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The Raw Material of Beauty: A Qualitative Study of Actors' Perceptions of Creativity and Mental Health

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The Raw Material of Beauty:

A Qualitative Study of Actors’ Perceptions of Creativity and Mental Health

Alexander J. Seife, M.S.

A DOCTORAL DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF
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Abstract

The following qualitative study aims to further the literature’s understanding of actors’ attitudes regarding the connection between mental health and creativity. Generally, there has been a one-way relationship between the field of psychology and acting, in that actors have utilized the field of psychology to inform character development, while scare psychological research has been completed with actors as a sample. For this study, 12 professional New York-based actors, ages 22-56, participated in individual interviews with the principal investigator via on-line video conferencing. Interviews were conducted in order to: (a) better understand actors’ beliefs about the relationship between creativity and mental health, (b) explore the ways in which mental health is discussed in the acting community, and (c) better understand actors’ attitudes towards the effects of psychotherapy on the creative process. Using the qualitative research methods of Auerbach and Silverstein (2003), the interviews were transcribed and analyzed in order to extrapolate themes and theoretical constructs, and to create a narrative. Based on the analysis, the actors’ narratives were notable for their paradoxes, which included their contradictory beliefs regarding the impact of acting on mental health, the relationship between mental suffering and creativity, and the value of psychotherapy. The study’s discussion contextualizes the data using “role theory” (Landy, 2009).
The Raw Material of Beauty: A Qualitative Study of Actors’ Perceptions of Creativity and Mental Health

Suffering is justified as soon as it becomes the raw material of beauty.


**Introduction and Literature Review**

For many professional actors, acting is believed to be not only a job, but a calling and a way of life (Robb, Due, and Venning, 2016). In an extensive study of actors and comedians, Fisher and Fisher (1981) described acting as an almost religious-like dedication to self-expression, communicating intense feelings and new ideas, preserving the past, and demonstrating a shared humanity among diverse individuals. The business of acting, however, is complex. The work requires constant auditioning for roles, and actors frequently do not know when their next job will be. Additionally, actors are required to continue auditioning even while working on a current project. Furthermore, the road to success for an actor cannot be neatly defined. A successful acting career is subjective and is often the result of a combination of talent, professional connections, and sheer luck. The prize for a life in the arts, however, can be great, as a career in acting can offer a wealth of intrinsic rewards, including the unique challenges in creating a living portrayal of another human being engaged in conflict, as well as the development of such skills as enhanced attention, memory, concentration, memory, imagination, emotional expressiveness, physical action, and intellectual analysis (Barker et al., 2009; Thomson & Jaque, 2012). Additionally, the rehearsal process is often thought of as a safe space where emotional, intellectual, and physical exploration is encouraged (Robb et al., 2016). Actors
also report feeling highly engaged during performances; they feel deeply connected with an audience and report feeling mindful and present with themselves in the moment (Robb et al., 2016). Actors have also described feelings of belonging and connection, referring to fellow actors as their “tribe” and “family”. The intimate connections formed with other actors, however, can be complicated. Relationships formed during the acting process have been described as being intensely emotional connections, yet short-term and “false,” where intimacy is artificial and only necessary for building relationships between characters (Robb et al., 2016). Indeed, the lives and careers of actors are filled with unpredictable and turbulent highs and lows. While an acting career offers many rewards, there also appears to be a high psychological cost that may threaten an actor’s wellbeing.

**Occupational Threats to Wellbeing**

The demands of an acting career are many, including potentially detrimental effects to an artist’s physiological and psychological health. One occupational strain actors face is frequent unemployment, leading to financial insecurity and intense competition for jobs (Barker et al., 2009). Research suggests that a staggering 95 percent of New York stage actors are not engaged in stage acting at any given time (Kogan, 2002). In a report of Australian actors’ wellbeing, researchers Maxwell and colleagues (2015) presented a picture of extremely low levels of earnings. Three hundred and nineteen respondents (40.8%) reported earning less than 10,000 Australian Dollars (roughly $6,600 USD) in the 2011-2012 financial year, with a further 15% reporting income up to 20,000 Australian Dollars (roughly $13,000 USD). A higher proportion of female respondents reported earning less than 10,000 Australian Dollars from acting work compared to their male peers (46.5% and 33.2%, respectively).
In light of this financial instability, many actors choose to subsidize their chosen profession through other means. Actors frequently report having to do “survival work” – jobs that they are often not proud of, or connected to, and that are done purely for economic survival (Barker et al., 2009). In additional to the unfulfilling nature of “survival work,” these jobs can also leave actors little time for their own artistic endeavors (Barker et al., 2009). A majority of the artists interviewed in Barker and colleagues’ (2009) qualitative study described how artists compromised themselves either by cutting their rates of pay (“underselling”) or by doing “survival work”, which contributed to both a devaluation of the self and a perpetuation of a life of poverty. One participant lamented the difficulties in doing survival work, stating:

“In my case it is not having enough time to paint, again because of financial reasons and I have certain things that make me have to work full time. So, I always feel a big part of me is missing… I’m stressed because of that. Just because I have to juggle a lot of things and I just don’t get the opportunity to have my space to paint or be creative. And I feel that I’m missing something all the time.” (Barker et al., 2009, p.141)

As might be expected, actors experience high levels of stress associated with their low income and employment challenges (Maxwell et al., 2015). In Maxwell and colleagues’ (2015) study of Australian actors, 86% of participants reported that financial stress was an issue for them at least “sometimes,” while 27% of participants reported that it was “constantly an issue.” Even when actors are working, the demands of the job often negatively affect their relationships (Maxwell et al., 2015). Theater work in particular has been cited as the most common type of acting work that contributes to relational stress. Actors report that long separations due to touring can place a significant strain on their relationships with friends and family (Maxwell et al., 2015). Other factors that may negatively impact actors’ wellbeing include extreme pressure to
perform even while sick or injured, working long hours, sleep deprivation, and lack of help-seeking (Brandfonbrener, 1992).

The physical demands of acting and, in particular, workplace injuries, have recently begun to gain more attention in the acting community. The infamous 2011 Broadway production of Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark made headlines when several faulty harnesses and unsafe mechanical set pieces caused injuries, leaving at least one actor hospitalized after a free fall of more than 20 feet into the orchestra pit (Considine, 2019). Other examples include the actors Idina Menzel, who fractured a rib after falling several feet through a trapdoor during a performance of Wicked, and Groundhog Day's Andy Karl, who tore his anterior cruciate ligament onstage (Considine, 2019). But aside from the injuries that make the news, there is also an alleged culture of silence around the subject of theatrical injuries, particularly among emerging artists working on smaller-scale productions. While some of these reported injuries were due to accidents, many actors report suffering from repetitive strain injuries which are likely due to the overuse of their bodies and an inability or failure to rest or consult a doctor (Considine, 2019). Recognizing the demand for more support for actors’ physical wellbeings, the Actor’s Equity Association (AEA) finally announced in 2017 that it would provide physical therapy for those performing in shows longer than eight weeks and who are involved in significant choreography (Hetrick, 2017). While this is certainly a victory for professional actors, it is noteworthy that there are still no mental health services provided by the AEA.

Research indicates that actors are more vulnerable than the general population to depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and eating disorders (Maxwell et al., 2015; Robb et al., 2016). Furthermore, while actors experience a plethora of work-related stressors, few appear to actively seek help, although it should be noted that the available empirical literature is sparse. A
2015 survey by ArtsMinds, an information hub for people working in creative industries, found that only 20% of adults working in the entertainment industry have actively sought mental health treatment, as opposed to 42% of the U.S. adult population in 2017 (Love, 2018). Forty-six percent of the respondents described the state of their mental health as either poor or average. Australian actors in Robb and colleagues’ (2016) study made comparisons between their struggles and the suffering of others, with participants concluding that their suffering did not merit help-seeking. Additionally, the perceived specialness of choosing to follow the dream of being an actor translated into the belief that the psychological costs should be dealt with alone. In the words of one participant: “You don’t deserve help, because you’ve brought this upon yourself” (Robb et al., 2016, p.81).

