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Coming Home: A Journey Back to the Authentic Self

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Abstract

The theory of coming home is a three-stage classic grounded theory that details an individual's initial exploration of the world in childhood, followed by the subsequent abandoning of their authentic self and then the life-long journey back home to their most authentic being. In the first stage of the process, individuals act and express in authentic ways and receive feedback from the environment about which aspects of themselves are acceptable and which are not. In the second stage of the process, driven by feelings of shame and lowered self-worth or the awareness that certain aspects of themselves are unacceptable, individuals engage in abandoning behaviors to fit in and avoid rejection. After months, years, or even decades of increasing awareness about these behaviors, individuals may enter the third stage of the process, during which they come to re-explore, accept, and embrace their authentic selves.

Keywords: classic grounded theory, authenticity, authentic self, self-exploration, self-acceptance

Introduction

Authenticity has been a concept of interest to humans for centuries. To date, the body of literature on authenticity has been comprised mostly of research on state authenticity (Lenton et al., 2013; Lenton et al., 2015) and trait authenticity (Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Wood et al., 2008). There has been limited research, however, on the possibility or process of becoming more authentic throughout the course of one's life. This research study began as an inquiry into the lived experiences of highly sensitive individuals. Following the steps of a classic grounded theory outlined by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and later by Glaser (1978, 1992, 1998, 2002), I identified the main concern of learning to be and accept oneself. Then, through constant comparison of new data with already discovered concepts, I developed the theory of coming home. This theory addresses the gap in the literature around the process of becoming more authentic across the lifespan.

Methodology

Classic grounded theory (CGT) is a useful method for inductively generating theories about patterns of human behavior that help individuals within a substantive area to understand their situations and take meaningful action to resolve their main concerns (Glaser, 1978). CGT is typically conducted through a series of main stages, which include preparation, data collection and analysis, memoing, sorting, creating a theoretical outline, and writing. The grounded

theorist works on stages sequentially and often simultaneously, with many stages overlapping and insights from one stage informing work on another. This particular CGT was developed during my doctoral research at Saybrook University.

To prepare for this research study, I identified an area of interest, which was the experience of being highly sensitive. In order to minimize preconceptions, I delayed an initial review of the literature. I then developed a grand tour question, which is a broad open-ended research question or statement, that is likely to facilitate participant sharing about the experiences and concerns most relevant to them around the substantive area of interest (Glaser, 1978). My initial research statement was "Tell me about the experience of being deeply affected by people and situations."

I began data collection and analysis while awaiting Saybrook University IRB approval by coding and memoing on four short stories written by people who self-identified as highly sensitive. Once I received IRB approval to begin data collection with human subjects, I set aside the four stories and the memos developed from them and conducted an initial interview using my grand tour statement. I open coded that interview, memoed on the emerging concepts, and then conducted another interview. After open coding three interviews for any concepts that I could identify in the data and combining the new codes and memos with the codes and memos from the stories I had previously analyzed, I discovered a main concern of being and accepting oneself and a tentative core category of embracing the authentic self, which I later renamed coming home.

In the next phase of data analysis, I began selective coding for concepts related to the core category. Using theoretical sampling, I recruited participants whose interviews might help me to fill any gaps in the emerging theory. In total, I collected 50 separate pieces of data, including 28 initial interviews, 14 follow-up interviews, four stories, three videos, and a song. Initial participants responded to recruitment posts stating the topic of the grand tour statement. Subsequent participants responded to recruitment posts stating the topic of other grand tour statements, developed through theoretical sampling, including statements about experiences of feeling different and experiences of being or not being authentic.

As I developed concepts and their relationships through selective coding and memoing, I discovered a good fit for the theoretical code of a basic social psychological process. Applying this overarching code enabled me to begin integrating the theory. In the last stages of the CGT process, having reached "theoretical completeness with parsimony, scope, depth and breadth" (Glaser, 1998, p. 188) of emergent categories and their relationships, I sorted memos into the emergent structure, created a theoretical outline, and wrote up the full theory.

Coming Home

Coming home is a theory that describes a three-stage process, best understood as a journey, that begins in childhood and continues throughout the remainder of each individual's life. The journey involves exploring the authentic self, abandoning the authentic self, and, eventually, beginning the return journey back home to one's authentic self. However, since the authentic self is multi-faceted and changes over time, there is no specific destination of home to which one returns. Coming home, instead, represents the lifelong journey of becoming more of who

one really is.

