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Blurred Lines Between Role and Reality: A Phenomenological Study of Acting

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**BLURRED LINES BETWEEN ROLE AND REALITY: A
PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF ACTING**

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This dissertation, by Gregory Hippolyte Brown, has been approved by the committee members signed below who recommend that it be accepted by the faculty of Antioch University Santa Barbara in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PSYCHOLOGY

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Abstract

When an actor plays a character in a film, they try to connect with the emotions and behavioral patterns of the scripted character. There is an absence of literature regarding how a role influences an actor's life before, during, and after film production. This study examined how acting roles might influence an actor during times on set shooting a movie or television series as well as their personal life after the filming is finished. Additionally the study considered the psychological impact of embodying a role, and whether or not an actor ever has the feeling that the performed character has independent agency over the actor. Blurred lines between a fictitious acting role, character embodiment, and an actor's on and off-screen realities were explored during this investigation. Blurred lines were examined using a phenomenological paradigm, which encompassed interviews with six Screen Actors Guild (SAG) members about their own personal experiences living within a character. The outcome of this research suggested that actors are often emotionally and behaviorally influenced by roles affecting their daily lives and occasionally their romantic relationships. The participants also reported having experienced the effects of the illusion of a character's independent agency while playing particular roles. This dissertation is available in open access at AURA, http://aura.antioch.edu/ and OhioLINK ETD Center, https://etd.ohiolink.edu/

Keywords: actors, screen actors, acting roles, psychology of acting, phenomenology, phenomenology of acting, method acting, role immersion, character embodiment, multiple selves, multiple personalities, illusion of independent agency

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Chapter I: Introduction

One day, a visitor came into Edgar Bergen's [the ventriloquist] room and found

him talking—not rehearsing—with his dummy, Charlie McCarthy. Bergin was

asking Charlie a number of philosophical questions about the nature of his life,

virtue and love. Charlie was responding with brilliant Socratic answers. When

Bergen noticed that he had a visitor, he turned red and said he was talking with

Charlie, the wisest person he knew. The visitor pointed out that it was Bergen's

own mind and voice coming through the wooden dummy. Bergen replied, "But I

ask Charlie these questions and he answers, and I haven't the faintest idea what

he's going to say and I'm astounded by his brilliance." (Wegner, 2002, p. 221)

Health Ledger described his experiences of sleepless nights and mental

exhaustion to a New York Times journalist as he wrestled with his role of the

"psychopathic, mass-murdering," Joker in the film, *The Dark Night*. He revealed that he

took sleeping pills to no effect to relieve himself of the character in his dreams. "Last

week I probably slept an average of two hours a night," Ledger told the journalist. He

further stated, "I couldn't stop thinking about the character. My body was exhausted, and

my mind was still going." During post-production the 28-year-old film star was found

dead, face down at the foot of his bed in his New York City apartment (Monroe &

Benson, 2008).

Daniel Day-Lewis is particular about what he calls "the work," which is his

process of preparing and then inhabiting a character in a film. For the movie *The Last of

the Mohicans* Day-Lewis taught himself to build a canoe, shoot a flintlock, and trap and

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skin animals. For one scene in the film, *My Left Foot*, about Christy Brown, an artist with cerebral palsy, Day-Lewis taught himself to put a record on a turntable with his toes; he also insisted on remaining in a wheelchair between takes and being fed by the crew. He even learned to box for the film *The Boxer*. In that film he played a prizefighter and former member of the Irish Republican Army. During *The Boxer's* character development process Day-Lewis broke his nose and injured his back. To prepare for his role of gang leader, Bill the Butcher, in *Gangs of New York*, Day-Lewis took butchering lessons, cutting large sections of meat and parceling them out into chops, flanks, and filets. To play Abraham Lincoln, Day-Lewis convinced himself that he was, in fact, Abraham Lincoln and spent a year embodied by Lincoln's identity. Interestingly, Daniel Day-Lewis has a British accent and is not Lincoln-like in the least. He prefers not to talk about his method of acting confessing that even he does not entirely understand his own process (McGrath, 2012).

Another example of a character exhibiting apparent autonomy over an actor's native personality occurred during Brie Larsen's role of "Ma" in the 2015 film, *Room*. Based on the best-selling novel of the same name, *Room*, is about a seventeen-year-old woman who was kidnapped and held captive for seven years in a small backyard shed, where she had been raped and impregnated by her abductor. During a 2015 NPR interview on the entertainment news show, *The Treatment*, Ms. Larsen reported that because she has been acting most of her life reality sometimes gets confusing. She related that it depends on how long she prepares for a role. During her interview, she acknowledged that sometimes-personal narratives inside her head are not actually hers, and stated, "It's at times hard to remember what was a role and what wasn't." In her own

words Larsen described how traits of her recent screen character was sometimes autonomous:

> I think the brain just wants to help you so much that it latches onto things, and it'll put things at the forefront... So, for instance, with *Room*, as I was prepping in those eight months, things like my wrists had to be sore. And so I started wiring my brain to think that my wrist was sore so that by the time we started shooting, I didn't have to remember, oh, my wrist is sore… I just felt it like a phantom pain in my wrist. And you do that with all sorts of things. And you do it as a way so… you can be in the moment, you can listen to the other person and you can almost surprise yourself with what your reactions are [implying that they aren't her own]. You don't have to think, oh, I can't do that because my wrist hurts or I can't chew like that 'cause I've got that bad tooth or I'm really sluggish and tired 'cause I don't have vitamin D, you just… inhabit it [the role] (Gross, 2015).

Russian psychologist, Lev Vygotsky, considered the embodiment of a role to be the most important aspect of acting. He believed that an actor must avoid a "professiogram" or the "development of general qualities or traits" (Smagorinsky, 2011, p. 234). Vygotsky believed that technique alone was insufficient to create deep emotional states that stimulate a catharsis of character. Vygotsky argued that internal states during a performance are the "central node" of the acting experience, "becoming rather than mimicking the character is the goal of acting" (Smagorinsky, 2011, p. 234).

Purpose for the Study

There is an absence of literature regarding actors' character creations influencing their lives during, and after film production. In fact, there has been no study about film actors to this end (specifically relating to working Screen Actors Guild (SAG) members). Quoting the great acting teacher, Sanford Meisner, "the experiences of acting are living truthfully in imagined circumstances" (Noice & Noice, p.14, 2006). Sometimes acting roles contribute to an actor's level of psychological stress, including, changed behaviors, re-living trauma of past experiences, and various personality alterations as a result of pretending to be different people. The relationship between increased dissociation, reliving trauma, character absorption, and embodiment, conceivably blur the line between role and reality in some instances during film or television production and thereafter.

The intent of this dissertation was to investigate how the remnants of a character might influence the actors' screen life, relationships, and daily life during and after the performance period. The acting process might also evoke a feeling that a fictional character created from an acting role operates as a separate identity or, at times, may seem to have independent agency over a particular actor (as Edgar Bergin experienced with Charley McCarthy). Some experiences of how roles influence an actor's post-performance life seeming leave the actor susceptible to a destabilized sense of self, difficulties with interpersonal relationships, and potentially pathological mental states (Nuetzel, 2000; Rule, 1973). Therefore the purpose of this study is to:

Understand the lived experience of actors who have found that aspects of the characters they play, or react to during filming (including thoughts, emotions or actions), unintentionally influence their own thoughts, behaviors and actions

during the time they are playing the role as well as when they are no longer playing the role.

Rationale of the Study

Acting is a career that encourages a creative identity alteration and requires actors to believe that they become somebody else during the performance and through rehearsing and experimentation with a role. This study adds to the scant body of psychological literature on screen acting and role creation. Currently, there is a lack of research relating to the alteration of the actor's personality when enmeshed in a role, and how it affects the actors' behaviors and actions during filming and their personal life. By examining actors, one may observe the purposeful creation of alternate personalities to identify and interact within a fantasy world, which might also influence actors' reality and interpersonal relationships. Thus, the central premise of this study was to explore the personality of screen actors, and their relationship to performance states. A previous study involving a small sample of student actors concluded, "the character one is developing probably does have an influence on personality dimensions as measured by one's self-perceptions" (Hannah, Domino & Hanson, p. 284 1994).

Philosophical Foundation

This study's philosophical foundation is rooted in phenomenology, which encompasses the lived experiences of the participants and their psychological process embodying an acting role. I explored how actors inhabit fictional characters by resorting to fantasy, absorption, reliving past emotions, and dissociative experiences. I sought to understand film actors' mental states, and their behaviors when they occupy acting roles that impact their native personality.

Background

The creation of characters that an actor portrays often entails alterations or adjustments of the actor's personality. This requires an amplification of an actor's emotions with possible changes to an understanding of their social world, upbringing, and interpersonal relationships. Hannah, et al. (1994) theorize, "the actor does not create a role in a vacuum but brings his or her own personal history—emotions memories and drives into the role" (p. 278). Inside out acting training, such as *Method Acting* and its offshoots, fosters this type of behavior and encourages an engagement of counterfactual or "what if" thinking, autobiographical emotional re-enactments, and character immersion. (Chekhov, 1991; Hagen & Frankel, 1973; Meisner & Longwell, 1987; Stanislavski, 1946).

Method Acting originated with Konstantin Stanislavski's acting system taught at the Moscow Art Theatre in Russia. In this system actors learn to feel the emotions of their characters essentially living within the role, rather than remaining the native actor (Bruder, Cohn, Olne, Pollack, Previto, & Zigler. 1986). Method actors utilize memory exercises by which they recall and re-live a previously felt emotion or trauma in order to evoke authentic emotional responses for role embodiment (Hagen & Frankel, 1973). In his book *An Actor Prepares*, Stanislavski (1946) wrote metaphorically about what happens when an actor merges with the character: "Our type of creativeness is the conception and birth of a new being" (p. 294). Stanislavski also believed that when actors truly embody their roles they might be influenced to such a degree that the role affects their daily lives.

Neutzel (2000) maintains that actors, to perform a character truthfully, must identify with the essence of that character. The process of identification creates a link between both the emotional life of the character and the actor. The actor then takes the shared emotions and transfers them to scenes throughout the production. When an actor is selected for a role he or she brings two identities to the creative process. The first is the actor's native identity and worldly understanding; the second is an internalized fantasy formulation of the character's psychology. It is up to the actor to fuse both together to create a new entity (Nemiro, 1997).

Chapter II: Literature Review

The Creation of Multiple Selves in Acting

The idea of exploring and becoming a different self might be an underlying reason that actors choose a particular role. The idea of experiencing the emotions and thoughts of another person or becoming someone different then who they are holds a fascination for actors. Markus and Nurius (1986) define "possible selves" as ideal selves that a person would like to become or avoid becoming. Possible selves are "manifestations of enduring goals, aspirations, motives, fears, threats and fantasies" (p. 954). Specifically, in acting, this pertains to the exploration of a role, as it might relate to an investigation of elements within the actor's own personality, as well as research about somebody else (a created character) and a fantasy connection to that character. According to Markus and Nurius (1986), the idea of possible selves might also represent specific fantasies that actors might live out when embodying a role (see Doyle, 2013 on her observations about acting rehearsals and role creation). Actor's fantasies for role creations are influenced by the actor's character research, acting process, social world, culture, past experiences, idealized or damaged self perceptions, and, often, experiences of trauma. The actor substitutes his or her "as if self" for the character, which is the genesis of the character's interpretation of the world.

Directors are often the catalyst for evoking different emotional responses within actors, which can lead to unique behaviors. Bendelj (2003) stated, "[The] creation processes for any given character role are shaped by stage or film directors… that helps align the actors' portrayals… deemed as true-to-life" (p. 395). An interesting and historic strategy that one director used to trick an unwitting actor into character truth

occurred when Elia Kazan directed Paul Newman in the Tennessee Williams play, *Sweet Bird of Youth*. Kazan instructed the cast to snub Newman socially throughout the rehearsal period in order to increase Newman's sense of alienation while portraying the role of Chance Wayne (Farber & Green, 1993; Nuetzel, 1995). Because of the cast's actions, Newman, in fact, did feel alienated and consequently delivered a brilliant performance. Throughout the rehearsal period, Newman was unaware of why the cast was snubbing him. If he'd had knowledge of the director's strategy, he might have been unable to portray the role of Chance Wayne with a sincere and creditable feeling of alienation.

