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Abstract

Acting, in essence, is an exploration of character. But in what ways are the actors themselves affected by the roles they play and fictitious situations they have to insert themselves into? There are influences on the actor's brains, and the possibility of their bodies being impacted as well. It can be beneficial in some cases, and incredibly damaging in others. Adoption of their character's personality into their body can have long-term, potentially taxing effects on the actor's psyche as well, and examples thereof show that it is imperative for actors to find balance between fact and fiction.

For the Craft: Acting and Its Influences on Actors' Minds and Bodies

If one pays attention to the movie acting community, they will know the alleged story of Heath Ledger and his portrayal of the Joker in *The Dark Knight* - how the role drove him mad and caused him to end his own life. While there could be a correlation between Ledger's untimely death and the extremely taxing role, there are many more factors to keep in mind when speaking of this instance. What else was going on in his life at the time? What personal issues was he having, and what ways did he find to cope with them? There is always more to a story than meets the eye, or even that is talked about in rumors or media.

When I first began this dive into "psychology meets acting", I was mainly focused on the possibility of actors absorbing their characters' personality traits into their own vernacular. However, the deeper I went into my research, the more I discovered that there are many different theories as to why this phenomenon may occur. Starting from such places as personality development and stretching to how method acting - living in character - can have negative effects on actors' bodies and minds. However many changes my research and thesis went through is unimportant now, as my collective findings mean more as a unit than they could have individually. I will be delving deeper into the idea of the probability that actors absorb personality traits and habits from the characters they portray, and how different methods of acting can affect an actor's body and mind.

Personality as a Science

Social Cognitive Theory

There are many theories as to how human personality develops. Each of the theories I looked into - Psychoanalytic Theory, Humanistic Theory, Trait Theory, and Social Cognitive Theory - have their merits in research and in life. The one that I will be focusing on, and the one

that applied the most to my theory in my research, is referred to as Social Cognitive Theory. This theory revolves around the idea that one's personality is built from social interactions. This theory states that, while every person has an inherent personality that is unique to them and cannot be changed, the majority of a person's traits are adopted from observation of other people and their behaviors. This is how people learn certain traits that are praised or ridiculed by others, and how they should act in certain situations. (*The Science of Personality Development,* n.d.)

Now, to apply this to acting, we have to almost treat the roles an actor would play as another entity altogether. However, instead of observing the character's traits and interactions from a third person perspective, the actor instead adopts those traits into their own body, making it a much more personal experience for them. By living the character's life for even a few hours a night, or repeatedly practicing how they would respond to their surroundings, this can influence how the actor themselves would respond in similar situations. And, after learning how to literally perform these actions for the sake of the audience watching them, the actor's mind and body may unconsciously remember these things in their life. This relates to how, even from childhood, people are constantly observing and learning how to maneuver social situations. In Lapsley's article, *The Plot Thickens: Personality and Its Development*, he even compares the way children learn to behave in public to a stage with a crowd. Lapsley states, "the developing child comes to learn the rudiments of acting and calibrates performance to the requirements of the audience." (40)

Actors' Personalities and Brains, and Different Experiences

There is no one personality that a person must have to become an actor. No matter a person's background or upbringing, they can perform for an audience. An actor doesn't have to be a "people person", they don't have to be extroverted, and they don't have to be neurotypical.

With the rising popularity of personality tests such as the Myers Briggs personality quiz (MBTI), it is a common practice to try to slot personalities with certain careers. However, the truth is that anyone with any personality can pursue and succeed in any career.

The experience, much like the actor themself, is unique to every individual and circumstance. An actor can play a murderer in one movie, and in their next role they're portraying a kindergarten teacher. There are different things that happen in an actor's brain when they are portraying different personalities, and even between their own personalities and their character's.