When the interviews for the current study were completed, actors were also facing severe economic uncertainty due the COVID-19 pandemic. In April 2020, the U.S. economy lost 20.5 million jobs and the unemployment rate soared to 14.7%, both record highs (Davidson, 2020). Unemployment has reached virtually every corner of the entertainment industry. By some estimates at least 120,000 Hollywood crew members had lost their jobs, and more than 100,000 actors were out of work (Horn, 2020). The closure of Broadway, which began in March 2020, led producers to shut down several productions, including Disney’s “Frozen”, “Hangmen” and “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf”. With more than 51,000 members, the Actors Equity Association called for emergency aid for the arts and entertainment world following the Broadway shutdown. Although the exact data on actor unemployment is not yet clear, life drastically changed for actors; auditions were cancelled, callbacks postponed, and productions halted. Even survival jobs, such as working in child care, catering, and restaurant work, were no longer reliable ways of earning money, as these industries were also affected by the pandemic.
While other professionals transitioned to working from home, most actors unfortunately did not have this luxury, as the very nature of their profession required them to be in close contact with others.

**Marginalized identities.** The acting community is not a monolith, and it is important to discuss how the experiences of women and members of minority ethnic and racial groups differ from their White male counterparts. Representation in the entertainment industry, for example, is not equitable among different groups. The ongoing underrepresentation of women and members of ethnic and racial minorities has been extensively documented in the U.S. film, television, and theater arenas (Chatto, 2018). While there is a common thread that there have been significant strides in representation for marginalized communities in the entertainment industry, work remains to be done. The minority share of the U.S. population is growing by about half a percent each year, constituting nearly 40 percent in 2017; however, according to the most recent Hollywood Diversity Report (2019), people of color remained underrepresented on every Hollywood employment front from 2016-2017, with a ratio of 2 to 1 among film leads, 3 to 1 among film directors, and 5 to 1 among film writers. Furthermore, women, who constitute more than half of the U.S. population, also remained underrepresented with a ratio of less than 2 to 1 among film leads, 4 to 1 among film directors, and 4 to 1 among film writers. Similarly, an examination of the 1,000 top-grossing films produced and distributed in the U.S. between 2016 and 2017 found that women directed only 4 percent of the films and members of racial and ethnic minority groups directed just 5 percent (Chatoo, 2018). A lack of diversity is also rampant in the theater world; a report released by the Asian American Performers Coalition found that 86.8 percent of all shows in the 2016-2017 season were written by white playwrights and that the roles filled by minority actors dropped to 33 percent from a record high of 35 percent the
previous year (Chatoo, 2018). The report highlights that not only are actors of color underrepresented on stage, but they are also more likely than white actors to be cast in chorus roles as opposed to principal roles.

A well-developed body of research establishes the importance of reflecting gender and racial and ethnic diversity on film and television (Chatoo, 2018; Merskin, 1988; Ohye & Daniel, 1999). The media’s underrepresentation or near-total absence of portraying certain groups has been termed symbolic annihilation by some writers (Merskin, 1998). By rarely or never showing certain types of persons, the mass media systematically dispense with imagery and messages associated with these types of persons and, in the process, send a symbolic message to viewers about the societal value of the persons comprising that group (Chatoo, 2018). As one top industry film critic noted in the wake of recent #OscarSoWhite media coverage, diversity and representation in the media matter because:

“When we praise and reward certain stories or images, whether by big box office or gold statuary, we reveal what we as a society value, the kinds of people we find interesting, the characteristics we revere and revile. We show the paths we hope to choose or avoid and the lessons we have learned, or not learned, from history (Chatoo, 2018, para. 1)”.

Even when cast in a production, minority actors often continue to face challenges in the form of racism. In June 2020, more than 300 theater artists – black, Indigenous, and people of color – published a scathing statement addressed to “White American Theater” decrying racial injustice in the industry (Paulson, 2020). Penned in the wake of George Floyd’s murder and against the backdrop of the global Black Lives Matter movement, the letter touched on several different points, including tokenism, the co-opting of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) work, failures to make changes in leadership and programming despite claiming anti-
racist practices, the continued promotion of anti-blackness, and unchecked white privilege over the safety of BIPOC artists. The signatories include the Pulitzer Prize winners Lynn Nottage, Suzan-Lori Parks, Quiara Alegría Hudes and Lin-Manuel Miranda; the film and television stars Viola Davis and Blair Underwood; and many Tony Award winners, including the actor and director Ruben Santiago-Hudson and the playwright David Henry Hwang, who is the chair of the American Theater Wing (Paulson, 2020). Signed, “The Ground We Stand On,” the authors decried, “We have watch you exploit us, shame us, diminish us, and exclude us. We see you” (The Ground We Stand On, 2020). The statement came at a time when most American theaters were closed, and many actors unemployed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Within 24 hours of their call to action, their website received 80,000 unique visitors and 50,000 signatures demanding substantive change in the American theater (The Ground We Stand On, 2020).

Alcohol and Substance Use

Research suggests that in response to the occupational pressures they face, many actors actively self-medicate with drugs and alcohol (Maxwell et al., 2015). Maxwell and colleagues (2015) asked 782 actors whether they ever used a variety of substances in direct response to performance-related problems, and not in a recreational context. 37% reported using alcohol in response to problems related to their work as a performer; 13% reported using prescribed anti-depressants, including Prozac or Paxil; 8% reported using prescribed anti-anxiety drugs such as Xanax; 11% had used marijuana; 7% reported using illegal drugs such as cocaine, ecstasy or LSD; 29% reported using no substances or medication.

Alcohol use in particular has been suggested as being a problematic, albeit complex, means of coping. Researchers suggest that reliance on alcohol appears to be a coping response to the occupational strains of the profession, yet is also associated with forms of socializing linked
to the work (Maxwell et al., 2015; Robb et al., 2016). 43% of actors reported the use of alcohol as a means of unwinding and socializing after a performance (Maxwell et al., 2015). However, the study also found that actors were using alcohol at levels well above the World Health Organization’s guidelines for healthy consumption. Furthermore, male actors in the study consumed alcohol at levels significantly higher than female actors, yet both male and female participants reported alcohol consumption at potentially harmful levels. Robb and colleagues (2016) lent qualitative support to these findings, demonstrating that actors frequently used alcohol in order to unwind after a performance. Participants in this study described a professional culture of drinking significant amounts of alcohol at the end of a day’s rehearsal, after individual performances, while attending other people’s shows, while on tour, and during other arts events such as festivals. Participants in this study pointed out several benefits of drinking, including social support and building employment networks. However, significant negative impacts of drinking were also disclosed, such as performing while intoxicated and long-term alcohol dependence. Describing this ambivalent relationship, one participant explained:

Those that don’t drink feel a sense of being isolated from the social fabric of the industry... I’ve worked with actors that sort of have been drunk onstage and it’s a lifetime of social drinking that they’ve not been able to manage and control late in their career.

(p.80)

Research also suggests that LGBTQ individuals are at a greater risk for substance use disorders than the cisgender, heterosexual population, due to proximal stressors (e.g., self-stigma, expectations of rejection) and distal stressors (e.g., interpersonal and structural discrimination) (Hoard, 2020). It is noteworthy to highlight the experiences of drag and nightclub performers, who identify with a wide range of gender and sexual identities, and whose
popularity and visibility has increased due to the rise of shows like *RuPaul's Drag Race* (McDermott, 2018). The working conditions of a drag artist can often serve as a trigger for alcohol and substance abuse. Unlike the cisgender, heterosexual population, LGBTQ individuals have historically been limited to gathering in bars and clubs, where alcohol is readily available. Furthermore, drag performers are often supplied with free alcohol and drugs by guests and venue staff. In an interview with BOA, a contestant on *Canada’s Drag Race*, she states, “it’s tough for queens to avoid spiraling into excessive drug and alcohol use because queer culture, and especially drag culture, is deeply connected to gathering in physical spaces that encourage the consumption of substances” (Hoard, 2020).

While many actors may use drugs and alcohol as a means of coping with the extreme demands of the career, some actors may also use them as a source of inspiration. Knafo (2008) noted that artists may make use of substances in order to perceive life through a new, altered lens. Drugs and alcohol may be a source of inspiration for some, stimulating productivity, enthusiasm, and sensitivity, while also reducing inhibition. Kahoud and Knafo (2019) outlined the Western history of creativity and addiction, which dates to at least the nineteenth century, when opium and opium-based products were widely used by French and English writers and poets. The Hashish Club (1844-1849), for example, included Parisian writers and poets such as Balzac, Dumas, Flaubert, and Baudelaire, which met on a monthly basis in order to explore the effects of opium on creativity (Kahoud & Knafo, 2019). While the club’s activities largely remain undocumented, the members were both enthusiastic about the intoxicating and stimulating qualities of the drug, yet also recognized the danger in dependency. The French poet Gautier explained, “After a dozen experiments, we gave up forever this intoxicating drug, not
that it hurt us physically, but the true writer needs only his natural dreams, and he does not like his thought to be influenced by any agent” (Tilly, 2011).