Moreno (1978) theorized that many internal selves or roles lie within every individual. A particular self or role inhabited during rehearsals and performance may impact an actor's native self-conception, resulting in anxiety, or other psychological disorders. An extreme case of negative role embodiment can occur when an actor internalizes a character's malevolent traits when consumed in role creation. In that scenario the character's destructive psychology begins to affect the actor's life both during and after the performance, as was seen in the case of Heath Leger.

Schechner (1988) noted that the goal of the actor is to become completely natural and to embody the character through the process of *restored behavior*. Schechner described restored behavior as a reconstruction of past-lived behaviors or recreating of behaviors based on past emotional stimuli. For an actor to function as a character effectively, he or she must believe that the emotional and physical reality of the character is the actor's own. Actors must rely on their experiences of restored behavior including,

at times, negative and destructive aspects of their self-concept and hurtful memories to make a character come alive.

The process of acting has been conceptualized as exploring a new identity or creating an alter self to portray a character. Chaiken (1972) hypothesized that each new role the actor plays changes the actor's native identity and personality thereafter. An actor's memory of past experiences is utilized within the Method Acting system as well as a technique called *enactment*. Enactment is the portrayal and exploration of emotions the written text (screen play) depicts for the purpose of developing a role and embodying a character (Nuetzel, 1995). Actors prepare for roles by finding the character's emotions though enactments, which utilize memories that engage restored behavior during rehearsals with other actors.

Kjerbuhl-Peterson (1935), in his book *The Psychology of Acting*, recounted that the playwright and novelist, Goethe, advocated the actor remove his native personality for the creation of a character. Goethe reasoned that the actor has to remove the public self from the role, and journey into his or her unconscious to discover alternative selves to search for the truth underlying the character's emotion. This discovered truth would then resonate within both character and actor so that the performance becomes realistic. Kjerbuhl-Peterson also noted that the composer, Wagner, "demanded that the actor be controlled by the actions of the persons in the play, 'to the full surrender of his real personality and must be actually possessed by it [the role].'" This condition is supposed to explain and justify the whole life and behavior of the actor [as the character] (p.176). The effective performance of a character, according to Wagner, constitutes a replacement of the actor's self-identity with the character's identity (Kierbuhl-Peterson, 1935). Thus

the actor then becomes the character assuming a successful integration of fantasy and reality occurred.

Actor/Director Walsh-Bowers' (2006) essay on theatre acting and the post-modern self, stressed that actors employ multiple selves in their rehearsals and subsequent performances. His article argued that the actor functions in a liminal state between his or her native self and a character's conception. The fictional role might, at times, hold agency over the native personality of the actor although Walsh-Bowers does not elaborate on this concept within his essay. However, he did briefly discuss the delicate balance between actor and character from Stanislavski's viewpoint. In Stanislavski's acting theory the actor trades his or her native psychology with the role's fictional psychology to create an entirely new entity that perceives a different reality. Hitchcock and Bates (1991) theorize, "the actor, by assuming the role of a character stands as an intermediary figure, situated, as he is between identities" (p. 22).

Acting Styles

Modern Acting theory may have begun with 18th century French philosopher, Denis Diderot, who wrote a book on acting called, *The Actor's Paradox*. Diderot theorized that acting involved a three-stage process by which the actor observes strong emotions (fear, rage, awe, etc.), reflects on behavioral expression of these emotions, and, ultimately experiments with different tones and gestures. By following this procedure the actor ultimately hits a right combination of actions that mimic the character's reality. Diderot argued that the greatest actors follow these steps throughout rehearsal and performance, and, subsequently, can arrive at a true realism or truth without any personal emotional involvement (Diderot, 1952: Goldstein & Winner, 2010; Roach, 1985). For

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Diderot the goal of the actor is to produce tears without feeling any emotion. In

Diderot's theory of acting, emotion and cognition were meant to remain separate

(Benedetti, 2007).

The 19th century French actor Constant Coquelin theorized that an actor's job is

to understand the psychology of the character by seeing the character from an outside or

external perspective. Coquelin believed, as did Diderot, that actors should be able to stay

in control of their feelings and avoid internalizing the actual emotions of the role. In

Coquelin's conception of acting, actors should never immerse themselves in the

character's reality; rather they should only mimic the character's actions and behaviors

(Cole & Chinoy, 1949; Goldstein & Winner, 2010).

From the 20th Century onward, two modern acting styles have emerged in the

Western world: "the imaginative (internal) and the technical (external) styles" (Walsh-

Bowers, p. 667, 2006). The internal style of acting or "inside out" acting utilizes a

psychological analysis of the character's thoughts, feelings and intentions to evoke a

naturalistic performance of the character, or a "fusion" of character and actor.

Employing the internal acting style actors, "strive for absorption in the character by

personal identification with the character's personality" (p. 673). The external acting

style or "outside in" acting (called "technique"), emphasizes the timing of lines, mimicry,

and mastery of physical movement for an illusion of the character's reality (Mamet,

1997; Olivier, 1986).

Thus a question arises in performance theory; is the emotions or the body the key

to the control the actor's instrument? The major acting teachers of the 20th century have

tried to integrate the inner emotional life of the actor with mental and physical skills that

are necessary to perform. Most actors usually have a preferable base theory leaning in one direction or the other but often combining both methods.

Konstantin Stanislavski was universally recognized as the father of modern internal actor training in the United States. The Moscow Art Theatre, of which Stanislavski was a founder, toured New York several times in the early decades of the 20th century. This style of acting later called, *The Method*, took the New York stage world by storm because of the realistic portrayal of characters. Method style of acting influenced generations of seminal American acting teachers, such as Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler, and Sanford Meisner. Stanislavski's written work, *An Actor Prepares* (Stanislavski, 1946), *Building a Character* (Stanislavski, 1949), and *Creating a Role* (Stanislavski, 1961), provided the actor with a technique, that promoted spontaneity and inspiration and role immersion using a procedure called affective memory (affective memory requires actors to call on the personal memories from a similar situation, and import those feelings to those of their characters).

The following strategies are employed within conventions derived from the Method Acting technique, which enable an actor to achieve role:

1. The Method sees as the actor's essential task the reproduction of recognizable reality.

2. The Method seeks to justify all stage behavior by ensuring that it is psychologically sound, providing a unifying motivation for a character's behavior.

3. It places a high premium on genuine emotion as it is coming from the character and role not just the actor.

4. It identifies the actor's own personality as the mine from which all psychological truth must be excavated.

5. It encourages improvisation as a rehearsal aid. In certain cases as part of performance, in an effort to keep acting lifelike.

6. It promotes intimate communication between actors in a scene.

7. It demands an almost religious devotion on the part of an actor, to apprehending and embodying the character based on truth in performance (Bendelj, p. 393, 2003).

Narratives about the character and field observations of the character development process describe conceptually how Method actors draw from a well of creation strategies. Bendelj (2003) noted that these include:

(1) Identification of character role

(2) Transposition from personal experiences

(3) Use of cultural resources

(4) Physicalization

(5) Improvisation

(6) Imagination and fantasy (p. 393).

Bendelj (2003) further explained, "The Method tenets provide guidelines and practical suggestions for the character-development process… They advocate expression of "genuine emotions"..."truth in acting"… and the "reproduction of recognizable reality" (p. 394).

The script only provides the basis or schematic for typifying a character's attitudinal relations with other characters as well as behavioral ways of interacting.

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Complete information about a character is not written into the script. The director relies on the actor to develop the true nature of the character by experimentation, research, and use of the actors' psychological and physiological states of mind.   Bendalj (2003) recounts in his essay on Method acting: "To create a biography of one of the character roles she enacted, Jennifer Jason Leigh kept a personal journal, 'written as the character would write her own diary.'" This diary was "a source of [her] character's concrete memories and experiences," which was, of course, imagined by Leigh. In another instance, Jessica Lange, discussing her role of, Cora, in *The Postman Only Rings Twice* stated, "I created a complete, concrete history of this woman. In my fantasy, I'd live out every detail of her life, from childhood up until the present" (Bendalj, p. 289, 2003).

Sanford Meisner, influenced by Stanislavski, recognized that an actor's emotional understanding of a character had to be the fundamental part of every performance (Kindler & Grey, 2005). In Meisner's mind, getting an actor to master this requirement is the essential goal of the actor's training. Meisner developed a paradigm for training actors using an elaborate improvisational technique. By this technique, an actor's dual focus is recognized as the pursuit of the objective in a scene, allowing influence by the "other." The "other" is a one or more additional actors' within the scene whose interactive responses will create cause and effect experiences for the actor. Those experiences are lived in the present moment as the narrative progresses. The actor will then be forced to adapt how he or she pursues his or her scene objective in response to reactions received from other actors. Meisner referred to this technique as "the reality of doing" (Meisner & Longwell, p. 22 1987). Meisner stressed communication between actors to produce real "emotional dialogue" rooted in the character's interaction in the

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moment with other characters (Kindler & Grey, 2005; Meisner & Longwell, 1987, p. 22)

Murray (1996) corroborates Meisner's theories, and in his book *Shakespeare's Imagined Persons* noted, "the actor thinks the thoughts and feels the emotions the script creates for the character and responds to what happens on stage as if the action were real" (p. 63). Murray compared actor's fusion with character to a hypnotic trance state that is influenced by the script, shading the actor's native speech, movements, gestures, thoughts, interactions, and emotions. Murray hypothesized, "When actors fuse a character, they experience the character's thoughts and emotions, and their own are somehow displaced" (p. 50). The ability to embody a character is considered the talent within the repertoire of the actor's instrument. Once the actor is possessed by the role the character seems to have a life of its own and its own reality, according to Murray.

Acting is a difficult career with a roller coaster of passions, emotions and, sometimes multiple changes in self-concept and presentation, as Kogan (2002) noted. In his paper on psychological perspectives of careers in the performing arts, socialization and early childhood experiences are largely instrumental in influencing acting careers. Imaginary play, creating complex imaginary situations, writing stories, and poetry, having an imaginary playmate, and pretending to be different people, are activities that many actors participated in during childhood. Kogan asserted that actors have found the perfect career to indulge these passions by experiencing a change in their primary identity. Goldstein and Winner (2009) state,

> Perhaps the two most distinctive feature of the profile of future actors is their
> attraction to fiction and the world of imagination and their emotionality…one

must be able to enter readily into pretend worlds and one must be able to feel

emotions strongly (p. 123).

Counterfactual Selves and Immersive Acting

Dreams, nightmares, various subconscious experiences, and cultural expectations

are foundational components in the formation of a self-concept, according to Obodaru

(2012) who theorized about how counterfactual selves are elements of self-discovery.

The counterfactual self is an imagined self, and, oftentimes, lives in a possible or

imagined world in relation to the everyday world. This is especially true of actors

accepting roles using elements from their own counterfactual self-concept.

Counterfactual research suggests that self-knowledge (or imaginary self-knowledge)

extends not only along the actual time line of what was, and is, but also along a parallel

time line of what could have been. The self-concept can also comprise a self-

representation of whom a person might have been if something in the past had happened

differently. Counterfactual self-representations using immersive acting techniques

describe the actor as he or she presents within the dramatic world of performance, which

is an alternative version of their habitual reality.

Obodaru (2012) contends that a self-concept is a multifaceted and dynamic

cognitive structure encompassing all of a person's self-representations. Self-

representations are attributes the person sees as self-descriptive; they can be grouped into

two classes: (1) self-definitions and (2) self-comparisons (with others) (Obodaru, 2012).

Self-comparisons describe aspects of the self that do not currently define the person; in

that sense they are self-redefining, depicting a person differently than earlier self-

definitions. Recent counterfactual research has documented four global self-

comparisons: (1) past selves, (2) possible selves, (3) ideal selves, and (4) ought selves

(what I ought to be) (Obodaru, 2012). Self-definitions answer the question, who am I?

Self-comparisons provide an interpretive context for the answer. Much of the meaning of

self-definitions is perceived by juxtaposing self-definitions with self-comparisons of past

selves, desired possible selves, feared possible selves, and ideal selves (Obodaru, 2012).

These are good examples of how actors embody a role by creating an alter personality

utilizing a fictional work in concert with the native personality.

 Obodaru's theoretical paper based on counterfactual research (see Byrne, 2005;

Hoerl, McCormack & Beck, 2011, etc.) suggests that an alternative self is a self-

redefining counterfactual self that has become part of a primary self-concept. Like other

self-comparisons, an alternative self is self-redefining in the alternative reality it

perceives. In other words, a person may have a different concept of self if engaged in an

alternate reality, not unlike a video game player's perception of a video avatar in the

alternative reality of the game. If an actor embodies a character and the actor constructs a

narrative about how that character's life might have existed in all physical, cognitive and

emotional dimensions, then, in essence, the counterfactual self (embodied character)

becomes part of the actor's current self-concept in an alternate identity.