The Authentic Self

In order to understand the stages of the journey, it is important to first explain the authentic self, as seen in the data from this study. The authentic self is made up of many parts, some consistent and others evolving, that exist together as the ways one experiences oneself. Further, these parts of self are experienced through an individual's current level of awareness, which changes over time as a person grows and reflects. While these parts of self are neither static nor separate from one another, they are named and listed separately for clarity and to demonstrate the complexity of the ways that self is experienced.

The first aspect of the authentic self is the present self. The present self is the way one's authentic self is experienced in any given moment. It is comprised of thoughts, feelings, interests, desires, and preferences, all internal experiences that come and go frequently and may be experienced as unintentional, spontaneous, or happening to the self. This concept was exemplified as participants shared about their thoughts, feelings, interests, desires, and preferences, both in response to events in their lives and when they occurred during the interview. For instance, one participant shared an insight about himself and then said, "I've never thought of it that way before." This shows that he was having spontaneous thoughts at the time of our interview. In another example of the present self, a participant reflected on feelings she had during an argument with her partner. At the time of the argument, she was experiencing her present self through feelings that spontaneously occurred in her.

The second aspect of the authentic self, the past self, is the way one's history may be carried forward through memory. It exists in the present moment as the current self-understanding, shaped by past experiences, through which one interprets their thoughts, feelings, interests, desires, and preferences. This was illustrated by many participants who referenced events and experiences in their pasts and shared how these events and experiences contributed to their current lives. In one example, a participant shared about how his experiences of food insecurity, verbal abuse from caregivers, and his time in the military affected him throughout his adulthood. Demonstrating the way the past self is experienced in the present, he shared about a conversation with a VA representative during which he experienced anxiety and lost his composure. His physical experience and feelings in the moment did not accurately reflect his environment but, instead, reflected his painful history. Even after the conversation, he had a difficult time understanding what had happened and separating it from his anxious interpretation of the experience based on his past circumstances.

A third aspect of the authentic self, the enduring self, is represented by those characteristics of self that are observable by others and may have remained relatively consistent throughout the course of an individual's life, often appearing in early childhood. The enduring self is made up of one's fundamental ways of being, or "patterns of thoughts, feelings, behaviors, desires, interests, and preferences, as well as character qualities, that are inherent to each person" (Cashwell, 2021, p. 37). Multiple participants who identified themselves as highly sensitive shared that others had always noticed and commented on their sensitivity and that, no matter what, it always seemed to be a part of who they were. One self-

described sensitive participant, referencing his lifelong ability to understand both the obvious and very subtle dynamics between people in conversation with each other, stated that the ability was “really the most natural part of how [he] existed in the world.”

In contrast, a fourth aspect of the authentic self, one’s evolving self, represents the parts of the authentic self, such as one’s morals and values, that do change over time in light of growing awareness and new experiences. For example, one participant shared about inheriting morals and values from his family or origin and from his church. Later, as he grew and discovered more about himself, he began to think more about the morals and values he wanted to have as an adult. After years of reflection and changes to his ways of thinking about himself and the world, he was still updating the morals and values he used to guide his life.

A fifth aspect of the authentic self is the constructing self. The constructing self is the part of self that makes meaning of one’s experiences and weaves a cohesive self-story through which one thinks about themselves and others. Unlike thoughts, which arise spontaneously and in which people may not be particularly invested, stories are constructed over time, passed down through families, and often believed to be the truth of how things are. Many participants acknowledged stories they had been told that they believed until experiences caused them to question these stories later in life. One participant reflected on the story she inherited from her family that life is about suffering. As an adult, she realized that the story itself was increasing her suffering, and she began to question that story and decide she wanted to think about life in a different way. Individuals use one particular kind of story, identity, to explain aspects of themselves to others so that others may better understand them.

A sixth aspect of the authentic self, the relational self, is experienced specifically in relationship to others. Others reflect and develop stories about themselves and the world as well and then share some of those stories with the people in their lives. When a person hears what others think about them, and particularly who others think they are, they experience themselves through the eyes of those others. The relational self is the part of oneself that is made up of the reflections of others that have become part of one’s own self-understanding. Most of the participants in this study who identified as highly sensitive were first made aware of their sensitivity when those closest to them reflected it to them. One participant was frequently told as a child that she was “too” sensitive. Another recalled her mother saying, with dramatic emphasis, “you’re just so sensitive.” In both cases, the participants learned at a young age that they were viewed in a particular way.

