

Being authentic is the new image: a qualitative study on the authenticity constructions and self-images of Christian millennials in Africa

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ABSTRACT

The article is a qualitative study that focuses on the authenticity and self-constructions of Christian millennials in Africa. While exploring how 15 respondents manifested their authentic self-behaviours using a case study design, the hallmark of the study was to observe the common coping mechanism of self-regulation, adopted by respondents to deal with their internal crisis. This coping strategy was employed as they remained true to self by creating new “authentic” images of themselves in the forms of the *borderline self*, the *promissory self*, the *hyphenated self*, and the *religious self*. By implication, looking at the issue of authenticity from an African context has produced an African conceptualisation of authenticity. I argue that African authenticity can be understood by interpreting Africa’s voices of self-expression and images of self-definition, resonating within various African contexts in hope for some kind of cathartic and authentic living experience.

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Introduction

Authenticity has often been considered as a phenomenological representation of the self that is consistent with an individual’s feelings, thoughts, and/or behaviours (cf. Akin & Akin, 2014; Wood, Linley, Maltby, Balousis, & Joseph, 2008). An inconsistency in one’s feelings and thoughts may lead to an internal crisis, as the individual is confronted with a specific psychosocial task when experiencing the self within a social environment (cf. Counted, 2015a; Erikson, 1994; Zock, 2015). Authenticity, also known as “selfhood” (Anton, 2001), has been perceived as a moral necessity, especially within authenticity scholarship (Akin & Akin, 2014; Bialystok, 2009). Wood et al. (2008) describe authenticity as a modern or essentialist view of self which sees the experience of selfhood as illusory and reducible to one’s biological foundations. This constructionist view of authenticity allows us to see the reality of self-experiences as merely a fiction, reducible to some underlying environmental and biological determinants that might have easily been otherwise (cf. Anton, 2001; Martin & Sugarman, 2009; Vitz & Felch, 2006). Wood et al.’s (2008) understanding of authenticity takes root in these three inter-related self-constructs: personal experience, symbolised awareness, and outward behaviour (Wood et al., 2008; cf. Barrett-Lennard,

1998). According to Wood et al. (2008), the measure of congruity or consistency between these three self-constructs determines one's self-image² and demonstrates how an individual is authentic to self. This congruity is often achieved through self-fragmentation (Moltmann, 1974, 1976) or splitting (Masterson, 1981, 1988). Fragmentation, according to Moltmann (1974, 1976), is a self-discovery and phenomenological process that introduces a self, destined to realise its original intent with the intention of having some sort of eschatological fulfilment. Self-images, from an authenticity perspective, can then be understood as the fragments of the self as it wrestles with its contextual reality. In these kinds of experience (which I have observed in this study), self splinters in between the *borderline self* (Masterson, 1981), the *promissory or eschatological self* (Moltmann, 1976), the *hyphenated self* (Jeronicic, 2014), and the *religious self* (Muck, 1998). Self does this to survive its social reality, internal conflict, and biological foundation (Counted, 2015a). The subsequent pages will guide us to better understand the phenomenon of selfhood from the perspective of authenticity, and its unhindered operations within the human structure among Christian millennials in Africa. Many of whom are undergoing changes in their identity as a result of their biological foundations (such as abandonment and insecure attachment experiences with early relational partners).

Defining authenticity

The idea of authenticity, otherwise known as one's true self, is a common concept in popular culture (Rosenbloom, 2011). Motivational speakers and scholars alike have often given a functional definition to authenticity as a way of "being" and a reflection of selfhood that captures one's true identity (Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Wood et al., 2008). The constellations of selfhood and authenticity are believed to construct the nature of one's identity, which is "something unique to each of us that we assume is more or less consistent [and hence the same] over time" (Buckingham, 2008, p. 1). However, the idea of authenticity remains a vague concept, which has been used – and perhaps overused – in recent years, in a variety of contexts and purposes. Therefore, there are diverse assumptions about what authenticity really is, and about its relevance to our understanding of selfhood/self-identity/self-images. Since it is moral to be true to one's self, authenticity is considered to be a moral necessity addressing the congruence of feelings and thoughts (Akin & Akin, 2014; Bialystok, 2009), in a way that points to the true reflection of one's self in relation to its encounters with the world. Simply put, authenticity is a phenomenological lens for understanding self-identity– behaviours and experiences.

Authenticity theory is therefore grounded in a modern, essentialist view of the self (Vitz & Felch, 2006), which reflects concepts such as *core self* (Stern, 1985), *true self* (Winnicott, 1965), *real self* (Masterson, 1985, 1988, 2005), *self-actualisation* (Maslow, 1968), *selfhood* (Anton, 2001), *self-determination* (Deci & Ryan, 1985), *self-made man* (Vitz, 2006), *hyphenated self* (Jeronicic, 2014), *unified ego* (Lacan, 2001), *promissory and eschatological self* (Moltmann, 1976), *religious self* (Muck, 1998), and *the renaissance man* (Vitz, 2006). As a working definition for this paper, the concept of "authenticity" is used in this study to understand the unhindered, authentic self-behaviours of Africa's Christian millennials in relation to their self-experiences.

Authenticity and selfhood

There is confusion surrounding the concept of authenticity or selfhood, in modern culture, with the majority of young people either striving to attain authentic self-behaviours or claiming to have it (Rosenbloom, 2011). According to Davis (2010), authenticity is described as, expressing emotions that are consistent with one's physiological state, as well as values, beliefs, and cognitions that represent one's sense of being. Authenticity is a "self-experience that is embodied in the conscious awareness" (Davis, 2010, p. 51). Wood et al. describe this aspect of self-experience as the congruence between one's primary experiences, symbolised awareness, and consciously perceived behaviours (2008, p. 386). Authentic self-behaviours, in other words, involve being true to oneself in accordance with one's values and beliefs.

Aspects of Wood et al.'s (2008) authenticity³ theory show how influences from psychodynamic, existential, and attachment theories can shape people's selfhood. Winnicott (1965), Horney (1951), Masterson (1981), and Counted (2015a) give instances of such environmental and attachment influences to include (but not limited to) abusive parental relationships, depleting narcissism, childhood abandonment, peer pressure, and so on. Authenticity suggests the need for a unitary, coherent, durable, stable, autonomous, and rational conception of the self (Counted, 2015a; Vitz, 2006; Vitz & Felch, 2006). This conceptualisation details a person's embodied nature of self-experiences, which include "actual physiological states, emotions, and schematic beliefs" (Wood et al., 2008, p. 386). In addition to this, I include an individual's preferred religious state (Counted, 2015b).

Wood et al. (2008) emphasise the centrality of organism in psychology as the locus for understanding the operation of authenticity. This idea was borrowed from humanistic theory (Rogers, 1959; Wyatt, 2001), and known as the "psychological locus of all human experience" (Davis, 2010, p. 40). The quality of expressing congruity between actual (external/internal) experiences, symbolised awareness, and behavioural (I hasten to add "religious") expressions corresponds to an authentic self (cf. Counted, 2015a; Davis, 2010; Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Wood et al., 2008). Congruity is a psychological concept used to indicate the degree of consistency between the different constructs and criteria of authenticity. Barrett-Lennard (1998) and Wood et al. (2008) propose three of these criteria: a person's primary experience, their symbolised awareness, and their outward behaviour and communication. In other words, congruence between these self-experiences can drive one towards self-actualisation and becoming a fully functioning individual (Davis, 2010; Wood et al., 2008). Absolute consistency between these concepts does not need to be total, in order for someone to move towards a fully functioning human being. What should be noted, however, is how an individual's experiences, awareness of those experiences, and outward behaviour mirror each other to form the *authentic* self-images of a person.

Against this background, the idea of selfhood or authenticity is not different from the theology of Trinitarian relationality. According to Grenz, Trinitarian relationality has a threefold model: *essential being*, *explicit self-existence*, and *self-knowledge* (2007, p. 27). The first form (essential being) is seen as a "pure, abstract being" and describes the *primary experience* of the Christian God as an essential being. The second (explicit self-existence) inaugurates the grand entrance of an abstract (God-)self into the human existence and *awareness* in the person of "the Son". The third dimension of the Trinitarian

triangle (self-knowledge) is described by Grenz as the (God-)self “passing into self-consciousness” through his *communication* to humanity in the person of the Holy Spirit (2007, p. 28). According to Grenz, this movement of the Trinitarian relationality “marks the completion of reconciliation within reality” (2007, p. 28). Therefore the congruity between these three fundamental God persons or characters of God presents the authentic and absolute quality of the Christian God in the form of *Trinity*.