 With the help of Stanislavski's "magic if" acting technique, Stilson (2005)

contends that the "if" allows an individual to decide to depart from one level of truth,

thereby allowing a portal into an alternate reality and an alternate truth. This is similar to

Obodaru's concept of a counterfactual self that functions within a different subjective

reality. Each script redefines reality through the narrative of a character's eyes and

emotional state, such that the actor may experience anything conceivable within the

character's psychology within that reality. Stanislavski's reference to the "reality of inner life" is specifically pertinent to this process for an actor; "The actor seeks the inner world of an imaginary person with his own internal resources" (Stilson, p. 4, 2005).

Actors face the task of building a three-dimensional being who may be the actor's moral opposite in regard to every conceivable aspect of their lives. This is true regardless of how deranged, loving, hateful, or naive their characters may be. Stanislavski suggested that actors must never judge their creations or they will lose connection to the role, and thus not exemplify the character's truth (Stilson, 2005). Furthermore, Stanislavski stated that actors must never approach their characters from a third-person point of view, or pass a judgment on the character's moral, social, religious, and political beliefs and behaviors. If they do the actor will be unable to sustain conviction and reality within the performance. Bendelj (2003) noted, "What is considered real is constructed in a cultural frame since the notions of believable… can only be defined relationally" (p. 407).

Part of the art of creating a character might be defined as looking at the world through the eyes of a different being and utilizing those relevant behaviors, emotions and cognitions (Stilson, 2005). Stanislavski theorized a favorable condition for the embodiment of a character by means of the actor's commitment and will toward the character. Stanislavski, in essence, created a cueing environment for the inception of artistic stimulation during the creation and performance of a role. A cueing environment might be thought of as situational stimuli that engage aspects of background, emotions, culture, and memory. For example watching certain television shows like horror movies in a darkened room alone might access memories and emotions of fear and trepidation.

Thus the darkened room with the televised images and sounds becomes a cueing environment for types of horror. Stage and screen characterization and behavior appear spontaneous and natural as if it were real life within Stanislavski's rehearsal cueing environment. Stanislavski's system and its offshoots incorporated techniques that integrate the native personality of the actor with the fictional character's biography and psychology.

Dissociative States, Absorption, Flow, and Character Immersion

When an actor embodies a role for a film, the fictional character created depends on the actor's level of fantasy proneness, absorption, and dissociation from the native personality. The ability to create fantasy influenced by past traumatic events in the actor's life might create a dissociative personality conflict, which might cause various levels of distress as well as breaks with reality (Thomson & Jaque, 2011).

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5 (DSM-5) (APA, 2013) describes dissociation as "a disruption and/or discontinuity in normal integration of consciousness, memory, identity, emotion, perception, body representation, and behavior. Dissociative symptoms can potentially disrupt every area of psychological functioning " (p. 291). Dissociative experiences in the context of traumatic stress have been discussed in psychological literature for over a century and fall into one of three domains: (1) loss of continuity in subjective experience accompanied by involuntary and unwanted intrusions into awareness or behavior; (2) an inability to access information or control mental functions that are normally amenable to such access or control; or (3) a sense of experiential disconnectedness (Cardena, van Duijl & Terhune, 2009; Carlson, Dalenberg, & McDade-Montez, 2012). In other words, dissociation signifies an altered state of

consciousness and division of the personality with "parts" of the personality operating independently, and accompanied by unique somatic and/or mental experiences. This definition describes the creative process that some actors experience during role creation.

According to Briere, Weathers, and Runtz (2005), general descriptions of dissociation can be misleading, because they imply a one-dimensional state, or even a personality trait. A multidimensional state model might more effectively describe a range of dissociative states such as amnesia, absorption, and daydreaming (a narrowing of the field of consciousness), depersonalization, derealization, identity disruptions, or identity diffusion (Briere et al., 2005). However, a dissociative capacity might actually serve the creative process for the actor, helping focus and the imagination (Thompson & Keehn 2006).

The interactive factors of dissociation, trauma, and fantasy proneness seem to play a role in the experience of creativity for artists. Artists have the capacity to experience such extreme states while maintaining function, according to Thompson, Keehn and Gumpel (2009). Thompson and colleagues asserted that this even might be a potential source of psychological resilience and regulation. The capacity for dissociation and fantasy proneness may operate similarly during emotional circumstances outside the actor's creative work.

Thompson and Keehn (2006) hypothesized that dissociation specifically serves the creative process because of a creative person's ability to use fantasy and absorption to facilitate work. A multidimensional state model of dissociation, rather than a personality trait model, may more accurately capture the experience of creativity, as creative people seem to have the ability to shift between dissociative states. Furthermore, these states

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seem to be normative in young children, but gradually diminish in late adolescence. However, creative individuals might continue to engage in dissociative experiences long after adolescence has passed (Thompson, et al., 2009). This theory suggests something quite different from a pathological trauma-related dissociation. Dissociation, especially a dissociative type of asset or sense, might support an actor's ability to suspend his or her own personality in order to give life to a different personality, or evoke an alternate emotional state reflecting a fictional character.

Dissociative phenomenon involves experiences of absorption, defined as the profound narrowing or concentration of attention and a focused employment of cognitive resources (Tellegen & Atkinson, 1974). Panero and colleagues (2015) asserted the following concerning an actors' character absorption,

> Absorption suggests a state of focus entirely dedicated to experiencing
> the attentional object, whether it is a human being, a landscape, a memory, a
> sound, or an aspect of one's self. It requires totally engaging one's perceptual,
> motoric, imaginative, and ideational resources while not being distracted.
> Absorption is argued to result from a heightened sense that the attentional object
> is real (p. 14).

Absorption often might involve engagement with external objects or events (*e.g.* films, television, books, music). Many forms of recreational pursuits entail voluntary or purposive entry into dissociative states and absorption (Seligman & Kirmayer, 2008). Absorption also engages internally generated thoughts, images, or imaginative content, such as role, which might consume the actor. Examples of character absorption include daydreaming, reverie, deliberation and fantasy about the role. Actors are encouraged to

become immersed in a character's life per Stanislavski (1946), an activity that calls for absorption (Panero, et al, 2015). Sarbin (1950) stated in his research on inside out stage acting that actors experience an unusually high degree of absorption when performing, and that actors were, at times, unaware of the audience when they performed.

Other researchers have also noted an association between satisfying or significant personal experiences and positive dissociative experiences (see Seligman & Kirmayer, 2008). Such experiences have been likened to a concept of ''flow'' in which "a seamless integration of action and awareness that is absorbing can result in a dissociative-like suspension of self-reflexive consciousness" (Seligman & Kirmayer, p. 32, 2008). This is the cognitive activity that an actor utilizes subconsciously to embody a role. Csikszentmihalyi (1997) defined a state of flow as "an experience where action and awareness merge, destroying the dualistic perspective" (p. 247). During the experience of flow, a performer might lose conscious awareness of his or her actions playing a character as well as an awareness of their native personality.

 In a recent study, 40% of a group of actors who were measured with the Dissociative Experiences Scale II (DES-II) indicated a need for further screening for dissociative pathologies (Thomson & Jaque, 2011). The author's considered that further screening might uncover various aspects of fragmented personality states among actors. This finding lends support to a theory that trained professional actors employ dissociative processes to alter self-perception and blur boundaries between "me" and "not me" when they create characters (Thompson & Jaque, 2011).

Acting roles require that aspects of absorption, flow, dissociative resourcing, and cultural influence are culled from the actor's creative reserves to effectively embody a

role. In one study, Perez-Fabello and Campos (2011) investigated creativity levels and dissociation in fine arts students. Similar levels of dissociation and creativity that fine arts students experience also pertain to actors embodying character roles for performance (Thompson & Jaque, 2011). According to authors Perez-Fabello and Campos the creative process is increased by factors such as absorption, fantasy-proneness, and daydreaming (also see Thompson, et al., 2009; Thompson & Keehn, 2006). Both absorption and the imagination are combined within fantasy to allow for an unlimited exploration of reality. Fantasy resourcing can be used to develop intuition, creativity, and other subconscious processes (Perez-Fabello & Campos, 2011).

The findings of the Perez-Fabello and Campos study revealed significant differences in creativity (creative imagination and creative experiences) between the fine arts students who obtained high, as opposed to low, dissociative experiences scale scores. Fine arts students who exhibited the greatest dissociative experiences and absorption abilities appeared to have greater creative imagination and creative experiences than students with low dissociative experiences scores within this study.

The activities undertaken in acting workshops, rehearsals, and on sets require full commitment and promote total absorption with the role just as it might for fine arts students creating works of art. This suggests that properties of a dissociative condition are involved in role creation, including a full commitment to cognitive resources, and, potentially, a loss of reality when enmeshed in character absorption (Doyle, 2013). Dissociative experiences appear to occur with normality in the arts and seem to enhance the creative process.

Burgoyne, Poulin and Rearden (1999) in their research, asked student theatre

actors whether their acting experiences, thus role creation, had a significant impact on their lives and, if so, what any such impact might have been. They discovered that a blurring between actor and character might impact psychological growth as well as distress levels for the actors. The authors also found that inside out acting styles (*e.g.* Stanislavski's Method Acting), which encourage reliving emotional moments to facilitate character embodiment, increases the potential for blurred lines between a character's reality, and the actor's native personality. Burgoyne and colleagues, through their findings, recommended that the theatre profession address more aspects of psychological boundary management as a pedagogy for future actor training.

Contrary to Burgoyne, et al.'s (1999) research, Tust-Gunn (1995), proposed that a role or character might only marginally affect an actor's personal life and identity. She argued that stage work and the rehearsal environment provide a safe place for personal exploration. Character boundaries are specified by the written structure of the play and are confined to a specific temporality of the performance where the actor is the character. The structure of rehearsal and performance would, contrary to what Burgoyne and colleagues asserted, create resilience against the character influencing the actors' native identity.

However, Nemiro's (1997) research on the creative processes of three actors, noted in her interviews that the personality of a character did affect the native identity of these actors. Certain roles were deemed "scary and dangerous" suggesting that the actor's identity merged with the character's identity causing the actor to feel a loss of control.   The actors' interviewed also mentioned "avoiding certain roles," as a means to

circumvent certain stressful portrayals because of reliving painful past trauma (Nemiro, p. 225-226, 1997).

Actor and psychoanalyst Janice Rule (1973) contributed to performance research with several early case studies on actor identity crises. Rule considered acting a "hazardous job" because the actor sometimes splinters his or her native personality to achieve identification with a character. Rule stated, "the creative investment is deep…the preconscious and unconscious as well as the conscious mind are involved in the work, the actor rarely leaves the role when he leaves the theater or sound stage" (p. 51). She summarized the actor's work of embodying a role as "deep identification with great compassion" (p. 53). Rule noted that once character embodiment is complete, the actor reacts to any circumstance as the character. Rule asserted that the actor "must love the character whom under other objective circumstances he {the actor} might find offensive" (p. 53). Rule, similarly to Walsh-Bowers (2006), believed that actors' function in a twilight world between of fantasy and reality. She discovered, in her interviews, that too much identification with a role could carry over into an actor's private life affecting their identity. Rule also believed that extreme examples of role identification might hasten various degrees of psychopathology. Rule theorized that actors who experience over identification with a role might have been attracted to acting because of subconscious reasons to overcome psychological challenges. Acting might have allowed them to live in a fantasy world simultaneously fulfilling a psychological need to become someone else and live another person's life (Rule, 1973).

Most actors enjoy the challenges of creating a living portrayal of another human being. Actors learn techniques in various styles of acting such as increased attention,

memory, concentration, imagination, emotional expression, physical action, and analysis in their theoretical training (Hagen & Frankel, 1971; Hodge, 2000; Moore, 1960; Meisner & Longwell, 1987; Stanislavski, 1946, 1949, 1961). Many actors are able to monitor and regulate vulnerability in order to minimize potential psychopathologies (Seton, 2010). Given this practice of monitoring and regulation learned in some acting training, Thompson and Jaque (2011) speculated that actors cultivate a sense of autonomy, self/other awareness, and security within themselves, so as to reveal truths inherent within the character in front of an audience. Thompson and Jaque contemplated whether actors would gain more resolution of their own personal experiences of trauma and loss by portraying roles that included similar experiences. To investigate this query, the authors used the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI), The Dissociative Experience Scale II (DES-II), The Inventory of Childhood Memories and Imagining (ICMI), and The Traumatic Events Questionnaire (TEQ) as a battery of testing measures that would uncover dissociation, fantasy proneness, and trauma within a small, theatre-acting community.