These aspects of self description are known to the self because one may observe their own internal experiences. A seventh aspect of the authentic self, the observing self, is the part of self which notices these experiences and watches them come and go over time. This part of self represents “the space between experience and a different point of view within the self” (Cashwell, 2021, p. 42). This concept was exemplified when participants spoke about noticing their thoughts or feelings as they arose in response to specific situations. For instance, one participant shared about watching her thoughts in response to text messages she was receiving from a man she had dated. She was having spontaneous thoughts in response to her text conversation, and she was also observing her thoughts and letting them come and go within a larger space of awareness. Demonstrating the separate reference point of the

observing self, she was able to share both about her experience of thinking and the experience of observing her thinking.

Finally, an eighth aspect of the authentic self, the transcending self, represents the part of self which is the highest expression of one's own goodness or one's relationship with a higher power. The transcending self is "pure, fundamental, and unchanging" (Cashwell, 2021, p. 43). Thus, the transcending self may be understood as the deepest level of one's most authentic self or who one is at the core. Referencing the transcending self, one participant spoke about her relationship with God. Her journey of learning to live authentically has been to become "who it is that God intends for [her] to be." Another participant described "a soul or energy that gets to move [the] body," and he emphasized that "anytime you put a label to it, it's limiting." Though participants viewed the transcending self in varied ways, many shared the understanding that it represented a part of them or a connection they had which was deep, sacred, and which made them inherently worthy.

Contextual Factors

In addition to defining the authentic self, it is important to understand the contextual factors that influence each person's journey home to themselves. The most influential contextual factors are norms, values, expectations, messages, and relationships. These factors influence different individuals to different degrees and generally exert less of an influence the further one travels on the journey home. Next, I will discuss each of these contextual factors. Then, in the sections that follow, I will discuss how these factors affect the process of coming home.

Norms are "common standards of thinking, feeling, and, especially, behaving" (Cashwell, 2021, p. 45). They are communicated directly, using words such as "appropriate" and "normal," or indirectly in the form of teasing or questioning. One male participant shared a memory of being teased as a child for crying by another girl on the playground; this memory stood out to him as one of many times he understood that it was not normative or appropriate for boys to show emotion. Norms exist in groups of all sizes. Larger social norms, such as societal norms, are often distilled into family norms, which are then passed on to children. Specific kinds of norms, benchmark norms, set standards for which milestones should generally be met by certain ages in a given culture, community, or family.

Values represent those things which are considered important or worth one's time. As with norms, societal values tend to influence family values, which, in turn, tend to influence personal values. Values necessarily emphasize some things over others, and individuals may grow up understanding that societal and family values are not always well aligned with their own unique ways of being, thinking, and behaving. For example, one participant shared about being athletically and musically talented. Despite these gifts, she grew up with the awareness that she did not possess the specific skills or excel at the jobs that were most valued in American society.

Expectations are the "stated, implied, or perceived ideas that one should think, feel, or behave a certain way" (Cashwell, 2021, p. 48). Expectations may be expressed directly, with words such as "should," or subtly, such as by praising specific feelings and behaviors while ignoring or criticizing others. For instance, one participant remembered his mother praising

specific things about another individual in their lives and receiving the implied message from her that those qualities were ones she valued and expected of him. Societal or family norms and values may be internalized in an individual's own self-expectations.

Norms, values, and the expectations of others are known to individuals because they are expressed through messages. Messages are communicated and received through language or inferred through observation and interpretation. They are incessant; people are exposed to messages in every stage of life from many sources, including friends, family, teachers, colleagues and peers, art, entertainment media, and advertising. One participant reflected on the messages he received about what it meant to be a boy just based on the toys he was given to play with in his childhood. It is through both direct and subtle messages that people learn who their peers, family, and society want them to be.

While coming home is a journey that occurs within the self, it is also greatly influenced by others and may serve to deepen one's relationships. In relationships, people receive frequent messages indicating acceptance or rejection of their feelings, behaviors, and ways of being. One participant told a story about reaching out for support in his church group as an adolescent. In response, the group leader read him quotes from the Bible. No matter the intention of this act, the participant experienced it as a rejection and learned that his authentic feelings were unacceptable within the group. In relationships, individuals may also be motivated to caretake the feelings of others in order to avoid disappointing them or to experience acceptance. On the journey home, relationships both hinder and support individuals in various stages of the process.