To achieve congruity between the different criteria of self, there will be fluctuations within the self, which cause it to live out its authenticity and *divine* given purpose in an eschatological future (Grenz, 2007). This is done as a strategy for self coping within the confines of a challenge or crisis. Masterson (1981) calls this fluctuation *self-regulation* or *splitting*, whereas Moltmann (1997) refers to it as *self-fragmentation*. Self-regulation manifests as a consequence of an experience with either a relational partner (cf. Counted, 2015b), or alcohol and drug dependency, traumatic struggles around intimacy and sexuality, or perversions and promiscuity (cf. Masterson, 1981). At the core of each extreme is a misunderstanding of time and future (Dykstra, 1997). This is called the eschatological or *promissory* self-tendency by Moltmann (1976) often manifested as hyphenated labels of the self through means of “splitting”. Splitting is the tendency of self-creation, which thresholds through what Jeronic (2014) and Moltmann (1997) call self-fragmentation. Self-fragmentation is a coming together or activation of both future expectation and present misery to create self. This process of self-regulation is described in Masterson’s (1981) thesis as a hyphenation process whereby intense ambivalent feelings or emotions and thoughts are separated from each other in one’s consciousness. One’s consciousness then forms fragmented particulars of the true self, in relation to the social environment.

Martin and Baresi (2006) did a thorough study on *The rise and fall of soul and self*. In this work they presented readers with cultural factors and events that led to the demise of the unified self, by the end of the twentieth century. They argue that “self” must be understood mostly within the compass of compound concepts such as: “self image, self conception, self discovery, self acceptance, self reference, self modelling, self interest, self consciousness ... and self actualization” (Martin & Baresi, 2006, p. 297). According to Martin and Baresi (2006), towards the threshold of the third millennium, “the unified-self had died the death if not of a thousand qualifications, then of a thousand hyphenations” (pp. 297–298).⁴ Among others, Foucault (1994) concurs to the demise of the “objective and transcendental self” in his *Archaeology of Knowledge*. Foucault stresses that self is “decomposed into a number of disjointed parts”, which are “interplay[s] to ‘manipulate ourselves,’ and to be manipulated, ‘into a million shapes’” (1994, p. 231). Ideologically, Lacan (2001) calls this self-decomposition a “unified ego”, a camouflage he used to conceal the denial that self is indeed “split”. This customisation of self, although decomposed into various mirrored images, is encumbered by its self-creation of reality (cf. Freud, 1913/1950, p. 244). Moreover such self-creation potential, as observed among respondents during interviews, shows “that the mirror functions as a lure” (Jeronic, 2014, p. 245). This signals an understanding of the self in relation to the divine; relational partners such as family, friends, past authorities (e.g., caregivers or parents); the environment; and religious identity (cf. Counted, 2015a; Janssen & Prins, 2000). This self-creation tendency is magnified in a complex way that shapes an entirely new way of relationship (with self) (cf. Dykstra, 1986, p. 170). This new formulation of self-experience is foundational to, and assumed in, every relationship activity the individual engages in. This is

while adopting a self-regulatory coping mechanism to deal with the different perceived conditions of “self”, ultimately in a way that fundamentally amounts to a deceptive figment in absolute “discordance with his own reality” (Lacan, 2001, p. 2).

Self-regulation is therefore a coping mechanism that down-regulates the traumatic and intractable formlessness of the human *ego* (self). It is on this basis that Lacan (2001) rejects any notion of a unified authenticity or selfhood. Lacan does this for the simple reason that “ego [is] constituted in its nucleus by a series of alienating identifications” (Lacan, 2001, p. 97). Lacan’s (2001) understanding of authenticity as a “mirror stage”⁵ makes it reasonable to discuss the respondents’ authenticity and selfhood in hyphenated terms.

Kierkegaard (1987) equally describes this self-creation potential as a false sense of wholeness, unaware to the fact that it is only an imagination of the self (Kierkegaard, 1987, p. 87). Moltmann (1997) describes this *false* sense of self as a contemporary character of selfhood, oblivious to a chilly apathy. Moltmann’s (1997) theological anthropology suggests that human beings suffer from a chronic lack of wholeness. This epidemic falsity of selfhood has fuelled an urgent need for “new religious symbols, cultures, social orders, and changing political forms” (Moltmann, 1976, p. 2) that dislocate the actual self-experience into multiple points of self-investment known as *multiphrenia* (Gergen, 1991, pp. 73–80). As a result of this splintering tendency, self “acts out” and becomes the *norm*, depending on what is required in the moment and the peculiarity of a situation rather than “responding to what self has come to define as her internal standard” (Jeronicic, 2014, p. 247). It is on these grounds that Jeronicic (2014) calls the nature of authenticity (or selfhood) a kaleidoscopic or protean experience. Moltmann, however, believes that this experience is peculiar to the contemporary world since “we live more fragmentarily and experimentally than our fathers and mothers did. We live, as it were, no longer in cathedrals but in tents” (Moltmann, 1978, p. 41). Jeronicic (2014) reasons that this self-dispersant tendency is not easily detectable. Hence, because of the fact that some people incidentally fail to believe on the basis of emotion, intuition, or on indefinite grounds does not mean that they are not knowledgeable as to what is happening to/within them. A sense of fragmentation is not in itself, as Kierkegaard (1987) states, evidence that “the whole concept is but a mirage”. Therefore, it seems dubious to label these self-fragments of wholeness as guises of self-deception.

With this in mind, I concur with Kierkegaard’s (1987) position. This is because he argues that the different self-concepts and images used to describe authentic self-behaviour are not in themselves, a proof that the whole experience is but a mirage. On the basis of this statement, I chose to accept the self-creating experiences of respondents in this study as true. Additionally, Moltmann (1990) acknowledges self-creation as a characterisation of the postmodern self. This is an understanding of authenticity that is conceptually tied to individuation (cf. Jung, 2009), authentic living, justice, and a fracturing community. As a result of this conceptual sense of being, Moltmann (1990, p. 269) reasons that the “depleted narcissism of modern men and women relates everything to their own selves, allowing them to dethaw ... relationships, making each of us the artificer of his or her own life, and exposing us to the pressure of growing competition”. Within this context the self-searching, isolated individual becomes a perversion of what a person truly is. As a result, Meeks (1974, p. 27) has called this “social death” or a situation where the individual is no longer moved by misery, while defining and creating their social realities.

Purpose of study

Based on the above theoretical background, the present study is designed to explore the authenticity and self-experiences of African Christian millennials. This is with special interest in identifying themes that manifest their authentic self-behaviours. Furthermore, my interest is to see how our understanding of authenticity is manifested in the respondents' narratives and represented as the sources of their authentic self-behaviours. I will not be focusing on the socio-cultural and political dynamics leading to the experiences of authenticity or inauthenticity of the youths but will rather highlight the implication of conceptualising an African interpretation of authenticity. I will pay additional attention to how the biological foundations of the youths, as a result of their attachment experience with caregivers and experiences within social environments, influence their authentic self-experiences.

Hence, I have formulated the research question: How do Christian millennials/youths in Africa manifest their authentic self-behaviours and stay true to themselves? This research question will allow us to explore how respondents create their authenticity in a way that represents their personal experiences, symbolised awareness, outward behaviours, and religious stance. We will also see how the "self" manifestation of respondents is more easily activated within the circumference of close "other" relationships and the human environment (cf. Schmid, 2005; Wood et al., 2008). Attention will also be drawn on the implication of conceptualising an African authenticity as a means of interpreting the experiences of the African people.

Methods

Data collection was done through conducting semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with 15 respondents aged between 18 and 35 years who are of black, white, and coloured racial backgrounds. They were required to be active members of different youth groups in various church traditions in Stellenbosch, South Africa. The respondents were purposefully selected on the grounds of an initial quantitative survey⁶ that was carried out with 100 participants. The 15 respondents fall under the category of outliers. The quantitative survey (though not recorded in this study) and interviews were done with the permission from the relevant churches involved. The respondents, during the quantitative survey, were informed that some of them would be called for follow-up interviews. This was in order to fully narrate their self-experiences and "represent the complexity of their world" (Creswell, 2002, p. 194) in relation to their authentic self-behaviours. The themes I set out to explore were narratives of their self-experiences as it is related to their authentic self-behaviours; self-regulations and ways of staying true to self; phenomenological dimensions of authenticity and selfhood; and ways of coping with the self.