Kahoud & Knafo (2019) also described how alcohol and drug use extends to the American creative tradition. In the early twentieth century, many well-renowned American writers were alcoholics, including Edgar Allan Poe, Truman Capote, E. E. Cummins, and Jack Kerouac. Indeed, 70 percent of the Nobel Prize-winning American authors have been alcoholics (Kahoud & Knafo, 2019). Drug addiction was also particularly widespread among rock and jazz musicians, which included the likes of Louis Armstrong, Ray Charles, Jimi Hendrix, Elvis Presley, and Jim Morrison – many of whom died because of their drug addiction (Kahoud & Knafo, 2019).

What then explains this relationship between alcohol and drug use among creative individuals? Among artists, it is not uncommon to hear pronouncements of its inspirational qualities. In the words of Stephen King, “the main effect of the grain or the grape on the creative personality is that it provides the necessary newness and freshness, without which creative writing does not occur” (Goodwin, 1988, p.187, as cited in Kahoud & Knafo, 2019). How the connection is understood by the scientific community, however, is less well understood.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, Kris (1962) stated that creative work can be understood to have two distinct phases. The first phase is “inspirational” where the artist is passively present in the process. Kris described this phase as having much in common with regressive processes in terms of id impulses and drives, and difficult to achieve under normal circumstances. During this phase, the artist may experience feelings of rapture and of being driven by outside forces. In the second “elaboration” phase, the artist uses such conscious ego functions as the analysis of reality and logic. This phase requires concentration, purposive
planning, and problem solving. What was originally passively received in the first phase is now reconstructed in the second phase and made understandable to others. The use of substances may play a role in both phases of the creative process. Artists may use substances in order to find inspiration by stimulating their experiences and reaching regressive states. On the other hand, specific psychoactive substance may help in the reorganization of the unconscious material uncovered during the inspirational phase (Iszáj, Griffiths, and Demetrovics, 2016).

In a comprehensive review of the literature on creativity and psychoactive substance use, Iszaj and colleagues (2016) reviewed current published empirical publications and case reports in peer-reviewed journals that focus on the relationship between psychoactive substances and creative artistic process. The researchers identified a total of 19 studies that met their inclusion and exclusion criteria and explained that the results were difficult to summarize due to the different research questioned asked, the diversity of methods, different samples applied, and the various substances examined. Despite the limited agreement, most of the studies confirmed some sort of association between creativity and psychoactive substance use, though the nature relationship is not clearly established. The review of the relevant studies did suggest that substance use is more characteristic in those with higher creativity than in other populations, however, there is no evidence of a direct contribution of psychoactive substances to enhance creativity in artists. Rather, substances act *indirectly* by enhancing experiences and sensitivity, and by loosening conscious processes that might have an influence on the creative process (Iszaj et al., 2016).

**Personality Profiles of Actors**

While the literature suggests that there is no single “actor personality profile”, a number of researchers have attempted to identify traits that distinguish professional actors from non-
actors. In the 1970’s and 1980’s, psychoanalytic research of actors suggested many negative and pathological stereotypes of actors. One study suggested that actors were more confused about their identities than various control groups (Henry & Sims, 1970). The researchers concluded that actors’ identity confusion was resolved through rehearsing plays and that their need to perform was motivated by a desire to establish a clear sense of identity that had not been fully developed in childhood. Other researchers declared actors to be intellectually above average, while having poorly integrated, largely hysteric and schizoid personalities (Barr, Langs, Holt, Goldberg, and Klen, 1972). Pathologizing actors, the researchers theorized that they were more exhibitionistic, passive, vulnerable to stress, over-anxious and narcissistic than most, and had pent-up aggression as well as impaired body images. They identified actors’ major defenses as regression, projection, denial, isolation, and reaction formation (Barr et al., 1972).

While some of the early research presents an unflattering interpretation of actors’ personality traits, later studies questioned the directionality of these findings, and posited these pathogenic qualities were instead a product of the eccentricities and vagaries of the acting profession itself. The seemingly neurotic profiles of actors can be seen as the result of intense competition, constant close surveillance, high unemployment, and the temporary nature of the work (Layder, 1981).

Later studies took a less pathologizing approach to studying the personalities of actors, and consistently found that actors were high on extraversion and typically find social attention rewarding (Hammond & Edelmann, 1991; Marchant-Haycox & Wilson, 1992). In addition to higher levels of extraversion, Nettle (2006) found that professional actors were distinguished in their openness, agreeableness, and by a strong empathizing cognitive style. Empathy, in particular, has been shown in many studies to be higher among professional actors than non-
actors (Hammond & Edelmann, 1991). It would stand to reason that by repeatedly assuming various roles over a course of a career, actors must be able to identify and understand the motivations, beliefs, and emotions of the characters they are portraying. Furthermore, in order to effectively communicate the emotions of a character to an audience, an actor must feel the character’s emotions themselves. The research on empathy in actors, however, is mixed, and will be further discussed in the following section.

Although high levels of empathy and openness are valuable tools in the process of acting, adopting others’ personalities and intense emotional experiences also carries an element of emotional risk. Actors appear to be more vulnerable to past traumatic experiences, as painful experiences can be triggered by the associated emotions brought forth in their work (Geer, 1993). The following section will explore in greater depth the psychological risks actors face in when taking on a role.

The Psychological Effects of Acting

How an actor takes on a role varies greatly, and the available empirical research related to the experience is limited. Generally speaking, most approaches to acting involve identifying the given circumstances of a character (e.g., the facts provided about the character, the time and place of the action, etc.) and then drawing upon one’s lived experiences and imagination to effectively identify with the character. Preparation also occurs on both psychological and physical levels (Hannah et al., 1994). On the psychological level, actors develop a sense of mastery over the character’s inner word (their emotional states, motivations, and life narratives) to convincingly portray their character in performance. Indeed, it is not uncommon to hear actors assert that they know more about their characters than they do about themselves (Hannah et al., 1994).
Through the rehearsal process, actors develop the physical aspects of the performance, including the necessary facial expressions and postures needed to convey the right emotions, and learning where the body needs to be on stage at a particular time. Additionally, actors are frequently cast in roles that require them to transform their bodies, which often includes significant changes to their weight. Jake Gyllenhaal, for example, lost 30 pounds for his role in the 2014 film “Nightcrawler.” In an interview with Variety, Gyllenhaal described going on 15-mile runs and eating as little as possible in order to lose the weight. “I would try to eat as few calories as possible,” said Gyllenhaal. “I knew if I was hungry that I was in the right spot. Physically, it showed itself, but chemically and mentally, I think it was even a more fascinating journey. It became a struggle for me” (Acuna, 2019). In her role for the 2010 psychological thriller “Black Swan,” Natalie Portman reported being on a carrots-and-almonds diet to lose 20 pounds for her role as a ballerina. Portman explained, “There were some nights that I thought I was literally going to die. It was the first time I understood how you could get wrapped up in a role that it could sort of take you down” (Acuna, 2019).