Stage 1: Exploring

When people are young, they may not have a strong sense of what makes them who they are. Throughout childhood and adolescence, they begin the journey by exploring their inner worlds, which consist at any moment of various thoughts, feelings, preferences, interests, and desires. As they explore, they are subjected to constant messaging about the norms, values, and expectations of their families, other groups to which they belong, and the larger culture. These messages may be either direct or subtle and often vary by social category. At this stage, messages from one's environment are not easily distinguished from one's own thoughts. Demonstrating the ways messages may be integrated into one's ways of looking at the world, one participant stated, "as a woman in this day and age, you grow up, you know, thinking you need to look a certain way. . . ."

Simultaneously, as individuals explore and express their authentic selves, they receive feedback from those closest to them about whether or not they are accepted for the ways they authentically think, feel, express, and behave. Rejection may be expressed in the form of judgement, expectations, or through censoring. One participant recounted an indirect expression of judgement, teasing, that was particularly impactful to her; she was sobbing on a drive home with her family when her family began to make mooring noises back at her. Though her behavior was not criticized in words, she clearly received the message that her authentic feelings were unacceptable.

Since children wish to avoid rejection from those they love, they may develop the habit

of caretaking the feelings of others during this stage of the journey and may attempt to fulfill the expectations of others to avoid disappointing those closest to them. One participant stated that when she was younger, she had a "strong responsibility feeling" for others and that she "had to make them happy." In addition, while exploring themselves and their environments, young people may simultaneously compare themselves to others and to prevailing norms.

In the context of constant messages about who and how they should be, feedback from the environment about which parts of themselves are acceptable and which are not, and through comparison with others and with norms, young people begin to develop stories that aid them in understanding themselves and the world around them. Since messages, feedback, and one's own comparisons may emphasize the ways one does not meet norms or is not acceptable, many self-stories may be negative, and feelings of shame and low self-worth may develop. Even children and adolescents who are not aware of pervasive feelings of low self-worth may have received messages or created unconscious stories that certain aspects of themselves are unacceptable. These feelings and stories about aspects of the self then become catalysts for stage two of the journey.

Stage 2: Abandoning

During the exploring stage, young people have no real sense of a path in life but continue to learn about themselves, those closest to them, and the world around them. The second stage of the journey is marked by finding a path, albeit a path that leads away from the authentic self. Having experienced feelings of shame and low self-worth or unconscious stories about the lack of acceptability of aspects of themselves as well as pervasive messages about who they have to be to be acceptable, an individual steps foot onto the path of abandoning.

On the path of abandoning, an individual engages in one or more abandoning behaviors, each aimed at becoming more acceptable to others but none of which fully expresses one's authentic self. One abandoning behavior, reshaping the self, involves changing one's behavior, expression, or appearance to match prevailing norms or expectations. This concept was exemplified by a participant who decided to become a cheerleader, something that did not align with her authentic self, to fit in. Another behavior, making safe choices, involves making practical life choices that align with the expectations of others but which are not in alignment with one's authentic interests and desires. Illustrating this concept, one participant shared about her choice to pursue the same career as her mother--a choice that was practical and would please her family, but which did not bring her fulfillment. A third abandoning behavior, sacrificing, involves putting others before the self and, thus, deprioritizing one's own authentic desires. A fourth behavior, suppressing, involves hiding or repressing parts of the self, especially feelings, in order to earn the acceptance of others. Lastly, people at the stage of abandoning may engage in filtering, which is choosing to emphasize only the parts of self that they deem acceptable to others.

While on the path of abandoning, individuals may continue to caretake the feelings of others in relationships, a behavior that is likely at this point to become habitual and to reinforce further abandoning. Some individuals at this stage may actually lose any sense they had of themselves as unique, while others may simply act and express themselves inauthentically in relationships in order to fit in and avoid rejection. One may find respite on

the path of abandoning with the few people, animals, or environments near which they feel safe to be themselves. Overall, however, the second stage of the journey is accompanied by feelings of being unaligned, or fundamentally uncomfortable and insecure as oneself. Describing the feeling of being unaligned throughout the stage of abandoning, one participant stated that she was “never quite calm with [herself];” another shared that she had been “painfully uncomfortable in [her] skin.”