I asked the respondents series of open-ended questions related to "self" with the focus on their personal backgrounds, attachment experiences, social environment, and how they saw themselves in general. Other interview questions asked were: "What are the things that influence you as a person and why?" "What adjectives define you as a person and narrate an experience that happened to you in relation to the adjective(s)?" Some of the respondents with dominant religious voices were also asked how their religious experiences had influenced how they felt about themselves. When necessary,

especially where the respondents were unable to produce reliable answers, I probed them using open-ended and follow-up questions. This was to encourage them to elaborate for clearer understanding of their self-experiences and authenticity (cf. Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Esterberg, 2002).

The in-depth interviews allowed for identifying and soliciting knowledge from the 15 key respondents, who were instrumental in assisting me to articulate the phenomenon of authenticity from the perspective of the respondents. The respondents were interviewed between 11 August 2014 and 20 August 2014. For the sake of privacy, 13 of the interviews were held in seminar rooms of the JS Gericke Library at the University of Stellenbosch. While at the request of two other respondents, interviews were conducted at a McDonald's restaurant in Eikestad Mall Stellenbosch, South Africa. All interviews were face-to-face and lasted for about 35–60 minutes. The interview conversations were audio-recorded with a phone app to ensure accurate transcription. I also used handwritten notes during each interview to identify themes and keywords or highlight ideas of particular importance. The interview transcription began after the final interview on 20 August 2014, and was completed on 7 September 2014.

Data analysis followed the first three interviews. This was conducted on the same day to enable me to identify themes and theoretical patterns within the data (cf. Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Stake (1995) encourages qualitative researchers to exploit ordinary ways to make sense of a phenomenon, as he admonishes: "There is no particular moment when data analysis begins. Analysis essentially means taking something apart" (Stake, 1995, p. 71). Therefore, to do the data analysis we would not just try to make sense of the self-experiences of the respondents but equally identify and define observable authentic behavioural patterns that occur from that meaning-making process. For this purpose, I adopted the data analysis and coding procedures recommended by Creswell (2009) and Esterberg (2002). Both of which compelled me to "work intensively with the data, line by line, identifying themes and categories that seem of interest" (Esterberg, 2002, p. 158). This approach towards data analysis has helped me to identify and develop themes from the data. Consequently I also followed Creswell's (2009) six steps to "interactive practice" in data analysis. The steps include (1) exploring and organising the generated data. At this stage, the audio interviews were transcribed into word document transcripts. (2) "Read through the data" (2009, p. 185). Esterberg (2002) calls this to "get to know your data". Here, I reflected on the data to gain an overall understanding of the ideas that the respondents conveyed. (3) Coding the data via segmentation and labelling of text. I began this procedure by organising the data into categories, labelling each category with themes that are connected to the phenomenon of authenticity. (4) Developing themes via combining similar codes together. The themes that emerged were gathered together to form a holistic understanding of themes from respondents. This was with the aim of triangulating the data. (5) Commixing themes by advancing how the description of selected themes is logically represented in the narrative (cf. Creswell, 2009, p. 189; Counted, 2015a).

Before presenting the analysis procedure, it seems appropriate to reflect on my own account as the researcher. My story begins with my Masters of Philosophy research – a study of the youth identity crisis of Christian millennials in South Africa at Stellenbosch University, South Africa. Being a Christian millennial, I was interested in seeing how the experiences of fellow millennials influenced how we see the world around us and constituted some kind of crisis of identity. As a graduate student in Religion and Culture, I was also

trained in the importance of conceptualisation in research; as a result I read broadly across different theories that might explain the phenomenon of identity crisis. I was first introduced to the work of Erikson's (1994) on identity crisis, as well as Bosch's (1991) account of the identity crisis of the early Christian church in his book *Transforming Mission*. While consulting these literatures I also came upon Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory and Wood et al.'s (2008) explanation of the theory of authenticity. These were the conceptual threads that I used to link the different experiences of identity crisis observed during the research process. With my theological background and experience as a clergy member, I was also intent on seeing how religious experience might contribute to an identity crisis. In particular, I am interested in the attachment experience with the divine and how this influenced the authentic self-experiences of young people. Given that I had preached in most of the churches that took part in the study, I had easy access to their youth members. The advantage of this relationship with the churches made it possible for the youth members to open up to me (as one of their own) about their self-experiences during the interview sessions. However, in order to avoid inserting my own bias, as a clergyman or millennial during the research process, I decided to use deductive procedures in the data analysis, and as a result, was only focused on the working themes that were central to my research. A constructivist narrative was applied throughout the deductive procedure, as I began with a theory or a universal view of the situation and work back to the particulars. As opposed to the inductive approach, where researchers move from the fragments to a connected view of a situation or theory, in order to make sense of the meaning of the data and address the primary research question (Creswell, 2009). Although most qualitative researchers adopt an inductive process and deductive approach common to qualitative research, there are, however, no set rules on this. In fact, due to a scarcity of sources and additional risks (like inserting my own biases as a Christian, clergyman, or millennial) associated with engaging in an inductive research procedure, I chose to take a deductive approach. In this regard, Hyde (2000) states that the "adoption of formal deductive procedures can represent an important step towards assuring conviction in qualitative research findings" (p. 82). Hyde (2000) therefore urges researchers to consider introducing deductive procedures in qualitative research, due to their ability to test existing theories and equally match patterns of thoughts and themes emerging from a given case study. Ultimately, by building on my previous knowledge base through applying a deductive procedure, I have been able to avoid many of the risks of false conclusions due to my own bias or subjectivity (cf. Counted, 2016).

Findings: self-regulation and phenomenological dimensions of authenticity

A biological contagion: from an attachment insecurity to authentic self-regulation

Based on the theoretical reflections in previous pages, the findings in this study offer conclusions concerning the self-regulations and authentic self-behaviours of Christian millennials in Africa. My first observation was to see how real-life events and situations (such as separation or loss of a loved one, the attachment betrayal of a parent, experiences of abandonment depression, or the inability to practice affection with a caregiver) had interfered

with the authentic self-experiences of the respondents (see Counted, 2016, in press-a, in press-b).

Bowlby (1969) viewed the attachment system as one of the motivational bases for human behaviour, which provides an explanatory framework for understanding social relationship conflicts in relation to authenticity. Attachment phenomenon explains how social relationships are determined by the nature of internal working models (IWMs) of an attachment system. IWMs are the mental representations of oneself in relation to how we stay true to ourselves and maintain relationship with close “others”. IWMs develop through the effects of a particular set of activating triggers (like our mental states, environmental demands, or emotional needs) during a bonding experience with a relational partner. This sense of attachment resonates within an individual, thus when we are deprived of quality attachment by a relational partner, or experience insecure attachment with a relational partner, we seek out ways to compensate for such relationships elsewhere or decide to explore new relationships with ourselves, as a way of staying true to our authentic self. The negative attachment experiences voiced by respondents have led to the second observation, namely concerning self-regulation. I saw respondents trying to stay true to themselves by self-regulating their difficult attachment experiences. This was achieved through the means of “splitting”, in order to deal with their conflicting self-experiences in relation to their biological foundations. This coping mechanism appears to be the medium through which the respondents survived the severity of abandonment and attachment insecurity they were experiencing, as they express their authentic selves. “Splitting” is seen as playing two major roles: as a coping mechanism and a way of staying true to the self. According to Masterson, an individual who adopts “splitting” as a coping mechanism or a way to stay true to self will:

... go through life relating to people as parts – either positive or negative – rather than whole entities ... he [or she] will never create a single unified self-concept that he [or she] recognizes as himself [or herself] in both good and bad aspects. Instead, he [or she] will continue to see a “good” self that engages in immature, clinging, passive, unassertive behaviour and a “bad” self that wants to grow, assert itself, be active and independent. (1988, p. 79)

To this end, “splitting” is thought to eventually harden the respondents into having “a consistent lack of tolerance for ambivalence, anxiety, and ambiguity” (cf. Dykstra, 1997, p. 31; Pruyser, 1975). This equally makes it difficult to identify the representation of the respondents’ inauthenticity within the context of their self-experiences. This is based on the conceptualisation provided in the literature review, which makes the process of “splitting” a legitimate and authentic self-experience. I therefore cannot reduce the self-regulatory capacity of the respondents to a mere inauthentic experience. I cannot argue against the self-regulatory images of respondents as expressions of inauthenticity. Hence, with this in mind, I have engaged with respondents to see how the “splitting” process is factored within the self-creation potential, as some kind of authentic self-behaviour.