Contrary to Thompson and Jaque's (2011) hypothesis during group discussions about past trauma and loss experiences, the actor group had a higher proportion of the disorganized–unresolved classification of attachment when compared to a control group. Even though the participants in both groups experienced similar traumatic/loss events, the actor group had greater lapses of reason and loss of personal narrative during the researcher's queries. The lapses within their narratives included psychological disorientation of space and time, past feelings of being persecuted by an abusive figure, and beliefs that a deceased figure remained somehow alive, albeit hidden, from the

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actors'. These are all markers of a disorganized narrative relating to dissociation and past trauma. To date, it remains difficult to determine whether an actor's ability to give life to a character and a potential psychopathology is an antecedent or a consequence of participation in the dramatic arts.

Does an actor first have a fantasy relationship with a character? Do actors engage in imagined conversations with their characters so that they can incorporate them psychologically as an alternate or amplified aspect of their own personalities? Some of these questions are explored in Taylor, Hodges and Kohanyl's (2002-2003) study on the "illusion of independent agency" (IIA) with adult fiction writers as a research sample. Taylor and colleagues' findings are pertinent to screen actors' techniques and how they achieve role embodiment.

The researchers noted, as an introduction to their research, that many adults enjoy various levels of fantasy consumption. This might include activities such as role-playing in games; living secret lives on the Internet and acting in films or in the theatre. Taylor et al. (2002-2003) specifically hypothesized that the creation of fantasy characterizations from written literary work might be aligned with fantasy creation of imaginary friends as children. Taking this idea further in their study, they found that some fiction writers have personal relationships with their characters and imagined conversations with them. The same subconscious fantasy mechanism might hold true for an actor trying to embody a role to achieve character fusion.

Taylor, et al. (2002-2003) described a notable component of characters coming to life for adult fiction writers was having the character dictate their personality foibles, quirks, and intricacies to the writer. Later, these writers described their experiences such

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that the characters seemed to have their own thoughts feelings and actions, which dictated the writers' narrative. This illusion that the writer's and that some actor's experience is related to a state of flow referring to the feeling of being completely absorbed in the material as the character. A condition of this illusion of independent agency is losing track of the primary identity and becoming enmeshed with the character's identity, which becomes effortless and unconscious (Taylor et al., 2002-2003).

Creativity and Memory Cueing

Within research on the actor's psychology it is important to include a discussion on memory-cueing environments and psychopathology both of which may share common factors within the actor's psyche. The acting environment (rehearsal studio, the stage or movie set) is a perfect cuing/retrieval environment for the blending of self-states that are created from fictional material infused with emotion. Representations of character that evoke emotions might be subject to the cuing of past recollections, as previously discussed with the technique of restored behavior. Memory-cueing might influence future memory representations of what an actor, after the role is finished, perceives as real events versus their pre-role native experiences. In support of this idea, Newman and Lindsey (2009) argue that over three decades of scientific research have documented people making various autobiographical memory errors, such as failing to remember elements of their past personalities, not remembering important events, falsely believing that they experienced events, and even developing full-blown false memories of events that never happened (Loftus, 2013). Potentially, post-acting role episodic memories (of the character's conflicts) for some actors might become incorporated into the actor's psyche. The cuing/retrieval environment for character exploration can influence how

past and present might blur character with reality.   For example, words and fantasy that activate a certain actual memory may lead an individual to subconsciously invent fictitious elements within that memory. The distorted information could impact present reality (Schacter, 1996).

Conclusion

For an actor to fully embody a character, much of the literature suggests that a type of flow experience occurs so that the embodied character feels like a separate creation, different from the actor. Acting rehearsals and film sets function as cueing environments for re-enactments of past emotion and trauma, and possibly create a psychological context for the lingering embodiment of a character, with possible impingements on the actor's real life (like Heath Ledger's experience). Cues serve as the primary context that shape how the world is perceived and, as such, they can prime prior experience to influence memory recall and decision-making (Godden & Baddeley, 1975). Boundary blurring for some actors' might result from a strong desires to escape from current reality into counterfactual selves, which might influence a change in the actor's native personality. Given truthful and authentic character creations for certain actors, a type of pathogenic process functions as a catalyst for blurring the line between role and reality.

Chapter III: Methods Section

This qualitative phenomenological study examined the lived experiences of screen actors, whereby, the boundaries between roles they preformed and their real life experiences became blurred. Interviewing techniques, with six professional screen actors, incorporated semi-structured open-ended interviews. These narratives constituted the research material, which might illustrate the experience of boundary blurring. Actor participants were purposely selected because they utilized inside out acting styles for character creation, and reported having experienced incidents of boundary blurring during their professional careers and private lives. The research questions sought to understand these experiences from the participant's perspectives. The participants were from different backgrounds, representing diverse examples of individuals in the acting field.

Using a qualitative, as opposed to a quantitative approach affords many advantages for the researcher. This study was based on actors' life experiences and examined how characters may influence their world both on and off the set. Utilizing a phenomenological qualitative approach provided rich narratives of these experiences. Moreover, Merriam (2009), noted, regarding the usage of qualitative versus quantitative studies, "the quantitative study portrays a world of variables and static states. By contrast, the qualitative study describes people acting in events" (p. 210). Understanding an individual's world that makes meaning for the individual's experiences is the essence of qualitative research. This researcher believes that human behavior cannot be replicated exactly; behavior is dynamic, not static. Thus using a qualitative rather than quantitative approach was better suited for this study as the latter is based more on

hypothesis testing and deductive reasoning than actual experiences (Creswell, 2009).

Qualitative research attempts to bring intelligibility to the complex human experience.

Historically, knowledge has been gained from listening to other people describe their

lived experiences and it's continued ongoing meanings (Creswell, 2009).

Research Design

Qualitative research questions describe a constructivist paradigm seeking

inductive, biased descriptions and understanding from the participants (Creswell & Plano

Clark, 2011). A social constructivist worldview is utilized in phenomenological research

designs, which encompasses the concept that individuals seek an understanding of the

world through subjective meanings of their experiences. These meanings are varied and

multiple (Creswell, 2009).

Phenomenology

Phenomenology was founded by 19th century philosopher, Edmund Husserl as

the study of structures of experience, or consciousness. Phenomenology is the study

of "phenomena", which are things as they appear in our experience, or ways we

experience things (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Smith, 2016). In his quest for an

understanding of the human experience, Husserl initially made some key conceptual

elaborations. He asserted that to effectively study consciousness, one would have to

distinguish between the act of consciousness and the phenomena at which it is directed

(the objects as intended) (Husserl, 2001).

A human-life perspective is the overarching concept that this research study was

trying to achieve. Hence, utilizing the phenomenological approach to an actor's

experience of role embodiment offered the opportunity for participants to provide their

own narrative pertaining to the experience of how acting roles might have impacted their lives. Phenomenology, as a comprehensive observation, reflects the totality of lived experiences that belong to a single individual (Groenewald, 2004). According to *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research* (Given, 2008) regarding the study of lived experiences,

> Phenomenological research is the study of lived or experiential meaning and attempts to describe and interpret these meanings in the ways that they emerge and are shaped by consciousness, language, our cognitive and non-cognitive sensibilities, and by our pre-understandings and presuppositions…The notion of lived experience, as used in the works of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and like-minded phenomenologists, announces the intent to explore directly the original or pre-reflective dimensions of human existence (p. 614).

As a researcher, I explored boundary blurs from the actors' points of view taking into consideration the actors' lived experiences, and the ramifications of those experiences on and off the film-set. It might be noted that the creation of the character is an amalgamation of the actor's own autobiographical memory as an ongoing narrative (often distorted), the actor's emotional sensitivity, and the character's fictional history combined with the actor's envisioning a character's inter-psychic dynamics. In other words, during the acting process and beyond, I investigated how much agency certain character creations gain and influence the immediate acting experience, and the actor's life thereafter?

Participants and Sampling

The participants in this study were actors living in Los Angeles, California who are active members of Screen Actors Guild (SAG)/American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (AFTRA) and have reported at least 30 SAG/AFTRA payment days during the previous year. A criterion sample of six individuals including five males and one female over the age of eighteen was selected. The main goal of this type of sampling was to focus on characteristics of the participants' experiences that represent the phenomena being studied (Creswell, 2013).

Interview Protocol

The actors were all contacted by phone. They were told that the interviewer was seeking descriptions of their experiences from the time they were cast in particularly meaningful roles and thereafter. The participants were told they were chosen for the study because they had reported experiencing significant impact of a character (or characters) on their thoughts, behaviors, or actions when they were playing a role and no longer playing that role. Thus, how playing a character changed their respective personalities and self-concepts as well as the subsequent impact of these experiences on their life. The aim of the phenomenological interviews was to complete a description about how embodying characters might influence actors' behaviors, thoughts and actions (see Appendix A for full interview protocol).

Data Analysis Plan

Qualitative data analysis consisted of transcriptions and recordings to obtain a sense of meaning of the actors' experiences of character embodiment. Coding of data was broken down into categories, sub-categories, and themes. Open coding was used for

participant quotes.

The interviews were transcribed using transcription software, and then incorporated into the Hyperesearch dissemination software that categorizes themes and similar meanings of the participants' lived experiences.

Bracketing and the Role of the Researcher's Experience

An important component relevant to the interviewing process is the role of the researcher's own experience as a film director. This is shared experience that existed between the researcher and participants. The experiences of actors that I have witnessed, and my own experience of boundary blurring as a film director, initiated my curiosity for this study. Working in the entertainment industry for thirty years provided me with unique access to the participant pool of screen actors. It must be noted that familiarity from a common vantage point of on-set experiences might have created a bias within the interviewing process, possibly influencing the types of questions asked (or avoided), or decisions made by the interviewer. To protect against personal bias, it was necessary for me to bracket my experiences as a film director. Bracketing refers to the process by which personal biases are exposed, discussed in this document, and set aside to the best of one's ability.

 LeVasseur (cited in Creswell, p. 83, 2009) discussed a definition of bracketing, and proposed that the process involves, "suspending our understandings in a reflective move that cultivates curiosity." This concept is important to this study, as participants had been selected based on personal relationships developed throughout the researcher's involvement in the film industry. As I have stated previously, some of the experiences described by participants could potentially be shared experiences with the researcher.

However, shared experiences do not mean shared interpretations, and bracketing is utilized to shield against the researcher engaging in his or her own specific meaning-making of the process. Bracketing simply acknowledges the lens that shapes the interviewing process, and allows for the perspectives of the participants to exist in contrast to those of the researcher (Creswell, 2009). I maintained a personal research journal separate from data collection materials throughout the data collection process, which enabled me to reflect my own thoughts and feelings about the interviews. These elements of research were implemented to minimize unwitting researcher bias, and to more clearly differentiate perspectives belonging to the researcher as opposed to the participants.

Ethics: Consent to Participate in Research

An informed consent agreement to participate in the research specified:

(1) An acknowledgement to participate in research (participants were all over 18 years old).

(2) How the participants were selected (SAG/AFTRA members).

(3) The purpose of the research (without disclosing the central research question).

(3) The research procedures.

(4) The risks and benefits of participating in this study

(5) The voluntary nature of participation.

(6) The participant's right to stop participation at any point.

(7) Procedures used for confidentiality to protect the identity of study participants (use of a numbering system separated in a different

computer drive from identifying names).

(8) How the data/interviews would be stored. Specifically, that data will be stored
   minimally seven years before computer drives are wiped clean of data. In
   addition, the information was encrypted, and all resulting data from the study
   is kept secured under lock and key according to HIPAA standards of
   practice.

(9) Access to psychological counseling, if needed, to process interview questions
   or if questions lead to personal distress

(10) The length of time the research will be conducted.

This agreement was written in English and signed by each participant before
research was conducted (Groenewald, 2004).

Conclusion

Previous studies (e.g. Thompson & Jaque, 2011; Thompson & Keehn, 2006)
found links between dissociation, fantasy proneness, and trauma within a testimonial
theatre actor's sample. Two researchers (Nuetzel, 2000; Rule, 1973) suggested that
certain roles influence theatre actor's performance life thereby leaving the actor
susceptible to a destabilized sense of self. This study examined how lived experiences of
character embodiment and fantasy proneness might impact a screen actor's on and off-
screen identity including their social and romantic relationships.