Recognizing the extreme ways in which actors prepare for and take on a role, it is not surprising that a widespread belief has been found in both the existing literature and in popular culture that actors are psychologically affected in some way by the process of acting (Burkhart, 2018; Kogan, 2002). However, the available empirical research related to the psychological effects of taking on a role is limited and somewhat inconsistent. Goldstein and Bloom (2011) acknowledge that generally there has been a one-way relationship between the field of psychology and acting, in that actors have utilized the field of psychology to inform character development, while scarce psychological research has been completed with actors as a sample.
Positive effects of taking on a role. Several studies have identified the psychological benefits in taking on a role. Burgoyne and colleagues (1999) interviewed 15 university theater students and recent graduates as a part of a qualitative study exploring how actors were affected by acting. The participants described their positive experience with acting, which included improved sensitivity, empathy, awareness, sense of identity, self-understanding, and interpersonal skills. In a study comparing actors to non-actors in theory of mind skill and empathy, Goldstein and Winner (2009) found somewhat contradictory evidence to Burgoyne’s (1999) findings on actors’ improved levels of empathy. The researchers found evidence that actors had more advanced levels of social sensitivity and theory of mind skills than non-actors, but did not have higher measures of empathy. Theory of mind was assessed through a measure consisting of a 15-minute film, divided into 43 different clips, with each clip having one or two questions about the characters’ beliefs, intentions, and emotions. The actors in this study performed better in this task than non-actors and demonstrated a stronger ability in imagining the precise mental states underlying these filmed interactions. The researchers hypothesized that these strengths in theory of mind may be fostered by the experience of acting and through acting training, as actors must understand the underlying mental and emotions states of their characters in order to portray them in a convincing manner. They note that causality may work in the opposite direction, however, as the stage may attract those who already skilled in social sensitivity and theory of mind. However, contrary to Burgoyne’s (1999) findings, the actors did not perform better on measures of empathy. One explanation the researchers provide is that the experience of continuously feeling others’ emotions is emotionally exhausting and actors may need to regulate or even shut down their empathic reactions in order to successfully perform. Another possible explanation they offer is that actors may focus more on the analysis of
emotional states than on feeling empathy. In the words of one participant: “I’m having a
discussion with someone and they’re really having an emotional kind of experience and I’m
listening and I’m being empathetic, but at the back of my mind I’m like, my God, that’s so
interesting” (Goldstein & Winner, 2009, p.128).

The English film actor and comedian Peter Sellers is one example of an actor who
appeared to struggle significantly in his personal life, yet reportedly reaped temporary
psychological benefits when performing. Sellers’s versatility enabled him to portray a wide
range of comic characters using different accents and guises, and he would often assume
multiple roles within the same film, frequently with contrasting temperaments and styles.
However, in Seller’s personal life, he struggled with depression and substance use, and behaved
in erratic and compulsive ways, frequently at odds with directors and co-stars. Furthermore,
Sellers experienced chronic feelings of emptiness and even claimed to have no identity outside of
the roles he played:

I have no personality of my own whatsoever to offer the public. I have nothing to project.
When I look at myself I just see a person who strangely lacks what I consider to be the
ingredients for a personality. If you asked me to play myself, I wouldn't know what to do.
(Ebert, 1980)

However, when developing a role, Sellers described a profound transformation:

I work on the voice… after that I establish how the character walks. Very important, the
walk. And suddenly something strange happens. The person takes over. I stare at my own
image in the mirror waiting for the other fellow, the man I’m going to portray to emerge
– to stare back at me. And then it happens. I have the feeling that the film character enters
my body as if I were a kind of medium. (Peter Sellers Dies in London at 54, 1980)
According to Sellers, in taking on a role, he was able to achieve through his characters what he desperately lacked in his personal life: clarity, stability, and a sense of purpose. For Sellers the benefits of taking on a role were perhaps only temporary, lasting only as long as the cameras were rolling. Though acting may not have helped Sellers become more empathic or sociable in his interpersonal relationships, it perhaps offered him a sorely needed respite from chronic identity diffusion.

Another way to explore the ways in which acting can have psychological benefits, is to explore how the use of creative and expressive process have been used as an instrument in achieving psychotherapeutic goals. By analyzing creative arts therapies and their psychological benefits, one may attempt to draw conclusions about the similar creative processes found in the acting world. One such approach, drama therapy, involves the intentional and systematic use of drama and theater processes as a clinical intervention to achieve psychological growth and change within a psychotherapeutic relationship (Feniger-Schall & Orkibi, 2019). Feniger-Schall & Orkibi (2017) made a valuable contribution by conducting a systematic review of drama therapy intervention studies published in the preceding decade. The researchers identified the different approaches used in drama therapy, which include role play/role theory, storytelling/narradrama, and developmental transformation.

Role play or role theory, developed by Landy (2009), frames “role” as a personality concept. According to Landy, human experience can be conceptualized in terms of discrete patterns or “roles” of behavior that suggest a particular way of thinking, feeling, or acting. Landy suggested that role is an organizing construct, which serves to define an individual’s personality. A role is not a fixed entity but is capable of changing according to one’s life circumstances. A person’s ability to experience and express more roles, therefore, leads to a healthy balance and
management of this system. The purpose of role play, therefore, is to engage an individual in dramatic play in order to practice and play out different roles as a way to better cope with the complex nature of the human condition.

Storytelling or narradrama is a form of drama therapy in which an individual creates and tells stories or narratives in order to explore their personal issues (Dunne 2009; Gersie 1997). With a new perspective, clients can feel more empowered to make changes in their thought patterns and behaviors and rewrite their life stories. A drama therapist actively helps a client structure a coherent and meaningful narrative around their past life stories. The client is then encouraged to compare the old story with the new with the hope that they will develop more personal agency and awareness of the ways in which they can reshape their lives (Dunne, 2009).

Developmental transformations (DvT) is a method of drama therapy which assumes that the very experience of being alive creates moments of turbulence and instability (Reynolds, 2011). In attempting to cope with this instability, people develop patterns of behaviors that over time become fixed and rigid. Through DvT, participants are able to play and improvise with others as a means to explore and release new patterns of behaviors. DvT encourages participants to choose new alternatives and gain new insights into old behaviors and situations. Because one cannot force the world to change and become safer and more predictable, participants in DvT work to develop a greater capacity to tolerate the unknown and to respond in a way that is more authentic and satisfying.

It is important, however, to not overemphasize the psychological advantages of taking on a role. While the literature details such benefits as an increase in empathy and a greater sense of purpose, there is also a great deal written about the many physical and psychological risks of acting.
**Negative effects of taking on a role.** While the potential risks of going “too deep” into a character have become common lore, especially among those in the acting profession, few studies in the scientific community have attempted to study these effects (Burkhart, 2018). The negative effects of taking on a role typically fall into two categories: the impact of prolonged negative emotional states and the impact of diffuse self-character boundaries. Geer (1993) described the prolonged negative states actors experience as “not feeling like their usual selves after a performance” and “having difficulty letting go of the emotional content in their performance”. The notion that the emotional content of a performance can have an effect on the actor’s own emotions has led some researchers to consider the possibility that various types of psychological traumatization can occur in actors. Burkhart (2018) noted that the descriptions in the literature suggest that traumatization can happen directly, through triggering an actor’s personal traumatic history (i.e., retraumatization), or indirectly, as a result of portraying or witnessing traumatic events in performance (i.e., secondary trauma). The author described that the trauma responses in actors have presented as both states of hyperarousal and dissociative symptoms. Burkhart (2018) suggested that the acting community may be ill-equipped to recognize when an actor is traumatized, retraumatized, and/or experiencing secondary traumatic stress, as acting teachers and directors may not be trained to recognize or support these responses.

The potential negative effects related to the self-character boundary have also been researched, with Hannah and colleagues (1994) noting that when actors embed aspects of their own lives, personalities, and experiences into their character, there is a risk in over-identifying with the character. Furthermore, actors may have difficulty identifying the line between self and role and may also bring their personal issues, rather than the character’s, onto the stage.
Heath Ledger is one example of an actor whose mental and physical health reportedly suffered from taking on a role. Ledger’s portrayal of the Joker in the 2008 blockbuster film “The Dark Knight” earned him accolades from critics and audiences alike. In order to transform into the role, however, Ledger physically and emotionally pushed himself, at one point isolating himself for over a month (Lyall, 2007). Ledger also reportedly had a long history of sleep troubles, which become more prevalent after filming “The Dark Knight.” Speaking about his losing sleep during this time, Ledger explained in a New York Times profile: “Last week I probably slept an average of two hours a night. I couldn’t stop thinking. My body was exhausted, and my mind was still going” (Lyall, 2007). This interview took place several weeks before Ledger’s death – an accidental overdose of sleeping pills. For months before his death, Ledger reportedly continued to have trouble sleeping and was mixing sleeping pills with other prescription drugs in a desperate attempt to get some rest. While many unanswerable questions loom over the impact of his role as the Joker in Ledger’s death, what remains clear is his process’s physical and emotional toll. For Ledger, like many actors who fully immerse themselves into their roles, there appears to be detrimental psychological and physiological effects due to the lack of boundary between self and role.