Brain Activity

Not everyone is able to suspend their disbelief to the point where they are able to be good actors. It takes practice - sometimes years' worth - to believably play a role. An audience member would most likely believe that actors have to focus incredibly well while performing, always perfectly conscious of every action, reaction, and word. However, there are theories relating acting to dissociation. Panero, Michaels, and Winner's study shows an increase in dissociative characteristics in acting students compared to any other conservatory students (Panero, Michaels, & Winner, 2019).Over their six-month testing period, while there didn't seem to be any significant rise in dissociative tendencies in any one group, the group of acting students' subscale measurements began and remained higher than the others.

A study conducted by psychology professors from McMaster University (Brown, Cockett, & Yuan, 2019) recruited participants with theater and acting majors. They were given roles from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and were asked to answer questions in character and as themselves. They were also asked to answer these same questions as people whom they knew and were close to in age, and again as themselves, but using an accent. While answering these

questions, the actors would be put through an fMRI scanner to see what brain connections were activated while thinking of answers for these questions. None of the scans were done back-to-back, so that the actors could truly be in character or not. The scan revealed that answering as a friend or themselves with an accent triggered less of a response from the section of the brain associated with self-awareness than answering normally for themself. When asked in character, this portion of the brain was even more inactive comparatively. In addition, when asked to answer questions as a friend, they would answer in third person, while when they were in character they answered everything in first person - seemingly lost in their characters. The actors had an easier time answering questions while pretending to be someone else than they did answering as themselves, possibly due to the fact that real people think of nuances that fictional characters would never experience. (Katz, 2019) It's easier to be a character with listed traits than it is to be a whole person.

In a different study, fans of the show *Game of Thrones* were shown pictures of different characters from the show - heroes, villains, side characters, etc. Participants were asked to rate how familiar they were with the characters, and compare themselves to the characters or their friends. For those who were very familiar with certain characters, they would almost consider them as friends. In fact, when thinking of themselves and their friends versus themselves and the characters, there was more activity in the medial prefrontal cortex (mPFC) area of the brain when comparing anyone to the characters. It shows that these characters, though fictional, lend themselves to in-depth analysis and new ideas, rather than the familiarity of people you know in real life. Fiction is exciting and new, and filling in blanks that the media doesn't fill is always a fan's - or even an actor's - favorite part of character study. (Broom, Chavez, & Wagner, 2021)

Method Acting

There are different ways actors can go about developing characters. One such way is through method acting, where the actor goes about their life in character, even when offstage or off-camera. Method acting is often considered as immersing oneself into a character as to "become" them. Sometimes directors will unknowingly throw their actors into method situations, such as Elia Kazan in *Sweet Bird of Youth*. "Kazan instructed the cast to snub Newman socially throughout the role of Chance Wayne… Because of the cast's actions, Newman… did feel alienated…" (Brown, 2019, p. 9) Some actors and directors work together to form a personal connection between the actor and the set they're performing in, such as the case of *Room*; I will be exploring this case more in the character studies.

Method acting can be extremely effective in developing natural, in-character responses. However, if there is not a proper separation of reality and fiction, it becomes difficult for the actor to "de-role", or come out of character. This can be dangerous for the actor's psyche, depending on how emotionally taxing the role is. I will expand more on the possible risks in method acting in the character studies, as well as the section focusing on psychotic characters.

Molding a Personality

As proposed by David Orzechowicz, actors may be at an advantage when it comes to managing emotions. Actors are in the practice of their bodies experiencing a higher number of emotions than any regular person would, and have to build character's personalities from the bare-bones descriptions they get from their scripts. Orzechowicz' theory is that actors are "privileged" in their emotional management because of this constant flow of emotions through their bodies that don't really belong to them (2008, p. 143). If this is truly the case, then the actor's process of developing characters can be aided by practice and repetition, which is

reflective of experienced actors being some of the best and most recognized character actors in the business.

From Script to Stage

Stanislavski is considered by most to be the father of modern acting and character creation in theater. His work on his acting style, simply referred to as *The Method*, revolved around actors "living in truth", or portraying characters as real individuals and drawing inspiration from their own experiences and lives (Brown, p. 14). If portraying a tragic role, actors will pull memories of tragic events in their lives and use that feeling to bring the character to life. The same is to be said of overly optimistic characters. An actor can focus on happy memories and use them for the role's inspiration.