By focusing on film actors, one might observe the purposeful creation of alternate
identities. Through the process of role creation, the influences of an alter-identity might
influence the actor's life such that an actor might embrace a counterfactual world as a
new common reality. This study was an investigation into the actor's psychology, and it

functions as a laboratory of sorts developed for the purpose of researching an evolving,

fluid concept of the self.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

Introduction

For this study, six screen actors were interviewed. All participants in the study were Screen Actors Guild Members, and self-identified as part-time or full-time working actors utilizing Method or "inside out" acting techniques. Five of the participants who were interviewed identified as male and one identified as female. The participants ranged in age from 22 -65 years old. With regard to ethnicity, four participants identified as Caucasian, one participant as Hispanic/Latino, and one participant as Persian-American.

Participants were asked 19 semi-open ended questions to identify and describe their experience of taking on acting roles, and the effects of embodying those roles that might have blurred the line between role and reality during and after film production. I also examined the experiences of some of the actors' romantic feelings towards other actors where the nature of their relationship boundaries became blurred.

Using a semi-structured phenomenological interview process, audio-recorded material was collected to create transcriptions. Overall, five themes emerged from the interviews. Themes were identified when the majority of participants provided similar contextual responses to the open-ended questions.

Participant Descriptions

Jeff.

Jeff is a 22-year-old, single Caucasian male actor; he was born in Chicago, Illinois. He has achieved some success performing in movies and television shows since he was seven years old. Jeff works as a full-time actor and has garnered roles in television shows, movies and commercials. He enrolled in acting classes as a child and

continued taking classes throughout adulthood. He reported that as a child and young adult, he often fantasized about being somebody else "trying on somebody else's skin." He spent two years in college where he majored in drama. For the past few years he has been studying an offshoot of the Method acting style two times per week.

William.

William identified as a 25-year-old single Hispanic male who grew up in McAllen, Texas. He stated that he is employed as a part-time actor. William started taking acting classes four years ago, and he attends acting class four to five times per week. He acknowledged studying a variety of immersive or "inside out" acting styles, with two years of study in the drama department at a community college. He reported that he did not fantasize specifically about characters from books or movies as a child as much as the other participants indicated, but acknowledged, "I always wanted to be an actor since I was a kid." When I asked him why he wanted to be an actor, he stated, "I was curious about other's people's lives and what it would be like to be them." William specified that he has worked mostly in "cheap" television commercials, with some student film work through the UCLA Cinema Studies Program; he also performs in many plays in Hollywood, California. He noted that he recently had a successful showcase that has enabled him to attain "some meaningful television work… finally."

Ty.

Ty is a 23-year-old single Persian-American male from San Diego California. Ty reported that he did not take acting classes as an adolescent or teenager. Ty has been acting for three years; he reported currently studying Method acting three days per week. Ty stated that he has achieved some success in television commercials and plays, "almost

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working full time," and reported that he is "starting to get parts in television shows." He acknowledged that as a child he fantasized about being super heroes and gangsters. He indicated that he often fantasizes about being other people because, "sometimes I just want to be another person, not me."

Kyle.

Kyle is a 49-year-old married Caucasian male from Fairfield, Texas. Kyle acknowledged acting since grade school, and majored in drama as a young adult. He received a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in theatre from a mid-western university. Kyle stated that he has been acting for a total of thirty-three years, and currently takes acting classes three days per week studying the Meisner technique (an offshoot of Method acting). Kyle reported that he mostly works in films and has been the lead actor of several Netflix thrillers. He noted that he regularly fantasized as a child about movie characters to such an extent that it sometimes caused him difficulties in school "for not listening to the teacher." He further stated, "I played many role playing games with my friends becoming spies, bank robbers, and especially *Star Trek* characters and aliens." Kyle acknowledged that he still fantasizes about being other people and stated that his wife sometimes finds him "odd."

Janie.

Janie is a 55-year-old divorced Caucasian female from Washington, D.C. Janie has been acting for thirty-three years and attended an east coast university majoring in drama. Janie reported that she does not currently take acting classes but that she did so for several years starting at an early age. Janie stated that she mostly works in television series and in smaller-budget films. She further indicated that she has been the lead

actress in several recent series and also is cast in supporting roles. Janie acknowledged that as a child, growing up in a large family of five siblings, she fantasized about being an only child. She reported, "I was very bookish and often lived in a fantasy world around the books I was reading so I could escape from my normal world." She also acknowledged that she fantasized about living in different times in history. Janie stated that she has been exposed to many acting styles; thus she uses a "variety of acting approaches—it's not a one size fits all method for me." Janie shared that she often fantasizes about the character when she plays a lead role in a television series.

Arthur.

Arthur is a 65 year-old-single Caucasian male born in Sydney, Australia. He has been acting for thirty-five years, initially finding success in theatre, and later achieving notoriety in many television series and films. As a child Arthur often fantasized about what it would be like to be someone else, very foreign to his upbringing such as a circus performer. He stated, as an adult, he fantasizes about other playing people who are ethnically different than him, and from a different social stratum. He currently does not formally study acting. He considers the voice of a character as an entryway into that character's personality, and often uses inside-out sense-memory techniques (a technique of using prior emotions to create a believable feeling) to achieve an emotional connection with the character and other actor. He also stated, "I try to hear the character's voice and also channel how they think and feel."

Themes

Theme One: Acting Approach--Getting Into a Role.

One theme that emerged among the participants' interviews was common

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narratives about how they apprehend or embody a role in light of their specific acting styles and personalities.

Jeff shared a story about playing the character of a boy, Chris, who had been diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome. He reported, "I studied the effects and behaviors of Asperger's kids, I went to UCLA and sat in on a program for kids that were born with Asperger's… I would learn anything that I could learn." Jeff recounted that he would often communicate with the head of the UCLA Asperger's Program to try to understand and incorporate nuances of the internal and external effects of Asperger's syndrome. He stated, "I would have emails and phone calls with her about my questions…for a period of about three months that's all I was doing…so the character, Chris, really stuck with me." During Jeff's script analysis he would try to embody the feelings of being bullied in school based on his own middle school experiences. He shared,

> When Chris was in school he was very picked on like me… I would sit in my
> room, at home, close my eyes and think what would it feel like if I were bullied in
> school the same way [he was] because of his condition… if somebody picked up
> my lunch and threw it down how would I react?

Jeff also described situations when he was off the film set and socializing with his friends as an opportunity to rehearse the role, "And it was [with my friends] if you want to hang out I'm not Jeff anymore I'm Chris…your going to have to acknowledge me as Chris." During these periods, Jeff would act like the character, Chris, and sometimes it would, "put my friends on edge… I seemed to be somebody weird to them."

William reflected about tapping into his intuition when it comes to searching for the essence of a character. He stated, "I find a lot of the process is reading the script

finding out who the character is in his world." During his script analysis, William often

fantasized about the character and stated,

> I'll create a memory bank of just that world such as what music do I like how do
>
> I interact socially…what are my beats...I try to look through the character's
>
> eyes at his environment, who he'd be friends with… what are his views… how
>
> does he feel happy, sad…all different emotions and why.

William mentioned that the way he understands a character is, "to become him." He

stated, "Each character [I play] has their own essence that I need to tap into [to embody

the character]." William commented further on his process and stated, "I give myself this

pool of knowledge that I wasn't privy to myself [about the character]... it [the character]

just starts to come out when I tap into his essence, his beats."

Ty recounted several such experiences and reported, "The first thing I do is read

the script and look for clues about the character…what people say about him, and I

imagine what he thinks about himself." He went on to discuss how he models real people

that have similar personalities, behaviors, and experiences with the characters he plays.

Ty then gains a personal connection to those characters by comparing his own behaviors

and experiences to the role. Ty stated, "I think about the character's aspects that are like

my own life…I focus on those things…it becomes repetition I develop a habit." These

are similar contextual experiences to how both William and Jeff apprehend a character,

similar to a role-playing game coupled with elements of restored behavior. Ty explained

an example of his process embodying one bigoted character through repetition, where he

started to build a negative and angry mindset within his own behavioral matrix. Ty

stated,

Once I had to play a character from the 70's, an angry prejudiced juror selected

for a trial of a black guy…I started looking at the crime statistics and found that a

lot of crimes were from minority races… more crimes are from minorities…I

allowed myself to say that constantly over and over and I started believing it.

Kyle viewed his experiences to embody a role, as a lot of discovery, "almost like

police work."   Kyle's method is to let go of his native persona to discover who the

character is and become psychologically open to that "new mind." He stated,

It's a bit of a process, you kinda do an overall read [of the script]…to get an

overall feel of the world of the character… you go back and read it over and over

[the script] to understand the nuance of what's happening…there's a huge act of

discovery to figure out what that person [the character] might be thinking,

feeling, imagining, what are their motivations…their relationships…their

upbringing…you try to immerse yourself in their world completely.

Kyle further explained about his process, "It's always just me [the character] but I'm

allowing certain things [of my personality] to come through like either a better nature or

darker nature that I'm not consciously in touch with." Kyle acknowledged,

I don't have a lot of ego, I tend not to worry about how I look, how I come

across in front of people… I'm in the moment of what's happening it's how

vulnerable you're willing to be…how much your letting people see you without

your mask on.

 Kyle also added that he improvised many scenes to discover the character and his

relationship with other characters. He stated, " I let go of me."

Janie shared that she initially does a lot of research for a character, "I try to

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imagine where they came from…how they grew up… where they grow up, and everything I can imagine about that character historically." She also stated, "I want to know the physicality of the character…how they feel in various circumstances… give me a role… the material…let me research it…let me find out [about her]." Costumes, hair and make-up seem important to Janie as fantasy triggers necessary to apprehend a role:

> I like to be very collaborative with costumers and hair and make-up people…I always have to know, ok, if she's wearing this where did she get it, why did she choose it…a lot of the character comes alive in those sessions for me.

Arthur shared that the script is a roadmap to understanding a character with the director's help. He stated,

> When I read the script, I start to hear the voice of the character and then I'm able to conjure him …he starts to come out of me…the way the voice is used and how it comes out of me suggests that the character is not I.

To help Arthur "conjure" the character, "a past memory can help trigger emotional stuff…I can connect with the character's emotions most of the time…especially sadness and anger."

Theme Two: Initial Changes in Self while Connecting with the Character.

A second central theme that emerged was related to the changes in an actors' self-conception to embody a role. This theme addressed how a role affects the actor's personality during the rehearsal process and the days during filming.

Jeff described after all his research and rehearsals the following, "the second I sat down in the hair and make-up trailer [the character of] Chris just started coming out… it felt like sometimes Chris and Jeff were fighting inside of me." William recounted a

similar experience of his own and stated,

> Sometimes I'll check out of being me…it's like you gain this double consciousness thing going on where your kind of having to check what the character is doing and what you're doing physically…then there's moments like it where it's all one thought--me as him.

Ty described his experience as follows,

> In one role I remember completely buying into it [a role of a very bigoted juror]…I was particularly close to my buddy Lamont who is a black guy, I didn't hardly talk to him the entire time I was working…it was kind of like I developed this distain and wariness of him cause he was black.

Kyle discussed how he changes when he becomes enmeshed in a role; he stated that he sometimes gets more invested in the character's life than in his own real life.

Furthermore he shared,

> I've had roles where I completely lost it emotionally…in one role as a doctor I was so overwhelmed with not having the ability to help the mother of twin little girls dying of cancer that I was just bawling uncontrollably, I couldn't speak…I've probably only cried in my personal life three times like that.

Janie spoke about an instance of how changes in her personality occurred while getting into wardrobe, and putting on make-up for the role of a heroin addict prostitute. She reported,

> We forgot to do the black eyeliner inside of the eye, then I do that and then, looking into the mirror, there she is…now I'm looking at her…my body starts moving in different ways, then the stylist puts all these rings on my hands and it's

like ok there we go, it's her not me anymore.

She went on to describe the challenges of embodying characters for a television series as, "the inner work of the character has to connect really quickly and you have to think on your feet…react on your feet…have instincts on your feet…be ready to change yourself at any moment when you walk into the room." She mentioned yet another role where, "my voice started getting husky because of my allergies once, and I determined to give that voice to her [my character]… that started affecting how I carried myself and how she [me as the character] reacted to things." Janie went on to discuss how she, as Janie, is really shy and uncomfortable around people, however, when she embodies a role she explained, "I am not shy…I've done a lot of things in a lot of movies and I'm not shy to do them [on camera when I'm playing a role]."