The borderline self-images: a response to an attachment separation and abandonment crisis (biological contagion)

Self-creation through authenticity rhetoric is highlighted through abandonment distress. According to Masterson (1976), the borderline dilemma elucidates this experience as the

self defends itself against traumatic eruptions of abandonment distress using a coping mechanism known as “splitting”. “Splitting” is seen as a primary way of “acting out” behaviourally (Dykstra, 1997). Due to borderline situations the self engages in the process “splitting” as a way of expressing its authenticity. I will now address how respondents relate to their self-experiences and authenticity (i.e., stay true to the self) during abandonment depression and negative attachment experiences. This process revolves around fragmentation of their self-reality into what Jeronic (2014) describes as a kaleidoscopic or protean self.

Dykstra (1997) argues that during the developmental period of childhood prior to puberty, along with the increasing social/peer pressures of separation from caretakers, most children face “a second major separation experience from their parents” (p. 31). This is a period of emotional conflict that has the power to activate a borderline disorder in a child. Borderline disorders arise in a child when they try to build new social defences, which results in some sort of “acting out” or “acting in”. Ironically, this “acting out” or “acting in” can further damage and worsen their feelings of abandonment. In conflict a child or youth is likely to activate an insecure borderline self in order to cope and adjust to challenging situations. Instances like the many cases of belongingness, feelings of attachment and abandonment, as well as environmental separation they might be experiencing constitute these situations (Dykstra, 1997). The concept of the borderline self is an essential feature in every child and youth, often marked by impulsivity and fluctuation of relationships, social effects, and the self-image. This kind of self-experience is also often replayed during early adulthood and happens across a variety of contexts.

Masterson (1988) outlines clinical symptoms of the borderline self as: destructive acting out, an internal conflict externalised through outlets of tension, and feelings of dependency. These feelings manifest as intense fears of abandonment, irritability, anger, devaluation of others, passivity, impulsivity, and fluctuation between positivity and great disappointment. Most individuals having the borderline self syndrome learn to express their needs for help predominantly through *acts*, since “the pattern of family communication involves acts, not words” (Dykstra, 1997, p. 32). Such *acts* when dispensed callously towards others often lead to a series of misbehaviours or “acting out” with the intention of breaking the ice of unawareness and abandonment of close “others”.

After an early separation experience with her mum in Grade 1, June struggled to cope with her borderline self. Her borderline self is reflected in her social relationships, where she indicates instability in her social relationships, especially with close “others”. She notes, “I would describe my relationship ... sometimes close sometimes quite distant – it depends on what circumstances I have”. Part of this feeling of instability is traced to her separation experience with an early caregiver who left her for London when she was about 11 years old. Masterson describes the borderline self as a condition that is an outcome from the “terrible tragedies ... inflicted on many children during their early developmental years which plant *time bombs* that go off later in life” (Masterson, 1981, pp. 186–187). June unconsciously exudes impulsive layers of agitation against her close *others* with clauses like “... it depends on how busy I am ...”, “I keep people distant from me ...”, “I won’t trust people”, or “I have distrust for trusting people”. Without provocation, June erupts in anger over her separation experience: “I feel sort of abandoned, and because of that I don’t want people to get close to me ... I don’t have to rely on somebody else – they can disappoint me in the future or like abandon me again.” June’s borderline

self is “acting out” and “acting in” through outlets of anger, agitation, and the projected fear of future abandonment. Her “acting out” and “acting in” is a symbolic way of breaking the assumed vacuum of unawareness of her close *others* who, apparently, seem not to understand why she acts out in strange or aggressive ways.

Although people close to June are not aware of her “acting out”, she is fully aware of her borderline self. June continues, “I have people close to me but there is like this barrier between me and them [her borderline self], and they won’t notice it but for me I notice it.” June’s candidacy for the *borderline self* is present in her excessive agitation and fear towards her close “others” due to her abandonment experience.

On the other hand, Siphon (an enthusiastic Christian youth) claims to be independent and true to self. However when I probed him further, Siphon’s instability with a relational partner (in the person of God) and experience with self eventually oscillated between two distinct poles: (1) high positive regard and (2) great disappointment for his sacerdotal vocation in the church.

According to Siphon, “I communicate with God almost on daily basis. I get very personal ... I talk to him. [But] sometimes I feel like shouting ... like this cannot work. ‘What kind of God are you?!’” Siphon shows an alternating instability and irritation in his close relationship experience with the divine, by “acting out” in a way that portrays God (his close other) as both too near and too far stemming from a possible fear of abandonment. Siphon’s borderline self manifests its vexation by breaking the supposed vacuum of unawareness of the divine, who appears unaware of his internal conflict.

Yebo offers a different situation; his clear and strong attachment to his mother is a leading factor in his relationship with the divine. He is constantly in intense fear of separation from his mother, of which he admits: “I didn’t want to be without her. I didn’t want to be in a place where she is not. That brought me closer to God and closer to acknowledge him as my Lord and Saviour.” Because of Yebo’s fear of losing his mother; Yebo is “acting out” and “acting in” through emulating his mother’s commitment to religion. One of Yebo’s motivations is to re-live his life with his mother in the afterlife. Although he is not always irritated like June and Siphon, he suffers from an emotional instability and a prolonged dependency in his relationship with close “others”. Masterson (1981) calls this a narcissistic orally fixated character structure. This has appeared in Yebo’s experiences and encounters with other people, as he experiences self-defects that make him tend to crave immediate satisfaction and relief from tension. Yebo shows this by way of associating with people who would boast his ego and self-image.

Yebo admits he does not like people who will “bring him down”, since his perception of ego is not particularly robust. In fact, the very reason he goes to church is to engage with people that will nourish and massage his depleted ego. Indeed, what Yebo does not like about people is:

... this whole point of judging someone. They don’t know why you are where you are, they don’t know how you got to where you are, and they don’t know how you feel about where you are, and now they make all kinds of judgments and assumptions and actions against you – that’s basically what I don’t like.

Yebo “acts out” his frustration by fluctuating back and forth on the borderline of instability.

Wendy is “acting out” passively, because of her separation experience with her husband, which appears as her not trusting anyone. This is a position of the self that signals a borderline disorder. She relates that: “I don’t talk to anybody about myself. The friends I used to have are not my friends anymore because of my separation with my husband. I withdraw myself from people.” Moreover, her separation experience with her husband mirrored her experience with her father. Wendy’s father left when she was 10 years old and played a major role in her acting out. This experience eventually made her adopt poor impulse control, showcased through her low threshold for frustration tolerance, which was displayed when people related with her or treat her inconsiderately. Wendy reasons:

Because a lot of people judge me. They would tell me why did you do this and why did you do that. And then my answer will be: they don’t know what I and my kids went through. Now for me and my husband we’ve separated. For me I was so depressed before ... I went into the hospital a lot. That was with my kids. They faced bullying at school, and my oldest daughter was raped at school.

The case examples cited above suggest some kind of *borderline self syndrome*, which, in Masterson’s (1981) reasoning, exacerbates the feeling of abandonment and often results in unstable patterns of social relationships. Borderline disorders quite often progress to stormy and dramatic attachment tendencies towards close “others”. These tendencies frequently shift to and from great admiration of love in social relationships, to devaluation or intense agitation and resentment towards the same idealised close “others”.

The promissory self-images: a response to self-dystopia and the borderline self

As the immature reality-based *borderline self* becomes strengthened through the “splitting” process (caused by an abandonment or environmental crisis), it creates different destructive masterminds or self-images in its “acting out” (Dykstra, 1997). However, during the grieving and splitting process, self then begins to express certain “signs of health emerging in the decreasingly polarized, increasingly nuanced self” (Dykstra, 1997, p. 33; cf. Masterson, 1981). During this process, the self is attuned to euphoric expressions of spontaneity, joy, hope, vigour, excitement, and spirituality. Moltmann (1976) calls this kind of self-experience the *promissory self* – which is a mastery of one’s sense of being. I see this new self as some sort of *promissory* “stand up” that blocks the immediate conflicting future of the borderline self, which inspires hope in the individual.