An individual may walk the path of abandoning for years or decades, habitually attempting to fit in, whether consciously or not. However, over a period of time, an individual may experience one or many catalysts, each increasing their self-awareness. When experiencing a catalyst, an individual pauses on the path of abandoning, questioning their basic stories and becoming aware of their own self-abandonment. The first catalysts may be small moments of insight; however, many small moments increase one’s awareness and skill at questioning. Demonstrating this concept, a participant shared about the stories he developed about the world growing up in his religious, conservative household. After going to college, he met someone who identified as a pacifist. Interested in this young man’s differing opinions, this participant asked questions of him. At first, the participant was defensive and argued with each point. However, over time, he became more open and curious, and he found the man’s points had merit. Eventually, he began to question many of his own stories about the world. As one experiences more catalysts and continues to question the stories they hold about themselves, about others, and about how the world works, that individual may begin to veer off the path of abandoning altogether.

Stage 3: Returning

As one veers off the path of abandoning, which in itself may be a slow, incremental part of the process, another path becomes visible. This is the path of returning, and it is the path which leads one home to their most authentic self. On the path of returning, there are three main tasks that one may undertake sequentially or in tandem: re-exploring, self-accepting, and embracing.

The first task, re-exploring, involves continuing the exploration of one’s authentic self that was so natural in early childhood. While an individual’s exploration of the authentic self in childhood may have been hindered by the simultaneous desire to caretake the feelings of loved ones, individuals on the path of returning recommit to discovering more about who they are, even when others may not approve of their choices. Participants shared about exploring different interests, careers, courses of study, identities, and sexualities, knowing that it was more important for them to learn about their own authentic interests and desires than to live their lives making only practical choices or choices that would be acceptable to others. In one example, a participant described the liberation she felt exploring various sexual identities and relationship structures when she left home for college. Another participant, after earning a degree in business administration from a prestigious school, decided to completely abandon her safe and practical career path and re-explore her authentic self through travel.

The second task, self-accepting, involves sourcing acceptance from within rather than seeking external validation for being who one is. Self-accepting may occur with different aspects of the authentic self, including feelings, desires, interests, and one’s natural ways of

being. It may also include the realization that it is ok not to fit in and to be different. Illustrating the awareness gained through the task of self-accepting, one participant stated, "I am who I am, and I understand that some people won't like me, or won't like parts of me, but that is life and that is ok."

Self-accepting is accomplished and reinforced through three main behaviors: restorying, integrating, and showing up. Restorying involves questioning the stories one has inherited, both from society and from their families and peers, about themselves, others, and the world. Particularly, it involves rewriting stories that certain aspects of themselves are unacceptable. In one example, a participant worked with a therapist to identify and then retell specific stories about herself enough times that they were ingrained as the new ways she thought and spoke about herself. Integrating involves "becoming aware of, accepting, and bringing together the parts of the self that were abandoned" (Cashwell, 2021, pp. 92-93). Describing his experience of integrating, a participant shared about starting to acknowledge the aspects of himself of which he had been most ashamed and slowly beginning to express those parts of himself to a community of others. Showing up involves the physical and emotional acts of focusing on oneself and one's needs. One participant described learning to offer herself love and compassion and to prioritize her own needs, while another participant started a yoga practice to engage in a physical act of self-care.

The third task of returning, embracing, involves a commitment to being who one is. Beyond simple self-acceptance, embracing involves aligning one's life with who one is, surrounding oneself with others who are supportive, and being authentic in each moment as well in one's life as a whole. Many participants described expressing their authentic thoughts and feelings more often, including setting boundaries that they had not previously set with others. For instance, one participant described finally telling her son that she was not going to drive him around everywhere; something she had previously done and was expected to do. In addition, she began to tell her partner how she felt in response to his expectations of her, and she asserted the boundary that if he wanted something other than what she was making for the family for dinner, he could make it for himself.

The path of returning runs parallel to the path of abandoning, though it runs in the opposite direction, which is back into a deeper knowledge of and relationship to one's authentic self. Nonetheless, the path of returning still has familiar challenges. While one does not end up on the path of abandoning again after veering off and committing to an authentic life, specifically because it is not possible to unknow what one has discovered on the journey, it is very common to stumble on the path of returning and momentarily engage in abandoning behaviors or caretake the feelings of others in order to fit in or earn acceptance. However, the awareness one gains on the path of returning becomes the foundation on which an individual discovers they have stumbled into old habits and recovers their footing by re-engaging with the tasks of re-exploring, self-accepting, and embracing the authentic self.