However, if an actor has never experienced a certain occurrence or emotion, the only thing to be done is intensive research. For my character study of Brie Larson's role in *Room*, her character was a sexual assault victum. Larson had never gone through something of this caliber, so she spent months conditioning herself to experience that find of fear from a trauma she herself had never gone through (Radish, 2015). Larson's character also had a wrist that never healed properly from a previous injury, so she held her wrist in a way that would be unusable in some circumstances as physical conditioning. Other examples of physical characterization conditioning include corseting during rehearsals so that the character seems stiff and unmoving, wearing shoes with different heels to force a limp, or over-exaggerating arm movements and expressions in high-intensity moments.

There is potential for danger in certain interpretations of Stanislavski's work. As stated earlier, Stanislavki's Method used the actor's own experiences to enrich a character. Lee Strasberg, though he based his own acting teachings on those of Stanislavski, placed more

emphasis on the idea that actors cannot simply use any memory that they may have, because older memories will not have the same emotional potency. The largest portion of his own Method, Affective Memory, was originally supposed to be used as a meditation tool to aid actors in their search for emotional connection (McFarren 2003, 133). However, instead of focusing on the content of the memory and how it affected the actor, Strasberg simply looked for the memory that invoked the most dramatic emotion, no matter what it made the actor feel. In his mind, he believed that this amount of emotion could be translated into anything, rather than drawing on specific memories to portray certain emotions. He thought a memory could get "stale" if used over and over again for the same emotion. Needless to say, many of Strasberg's students suffered mentally from these exercises (2003, p. 152, 153).

Psychotic Characters

A person would think that portraying a psychotic character onstage or in film only has the possibility of being extremely taxing on the actor. However, it stands to reason that some actors find playing these outlandish characters as extremely therapeutic and cathartic. Sigmund Freud states, "Certainly the release of the subject's own affect must here be given first place, and the enjoyment resulting therefrom corresponds on the one hand to the relief produced by their free discharge…" (1960, p. 144) In simpler terms, psychotic characters bring a sort of unapologetic approach to emotion that humans cannot always indulge in for the sake of themselves or the people around them. These roles are purposefully played up because they are meant to be mentally unhinged. And while, yes, there is a sense of emotional exhaustion that comes from portraying this type of role, an emotional release of that caliber cannot be realized in everyday life - not without concern, at least. Problematic emotions (McFarren, 2015, p.169), such as grief, rage, anxiety, elation, or hatred, can be discharged by physical means such as crying, shaking, or

even punching a pillow. This concept is translated into theater, where the actor's body gets to experience the emotions in a controlled space and receives no judgment for it.

Drama Therapy

Before the beginning of my research, I was unaware of the existence of drama therapy. Luckily for me, my academic mentor, Dr. Cheryl McFarren, has done an extensive amount of work researching drama, its relationship with trauma, and drama therapy in the past and thought it fitting to share two of her previous works with me for this research. In one of her works, she describes her own experience with using a role to help her grieve the death of her father (2015, p. 157). The role was that of a widow, mourning the death of her husband. Of course, the character and McFarren's situations were inherently different, but the experiences need not be identical for Stanislavski's Method to be put to use. Pulling from her own pain, the tears in rehearsals were her own, used for the sake of the character (p. 161). However, in this paper she also stresses the importance of distancing oneself from the character enough to pull out of the overwhelming emotion so you are not swallowed by it.

Drama therapy also has the potential to help individuals heal from past trauma or overcome anxieties or emotional stunting. Emunah's book on the topic explains and details the steps necessary for growth in people seeking active help from this process. People are allowed - encouraged, in fact - to explore possible facets of themselves that they otherwise would have never found. Simple dramatic play, just following a script, can help clients to feel certain responses to problems in their own bodies and see reactions that a character can have to situations that may be familiar to their own (1994, p. 35). Adding such ideas as improvisation to the clients while they remain in character gives them the chance to develop responses to stimuli

that they can then use for themselves. Playing roles different from oneself (p. 37) can help empower a person's sense of empathy, as well.