Recall, before the *promissory* reprise, is the borderline experience (discussed earlier) at life’s *dark places*. Moltmann (1976) calls it “self-dystopia”. Dystopia simply means a dark, bad, or unfortunate place – a conceptual placelessness of ordinary existence. The respondents’ self-dystopia was caused by their borderline experiences as a result of their negative attachment experiences and anxiety over: future needs/expectations in relation to supporting their family, having acceptable academic results, a good career, maintaining a positive relationship with relational partners, and so on. They lament:

I think money plays a vital role. I am worried that I will get to a stage where I can’t one day provide for my family – I worry about that. I don’t worry about having a big house – I am worried about providing for my family one day. And they influence me and with that they

want me to have an education. I want to be able to get a work one day. I think this kind of affects me. (June)

The expectations people have of me ... not that I have not lived up to the expectations they have of me. A lot of people have believed in me and they told me I will be so successful ... It is more of the expectation everyone has of me – I sort of try to please way too many people. (Jerome)

I'm a middle child and I actually have a lot of gifts God gave me and it was always criticized. And my family ... my parents they love me really much and due to the circumstances they grew up they can't help it but to be critics. (Julie)

I am not sure if I am going to pass this year. That is one of the concerns ... that is based on mistakes that I have made in the past. It is affecting my result. (Yebo)

A common experience among the respondents is their self-dystopia, which focuses on future expectation, which is an effect of the borderline self. Jeronic (2014) argues that such distortion of the self expresses itself from alcohol or drug dependency to a plethora of anxiety over career success, attachment abandonment, and family expectations. Jeronic (2014) further informs us that at the core of each extreme is a misunderstanding of time and future.

After an individual has been reduced to boredom, passivity, eruptions of absurdities, and confusions due to cultural expectations and attachment dilemmas, self-fragmentation/"splitting" in the borderline context receives a negative valorisation. It is here that Moltmann introduces the *promissory self* (what Bosch (1991) calls a "creative tension") an ideological response to any form of self-dystopia or borderline self. This occurs after self had been reduced to a *weak* state of emotional crisis. Jeronic (2014) whilst citing Moltmann (1976) notes that the *promissory self* is the effect of the *creative tension* between what he calls the "pneumatologically-informed and eschatologically-driven account of self-integration that envisions a non-violent re-gathering of fragments", and "fragmentation defined as a negative reflex of late industrial capitalism and fragmentation as a fundamental demarcation of being-in-the-world" (Jeronic, 2014, p. 248). It is on this account that Moltmann calls this *creative tension* a "weak" metaphysics embodying some sort of inclination to be kind, benevolence, penultimate, and peaceful. This is a transformed vision of a transformative self that "does not remain victim to the social, moral, or cause-effect forces which determined its historical situatedness" (Thiselton, 1996, p. 128). The following case examples show the emerging *promissory self*.

Sharon first indicated the emergence of a *promissory self* despite her attachment distress caused by her relational partners (in particular, her mother). In her words, she sees an emerging hope in the midst of her attachment insecurity and emotional conflict with these words:

I feel like God is making a way for me every day. I see God's hand in everything in my life and that's why I am privileged to know today that God is with me every step of the way and I don't have to be afraid of whatever that might come my way. I need to know that my life is in God's hands ...

It is in this context that the *promissory* experiences of the respondents were narrated along the same lines as Moltmann's (1976) eschatological reprise for staying true to self, which is seen as an emerging hope. With the glimpse of an emerging hope, irrespective of their emotional conflict, the respondents forecast transformative visions of themselves.

This new emerging self seems to be overburdened with protean self-positives as seen in the words of the respondents below:

I see myself as a very enthusiastic person. (Yebo)

I see myself as a good man with a gentle spirit, always inspired by the things of God and to do what God really wants of me. So my life is actually on a way to pleasing God. (Andy)

[I see myself as] ... a learner. Honest. Giving and trying to do my best. I love teamwork very much. (Adam)

I am a friendly person. I love animals. I love beautiful sceneries. I love adventure stuff. I love to go places. I love to see new places. I love meeting new people. I am a family person and I think I am a kind person. I try to be friendly. (Cara)

I am a caring person. I love to see people grow up. I love to empower people. (Chris)

I love people. I love spontaneous things. I see myself mostly as a child of the Lord which is the foundation. (Julie)

I love to be positive. (June)

I think I've got a very good sense of the self. (Sipho)

I'm an overachiever. I believe in myself and I always try to be the best I can be. (Maddie)

I see myself as an independent person. Someone who is open-minded and can relate with anyone. (Marvin)

I am just plain and simple. Like to enjoy life. (Neville)

I like to relate to people, communicate with people. I guess I'm a people-person. I am a very motivational person when it comes to encouraging people. I like to communicate. (Sharon)

The respondents disclosed their promissory self-images as a way of dealing with their *borderline* selves. However, this does not in any way suggest a misconception of their true self-representation, since an ideal authenticity experience is often mirrored into the very definition of its fragments (Jeronicic, 2014; Moltmann, 1976). This means that a sense of fragmentation is not in itself, as Kierkegaard (1987) puts it, evidence that the whole concept is but a mirage. From this account, we then choose to assume that the respondents' *promissory* self-representations carry within it self-seeking *positives*. These self-seeking *positives* entail being enthusiastic, honest, a learner, friendly, spontaneous, independent, open-minded, and a team player, as motivating conduits for expressing authenticity at the *promissory* level.

The hyphenated self-images: a response to an emerging hope and the promissory self

Signs of emotional conflict and self-dystopia among the respondents were visible, highlighting the *borderline self*. Signs include legitimate claims and expressions of abandonment, anxiety, loss, uncertainties, and premonitions of insecurity. In contrast, the *promissory self* introduced an emerging hope, a new self-image, which Moltmann (1996) calls the "hyphenated self" or an activation of both *futurum* and *adventus*. *Futurum* suggests a sense of *becoming a self*, whereas *adventus* points to an actualisation of *coming to self*. The *promissory self* seems to have matured to a transforming and

hyphenating self complex, showing evidence of an emerging hope and blocking any *miserable* future. According to Jeronic (2014), the hyphenated self is an aspect of authenticity and self-construction that resonates with the pithy statement “coming to ourselves in hope” (p. 249). In the light of this, Moltmann (1975) reasons that such coming-to-hope of the self has an anticipatory character. I observed the respondents display estrangement from any future experienced as hopeless and childish, instead choosing to focus their lives to a utopian escapist vision of the self. Noticeably respondents neglected careful preparations, necessary planning, or self-control to deal with the historical embeddedness of their attachment and borderline crisis. This led the respondents to a hopeful, yet dramatic oscillation between two extremes: *becoming a self* and *coming to self*. Such oscillation between self-value and self-position propelled some kind of emerging hope in the self-experiences of the respondents. This next phase of being *authentic* substantially thresholds the coming together or activation of both the *futurum* and *adventus* to construct self. Moltmann (1996) distinguishes between *futurum* and *adventus*, in that the *futurum* paradigm emerges out of the past. According to Moltmann (1996), the future is not evident but in the process to overcome the past, hence, the past is not reproduced in relation to the future. In other words, memories of the past are not useful in this process but rather stand as obstacles, as self tends to adapt to a radically future-oriented perspective. On the other hand, *adventus* is an arrival or coming to self in the “transcendental conditions of time” (Moltmann, 1996, p. 22). As expected, the conditions of *adventus* instigate some sort of surprise for the “astonishingly new” self, says Moltmann (1996, p. 22). *Adventus* is therefore “the coming of the future to the present” (Moltmann, 1996, p. 22).

In the light of this conceptualisation, I will then discuss the respondents’ transforming self-constructions, manifested within their conceptual *futurum* (future) and *adventus* (present) using the concept of the *hyphenated self*.

Futurum – becoming self

Leadership. Part of the *becoming self* tendency portrayed by the respondents is seen in their passion for leadership. Some of the respondents strived to overcome their conflicting past through leadership interests. Most respondents either thought they possess some kind of leadership quality or wanted to lead others through teaching, serving, and mobilising others, without necessary preparation, and even though ignorant of what this new responsibility might entail.