**Method acting.** One acting technique that emphasizes the blurring of the professional and the personal is “Method acting.” Method acting is based upon the principles of the Russian actor and director Konstantin Stanislavsky, which requires an intricate level of commitment from an actor off the stage in order for them to produce genuine feelings during their performances. Stanislavsky advocated that actors who are preparing for a role that involves fear, for example, must remember something frightening and then act the part in the emotional space of the fear they once felt (“American Masters: Constantin Stanislavsky,” n.d). Actors who adopt this
technique must perform intense background research into the role and bring in own their personal experiences in order to make their performance more authentic and believable to an audience (Ferris, 2011). Studies have also suggested that Method actors can suffer as their everyday lives become overly enmeshed with the roles they are engrossed in (Davison & Furnham, 2018). These actors can experience a blurring of lines between their own personality and their characters’, although the effect appears to be only temporary.

Because actors (specifically those trained in the Method) are being asked to draw upon their own experience, the question arises over what actors perceive the costs and benefits are of having painful experiences to draw upon. On the one hand, an actor who has had more distressing experiences may believe that they are more effectively able to communicate a variety of emotions on stage. On the other hand, an actor may believe that their imagination is enough to create the inner world of a character, without having actually experienced the character’s intense emotions. Another question arises over whether actors believe that processing and resolving the source of their distress would interfere with their abilities to recreate these emotions on stage. Here is where the empirical research appears to be lacking; studying actors’ beliefs about the link between creativity and personal suffering and its effect on help-seeking behavior does not appear to be found in the existing literature. Indeed, Robb and colleagues (2016) noted that there is no research to date on psychological helping-seeking in actors. Instead, what exists is the myth in our society of the “tortured artist.”

The tortured artist. History is full of suffering creative geniuses. Artists of all types suffer greatly from emotional disorders such as depression and manic-depressive illness. Indeed, some of the most outstanding creative artists in history seem to have been afflicted by some significant degree of neurotic or psychotic depression and/or mania, including the poets Charles

The theory that one must suffer to produce something great dates to ancient times. Plato wrote that poets created their work during episodes of “divine madness” (Plato & Waterfield, 2002). Additionally, the Greek myth of Philoctetes tells the story of a wounded man who invents the bow and arrow after being excluded from society. While Philoctetes’ wound is the reason he is exiled, it is also seen as the catalyst of his invention (Banymadhub, 2018). The myth of the tortured artist may also have roots in Western society’s strong emphasis on the Protestant work ethic; work is required to be difficult, taxing, and demanding. Barker and colleagues (2009) posit that in order for artists to legitimately claim their art is legitimate, then many believe the art must involve pain and sacrifice. If not, then, their art is at risk of being devalued and regarded as a mere hobby.

The limited research that exists on helping-seeking behaviors in actors portrays a life in which suffering is often idealized and experienced largely alone. Actors describe a professional culture in which they are expected to look after themselves and to leave their personal issues “at the door” (Robb et al., 2016). Additionally, actors express that they are not deserving of help and that the psychological costs of being an actor should be dealt with alone. Actors have also reported shame in seeking help, due to a fear of appearing less capable than other artists (Barker et al, 2009). This theme is echoed in Alford and Szanto’s (1996) work on pianists, who also experienced strong disincentives to acknowledge and seek help for the physical pain they experienced. Describing actors as the “forgotten patients,” Brandfonbrenner (1992) reported that actors are known for neglecting medical treatment until their situation becomes dire. The
the paradoxical nature of this situation is clear; due to the occupational hazards, actors may be more vulnerable to mental health issues, yet they appear to be less likely to seek help.

Nonetheless, the connection between psychological disturbances and creativity is too strong to be dismissed. Diamond (1996), a psychologist and former student of the existential psychologist Rollo May, describes the relationship between creativity and psychopathology, positing that “creativity is the child of conflict” (p.184). Diamond (1996) broadly defined creativity as the “constructive utilization of the daimonic” (p.184). The term Greek term daimonic was initially repurposed by May (1969) as “any natural function which has the power to take over the whole person. Sex and Eros, anger and rage, and the craving for power are examples. The daimonic can be either creative or destructive and is normally both” (p.123). Therefore, creativity – be it the creativity of an artist, a psychotherapist, or a psychotherapy patient – can be understood to some degree as the subjective struggle to give form, structure, and constructive expression to inner and outer chaos and conflict (Diamond, 1996). Art from the perspective of a spectator can similarly be experienced as cathartic, as it stimulates the viewers denied or dormant urges. Writes Diamond (1996), “Great art is art that makes us feel angry, anxious, scared, sexual, sad, serene, inspired, awed, or joyful; it piques the passions, while simultaneously transmuting and thus transcending them via the sublime creative processes.”

Diamond (1996) also claims that many artists are aware of the relationship between their creativity and inner conflict, specifically around feelings of rage. It is their rage that, when redirected and channeled into their work, gives it the intensity and passion that performing artists such as actors and actresses seek. The acting of Al Pacino, Robert DeNiro, Jack Nicholson and Jessica Lange, he notes, are good examples. These artists have learned how to harness the power and intensity of their own rage (among other demonic emotions), deliberately tapping into their
personal demons to animate and intensify their acting. Diamond (1996) also notes that anxiety, like anger or rage, is another experience closely connected to creativity. Anxiety, he writes, can be thought of as one of the demons one does not want to deal with, and so it is either denied or avoided. Furthermore, anxiety is related to the fear of the unknown, of the unconscious, and of death. Creativity, therefore, requires making use of this existential anxiety. One can either attempt to avoid this anxiety or face it head on and confront that which underlies the anxiety. In the words of Diamond, “that which we had previously run from and rejected, turns out to be a redemptive source of vitality, creativity, and spirituality” (p.181).

The goal for psychotherapy for creatives, according to Diamond (1996), should not be to eradicate existential anxiety, nor to drug or rationalize it out of existence. Rather, the therapist’s role should be to awake and confront one’s inner demons and help the patient recognize that they are a part of their identity and a part of their creative process. However, according to Diamond (1996), there is a fear among many artists that therapy may interfere with their creative process. The poet Rainer Maria Rilke, for example, dropped out of analysis after only a few sessions, fearing, that if his demons were forced into the light, he would become less creative. These fears, that one’s creative processes may be interrupted or obstructed, may keep actors from attending therapy consistently, if at all.

**Psychotherapy and Acting: Overlapping Processes and Goals**

As outlined above, there are many consequences of taking on a role, including improved sensitivity, empathy, awareness, sense of identity, self-understanding, and interpersonal skills, as well as the potential risks of going “too deep” into a character and the blurring of lines between self and character. Much has also been written about the overlap between psychology and the arts, specifically psychoanalysis and other dynamic therapies (Marcus & Marcus, 2010). Many
of the creative processes and goals present in the arts can also be found in the therapy room, including creating a more authentic and “real” life or character. The following section will therefore outline the overlap between psychodynamic therapies and the arts and will address the implications for actors’ attitudes towards treatment.

**Theater and psychoanalysis.** For Freud, the main goal of psychoanalysis was to develop the capacity to love and to creatively and productively work, without being hampered by neuroses. In Freud’s words, he hoped to “transform neurotic misery into ordinary unhappiness” (Freud, 1895, p. 305, cited in Marcus & Marcus, 2010). For Freud, and for many subsequent practitioners of psychoanalysis, the main clinical goal has been roughly the same – profound characterological change. An analysand seeking to transform his or her personality must undergo the onerous process of self-exploration in order to gain a new perspective on life and of “internal and external reality, personal truth, one’s relationship with one’s emotions, and one’s moral outlook” (Marcus & Marcus, 2010). In effect, transforming one’s personality allows one to act more effectively in the world, by loving more deeply and working more creatively and effectively. Marcus and Marcus (2010) suggest that the goals of psychoanalysis (i.e., characterological change) are analogous with the goals of theatrical performance. An actor, they argue, is taught to gain insight into their emotional, intellectual, and physical being in order to translate their internal experiences into actions put on display for an audience. In the words of one of Stanislavski’s favorite actors, Vasily Toporkov (1979), “the creation of a really living person – this is the goal of high art” (p.218, as cited in Marcus & Marcus 2010).

One shared ingredient between the acting and therapy world is the emphasis on “the real.” What is real, however, is not always agreed upon. In the psychoanalytic community, for example, there is little consensus over what constitutes the term “reality.” For Freud, the “reality
principle” referred to the fact that the goal of analysis was for the patient to be able to relinquish illusion in favor of reality. Reality in this context refers to the patient’s ability to be able to distinguish what is “internal reality,” such as one’s thoughts or fantasies, from “external reality,” or what is perceived by one’s sensory organs as outside of oneself. Other analysts believe that reality is an absolute and objective description of the physical world, while others maintain that reality is a mutable and subjective description of one’s experiences (Marcus & Marcus, 2010). In light of the lack of a shared definition of reality, psychodynamic therapies share the common goal of making sense of one’s life in order to better navigate the “real.”