Arthur discussed aspects of emotional changes that occurred to his character, when he worked with a hostile director as, "feeling bullied and belittled [by the director] then the character acted that way and became very very angry." He described other changes in his self-conception as, "sometimes, depending on the role, you feel a bit sadder in life or a bit more caring of others." He also acknowledged that it takes awhile for him to get over playing a villain because "he's been part of you every day and you haven't been you."

Theme Three: Losing Self in a Role.

The third theme focused on moments where the participants felt their primary self was being overshadowed by the role. One participant, Kyle, initially denied this happened to him, and stated, "I'm just acting… the character is not really me." However, later, as the interview progressed, and as he became more comfortable with this

researcher, he recounted several experiences where playing a role influenced him so deeply that he lost control of his emotions and feelings. The role, "psychologically imbalanced me…I guess I tapped into my darkest nature." Kyle acknowledged that the feelings of imbalance lasted a couple of days.

Jeff described portraying the role of Chris (the boy experiencing Asperger's Syndrome) as, "I had times where… if I wasn't doing the scene I would do things just that would come out, that wasn't me, I would say something that was Chris that wasn't even in the script…I didn't know where those things came from." Jeff focused heavily on those words for more emphasis so I would understand a little bit more about what the character might be going through, "I would just come out with something… or I'd do something that was him… I noticed changes in myself… I'm like that wasn't me at all…I don't do that stuff… it was weird."

William described his experiences of connecting with a character and stated, "I find it easier and easier [in my acting career] to completely let go of who I am and let something else come into me completely." He described this as, "some other essence…I let go of the script let it come out without worrying about the lines, the character just comes out and is." Ty's narrative included similar experiences. He stated,

> Sometimes, during certain roles that I was playing, I wouldn't call my friends or
> family because I wasn't Ty or I didn't feel like him…you forget that you're you at
> times…you forget your playing a role that you're in the midst of.

Kyle related his experiences as follows,

> I've had roles where I just lost it emotionally without meaning to, like
> being overwhelmed about what's going on…you got to wonder what the

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lasting effect of an acting trauma is… as having going through what the character has gone through…you're really not mimicking what someone would do… psychologically you're really doing it with your mind and emotions… if the character is raging, you are raging…if you have somebody you're having a relationship on camera with, if you're lovers, or you're married… you actually have that intense connection…that's you in the moment, you're in that relationship.

Janie also discussed "being in the moment to understand the character's truth, not her own." She stated,

It's the most fun to go away from myself, be more of the character…I also feel many times more comfortable with it [the character]…the last thing I want to do is get up onstage or on a set and speak or do interviews which are torture, or even go to a party, but when I'm the character I can do anything she needs to do I'm not me.

Anecdotally, this researcher saw Janie at a party when a casting director friend introduced her as a potential good subject for this study. She was engaging and vivacious and not the least bit shy. I mentioned to her about my observations of her comfort level (given how she described her personality) during this current interview. She said, "I put on a costume, a slinky little dress and very fashion forward eye make-up, I was playing a role…you weren't really talking to me." I wondered during the interview, if she, at times, was playing a role because of her shyness and stated dislike for interviews. When I asked her about her role as an interviewee, she laughed briefly and did not answer the question. It seems, as she stated, "you have to flexible with a role."

Arthur shared his experiences when losing himself in a role and stated, "Most of the time when I'm preforming I believe I'm that person…whatever the character must do or whoever the character is." He also stated, "You're always thinking, sometimes the next day, like the person you were playing, especially in highly emotional scenes." He acknowledged, "I've had roles that have unbalanced me, especially during scenes of anger."

Sub-Theme One: Character Autonomy.

Character Autonomy in this instance refers to when a character seems to act with independent agency. This is where a character eclipses an actors' pre-performance identity. Character autonomy is intrinsically related to theme two and three (Initial Changes in Self while Connecting with the Character and Losing Self in a Role) as a continuation of some of the experiences already presented.

Jeff spoke about an instance while playing the role of Chris, when Chris eclipsed his native identity. He reported,

> There were times that I'd just kind of sit there and all of a sudden be uber-focused
>
> on a task like cutting my lunch up into small pieces and arranging them on my
>
> plate or whatever like an Asperger's kid… Chris would completely take over.

William acknowledged, "Sometimes I'll check out of being me… I don't quite remember what happened… It's not like I don't remember exactly…there were moments I let go in such a way where it was just him [the character]."

Ty stated, "I had these nasty prejudiced thoughts from that one character… I'm the character in certain moments… he would say something that I would normally not

say or do, something I'd never do." Ty explained this happened often during rehearsal periods and described it as being a weird experience "uncontrollable at times."

Kyle reported, "Sometimes you, when playing a role, have ideas you're not aware you had... sometimes you say things you wouldn't and would never until it comes out of your mouth."

Janie mentioned that when a series she was cast in was cancelled, "I was devastated when it ended I loved her [the character] and she was real" [indicating that Janie felt she was living the character's life]. She also stated, "I wanted to know her more…I was really upset…she was really hard to let go."

Arthur shared, "I've never understood the separation from self and character…what's me and what's character at times... we psychologically change when we're playing somebody else."

Theme Four: Role Carryovers Outside of the Set.

Role carryovers refer to situations outside of the film set or rehearsal space in which a character has influenced an actor; sometimes impacting the actors' life off stage or set.

Jeff acknowledged, "I'd definitely notice changes outside of myself…like that wasn't me doing this or that…it was this guy that I'm playing…you have to catch yourself sometimes." He described one instance where he experienced a role carryover stating, "for awhile I started to put my hands in my pockets when I got nervous, this was like what Chris did…I did this if something was going on or I got stressed…it was a break for me."

William spoke about self-changes and stated,

Each character has its own drumbeat or its own heartbeat…he would sometimes stay with me a lot longer whenever I stopped doing the acting…sometimes it seemed I'd check out of myself…one time I played a role where this gay guy, Coco, had very flamboyant pants and afterward I would continue to wear the pants and dress like Coco for a couple of months…it didn't bother me, but it might have in the past…you wouldn't do this stuff from where I'm from in Texas.

William went on to talk about Coco, whose behaviors he carried with him after the film, and expressed,

I'd be bopping around to the same beat he had and I really enjoyed that because I did things not in my own nature…he kind of taught me about day to day living…I try to reach out there into a universal consciousness that we all have, and connect with something else when I'm acting and sometimes it stays.

He reported, "When I leave the character I try to let it go but sometimes it still remains in the way I handle some things in life."

Ty reported the prejudicial thoughts he had from the prejudiced character that he had previously described did carry over for him, "but I finally got rid of them." Using an example from that character he stated, "I was really more outspoken, I didn't give a crap what people thought for awhile." Ty explained another instance of role carryover for him, stating, " In another film I played a guy in a kill squad in Vietnam…after the project ended I had this insane heightened awareness or paranoia about what was going on around me." He went on to express, "I don't think that the stuff I carry with me is negative, I see some of it as an improvement to myself, it's the new me."

Kyle expressed, "If you do a really emotional scene it actually makes you feel better when you're finished… there is a bit of a high that you have afterwards, it can be addictive." Kyle went on to talk about how characters can expand an actor's awareness in this regard, "I think playing a role teaches you to engage the world in a different way, it allows you to be more receptive, more perceptive…you may notice things about your partner or children that you never saw before." Kyle also described a negative experience after playing a rapist,

> After we shot the scene, I had a horrible headache…I ended up being sick for a couple of days afterward…the actress wanted to connect with me on social media but the experience was so traumatizing to me that I couldn't…there are certain aspects to characters that will linger on…after a cop role I acted like a cop, which my friends didn't like.

Janie shared several of her own experiences with role carryover,

> Yes they [the roles] have an effect …right now I'm playing a women who's very, very angry and having a difficult time [in life]…I see myself being short tempered and angry on set…when I go home I'm like; why did I behave that way?

She went on to explain, "it does seep into you [the character]. She further explained that when she was playing the role of a "stoned out of her mind" woman, she was more relaxed on the set. She continued, "If you don't do everything the character should do on set [complete all of the emotional arcs of the role] you're going to go home with her [the role] clinging to you."

Arthur reported several experiences of role carryovers. He stated, "sometimes it's hard to drop the accent of a character, you might bring it into your day and the next day off the set…it occurs to you 'oh God that's the character not me.'" He mused, "sometimes I wonder when are we the character and when are we the real person." When discussing leaving a character, Arthur noted, "in finishing it…putting it to bed so to speak…leaving the character behind, I often, early on, had to be helped along with alcohol and drugs."

Theme Five: Romantic Involvements—Falling for a Character Not the Person.

This final theme encompasses romances that involve an actor falling for a character (not the person playing the role) that an actor is paired with during the production period. This can also include other set personnel such as a producer or director that might develop a romantic crush on a role that an actor is playing, rather than the person playing the role.

Jeff acknowledged, "you get caught up in the world of the film and forget about life outside...I definitely have fallen for somebody on the set I was working with and after the film was finished, I was like, 'what was I doing, what was I thinking?'" He went on to describe a specific experience where he was let down from a romantic crush, and stated,

> There was this girl who played this bad ass character…it was hot…I got a crush
> on her and asked her out…we went on a date but she was kinda bubbly and funny,
> not the girl I had a crush on…I guess I felt a little let down.

Ty related a story of having a crush on a similar "take charge" type of woman, and stated,

> I was in this student film from USC and I was playing against this very
>
> demanding and hot headed sexual kind of character …but when the film ended
>
> she was the opposite type of person…it was weird what it kind of did to my
>
> feelings.

In another instance when Ty was performing in a play during a season of community theatre, he stated, "I was playing Lysander in love with Hermia in *Midsummers Night's Dream* …The actress wasn't my type …I even think she had a boyfriend…I started to see her as pretty cute…So crazy feelings developed for her, I wanted to be with her."

Kyle spoke about being involved with various characters as love interests during film shoots and feeling completely connected to them. He described his excitement about going to the set the next day to see an actor playing a role that was his love interest. Kyle acknowledged,

> There's an emotional connection sometimes, even when the scene has been
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> cut and when the film is over…It's strange cause I feel like I broke up with the
>
> actor because she's not going to be in my life anymore… I have this
>
> memory of being in love and lust… it's like she was part of me…I think there's a
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> part of your mind that doesn't know the difference [between the real person and
>
> the role].

Janie described being on the receiving end of romantic set entanglements, "I've had a number of guys, actors, and other people on a set that were in love with me at various times…. I think they mostly saw the role." Janie went on to explain, "I do think

it was the role because I was behaving as the character would…It was also how we took care of each other in character [as actors playing characters] no matter what we were doing." Janie suggested that these types of connections during performance were so emotionally real that it was difficult to separate her native self from the character. She acknowledged that she had developed several on-set relationships with other actors who she admitted were probably only in love with the character she was playing.

Arthur acknowledged having been romantically infatuated with another actor's character on various occasions. He stated,

In my younger years, I often fell for somebody on the set…I always wondered if you're getting to know them as the person, who they are, or are you getting to know the character they are playing more intimately…it's a very difficult blurred line...You get clouded by the fantasy of the work that you're in…you later wonder, who are they really?

Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to investigate the lived experiences of film actors who identified themselves as utilizing immersive acting techniques, and who had blurred the boundaries between an acting role and reality. In this section, the identified themes are explored by using the findings from the literature review. An analysis of the interviews with the six actors led to five major themes and one sub-theme that investigated the actors' process and how a role affects the actors' sense of self and their personality, both on and off the set. Implications for clinical practice were examined as well as ideas for future research. Limitations in the current study were also identified based on the multifaceted aspects of the study.

Several themes that emerged in this research are supportive of information developed in previous research about stage actors. However, the current study is different from other studies because it focuses on film actors that discovered aspects of the characters they play unintentionally influence their own thoughts, behaviors, or actions, during the time they are playing the role and after the role has ended.