Chris, for example, is anxious about his social relationships and struggles with his spirituality. He does not “... agree with how God wants to do some things”. The sovereign personality of the divine, according to Chris, often makes him to want to give up on his relationship with the divine. Instead of choosing as other Christians might, to conceptualise a situation as “what does God want me to learn” he says: “I get stuck on why this thing is happening ...” Chris further admits “I am stubborn in my relationship with God.” Chris also suffers from low self-esteem and as a result he “... can’t allow a person too close in [my life] to see who I really am because, I feel if they get to know me they might not really like me that much”. In order to stabilise his self-experience, Chris then tries to recompense for his lack of self-esteem with a bold futuristic vision of himself as a teacher without considering the consequences. According to Chris:

I always try on the outside to be the example and teach by being a good example of what it is like to follow Jesus. But I know my own failures so I don't want people to know that failure. But I am open to the perspectives of other people ... to learn from them.

Two themes emerge from Chris' narrative: one is the regulation of his low self-esteem with some sort of *futurum* through teaching and serving others; the second is his salient use of religious language. Chris uses this language as some form of springboard for his aspiration to be a leader, which he claims was an exemplification of what it truly means to be like Jesus, his divine relational partner.

Julie is very positive about having leadership qualities, irrespective of her abandonment experience, which partly mediates her borderline self. According to Julie:

I think I have leadership qualities. But I rather lead through example than being someone that leads. I like serving ... I rather serve than organizing. I can organize if I must. If I do something I do it because I want [to] and not because of what people say.

Julie is passionate about serving others, she thinks, and, therefore, believes she is a leader. This conveys a sense of *becoming self*, in which we see Julie regulating the negative experiences of her past by creating a positive self-image. This is while she adopts a more service-oriented kind of leadership in her authenticity frame. We also see religious language playing a role here for Julie, as she inspires herself saying, "There is a scripture that says ... you can do all things ..."

Sharon, on the other hand, started her interview by asserting that she was a leader. She insists, "as a leader, that's the person I am – am everywhere. I am part of so many things now". Although without a deep understanding of what leadership really entails, Sharon believes that being a leader is exemplified in participating in so many things at the same time. This appears to be a part of the "becoming self" experience that leads to her hyphenated self-authenticity.

Positive self-image. Regardless of their negative self-experiences, respondents tended to adopt a positive self-image or *futurum* in response to their past-experiences. June speaks:

I love to be positive. I don't like negative people around me. I feel the emotion strongly when people are negative and down. I want to cheer them up. I hate it if people wake up grumpy ... I hate that ... I love people.

June had an early abandonment experience with her mother who left her for London when she was 11 years old. After the anger and distrust over her separation experience with her mother, June regulated her poor frustration tolerance with a loving and positive self-image.

While being assertive and purposeful, Siphon became more aware of his sense of self. He says, "I think I have got a very good sense of the self." After his aspiration of becoming a Roman Catholic priest was crushed by his superiors at the monastery, Siphon is now more self-assertive and confident than he was in the past.

I don't realise myself in relation to others [anymore]. I just know I am and if you want to fit in my definition of who I am that's fine by me. I am me and if I should live my life I should live it the way I should live it and live it to the full potential of myself.

Siphon shows some elements of *becoming self*, as he embraces a new self-image that reconciles the mistakes of the past and present.

Adventus – coming to self

Independent and open-minded. The respondents were not controlled or motivated by external forces at the *adventus* stage. Arguably, this is also a deliberate attempt to conquer their *borderline self* as they show some kind of prolonged dependency, passivity, or poor frustration tolerance in relation to others and themselves. Irrespective of their past, the respondents note the following:

I see myself as an independent person ... I was in a stage when what people thought of me mattered a lot. I have overcome that because I just realised ... why worry what people think. Then I moved out of that circle and then I realized that people just don't care. (June)

I see myself as an independent person. Someone who is open-minded and can relate with anyone. So long as you are ready to relate with me. If you are not ready I don't care! (Marvin)

Only when you realise who you are as a person you would be able to reach certain [goals]. Dependence that swallows up the uniqueness of a person is bad. So until you realize that ... only then you can truly realize your own personal qualities. (Sipho)

Authentic and true to self. The respondents also disclosed their *coming to self* in terms of being true to self. In the past Sipho had a high dependency profile, but now stays true to himself in relation to his social environment: "I say what I want to say ... I think I've got a very good sense of the self", says Sipho. Marvin, on the other hand, admits, "I like being true to myself. I don't like living a lie. Look at it as the right thing for myself." Neville's *coming to self* is centred on gender. He believes he has to be true to himself because he is a man. He feels, "Because I am a man I believe in myself ... by following my own way." Sharon's love for people, as well as her negative attachment experience, drove her to adopt an authentic living attitude as well. Sharon feels she is a strong woman who is committed to her own values because she notes, "I have the ability to change people's lives." This candid opinion of herself was absent during her attachment separation and borderline experiences. Regardless, she reasons, "I have my values and I commit myself to my values and I stand by my values."

Overall, the respondents exhibited two aspects (i.e., *futurum* and *adventus*) of the hyphenated self, as a response to an emerging *promissory* self. So far, the cited cases make it possible to sympathise with Dykstra (1997) and Jeronic (2014) on the idea of *splitting*, as the activation of *futurum* and *adventus* to construct a hyphenated self.

The social-cognitive dimension of authenticity therefore includes the need for autonomy with the aim of achieving orderliness, self-organisation, and self-integration (Kernis & Goldman, 2006). This was indeed present with respondents. This self-directed trait of self-creation is described by Moltmann as an emblem of the human existence, lived out through our lifetime, where "*being* human means *becoming* human in this process" (1990, p. 269). Therefore, it is on these grounds, Moltmann (1974, p. 2) argues that authenticity suggests a theological anthropology, which serves as a precursor to self-knowledge and self-healing. This process is as we live and make ourselves recognisable to others, although not in absolute terms. This self-experience leads to the next *splitting* stage of authenticity identified during the interview process: the religious self.

The religious self-images: a response to a “weak” self-integration

Moltmann’s *promissory self* continues reinventing itself, showing up as a not-yet-fully realised eccentricity (Kesley, 2009). This is because, according to Moltmann (1974), the human person is never formed into wholeness and is incapable of inward self-realisation. Attaining a perfect state of authenticity is never something we have completely within reach. Humans are therefore prone to incompleteness and an unending self-fragmentation, which Moltmann believes is inescapable, and thus makes authenticity a weak self-integration.

Moltmann (1974) understands “weak self-integration” as the compounding of the decomposed self. In relation to this, Farley (2001) reasons that the teleological nature of this compounding metaphysics provides self with the needed impetus to commence a new transcendent adventure of self-transformation. This eventually breaks down the baggage that holds the self down at its *borderline* or attachment placements. It is on this note that Thiselton (1996) argues that the “weak” integrated self is revived and strengthened by means of a transcendent repute, manifesting as a “transformation from the failed or distorted ‘image’ of humanness into the ‘image’ of Jesus Christ” (p. 128).

In the light of this, I will introduce the next dimension of the Christian youth authenticity experience called the *religious self*: an emerging image of hope, which leads to “true self-liberation” (Moltmann, 1974, p. 266). I view this as the *survived self* – a self that has been through episodes of struggle within its extremes to own its experiences, beyond the normal or physical reach. Muck (1998) calls this the “responding self”, nestled within the “weak” logic of integration.

The respondents’ authenticity, in response to their “weak” self-integration, took on a religious posture. This was as they transformed and regulated themselves to overcome their internal and external conflicts. Before citing case examples, it is important to introduce a brief discussion on the three main features of the religious self-image: *mediating transcendence*, *multidirectional*, *never-ending journeying*, and *chosenness to choose* (Muck, 1998, pp. 114–121). The *mediating transcendence* dimension of the religious self-image shows a transcendent connection of some kind. Muck (1998) argues that Christians in general call this dimension “God”. Illustrating from an economic power model, Muck argues that within society, “we must have a transcendent reference point, a court of final appeal that we do not control or even fully understand” (1998, p. 116) (which is often identified by many as the divine). The second dimension of the religious self-image is the *multidirectional*, *never-ending journeying*. Muck calls this the “dynamic element of personality” (1998, p. 116). He sees *journeys* as an easily symbolised meta-metaphors of a particular state of experience. The last dimension of the religious self is coined from the *Reformed thought*⁷ on the concept of chosenness. Muck (1998) calls this dimension the *chosenness to choose*, which he explains as seeing one’s self as a *divine mandate*. Although undergoing some kind of movement – from Masterson’s *borderline* self, to Moltmann’s *promissory self*, to Jeronic’s *hyphenated self*, and then to Muck’s (1998) *religious self* – in the concept of *chosenness to choose self* goes through radical shifts to choose its life in relation to a covenantal promise (cf. Muck, 1998). Below I have outlined and categorised empirical examples from the respondents who support Muck’s (1998) religious self-image (see Table 1 for the listing).