In the world of the theater, actors, particularly those in the Stanislavski tradition, are also in constant pursuit of embodying and communicating “reality”. As actor Vsevolod I. Pudovkin (1893-1953) noted, “The final object of the actor and his performance is to convey to the spectator a real person, or at least a person who conceivably exists in reality. But at the same time, all the while he is creating this image, the actor none the less remains a live, organically whole self” (Cole & Chinoy, 1954, pp. 455-456, as cited in Marcus & Marcus, 2010). The actor, similar to the analysand, is focused on the internal experiences, the motives, and given circumstances of their character, which then become expressed in external behavior. Stanislavski explained that the ultimate goal of acting is to accurately portray the human condition, without inhibition or tension (or what is commonly known in the acting world as “over-acting” or “indicating”).

Similar to the pursuit of “reality” is the shared theme of “fidelity to truth” in both the world of psychoanalysis and theater. In the world of psychoanalysis, much has been written about living a more truthful life, beginning with Freud’s writings on “correspondence theory.” In the words of Freud (1933), “The correspondence with the real external world we call ‘truth.’ It
remains the aim of scientific work.” Since Freud, different definitions of truth have emerged in the psychoanalytic community. Winnicott, for example, distinguished between the “true self” and the “false self.” Winnicott used the term true self to describe a sense of self based on spontaneous authentic experience and a feeling of being alive. The false self, by contrast, Winnicott saw as a defensive façade which results in a lack of spontaneity and feelings of emptiness (Mitchell & Black, 1995). While psychoanalysts can have different definitions of “truth,” most can agree on a definition that deeply resonates with acting theory, namely that personal truths reflect deep inner convictions, often rooted in identification with loved or admired person, and is tended to be judged as adaptive as opposed to defensive (Marcus & Marcus, 2010).

Indeed, there may be no more important lesson in acting than learning how to “live truthfully and fully under the imaginary circumstances of the play,” a refrain which can be heard from virtually every major acting teacher in the world (Meisner & Longwell, 1987). Michael Chekhov (1991), a student of Stanislavski and a teacher of many famous actors including Marilyn Monroe and Clint Eastwood, outlines the many aspects and types of truth that exist on stage. First, there is psychological truth, which is the kind of truth analysts are most aware of, where one’s words and actions reflect one’s “true self,” and in which one is able to be both spontaneous and authentic. There is also being true to the given circumstances of a playwright’s words, which in psychological parlance can be thought of as context-dependent or setting-specific behavior (Marcus & Marcus, 2010). “Historical truth” refers to capturing the sense of style of the age and period-specific aspects of the setting in which a play takes place. “Stylistic truth” refers to the need for actors to reflect the specific style of the play, be it tragedy, comedy, drama, or farce. There is also being true to the character, which means being receptive to what
the character is showing you about itself. Finally, Chekhov highlights the “truth of relationship…the often subtle differences and attitudes of one character to each of the other characters around him” (p. xxxix). Indeed, acting is a profoundly relational endeavor, which demands being able to engage openly with one’s fellow actors, their characters, the script, the director, the playwright, the props, and an audience.

**The Alexander technique.** In order to effectively communicate the “truth” of a character, a significant part of an actor’s training includes a heightened awareness of the ways in which they use their bodies. An actor may, for example, have a tendency to unconsciously furrow their brow or clench their jaw, habits which may not be appropriate for the character they are trying to portray. In the words of Stanislavski (1936), “As long as you have this physical tenseness you cannot even think about delicate shadings of feeling or the spiritual life of your part. Consequently, before you attempt to create anything it is necessary for you to get your muscles in proper condition, so that they do not impede your actions” (p.95). Today, many actors, particularly those training in graduate schools, study a form of movement training known as the Alexander Technique, a form of body work which seeks to educate its pupils to use their bodies more efficiently in everyday movement (Tarr, 2011). The key process in the Technique is the inhibition of the initial desire to react to a particular stimulus, in order to consider and apply conscious control to the response. Many of the lessons include activities such as standing and sitting from a chair, and are generally concluded by “table work,” in which pupils lie on a table and their bodies are passively manipulated by the teacher.

The use of the Alexander Technique has extended beyond the stage and is often categorized as a form of complementary and alternative medicine and therapy (Tarr, 2010). While the Technique has received little scientific and medical attention in terms of its efficacy,
its founder F.M. Alexander had always intended his work to be taken up by the medical profession (Tarr, 2011). The use of touch in the psychotherapy community, however, is complicated; while the use of touch is often presented as essential for growth and wellbeing, it simultaneously attracts caution and controversy (Jones & Glover, 2014). Research suggests that touch can induce positive hormonal changes, including increased levels of oxytocin and decreased levels of amylase, which has been linked to reduced stress levels and increased feelings of calm (Jones & Glover, 2014). Other studies have suggested that the Alexander Technique has psychological benefits including reduced depression, improved attitudes towards self, better coping with stress, increased confidence and control, reduced performance anxiety, and increased awareness and calm (Jones & Glover, 2014). Certain psychological theories also support the benefits of positive touch. The humanistic tradition, for example, promotes openness and genuine in the therapeutic relationship, with Rogers (1961) supporting the holding and embracing of clients. While touch has been demonstrated to be a powerful psychological tool, 90% of psychological therapies never or rarely use touch (Stenzel & Rupert, 2004 as cited in Jones & Glover, 2014). Reasons for this include the common psychoanalytic assertion that touch infers with a client’s transference, that it may break therapeutic and professional boundaries, and that it may re-traumatize those with histories of abuse (Bonitz, 2008). The information of how often and by whom the Alexander Technique (and other uses of touch) are used by psychotherapists is unfortunately limited, as much of the research on touch in psychotherapy is reported to be increasingly focused on ethical concerns rather than the theory and technique.

The sections above outline the similarities between acting and various psychotherapy approaches and suggests that this overlap impacts an actor’s attitude towards psychotherapy. This proposal, however, assumes that actors possess a certain degree of knowledge about the
processes and goals of psychotherapy. While there does not appear to be any literature assessing actors’ familiarity with psychotherapy, it is useful to explore one medium in which actors are exposed to what takes place between a therapist and patient: the media.

**Depictions of Mental Health in the Media**

In addition to examining the psychological benefits and costs of total immersion into a role, as well as the similarities between acting and psychotherapy, exploring the past and present depictions of mental health disorders by the entertainment industry is useful to understanding how an actor’s attitudes towards the relationship between creativity and mental health may be shaped. A large body of research indicates that the media plays a central role in informing the public about areas in which they do not possess direct knowledge (Happer & Philo, 2013). In these cases, the media can be especially influential in shaping an audiences’ individual beliefs and behaviors. Furthermore, research suggests that exposure to portrayals of mental illness in the media can impact stigma as well as help-seeking behaviors related to mental health (Pirkis, Blood, Francis, & MacCallum, 2006). The implications for actors are complex, however. Actors, like the rest of the population, consume media, and perhaps at even higher rates, as part of an actor’s preparation can involve researching performances as well as watching television shows that are actively auditioning. There is also nothing to suggest that actors are immune from having their attitudes and beliefs shaped by the media’s implicit messages. One question arises when considering this relationship: are the messages communicated about mental health and psychotherapy more salient when they come from inside one’s own industry? Might this be especially true if an actor has no prior experience with psychotherapy? To understand some of these internalized attitudes, the following section will explore the types of messages being communicated by the media.
In a comprehensive review of published literature on the portrayal of mental health in fictional films and television programs, Pirkis and colleagues (2006) suggested that on-screen portrayals of characters with a mental illness are frequent, generally negative, and have a cumulative effect on the likelihood of people with mental illness to seek appropriate help. In the first of several research questions, the researchers address the extent and nature of the portrayal of mental illness on screen. The researchers found that in the cases of both television and cinema, the portrayal was both extensive and overwhelmingly negative. Examples of the negative depictions include various technical filmic devices, such as close-up shots, discordant music, atmospheric lighting, and setting selection, used in order to indicate that characters with mental illness are different from other characters (Hyler, Gabbard, & Schneider, 1991). Furthermore, disparaging language (e.g., terms like “crazy,” “psycho,” “deranged”, and “loony”) were frequently used by other characters in reference to the character with a mental illness. The characters in question were also often given distinctive and unattractive features, such as rotting teeth or unruly hair (Pirkis et al., 2006). Researchers Hyler and colleagues (1991) categorized these negative portrayals into the following stereotypes:

- The homicidal maniac: The most commonly cited negative stereotype is that individuals with mental illness are hostile and dangerous to themselves and others and. Numerous studies have shown that violent acts are far more likely to be committed by fictional characters with mental illness than by other characters, and at rates that do not reflect real life (Hyler et al., 1991, Condren & Byrne, 2000).