Character Studies

There are multiple incredible examples of actors being very adept in this separation of fact and fiction. However, the stories we usually hear of actors following Method - no matter the definition and teachings of the *Method* used - are those of actors treating staff poorly in the name of art or going insane due to the demanding role. In my studies, I have chosen two examples: Brie Larson and her performance in *Room* and Heath Ledger and his performance in *The Dark Knight*.

When Brie Larson was approached with the offer to play Ma in the movie adaptation of *Room*, she immediately accepted. Having read the book the year prior, she was excited to see this extremely nuanced and deep plot told through the eyes of a child translated to visual media (Radish, 2015). Larson and her co-star, Jacob Tremblay both were instrumental in the set and costume design, knowing their characters better than the crew did. The set, referred to simply as Room, housed their characters for five straight years with no escape. There were drawings done by Larson and her co-star, old photos of them both, fading where sunlight would hit the wall, and other such examples of wear in Room. They reused old clothes as rags, and Larson sewed a pair of stretched-out jeans with a needle and dental floss (Rotten Tomatoes).

Larson fully enjoyed her time during the production of *Room*, despite the dark undertones of the plot and her character. She spent months during pre-production on the dark, pained history her character needed to exist how she did in the film. The previously-noted wrist injury and phantom pain she felt were developed in this months-long character building process. She spent the time isolated, meditating on the character. As they moved to set, she noted her separation of

herself and Ma as a physical cue: if she was inside Room, she was Ma. If she was outside, she was Brie (Radish). With the preparation she had, when it came time to be on set, she was able to exist as Ma, as a trapped sexual assault victim, but also as a mother enjoying time with her son, who she says made the entire production much brighter and easier to stomach (Kinowetter).

Many people are familiar with this story: Heath Ledger spent all of his time in character as the Joker, and the role eventually drove him mad and led to his death. However, if you were to ask the two directors he worked with for his final projects, they both would tell you he was the most stable person they'd ever met (The US Sun). Christopher Nolan, in the behind-the-scenes clips on *The Dark Knight* DVD, spoke on how Ledger approached him about wanting to be part of the project, and they discussed what they potentially saw for the Joker's portrayal. They saw everything eye-to-eye - the inspirations from *The Clockwork Orange* novel and film, the mad genius side of Joker that rarely is seen in the source comics from DC, a sense of spontaneity that the actor that played this character would have to embrace wholeheartedly. So many of Ledger's lines that he improvised on set made their way into the film. The iconic scene where Joker blows up a hospital was supposed to be at a specific time, but Ledger blew the fuse early to get a real reaction from the other actors. He kept a journal in character - that convinced the crew that he truly had gone mad - and helped the costume department develop his costume from the ground up. He put on his own makeup for the role as well. (Cinema Cinema)

If Ledger was enjoying his role of the Joker so much, what caused his death? The autopsy report stated he overdosed on six different types of prescription drugs. Theories about the correlation between Ledger's death and the end of filming for *The Dark Knight* began surfacing immediately. Although, it is much more likely that his insomnia led to the accidental overdose, as he tried to self-medicate. The role of the Joker was a fun experience for Ledger, and everyone

in his life saw this. However, in the apartment Ledger was found in at the time of his death, there were comic books, drawings, and recordings all relating to his role of the Joker; thus began the theories. His on-set journal he kept during production on *The Dark Knight* ended with an ominous "bye bye". All of this added to the fire that was the theory that Joker had killed Ledger. (The US Sun)

Conclusion

All of this is to say, I believe that it is imperative that an actor adopt personality traits of their characters into their body. The side effect of that character's traits remaining with the actor after the role is over is entirely dependent on if the actor was successful in separating what they wanted from the character from what needed to remain in their fictional world. As for adopting traits permanently, it is entirely possible; drama therapy is a prime example of purposefully pursuing methods of coping with a person's struggles. Absorbing traits of characters that a person views stronger or more beneficial than their own can be part of that process. But one must be careful, because there is a delicate balance between enjoying your role and letting the role take over your mind.

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