Table 1. The religious self-images of the respondents.

Mediating transcendence	Multidirectional, never-ending journeying	Chosenness to choose
I am pleased with myself because God is pleased with me	He provides. He is a father. Sometimes when I miss my own father ... I see the love of God keeping me and providing for me and protecting me and not let anything harm me	Because I am the man and the priest of the house ... it makes me to want to lead and live a life that is pleasing to God and take leadership roles
I try to see myself in the light that God sees me ... There is a scripture that says ... you can do all things but even with all this, if I don't have love, I am nothing	I know it is not by might nor by power but by the spirit	He loves me no matter what
... I cried every time and God managed to come through for us until we received our own house. When I met Christ that time he healed me of that hurt I had in my heart over the years ... I want to be more like Jesus	I will say God is a true friend. By true friend I mean someone Who is there the time that you need them most	God created you who you are and why should you hide it. And God uses imperfect people for His kingdom ... He doesn't use perfect people
I know God will somehow carry me through ... In that emptiness that I felt I always say "God I know you are gonna fill this". I spoke my heart out to God and I told God that he must help me through this because I can't handle it by myself ... and then God helped me through everything that's why I say he is caring and lovable ... I feel like God is making a way for me every day. I see God's hand in everything in my life and that's why I am privileged to know today that God is with me every step of the way and I don't have to be afraid of whatever that might come my way. I need to know that my life is in God's hands ...	He is like my pillar of strength	God loves the women more because if you watch in church you will see
I am very close to God. I communicate with God almost on daily basis	There was a lot of attack of the enemy in my life	I feel good in my relationship with God generally because of his grace for me
I started to live with it because I know God will somehow carry me through	God rewards, and he is very rewarding and loving. He has actually acted as a rewarder for me God is a father to me, the father of love and he has showed me in many ways that he is alive God is love and love as pure as gold can never be anything but love God is authentic	I feel loved by God because I am his bride

For the sake of clarity, the concept of the *religious self-image*, according to Dykstra (1986), is an indication of religious faith (or a certain level of connectedness with God). Dykstra explains this as: "Religious [self] as a way of life is borne, necessarily, by language and each distinct way of life necessarily has a language of its own." I have noted how the *religious self-image* (see Table 1) of the respondents is used as a spiritual pathway to the transcendent and a way of down-regulating the crisis associated to self. But also, the *religious self-image* (see Table 1) was seen as a self-regulating agency and a coping mechanism through which the respondents dealt with their "weak" self-integration.

Discussion: an African conceptualisation of authenticity?

From my findings, emerging authenticity and self-image themes of African Christian millennials were: the borderline self (Masterson, 1981), the *promissory* or eschatological self (Moltmann, 1976), the hyphenated self (Jeroncic, 2014), and the religious self (Muck, 1998). These dimensions of authenticity and self-images express the different constructions of self-regulation observed among respondents. This was in relation to their primary experience, symbolised awareness, outward behaviours, and communication within the context of their environment and self-experiences (cf. Barrett-Lennard, 1998; Wood et al., 2008).

Most importantly, the origin of these experiences were linked to their biological foundations (in particular, abandonment and attachment issues), environmental pressures, and in some cases tied to their religious experience. The respondents adopted these different forms of authenticity and self-construction as a way of surviving internal conflict within the self and its surrounding social environment (Counted, 2015a).

I observed the salient role of self-regulation in the process of authenticity among the respondents. Self-regulation was actualised through *splitting* and seen playing two major roles: as a way of dealing with self-related crises and experiences (Jeroncic, 2008; Masterson, 1981, 1988; Moltmann, 1974, 1976), and as a self-created tool in the human system (ultimately for staying true to self in relation to a particular context and state of being). It is on these grounds that I propose a new construction of authenticity that recognises the self-regulatory consistency between a person's borderline self, the promissory self, the hyphenated self, and the religious self. The borderline self-image emerges from struggles within one's environment and one's biographical or biological situation such as family background, attachment abuse, and social context. The *promissory* self-image is seen as the self overcoming the internal crisis associated with its biographical backdrop, as we see the self emerging as hope to overcome its conflict. While on the other hand, the hyphenated self-image is a continuous journey of hope following the *promissory* self-image. This is where authenticity is realised by asserting our *promissory* desires and aspirations, and hence, making the individuals involved to assume positive and inspiring roles they may not be qualified for. The religious self-image was seen as self surviving its *weak* self-integration using religious languages, metaphors, and symbols that exert the power to reassure hope and value within the self, regardless of the conflicting circumstances.

This study supports that being true to self is strongly associated with several indicators of attachment, self-regulation, religious experience, and well-being. Authenticity experts had earlier reported similar findings. Kernis and Goldman (2006), for example, reported authenticity associated with greater life satisfaction and self-esteem. Wood et al.'s (2008) authenticity support increased subjective well-being and decreased stress. Davis (2010) saw an attachment experience as a predictor of authenticity. Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne, and Ilardi (1997) saw authenticity associated with extraversion, agreeableness, openness, and conscientiousness, while Menard and Brunet (2011) reported a positive relation to well-being at work. While the study conducted by Lakey, Kernis, Heppner, and Lance (2008) suggests authenticity to positively relate to higher mindfulness and lesser verbal defensiveness. From a humanities perspective, Swinburne (1979), Alston (1991), Levine (1984), and Plantinga (1981) have equally proposed variations of self-

authenticity on account of religious experience. Hence, this collection of studies support that being true to one's self inspires a motivation to have a healthy, regulated, religious, secure relationship with our realities. I think the experience of authenticity is not restricted to any particular constellation of experience across cultures or religions. Authenticity is not one dimensional in nature, since the different fragments of our being are interconnected to make up the whole of our essence. This is equally characteristic of the African Ubuntu philosophy (Nabudere, 2005), where multiculturalism or cultural pluralism is seen as a model of cultural authenticity. African Ubuntu philosophy expresses a sense of connection with one another within a community – a bond that makes us one and inseparable. Ubuntu is the quality of being human in the African worldview, and can be conceptualised as a form of African authenticity due to its kaleidoscopic nature. The idea of Ubuntu is at the foundation of the African philosophy of life, and the belief systems in which the daily experiences of people within an African community are reflected. The integrative nature of the Ubuntu philosophy makes it impossible to provide a straightforward, one-dimensional explanation of the African identity in which its uniqueness can only be seen when explained from the lens of authenticity. African identity can also be described as the constellation of various forms of African self-concepts and images that make the African people one, unique, and whole. The dynamism and vibrancy of the philosophy of Ubuntu, in relation to African culture, makes it a strong case for African authenticity regardless of whatever linguistic lens it may have been explained through. Against this background, we might give a new definition to the Ubuntu philosophy as the different constellation of experiences that make up the African identity and authenticity.

The conceptualisation of African youth authenticity as a constellation of different forms of self-experiences is significant for explaining African identity and authenticity. Looking at the situation of Africa since the time of independence, my contention is that the discourse on African youth authenticity and their representations of their authentic self attributes does have huge implication for the African society. This is in the light of thinking how we can leverage on the role of the African youth authenticity for positive change within the African community. This positive change is grounded in our ability to see the beauty of diversity and pluralism, which unify our common identity as a people. With the lingering effects of colonialism, which have ravaged the breadth of Africa, the expected "fight-back" posture of authenticity evidences the self-affirming and counter-ideological positions of the African people.