Though on the path of returning one no longer regularly seeks external sources of acceptance; relationships at this stage are often supportive and fulfilling. At this point on the journey, one may cut ties with others who do not accept them or who are not themselves committed to an authentic life. Further, one may meet new people with whom they can share

an authentic relationship or find communities within which they experience belonging, or acceptance for being who they are. These relationships and communities then serve as sources of strength and inspiration on the journey home.

While the path of abandoning evokes feelings of being unaligned, the path of returning evokes the opposite: a sense of alignment, or a sense of comfort in one's own skin. Describing this state, one participant stated, "I feel so secure and confident with myself." Another shared that she had "become more comfortable in [her] own shoes." Other feeling states one may experience on the path of returning are increased self-worth and a sense of empowerment, or a "strength and permission from within to be who one is and do what one wants to do" (Cashwell, 2021, p. 109). These enjoyable states may be used as barometers which help people to assess when they have stumbled. Fleeting feelings of being unaligned may be the first sign that one is again abandoning. Also, these states make the third stage of the journey somewhat self-reinforcing; the more aligned, worthy, and empowered one experiences themselves to be, the more committed they may be to the tasks of the third stage, and both the feelings and commitment to the journey grow over time.

Discussion

The original substantive area for this study was highly sensitive individuals. Through application of the CGT methodology, emergent concepts and theoretical sampling revealed a larger, overarching process of which sensitivity, as one of many authentic ways of being, was just one part. This mid-range theory explains how people, including highly sensitive individuals, come to explore, accept, and embrace who they are across their lifespans despite the varied messages they receive about who they should be.

The theory describes a life-long journey home to the self, though the second stage initially draws one further away from oneself. However, the stage of abandoning is essential to the overall process of coming home, as it is through self-abandonment that people develop the insights necessary to change course. Through the discomfort one may feel in being unaligned with the authentic self and through the catalysts that come one moment at a time over many years, an individual may come to realize that the safety of fitting in is not worth the sacrifice of their true self and the opportunity to belong just as they are.

Since the authentic self is multifaceted and people continue to receive messages about their inherent worthiness and who they should be throughout their lives, the journey of coming home does not lead to a specific destination. Home is, instead, a deeper relationship with oneself. Accordingly, coming home is a process that may continue until the day of one's death.

Three broad psychological theories share similarities with the theory of coming home. Rogers' (1961/2004) theory of becoming a person describes a similar trajectory of personal growth, in which people eventually move away from the ideas that they should be a certain way or that they need to please others and eventually become more self-responsible and internally-directed. Since Rogers worked with adults in his psychotherapy practice, he worked mostly with people who were already experiencing catalysts and questioning and, eventually, who would veer off the path of abandoning throughout the course of their work together. The theory of coming home compliments the theory of becoming a person, as it describes how one

initially comes to abandon their authentic self.

Maslow (1962/2014) also developed a broad theory of human growth. Like the theory of coming home, Maslow's theory of self-actualizing begins in childhood and can be applied across the lifespan. He described a similar process of exploring in childhood and emphasized the impact of parental rejection, including a child's choice to earn the approval of others over continuing to experience their own delight. Maslow also described a turning off of the path of self-actualization when one experiences hidden guilt associated with self-betrayal. While the overall growth trajectory described by Maslow shares many similarities with the theory of coming home, it is first and foremost a theory of meeting basic human needs and fulfilling one's potential. The theory of coming home focuses more on becoming who one is with less emphasis on the concepts of motivation and potential.

A final broad theory that shares conceptual similarities to the theory of coming home is self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1980, 1991, 2000). Self-determination theory (SDT) is a metatheory that covers many topics, including motivation, personality, and basic psychological needs. Deci and Ryan (2012) emphasized the importance of an individuals' multiple identities; this idea is somewhat similar to the multifaceted self description in the theory of coming home, though identity in this theory is more conceptually similar to self-concept (Oyserman et al., 2012). Another similarity can be found between the basic needs of competence and autonomy described in SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which may be conceptually similar to empowerment as described in the theory of coming home. Finally, Deci and Ryan (2012) described six main types of motivation from a complete lack of motivation to an extrinsic motivation to an internalized motivation, whereby individuals make choices by following their own inner directives. The theory of coming home shares a similar trajectory, with individuals first modifying their behavior and expression to earn the acceptance and avoid the rejection of others and then later finding acceptance and direction from within. While SDT and the theory of coming home have some overlapping concepts and trajectories of development, SDT is primarily a theory of motivation and personality and, thus, focuses on different aspects of psychology and development from the theory of coming home.

