often face obstacles to feeling fully understood by others because they are difficult to categorize (e.g., Kang and Bodenhausen, 2015). Even within the workplace, where identity complexity is becoming more prevalent, organizations are often requiring that individuals take on multiple or even hybrid work roles, such as being nurse-managers (Caza and Creary, 2016) or army medics (Leavitt et al., 2012). For instance, a professor who holds roles as a journal editor, junior faculty mentor, doctoral student coordinator, department head, and teacher may grapple with ways to feel and seem authentic across work roles that have different role expectations, especially when it requires thinking about and interacting with the same audience in different ways (e.g., as a faculty mentor and department head). Importantly, we think that the degree of social acceptance of role plurality is a critical boundary condition for our theorizing. Our model is most relevant and transferrable to contexts in which people are highly committed to multiple identities in a way that counters social expectations. Across domains, such as work–family, and even within some domains, such as community involvement, there is a growing acceptance that people will have

multiple role identities. But in domains in which having multiple identities is not expected or fully accepted, individuals may struggle with being, feeling, and seeming authentic.

Another boundary condition concerns identification with and commitment to multiple roles. We focused on a subset of people who voluntarily chose to hold multiple jobs because it allowed them to pursue their multiple interests or passions and who saw each of their work identities as central and valued. In contrast, people who have multiple work roles for financial reasons are less likely to be strongly committed to or internalize each of their work roles and therefore may have different expectations and experiences of authenticity at work. Future research should examine whether and how workers develop a sense of authenticity when enacting multiple work roles with which they do not initially identify.

Our study also has limitations that suggest future research in this area. First, though our informants held a wide variety of roles within and across various industries, we did not investigate how specific numbers of roles or combinations influenced the authenticity process. The experience of balancing two, rather than three or four, jobs may be fundamentally different. It is also possible that the kinds and combinations of roles people take on will influence when and how they find authenticity in their work. Given the different types of configurations for holding multiple jobs in the current economy, future research should investigate how different characteristics of and relationships between roles influence the authentication process and the transition from synchronizing to harmonizing multiple identities.

While opening the door to a more dynamic understanding of authenticity, our model does not capture all of the potential messiness in the authentication process. Our data provide clear evidence of a general trend whereby most of our informants moved from the synchronizing to the harmonizing phase, but some informants did not change phases. Further, there are likely instances in which people vacillate between phases and perhaps even go back to the synchronizing phase after harmonizing multiple identities. For example, when plural careerists add a new highly divergent role, they may move back to focusing primarily on who they are in that role. But once individuals have developed a sense of authenticity to their work self, they may spend less time in the synchronizing stage even when adding a new job. In general, knowing more specifics of the temporal patterns of holding multiple jobs would enrich our ability to theorize about how, when, and why such transitions occur.

The current gig economy, which enables, motivates, and sometimes forces workers to enact multiple vocations, has increased plurality in the workplace, making it critical to update our understanding of the modern experience of work. Our study suggests that having multiple work identities provides both opportunities for and barriers to authenticity in the workplace for contemporary workers and that the process of authenticating multiple role identities is a complex, tension-driven journey. But with the right resources, individuals can move from synchronizing role identities to harmonizing a work self that is both fulfilling and sustainable.

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