Much like the youths in this study who had their identities traumatised as a result of the errors of authorities and attachment figures, so too the African people has been impacted upon by the forces of slavery and colonialism. As a coping response to the lingering effects of our traumatic past, the African people are brewing new authentic self-constructs as they present the case of African authenticity. African authenticity is an ongoing cultural, political, post-colonial, socio-economic process of self-regulation and self-definition. In seeking self-affirmation, as part of the vital project of African authenticity, the African people keep evolving into different "self-tendencies". At some point the "self-tendencies" have a sense of communal living, at another functioning as a community of resistance, and as a neo-colonial state. This is as the African people battle their past and present challenges by creating a *promissory* future that is an integration of a crisis, hope, character, and deep spiritual root. African youth authenticity is therefore not different from African authenticity. They both express a constellation of self and state experiences that define the nature of our existence

as a marginalised and traumatised people, hanging onto the margins of an emerging hope to build a future in the present through our self-creation and self-determination potential.

Paulin Manwelo has succinctly explained the challenge of achieving an African authenticity in her paper *The politics of identity in Africa*:

If we consider a few cases such as Ghana with Kwame Nkrumah (who was a strong voice of the exceptionalist school), the case of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (the former Zaïre) with Mobutu (a strong advocate of the humanist school with his philosophy of authenticity), or the case of Malawi with Kamuzu Banda and Zambia with Kenneth Kaunda (both strong proponents of the humanist school), it becomes obvious that the politics or the challenge of building up a sound, dynamic and prosperous African identity [and authenticity] has failed mainly because of their inadequate and one-dimensional approach. (Manwelo, 2011, p. 105)

After many decades of living in a neo-colonial Africa, many African states are still struggling to find a sound model for describing the African identity and authenticity. According to Manwelo (2011), the models of exceptionalism, assimilationism, marginalism, and humanism do not define African authenticity. Manwelo (2011) reasons that this is why ethnic conflicts, tribalism, nationalism, racism, and all forms of exclusion are rampant in African societies. This is because people are confined to a specific familiar context, without the chance of seeing the African identity and authenticity as an ongoing process throughout time.

The construction of a unified self-concept for describing African authenticity is one of the vicious viruses destroying the African continent. Therefore, African authenticity should be seen from a kaleidoscopic lens and as that which is always evolving. An African conceptualisation of authenticity should not be confined within a particular familiar context of experience or to a mere political or colonial interpretation. The African identity is authentic in nature because of its new forms of expressions and images of self-actualisation in the contemporary life.

Limitations and further directions

There were few limitations to the study. Firstly, due to the nature of qualitative research, the data obtained during the interview sessions may be subject to different interpretations by different readers. There is also the high chance that I may inject my own bias into the analysis of the findings. For example, some critics may be concerned about my inability to demarcate the different trait and state-based authenticity specifications, while analysing the self-representations of the respondents. While this is a valid concern, the purpose of this study is not to expand on the different specifications of authenticity, but to demonstrate how Christian millennials in Africa experience the phenomenon of authenticity. Perhaps another study that pays close attention to this important detail would be fruitful.

Most importantly, taking a quantitative approach to examining the predictive power of authenticity in relation to attachment, gender, religious, and social backgrounds would have added a valuable stock of data as well. As a result, a serial quantitative researcher might be uncomfortable with the results of this study because of the sample ($n = 15$) size. This could be considered too small for quantitative research, but satisfactory for qualitative inquiries. However, I note here that a larger sample size, with a wider range of characteristics for future qualitative study, would increase the possibility of generalising results to other populations of Christian millennials. That said, a very important study

investment as a follow-up would be to explore other populations of Christian millennials to see how they stay true to themselves. Secondly, it would be ideal to explore how the different faith and African cultural groups are sensitive to the authenticity signals of their millennials. Thirdly, future research endeavours that explore the different ways gender and religious backgrounds play a role in the authenticity constructions of young people in general would be a formidable endeavour. And lastly, exploring how a case for authenticity could inspire positive change among young people across the African continent would also be a noble endeavour.

Conclusion

Authenticity is a term used to describe the common experiences associated with the self in relation to its feelings and thoughts, and/or behaviours. Authenticity is achieved by the degree of congruity between one's primary experience, symbolised awareness, and outward behaviours. To achieve this congruity, there is some kind of fluctuation within the self to bring to bear and live out one's true self. The self begins to cope within the confines of its placements by means of self-regulation – which is often described as “splitting” or “self-fragmentation”. The study's findings demonstrate that the respondents were experiencing their authenticity and staying true to self in a kaleidoscopic way, creating new images of the self at almost every stage of their self-experience. The images were representative of some kind of *borderline self*, *promissory self*, *hyphenated self*, and *religious self*. Furthermore, these findings suggest that authenticity is strongly linked to biological experiences that influence our life's trajectory such as our attachment and abandonment experiences, and in the pursuit of our spiritual and mental well-being.

This knowledge base has allowed me to construct a conceptualisation of African authenticity as the constellation of various deep-seated experiences of the African people, which is always evolving within different contexts and meanings in the contemporary life.

Notes

1. I took the risk of using the Americanised term “millennial” to refer to young Africans within the millennial age gap. Although arguably, Africa's younger generation may not have the same identity parallels as their American counterparts, which of course requires further investment in research. Hence, when I refer to African Christian millennials/youths in this article, I only refer to Africans who are between the millennial age bracket (born between 1982 and 2001) and are active members in Christian faith communities in South Africa (cf. Counted, 2015a; Howe & Strauss, 1991, 1997). For clarity, “millennials” are the demographic cohort following Generation X at the *Fourth Turning*, known for their technological exceptionalism and high a disregard for recognised (religious) institutions (cf. Howe & Strauss, 1997). I therefore propose that South Africa's teens and 20-somethings are the “millennials” of South Africa in the context of this study.
2. “Self-image” is often a term used to describe the different representations of selfhood. Some use the term as a synonym for selfhood or authenticity. Since there is no uniformity on the use of the term among scholars, I will use this term with regard to the two following reasons: firstly, as a synonym for selfhood or authenticity, and, secondly, as a word describing a particular representation(s) of selfhood.

3. There are other notable definitions of authenticity aside from Wood et al. (2008) proposition. For example, Kernis and Goldman (2006) saw authenticity as a combination of philosophies of Aristotle, Hume, Descartes, Sartre, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. Their “authenticity” proposition is primarily grounded in the “modern view of the self” theory (Vitz & Felch, 2006). This concept of selfhood emphasises Aristotle’s “eudaimonia” and the pursuit of well-being and character virtues. Jack and Dill (1992) also gave a definition of authenticity, where authenticity varies by our relationship domain. This is contrary to Kernis and Goldman (2006) and Wood et al.’s (2008) authenticity propositions, which operate at a global dispositional level. Jack and Dill’s (1992) authenticity proposition is a popular framework for understanding selfhood in romantic relationships and looks at themes such as: externalised self-perception, caring as self-sacrifice, silencing the self, and a divided self. Lopez and Rice (2006), on the other hand, examine authenticity within the relationship-specific aspects of interpersonal relationships and called it “relationship identity”. Their proposition is grounded in the relational-psychoanalytic theory of Mitchell (1992) and the social constructivist theory (Gergen, 1991). Harter (2002) also understands authenticity, as the ability to be in control of one’s personal experiences in relation to one’s thoughts, emotions, needs, wants preferences, or beliefs. However, Harter’s (2002) authenticity model depends on Kernis and Goldman’s (2006) and Wood et al.’s (2008) foundational theories of authenticity.
4. Jeronic, paraphrasing a sentence from the iconic movie *Matrix*, describes the present-day understanding of self-authenticity as a “desert of the real [self]” (2014, p. 244).
5. *Mirror stage* is a recognition of oneself like in a literal mirror or other symbolic contraption which induces apperception and evaluation of oneself.
6. The 15 respondents who participated in this study were first assessed using Wood et al.’s (2008) 12-item Authenticity Scale (measuring *authentic living*, *self-alienation*, and *accepting external influences*) in an earlier survey ($n = 100$). The 15 selected respondents had higher scores in the “Authentic living” subscale. The authentic living subscale contains four items that examine the extent to which behaviours are consciously consistent with one’s internal experience. Higher scores in the “authentic living” subscale show better chances of authentic behaviour and seen as an indication of authenticity. However, the quantitative study is not reported herein. Respondents who participated in this study were rather selected for follow-up interviews in order to understand how their self-experiences are manifested in relation to their authenticity and selfhood.
7. By “Reformed thought” I mean reformed theology.

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