The existing empirical literature on authenticity has focused mainly on state authenticity (Lenton et al., 2013; Lenton et al., 2015) and trait authenticity (Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Wood et al., 2008). Therefore, while the psychological theories described in this section share some similarities with the overall developmental process of coming home and the empirical literature on authenticity covers the experience of being authentic and the tendency of some people to be more authentic, there is a large gap in the research around the process of becoming authentic across the lifespan. This research offers a thorough, integrated theory on becoming more authentic to the existing body of literature.

Implications of the Theory

The theory of coming home has relevance for a variety of populations, including individuals who are highly sensitive, the initial population of interest. The theory may also be useful to other individuals with marginalized identities who have received messages throughout their lives that they are not acceptable as they are. It may additionally be relevant to parents, teachers, and caregivers of children who wish to protect children from self-abandonment and

encourage the exploration and expression of their authentic selves. Further, it may be of particular interest to adults in later stages of life or those with terminal illness to assist them in reviewing their life choices and offering a structure through which they may explore living the rest of their lives as authentically as possible. Finally, the theory may be particularly applicable to a therapeutic setting, where it may be used to support clients through an inquiry into their choices and a guided process of coming home.

Limitations and Areas for Future Research

Since grounded theories are both grounded in data and conceptual, they may be more broadly applicable than other theories. However, they are not without limitations. The most obvious limitation to this theory is sample size. While participants were demographically diverse, it is possible that the journey of coming home does not apply to all people. A second limitation is that all participants in this research lived in the United States. Therefore, one cannot conclude that this research applies to people living in other countries or to people from collectivist cultures. However, there is some existing research suggesting individuals in collectivist cultures still experience authenticity (Slabu et al., 2014). Hence, this may be an interesting area for continued sampling. A third limitation is that participants in this research volunteered in response to recruitment posts stating the topic of study. It is possible that individuals less interested in the topic of authenticity might have contributed different ideas, from which other concepts and insights for the larger theory may have been developed.

There are many concepts that emerged from this research that may prove to be interesting and important topics for future study. Data from this study indicate that veering off the path of abandoning within a relationship may negatively impact the relationship when one's significant other or spouse is not also at the same point in the journey. While people may meet others with whom they can be authentic on the path of returning, there is still much to be discovered about coming home within established romantic relationships. Another potential area for future research is the influence different parenting styles have on the first two stages of the process, exploration and abandoning of the authentic self. While abandoning is important in generating opportunities for awareness which eventually catalyze the next step of the journey, considerable suffering may be avoided if parents are equipped with the necessary tools to remain vigilant of messages they communicate about their acceptance of their children's authentic selves. Along these lines, research is warranted on the potential protective role that teachers, parents, and caregivers may play against children's self-abandonment and the strategies they may employ to carry out that role. Lastly, data from this study indicate that the use of social media may inundate people with negative messages, encourage comparison, and make it challenging for people to figure out how to be and express themselves among friends, family, and community in a virtual environment. Therefore, coming home within the context of modern culture, particularly for people who rely heavily on virtual environments for socialization, is another area of potentially valuable future research.

Conclusion

People have been interested in the concept of authenticity for centuries. Despite this fact, the current research is comprised of a number of broad theories (Rogers, 1961/2004; Maslow, 1962/2014; Deci & Ryan, 1980, 1991, 2000) that cover the overall trajectory of human growth

and development towards a more inner-directed, authentic life and many empirical studies focusing specifically on state authenticity (Lenton et al., 2013; Lenton et al., 2015) and trait authenticity (Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Wood et al., 2008). The theory of coming home overlaps with and complements the broad theories named above by contributing an organized and thorough road map of the journey home that is useful both to academics and, most importantly, to individuals in the process of figuring out how to be themselves in the world. Further, the theory of coming home adds to the empirical literature by suggesting that, beyond state and trait authenticity, any individual may develop greater authenticity over the course of their life. While this research study began as an inquiry into the experiences and concerns of highly sensitive individuals, it transcended the initial substantive area and is, thus, potentially beneficial to a wide-range of individuals on their journeys to live more authentic lives.

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