- The rebellious free spirit: Many characterizations of individuals with mental illness depict them as eccentric, different, or free-spirited. Often these characters are also imprisoned (Hyler et al., 1991).
• The enlightened member of society: This stereotype, although less negative than some others, depicts people with mental illness as capable of creating a utopian society (Hyler et al., 1991).

• The female patient as seductress: This stereotype depicts female characters with mental illness as nymphomaniacs with seductive powers that can destroy men. These portrayals stigmatize women with mental illness, as they suggest that their problems are self-induced and that they deserve punishment rather than treatment (Hyler et al., 1991).

• The narcissistic parasite: Under this stereotype, individuals with mental illness are depicted as over-privileged and over-concerned with their trivial problems (Hyler et al., 1991).

• The zoo specimen: Finally, this stereotype depicts people with mental illness as dehumanized, without rights, and open to unqualified scientific observation.

Pirkis and colleagues (2006) noted that while historically negative stereotypes have been prevalent, there is evidence of more sympathetic portrayals in more recent years. The researchers cited a number of films that have been celebrated for portraying people with mental illness as articulate and witty. However, the researchers acknowledge that commentators do not always agree on what constitutes a positive portrayal. They use the example of the portrayal of the mathematical genius John Nash in A Beautiful Mind (2002). Some have applauded the depiction as constructive, demonstrating that people with mental illness can achieve great heights in their chosen profession. By contrast, others have criticized the same film for implying that individuals with mental illness will only succeed if they are exceptionally talented.

In addition to the portrayal of individuals with mental illness on screen, there have been extensive depictions of mental health professionals (primarily psychiatrists) on film and
television (Pirkis et al., 2006). Gabbard and Gabbard (2001) identified more than 400 films that feature a psychotherapist at work, while Diefenbach, Burns, and Schwartz (1998) observed that 10 out of 107 (9%) U.S. prime-time television programs in a one-week sample involved a mental health professional. It should be noted, however, that these studies were conducted roughly twenty years prior to this paper, and so the numbers have likely changed. The nature of these on-screen portrayals of mental health professionals were categorized into three types by Schneider (1997):

- Dr. Dippy: a comic character, characterized by a bumbling, idiotic, and incompetent manner.

- Dr. Evil: a sinister scientist, who is often outwardly charming but inwardly manipulative and malevolent. These types of fictional mental health professionals often confine patients against their will and breach patients’ trust.

- Dr. Wonderful: an attractive, selfless, dedicated, always available (to that extent that boundaries may be transgressed), and extremely skillful character (e.g., often implementing dramatic cures by concentrating on a single traumatic episode). This character also often does not have a life outside of their work. The Sopranos, for example, provides a Dr. Wonderful in the form of Dr. Melfi, who is readily available to the lead character (Mafia boss Tony Soprano), and who continues to treat him for more than four years despite comprising her ethics and endangering her life.

Pirkis (2006) noted that these on-screen portrayals of mental health professionals have been depicted negatively and have been set up to be ridiculed, feared, or treated with contempt. Even the Dr. Wonderfuls, who might be admired for their devotion and skill, have fatal flaws like over-involvement with their patients and chaotic personal lives. In a study of more than 400
films, Gabbard and Gabbard (2001) observed that in the past 30 years only three films have portrayed mental health professionals in a sympathetic manner, including the Oscar-nominated film, *Good Will Hunting* (1997). However, the researchers noted that the film’s portrayal remains open for debate as the therapist uses unorthodox methods, including roughing up his patient, which would have ethical and legal consequences in real life.

The historical on-screen depiction of female therapists has also been a source of controversy. Samuels (1985) notes how female therapists have often been depicted as unfulfilled, unable to maintain healthy relationships, and rejecting of children. Samuels (1985) also highlights the frequent depictions of the female therapist as sexual predator, who violates ethical prohibitions against sexual involvement with a client.

Numerous commentators have noted that representations of mental illness and mental health professionals in fictional films and television can negatively influence public opinion of mental illness, which in turn can perpetuate stigma (Pirkis, 2006; Hyler et al., 1991). These observations are supported by the findings that the entertainment media may exert a more powerful influence than news media on public opinion on mental illness (Pirkis, 2006). Results from studies that have examined the impact of specific films on attitudes towards mental illness further support this relationship. For example, Domino (1983) found that students who viewed *One Flew Over the Cuckoos’ Nest* (1975) demonstrated less positive attitudes towards mental illness than those who did not, and that these attitudes did not dissipate over time, even in the face of more positive screen portrayals.

In summary, viewers of fictional films and television programs are frequently confronted with negative depictions of mental illness, and these images have a cumulative effect on the public’s perception of people with mental illness. Consequently, people with mental illness, who
experience this stigma may be less likely to seek help. The consequences of the entertainment industry’s depiction of mental health may have noteworthy implications on actors, as they are a population with unique threats to their wellbeing and could likely benefit from mental health treatment.

**Personal Bias**

Prior to enrolling in a psychology doctoral program, I worked as a non-union, professional actor for approximately five years. While I worked across several platforms, including film, theater, and voice-over work, the majority of my acting work was in the theater. I spent several years working at The Flea Theater (an Off-Off-Broadway theater, in which actors not only worked for free, but were required to volunteer several additional hours each week helping to run the theater). My other work in the theater also required performing for free or receiving a small stipend (work which included several seasons at The Williamstown Theatre Festival, as well as numerous other Off-Off-Broadway productions).

Several years into my career, I began to wrestle with feelings of unhappiness, frustration, and uncertainty regarding my acting future; the work was inconsistent, the pay was minimal, I was dissatisfied with the quality of many productions, and I wasn’t confident that I was on a path towards “success.” I began seeing a psychotherapist and began to address many of these issues. While I hadn’t planned on leaving the acting world, therapy helped me bring more awareness to my conflicting feelings towards acting and provided me with a space where I was able to brainstorm other possible career paths.

**Method**

**Participants**
A sample of 12 adult, professional actors were recruited from the New York metropolitan area for this study. The number of participants was determined in order to meet theoretical saturation. To qualify for the study, participants were required to be over the age of 18, self-identify as a professional actor, and have worked in the profession for at least three years. Because acting typically involves working across multiple platforms, actors involved in any combination of theater, television, film, voiceover, and commercial work were eligible for the study. Efforts were made to include actors of varying ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

The sample included some diversity in race, ethnicity, age, and socioeconomic background. Of the twelve participants, six were male and six were female. Eight participants identified as White, two participants identified as Asian-American, one participant identified as Black, and one participant identified as Hispanic. Participants’ ages ranged from 22-56, with a mean age of 33.25. Two participants identified as upper-middle class, three participants identified as middle class, four participants identified as middle to lower class, and three participants identified as lower class. Demographic characteristics of the sample are displayed below in Table 1.

Table 1

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<td>6</td>
<td>(50)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
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<td>(50)</td>
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<tr>
<td>30-39</td>
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<td>(25)</td>
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<td>40-49</td>
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<td>(16.7)</td>
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<tr>
<td>50-59</td>
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<td>(8.3)</td>
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Design

This qualitative study utilized a demographic questionnaire as well as an individual interview in order to better understand actors’ beliefs about creativity, mental health, and mental health treatment. Interviews were audiotaped and then transcribed by the author and a team of coders. Following Auerbach and Silberstein’s (2003) grounded approach theory, the goal of this study was to allow the participants’ responses to unfold into meaningful patterns, thereby exposing themes surrounding the topic of interest. Coding of the participants’ responses were used to establish common themes, which were examined in order to create theoretical constructs.

Procedures

Convenience and snowball sampling were used to recruit 12 professional adult actors from the New York metropolitan area. The study was advertised via electronic methods on Backstage.com. The study was described as a research project aimed at better understanding actors’ beliefs on the connection between mental health and creativity (see Appendix A). Payment of $20.00 was offered to actors as an incentive to participate in the study. Participants were also able to contact the researcher via email or phone with questions.