It is also important to note that films are photographed with a variety of shots from close-ups to wider shots and with many takes. Film production managers usually format the shooting schedules by breaking whole scenes up into segments out of chronological order, where the actor is "in character" throughout the splintered story. The reason why the script's narrative is photographed in non-linear time is for production cost savings. Because of the nonlinear way films are photographed the actor must be flexible in preparation to embody all of the character's emotional arcs at any given time

throughout the production period. The actor through necessity relives the emotional

experiences of the character and maintains a realistic connection to other actors from

whenever timeframe the scene being photographed exists. Furthermore in my

observations of actors as a professional film director; the actor's emotional state and

fantasies about a character coupled with the scripted dialogue can be heightened by

repetitive exposure to the character's psychology.   Some actors may dream about

themselves as the character and can't escape the character's psychological and moral

challenges during production. An extreme example of this experience is the tragic case

of the actor, Heath Leger, reliving the role of the psychotic Joker during the production of

the film, *The Dark Knight*.

In contrast to screen acting and the attendant challenges of character

embodiment, Tust-Gunn (1995) proposed that an actor's character, in a play, might only

marginally affect an actor's personal life because stage work and the rehearsal

environment provide a safe place for psychological exploration. She argued that

character boundaries are specified by the written structure of the play and are confined to

a specific, shorter timeframe of the performance (i.e. span of time in the character's

history). However, one participant in this study who performed in a variety of venues

believed that boundaries were more difficult to uphold in a play. He reported that

reliving the whole character's emotional journey night after night in theatre production

intensified blurring the boundaries of self and role, in contrast to his experiences during

film and television acting.

Many acting studies have focused on theories and techniques of acting (see

Bandelj, 2003, Chekhov, 1991; Hagen and Frankel, 1973, Meisner and Longwell, 1987;

Stanislavski, 1950). Others have focused on social cognition, creativity, and fantasy proneness (*e.g.* Goldstein & Winner, 2009, 2010; Nemiro, 1997; Thompson & Keehn 2006). A few studies explored acting and personality change (see Hannah, Domino, & Hanson, 1994; Rule, 1973, and others). Still several other studies have focused on flow and dissociation (*e.g.* Penero et al., 2015; Thompson & Jaque, 2011). To date this researcher has been unable to find any studies investigating the psychology of character embodiment and its effects on professional film actors during and after film production.

Themes that have arisen in this study captured participant experiences of how roles affected their personality and self-concept on and off the set. All of the film actors interviewed identified Method or Method-related acting styles as the primary technique that they approached a role.

Theme One: Acting Approach--Getting Into a Role

Participants shared their experiences of how they approach a new role in this theme. The participants also provided an understanding of their own specific techniques of acting. This theme is consistent with previous research on inside out acting techniques and goals. One example of this comes from Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky's description of his psychology of performance goals, which are in line with Stanislavski's acting system and later Method Acting. Vygotsky stated, "becoming rather than mimicking the character is the goal of acting" (Smagorinsky, 2011, p. 234). Bendelj (2003) explained, "The Method tenets provide guidelines and practical suggestions for the character-development process." They advocate expression of "genuine emotions...truth in acting" and the "reproduction of recognizable reality" (p. 394). Several other researchers have described inside out acting techniques as "living truthfully

in imagined circumstances" (Noice & Noice 2006, p. 14), or as an ability to "enter readily into pretend worlds" (Goldstein & Winner 2009, p.123).

The preparation for character embodiment utilized by the actors I interviewed, as the literature suggests, include looking for key features of a character, repetition of reading and studying the script for dialogue and character clues, character research, fantasy role playing during rehearsal periods, improvisation and exploring character dynamics on the set. William reported that the music a character might listen to is also very important to him and helpful in apprehending. Ty compared similarities between his own life and a character's life as an entrance point to character personification. Janie finds the outward appearance (what she wears and her make-up style) and scent of the character (her perfume) a gateway to character embodiment. Arthur stated that hearing the character speaking to him in the character's voice is a catalyst to character embodiment. Four of the participants look for character clues in the real world to model. All of the actors used restored behavior (their own past experiences, emotional responses, and past relationships to understand a role). The participants expressed times when they felt their native personality became secondary to the character's personality while in the process of role development.

Obodaru's (2013) research on counterfactuals, although not specifically conceptualized for theatre of film studies about the psychology of actors, discusses the counterfactual self as an imagined self and, oftentimes, a self that lives in a possible or imagined world. This idea holds true for many experiences of actors as seen in the data of the first theme of this dissertation. The actors in this study voiced methods to apprehend characters consistent with counterfactual research, implementing creative

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dissociative states and flow, in order to facilitate character embodiment as well as an emotional understanding of character dynamics (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Kindler & Grey, 2005; Obodaru, 2013; Thompson & Keehn, 2006).

It is important for a director to be intrinsically involved in the character forming process and as an over watch to facilitate narrative continuity. The director is also a co-creator of the actions and assists the actor in experiencing truthful emotions in relationship to the world of the film. Bendelj (2003) argued, "[the] creation processes for any given character role are shaped by stage or film directors and fellow cast members. These provide direction and/or feedback that helps align the actors' portrayals… deemed as true-to-life" (p. 395). In this regard a director will suggest certain exercises or techniques in rehearsal stages to meld real emotions of the actor with character truth. Doyle (2013) discussed the importance of the rehearsals in her research on the acting process, "In rehearsals a new reality… emerges…here…structure and text are taken for granted… actors let go of prior intentions and spontaneously interact as characters" (p. 47).

In an interesting side note, while working as a film director, I went outside of usual film locations during rehearsals with key actors. We would tryout emotional and behavioral responses in various oppressive real world situations prior to shooting the film. The purpose of this experiment was to help the actors understand the truth of their characters in real world situations not just in a fantasy environment. I specifically experimented with this documentary method of rehearsal (ultimately changing the scripted locations), with two actors who were engaged in a conversation about death and morality while walking through skid row in downtown Los Angeles. These actors' were

"in character," while interacting with various non-actors, and were forced to embody character truth, spontaneity, and motivations in a real world cueing environment.

Theme Two: Initial Changes in Self---Connecting With Character

All six participants noticed changes in their self-concept when taking on a role, especially if the role affected them deeply on a personal level. The participants mentioned that during both rehearsals and performance certain characters made them feel "imbalanced," generating a sense of dualism between themselves and the character. Walsh-Bowers' (2006), stressed that actors employ multiple selves in their rehearsals and performance. He hypothesized that the actor functions in a liminal state between his or her native self and a character's fictional conception. Jeff and Arthur both acknowledged that they sometimes felt imbalanced, vacillating between the role and their own native identity. William expressed that he would suddenly "check out of myself," and Kyle revealed experiences where he lost control of his emotions and who he was natively. He stated that sometimes he felt more invested in a role than in his real life.

Theme Three: Losing Self in a Role

A central theme for all participants was moments where they felt a loss of their primary self-concept, or persona as being overshadowed by the character once they connected deeply with a role. This is the goal of good acting as it allows the audience to perceive the character as both believable and relatable. Bendelj (2003) noted:

> What is considered real is constructed in a cultural frame since the notions of believable… can only be defined relationally…[The] actor's goal is to create a character role that will match the audience's ideas [of reality] (p. 407).

Neutzel (2000) argued that in order for an actor to perform a character authentically, he

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or she must identify with the essence of that character. To achieve this character essence, Janie stated that she does anything the character needs to do in a scene and that she isn't her "normal self." Arthur acknowledged that when performing he actually believes that he is the character.

Chaiken (1972) suggested that each new role an actor plays changes the actor's native identity and personality thereafter. Kyle initially denied this happened to him and stated, "the character is not really me." He later amended his initial comments in the interview, suggesting that he accessed different and unexplored parts of himself when in a role, which sometimes affected him deeply. Janie reported that when performing in a role where she was psychologically invested, she had a feeling of great loss when the performance concluded.

Sub-Theme One: Character Autonomy

Character Autonomy refers to the phenomenon in which a character feels like an autonomous entity at times during the performance. Creating a character is defined as looking at the world through the eyes, feelings, emotions and cognitions of a different person (Stilson, 2005). Aspects of character autonomy might present with an actor using an immersive acting technique during his or her performance. Grey areas may exist where the actor loses the native self in a role and the role's effect on the actor's own personality. The actor throughout the performance period and beyond often discovers this experience. I believe, from my interviews, this is a fluctuating occurrence that lasts variable amounts of time for certain actors. Most of the actors in this study had a fantasy relationship with the characters they had played. According to Janie, " I fantasize about the characters and try to imagine what they're imaging and fantasizing about." All of the

participants in this study disclosed feeling that there were moments when they became

completely enmeshed with the character losing their primary self in the role during

rehearsals and filming. Both Jeff and William spoke about certain roles that went so far

as to completely eclipse their respective personalities, giving them a feeling that they

were not aware of their native identity. Kyle acknowledged, at times, he was not aware

of the character's words coming out of his mouth. Janie felt that sometimes she was

living the character's life and that the role was "hard to let go of." Arthur recounted his

experiences of when he was confused about who he was versus who the character was

during the term of production.

Taylor, et al. (2002-2003) described a component of characters coming to life for

adult fiction writers, and explained in their research, how certain characters dictate

behavioral intricacies and feelings to the writer. The writers in that study described their

experiences as the fictional characters seemingly had their own thoughts, feelings, and

actions. This illusion of independent agency (IIA) is related to the state of flow referring

to the experience of being completely absorbed in material, or an activity, and interacting

or becoming the "other." In those instances the writers lose track of the primary self and

developed an illusion of becoming conscious of a separate entity (the character speaking

through him or her) (Taylor et al., 2002-2003). This phenomenon is similar to characters

becoming autonomous for an actor embodying a role.

Theme Four: Role Carryovers Outside of the Set

This theme describes actors who carry a role, or the remnant of a role, with them

outside of the film set and after the production is finished. All of the participants in this

study experienced an element of this occurrence, and acknowledged moments where the

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character stayed with them after they left the set. William acknowledged that characters remain with him at times, and that he handles some challenges in life like one of the characters he portrayed. Ty considered certain behaviors that remained from roles as positive aspects of his own evolving personality. Kyle felt that roles he had played allow him to be more empathetic and perceptive of others; however, as mentioned in the results section, he became physically ill for a couple of days after playing a rapist. Janie shared several instances of role carryovers and stated that roles "seep" into you. She also acknowledged that at times she is more comfortable embodying a role in various life situations. Arthur reported he periodically found it difficult to differentiate where the boundary lay between a character and him.

Burgoyne, et al. (1999) reported, in their study of student theatre actors, that inside out acting styles (Stanislavski's "system," Method Acting, and other similar techniques), which foster reliving emotional moments to facilitate character empathy, and living in the moment as the character, increases the potentiality for blurred boundaries between character and actor. Psychoanalyst and actor Janice Rule (1973), speaking about theatre actors, believed, " When the creative investment is so deep, so that the preconscious and the unconscious as well as the conscious mind are involved in the work, the actor rarely leaves his role when he leaves the theater… " (p. 52).

Theme Five: Romantic Involvements—Falling For a Character Not the Person

Romantic involvements refer to an actor or a member of the production team becoming attracted to a character played by one of the actors, not the actor playing the character. Because of this mix-up of character and actor sometimes a relationship between the actors ensue. Occasionally an actor, in character, flirts, or falls in love with

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another actor, also in character, during scenes, which may be transported from the set into real life. To date, there is no research in the literature regarding the psychology of romantic involvements with film or theatre actors falling in love with a character another actor is playing. All of the participants acknowledged getting ensnared in the drama world to such an extent that they, at times, forgot about life outside of the set. In some of these instances romantic relationships followed with another actor. The participants reported these experiences are widespread on many sets. Both Janie and Kyle noted that romantic connections while preforming feel emotionally real. As immersive actors, they stated that they are living the character's life and truth in romantic scenes. They acknowledged that it is difficult to separate their own feelings from the character's feelings if the character is having a romantic experience. Arthur and Ty also acknowledged incidences of romantic involvements with another actor playing a role. Arthur stated, "You later wonder, 'who are they really [the other actor]?'"

To make sure that I bracket my own potential biases in this area, I have witnessed this activity. I even found myself once believing an actor that I was directing was actually the character, not the native actor. I subsequently dated the actor because of her strong embodiment of the role and the role's seductive physical and emotional elements. Of course, I discovered as I got to know the actor that she was nothing in real life like the role she was performing.

Conclusions

Throughout this study I identified themes in the experiences of actors embodying a role through various inside out acting techniques as well as instances of changes in their self-concept to portray a believable character. This study also recounts experiences

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where roles blurred the boundaries between the actor's self concept and the character both on set as well as when filming was finished. Thus, the central premise for this study succeeded in revealing the experiences of screen actors enmeshed in their characters blurring an acting role with reality. As Schechner (1988) noted recounting a Sanskrit text, "performance is an illusion of an illusion and, as such, might be considered more 'truthful' more 'real' than ordinary experience" (p. 4).

The participants in this study were able to provide first-hand perspectives regarding their acting experiences. From narratives of their lived experiences, themes emerged that correlated with the other actors' in this study. My hope is that this research provides an insight about the psychological effects on the actor when completely enmeshed in a role, and living truthfully as the character. The participants valued their experience as actors given that within social interactions, they became more empathetic, and open, with a heightened perception of others. All of the actors in this study felt the experience of acting and performance was an "addictive pursuit." It is perhaps for this reason that actors' function within a supportive subculture of other actors both living and exploring self-concepts in an alternate reality--the acting world. In Janie's words, " I get very attached to the people I'm working with…I have a very hard time letting go of that…letting go of the world…if it's a show you believe in, you experience real emotions with the other characters."   Within performance environments, actors are often emotionally and behaviorally affected by the characters they play according to this research, and might blur the line between roles and reality in their daily lives.

Limitations

One limitation of the present study is the lack of procedures to enhance validity.

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The only method used to collect raw data was participant interviews. Furthermore, I collected, oversaw transcription, and analyzed the data without assistance from a second coder. Moreover, there was no respondent validation, as participants were not available for a second meeting to review the content of themes and provide feedback on my interpretations of their responses. I worked in good faith, operating with the assumption that the narratives truthfully recounted the lived experiences of the participants. Themes were identified with as few biases as possible. However, it must be disclosed that I am a professional film director and have been intrinsically involved in inside out acting techniques as my primary understanding of character dynamics, and I am also a published researcher who specializes in spirit possession religions and its psychological influences on an individual, which bears some commonalities to the acting experience. Since the results of the current study were based on self-report, the participants' perceptions about role embodiment may be incomplete. In other words, the participants may not be wholly aware of all of the factors influencing their experiences or the aftermath of those experiences.

Implications for Future Research

The current study found a number of factors that impacted an actor's performance and post-performance life. It is hypothesized that it was not one factor but a confluence of factors that lead to how roles impact an actor's self-concept during performance and in the context of a post performance reality. No previous studies appear to have explored the post-performance experience and flexibility of the actor's self-concept when embodying a role and its influence on an actors' life. Thus, the current study provided an in-depth exploration of these experiences.

Additional studies involving factor analysis could serve to operationalize the specific components of the role embodiment experience to determine which particular components might predict outcomes with screen actors exploring character enmeshment. To date, there is no research in the literature, other then what I have briefly explored, regarding the psychology of romantic involvements with actors falling in love with a character another actor is portraying, or the outcomes of such relationships. In addition, behavioral therapies might be created for banishing negative character influences to help the actor facilitate role removal.

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Appendix A Research Questions for Actor Participant

1. What initially attracted you to acting?

2. Did you fantasize much growing up before you acted?

3. Describe if you sometimes fantasized about being another person and if that was enjoyable.

4. Please describe what it's like to prepare for a role including how do you get into character.
   B. How deep you go into character (emotionally invested in your acting process)?

5. Please describe if it is liberating to go very deep into a role, to get away from yourself. ----Positive and negative probes

   B. Have they ever noticed a difference in you after you have played a role?

6. Please describe a role that you were completely immersed in psychologically, a role that almost became obsessive. Positive and negative effects

7. What do you think about you that might make you susceptible to being impacted or influenced by a role really deeply?

8. Is there anything about your personality, background or past experiences that might impact this in your opinion?

9. Are there any roles you wouldn't take and why?

10. Describe the experience about a role that may psychologically imbalance you?

11. How did preforming a very intense and deep role affect your relationships with your family or friends? Please describe your experiences

12. Have you ever have the feeling that the character was independently reacting within a scene or had a life of its own, so to speak, and that you forgot who you were? Please describe if this even briefly happened.

13. Please describe if you have ever noticed changes in yourself after going deep into a role after you finished playing the role--- Probe for positive and negative effects.

B. Have you every noticed that you changed your lipstick, hairstyle, or clothes because of a role?

14. Describe an experience if a character you have been playing stayed with you after you have left the role and may have influenced some of the decisions in your life?

15. If you have a partner, has you partner ever noticed parts of a role or thought you were influenced a role off screen? Please describe.

 16. Have you ever relied on a character to help you think through a problem or situation e.g. how to talk to an auto mechanic? If so please describe, e.g. what would character X have done during this experience?

17. What do you do to get out—remove-- an intense or very demanding role you played-- after it was finished? Please describe your strategy for role removal or how another actor could help themselves remove a role.

18. Describe a time if you have ever developed a romantic relationship on the film set.
          A. If so, please describe if you were attracted to the character that another actor was portraying and if their portrayed character influenced your interest in the actor romantically.

          B. Describe a relationship with another person off the set that a role you played or they played might have influenced your relationship or interactions.

19. Is there anything that I haven't asked about becoming a character or being completely immersed in a role and it's effects on your personality and well-being that you can talk about?
.

Appendix B: Demographics Form

Please circle or indicate by filling in the corresponding answers:.

How long have you been an actor?_____years.

Age ____

Gender
- o   Male
- o   Female

Your ethnic and racial background?_____

Place of birth (city/region, country)_____

Are you a native English speaker?
- o   Yes
- o   No
- o   Decline to answer

During your childhood, in terms of socio-economic status, would you say your parents/caregivers were:
- o   Upper class
- o   Upper-middle class
- o   Middle class
- o   Lower-middle class
- o   Working class
- o   Poverty
- o   Decline to answer

Current personal socio-economic status:
- o   Upper class
- o   Upper-middle class
- o   Middle class
- o   Lower-middle class
- o   Working class
- o   Poverty
- o   Decline to answer

Do you have siblings?
- o   Yes
- o   No
- o   Decline to answer

If so, how many?_____

If you have siblings, what is your birth order? (i.e., first child, second child, third child, etc.)_____

Do you have a religious affiliation?
- o Yes
- o No
- o Decline to answer

Religious affiliation:
- o Protestant Christian
- o Evangelical Christian
- o Catholic
- o Muslim
- o Buddhist
- o Hindu
- o Jewish
- o Other_____
- o No religious affiliation
- o Decline to answer

Did you take acting classes as a child? _____yes,_____no_____

How often?_____

AS a child did you fantasize often?_____About what?_____

As a child was did you fantasize often about being somebody else?_____How

often?_____

What characters did you like to role play as a child?   If you did.

_____

As an adult do you fantasize? Often?_____About what usually?_____

_____

Do you as an adult fantasize about being somebody

else?_____

_____

If so who or what type of person for
example?_____

 How often?_____

 What is your primary acting style?_____

Have you studied Method Acting or an offshoot from Stanislavski (Strasberg,
Adler, or more

 modern variants e.g. Seacatt?_____ ____ If so for how long?_____years.

  If Method acting is not your primary style what other immersive style/s do you

utilize_____?

 Do you use a technique like restored behavior in your current acting

style?_____-_____

Do you currently take acting classes? _____How often?_____

 Highest level of education:
   o   High School or Equivalent
   o   Some College
   o   Associates Degree
   o   Bachelors Degree
   o   Master's Degree
   o   Doctoral Degree (MD, PhD, PsyD, JD, DC, OD, etc.)
   o   Other_____

 Current marital or relationship status?

- o Married
- o Divorced
- o In a relationship
- o Engaged
- o Living with another
- o Remarried
- o Separated
- o Single
- o Widowed
- o Decline to answer

Do you have children? If yes, how may?
- o 1
- o 2
- o 3
- o 4
- o 5
- o More

Who raised you as guardians or caregivers?
- o Biological parents
- o Single female parent
- o Single male parent
- o Biological and step-parent
- o Adoptive parents
- o Foster parents
- o Grandparents
- o Siblings
- o Other family/relatives
- o Decline to answer

Past and/or present employment status?
- o Employed full-time as an actor
- o Employed part-time as an actor
- o Unemployed as an actor
- o Other
- o Decline to answer

Is there any other pertinent information that you wish to add about your acting style and it's effect on your acting process to apprehend or embody a character?

Appendix C: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Project Title: *Blurred Lines Between Role and Reality: A Phenomenological Study of Acting*

Project Investigator: Gregory Hippolyte Brown MFA, MA.

Dissertation Chair: Dr. Brett Kia-Keating, EdD.

Thank you for your interest in being a part of this dissertation research project. Please take the time to read a brief description of the project before signing and agreeing to be a part of this project.

If you have any questions about any of the information provided to you, please ask the researcher before you decide to join in. You will be given a copy of this Consent Form to keep and refer to at any time.

This study will consist of a 60-90 minute interview, which will be audio recorded and transcribed into the final printed report of the project. The interview consists of sharing personal lived experiences from parts of past and present life, which pertain to the interest of the study (how acting roles may influence an actor's life and interpersonal relationships.). The interviews will take place in a mutually agreed upon meeting place.

1. I understand that this study is of a research nature. It may offer no direct benefit to me.

2. Participation in this study is voluntary. I I may refuse to enter it or may withdraw at anytime without creating any harmful consequences to myself. I understand also that the investigator may drop me at any time from the study.

3. The purpose of this study is to investigate the lived experience of actors who have found the aspects of the characters they play (including thoughts, emotions or actions) unintentionally impact their own thoughts, behaviors or actions when they are no longer playing the role. A sub-study of actor's significant others, when available, will also examine an outside perspective of the phenomena.

4. As a participant in the study, I will be asked to take part in the following procedures: Answer 8 semi-structured, open-ended interview questions pertaining to acting experiences, or, as an actor's significant other, answer 4 semi-structured interview questions about their partner's behaviors and actions.

5. The risks, discomforts and inconveniences of the above procedures might be that talking about said experiences could be uncomfortable to discuss, which may elicit anxiety or traumatization by memories triggered during the interview.

6. The possible benefits of the study to find out more about the individual/self in terms of behaviors that are vestiges of characters played, and, additionally, how various characters

played might have influenced past and current relationships.

Direct benefit to the researcher is to aid in research on actors and how roles may influence their lives and interpersonal relationships. These interviews will provide an in-depth look at the acting process as well as personal behavioral and psychological outcomes after the role is finished.

The outcome of this research will add to the pool of psychological knowledge pertaining to actors and their post-set behaviors, identities, and relationships.

7. Confidentiality of Participants: All personal information that was obtained throughout this project by the use of a demographic questionnaires; audio- taped interviews will be redacted and stored in a secured, locked box and on a password protected personal computer.

In the case of all written materials and oral presentations in which I might use materials from, I will not use your name, names of people close to you, or any other identifying information. Transcripts will be typed using your appointed alphabetical letter in place of your real name. All information is stored for a minimum of 3 years at the end of the study, or if the study gets published, then 3 years after the publication date all information will be shredded.

Participant's Statement
I agree that:
- I have read the notes the information above, and understand what the study involves.
- I understand that if I decide at any time that I no longer wish to take part in this project, I can notify the researcher involved and withdraw immediately.
- I consent to the processing of my personal information for the purposes of this research study.
- I understand that such information will be treated as strictly confidential and handled in accordance while personal data gets stored in a secured, locked container for seven years and then will be destroyed. My name will not be printed on any of the information you provide
- I agree that the dissertation research project named above has been explained to me to my satisfaction and I agree to take part in this study.
- I understand that my participation will be audio recorded and I consent to the use of this material as part of the project.
- I understand that the information I have submitted will be used as a graduate student project and possibly for scholarly research journal articles. Confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained and it will not be possible to identify me from any publications.
- I agree that my non-personal research data may be used by others for future research. I am assured that the confidentiality of my personal data will be upheld through the removal of any identifying information (including name, address, etc.)

- I agree that my age, gender, relationship status, and psychological history, acting techniques and methods, and other demographics may be identified in the final report. However, no combination of demographic characteristics will be revealed that can identify me. I have the right to decline to answer any demographics questions during the period filling out demographics form.

Contact information:

If you have any questions about the study, you may contact the researcher, Gregory

Hippolyte Brown, at gbrown@antioch.edu. If you have any questions about your rights

as a research participant, you may contact Dr. Brett Kia-Keating, EdD, Chair of the

Antioch University IRB, and my dissertation chairperson at (xxx) xxx-xxxx ext. xxx.

Participant Printed Name_____

Signature_____Date:_____