Participants were screened prior to enrollment to ensure they meet all inclusion criteria. The screening consisted of the Inclusion/Demographic Questionnaire (see Appendix B). Before

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<tr>
<th>Racial/Ethnic Identity</th>
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<th>Percentage</th>
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<td>White/Caucasian</td>
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<td>Asian-American</td>
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<td>(16.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/African-American</td>
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<td>(8.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
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<td>(8.3)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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<td>(100)</td>
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<th>Percentage</th>
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<tr>
<td>Middle class</td>
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<td>Middle-lower class</td>
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<td>(33.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower class</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>(25)</td>
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any further data was collected from the participants, an informed consent (see Appendix C) was signed electronically. The consent form outlined that participation in the study was completely voluntary and that they were free to discontinue their participation at any time. Once a sample of 12 actors was reached, the researcher discontinued the screening process.

Once enrolled in the study, participants were interviewed online via Zoom. The researcher explained to each participant that the goal of the interview was for the participant to describe their experience as a professional actor, including the demands of an acting career, their techniques of coping with these demands, and their beliefs about the connection between mental health and creativity. Participants were then administered a semi-structured interview consisting of six open-ended questions with follow up questions administered as needed. The format of the semi-structured interview allowed for the collection of similar data from each participant. Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim by the researcher.

Measures

Inclusion/Demographic Questionnaire. (Appendix B) Participants were asked to report their name, age, gender, socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, the number of years they have considered themselves actors, the number of years they have been auditioning for roles, whether acting was their primary profession, the type of acting work they were involved in, and any other jobs they worked in addition to acting.

Individual Interview. The author conducted individual interviews with participants using the following questions as prompts with follow up questions used as needed:

1. What are your thoughts about the connection between mental health and creativity?
   
   a. Could you describe your experience for when you feel you are at your most creative?
b. Could you describe your experience for when you feel you are at your least creative?

2. Could you describe your process in creating a character?
   a. How did you arrive at the process?
   b. What was the favorite role you played? Why?
   c. What was the most challenging role you played? Why?

3. Do you believe being in therapy can affect one's creative process?
   a. In what way do you think therapy can be helpful with your creative process?
   b. Are there ways in which therapy can be harmful to your creative process?

4. Is therapy talked about in your acting community?
   a. Is mental health spoken about in the acting community?
   b. Have you gotten different messages from peers, directors, agents, teachers, etc.?
   c. Do you feel like the acting community supports actors’ mental health?
   d. Are there ways in which you wish you had more support from the acting community?

5. What are your thoughts on the “Myth of the Tortured Artist,” or the idea that suffering improves your acting?

6. How do you support your psychological wellbeing?

Data Analyses

This study used Auerbach and Silverstein’s (2003) grounded theory approach to data collection and analysis. Theoretical assumptions and hypotheses were avoided, with the goal being for the data to unfold into meaningful theoretical constructs. Individual, semi-structured interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed by the researcher. A team of three coders
joined the researcher in picking out relevant text from the interviews and then identifying repeating ideas and themes. (The coders were all graduate students in the clinical psychology program at Long Island University – Post. The coders consisted of one male and two females, who were each in their twenties and with no prior experience with acting.) Finally, the themes were used to form theoretical constructs and to generate hypotheses regarding actors’ beliefs about the relationship between creativity and suffering.

The first training session with the team of coders took place prior to the start of coding and involved a discussion of the research question. The coders were made aware of the central question because the first step of coding involves reading through the raw text and highlighting text that is relevant to the research question. Questions such as, “does this relate to the research question and does this text help me understand the participants better?” helped guide coders’ decision on whether to deem text relevant or not (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). After relevant text was extracted from the raw interview transcript, coders were trained, again by the principle investigator, in the process of identifying repeating ideas. When at least two participants used similar words or phrases to communicate the same idea, it was said to be a repeated idea (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003).

The relevant text pulled from each interview was compared across participants to see which ideas are repeated by multiple people. Repeated ideas were given a title and are then grouped together according to the content of idea (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). The process of identifying relevant text and repeating ideas was conducted independently by each coder (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). However, coders and the investigator met periodically throughout the coding process to ensure interrater reliability.
A third training was conducted so that each coder was able to organize the repeated ideas into themes, which were implicit ideas or topics that described what the repeating ideas have in common (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). This work of articulating themes is done independently and culminates in a final training session during which the coding team agrees upon a master list of themes. The principle investigator, in consultation with his advisor, then constructed a theoretical framework that best encapsulated the themes. The final theoretical narrative weaves together the theories and references the original text from which the ideas originated.

Results

Five theoretical constructs emerged from the data and are presented in this paper in ALL CAPS. These constructs are supported by 15 themes, which are depicted with underlined text. The 15 themes are supported by 62 repeating ideas, which are depicted in italics. (See Appendix D for a hierarchical presentation of the data) Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) suggested that direct quotes from participants be used to name repeating ideas. Brackets signal words that were not said by a participant directly, but complete or abbreviate the quote based on context.

When actors spoke about their creative processes, their mental health, and their views on psychotherapy, they spoke of their experiences in five distinct, but overlapping domains: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ACTING AND MENTAL HEALTH, THE VALUE OF SUFFERING, NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES OF ACTORS, THE ACTING COMMUNITY, and THE ROLE.

Table 2

Theoretical constructs and supporting data

| Theoretical Construct: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ACTING AND MENTAL HEALTH |
| Theme #1: The Positive Effect of Acting on Mental Health (83.3%) |
| Repeating Ideas: |
- A constitutionally based pursuit of my happiness
- Creativity provides a useful outlet
- It’s pure bliss
- I’ve always viewed acting as a way to be stronger, braver, bigger, more intelligent than I am in real life
- A strong link between mental health and creativity
- Acting is a really spiritual thing for me

**Theme #2: The Positive Effect of Mental Health on Acting (58.3%)**

**Repeating Ideas:**
- If you have a wound, it needs to be scabbed over and healed and scarred before you can use it
- You don’t have to actually suffer to perform well

**Theme #3: Practicing Self-Care Through Lifestyle Choices (100%)**

**Repeating Ideas:**
- Being along and turning off my brain
- Self-care through physical activity
- Self-care through yoga/meditation
- Find things that make you happy that are not theater-related
- Self-care through dietary choices
- My faith has become a critical part of my life
- I like to solve my problems in creative ways

**Theme #4: The Value of Psychotherapy (66.7%)**

**Repeating Ideas:**
- Therapy is a way to become more self-aware and to release creative blocks
- Therapy is a place to challenge negative thoughts
- My therapist is creative and there is an unspoken language we share

**Theoretical Construct: THE VALUE OF SUFFERING**

**Theme #5: The Positive Effect of Mental Health Struggles on Acting (91.7%)**

**Repeating Ideas:**
- Everything that’s happened in your life you can bring into your storytelling space
- Out of my anxiety comes a golden
- You have to come from a hard life in order to get people to relate to
- There’s always an inspirational or emotional trigger for my creativity

**Theme #6: Actors’ Concerns about Therapy (66.7%)**

**Repeating Ideas:**
- Maybe if I was better at therapy
- If I enroll in therapy what will that do to my creativity?

**Theoretical Construct: THE NEGATIVE EXPERIENCE OF ACTORS**

**Theme #7: Actors’ Internal Struggles (100%)**

**Repeating Ideas:**
- Actors tend to be very vulnerable people who are put into vulnerable situations
- Actors are fighting their demons behind the scenes
- I’ve seen people turn to drugs to cope
- Feeling insecure inhibits my performance
During the pandemic it’s been hard to set goals that are

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme #8: Acting Teachers and Abuse (25%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Repeating Ideas:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>- A lot of acting teachers think that the way to improve someone is to tell them that they’re shit</td>
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<tr>
<td>- That acting teacher had no business psychologically taking that student there with no skills whatsoever to manage it</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Teachers are like, “it’s acting or nothing, do not support yourself in any other way”</td>
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<tr>
<th>Theme #9: Actors’ External Struggles (66.7%)</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Repeating Ideas:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>- I want more financial and mental health resources from the industry</td>
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<td>- There can be so much rejection</td>
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<td>- Let’s just talk about something else besides how I don’t fit into this dress</td>
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<td>- It was hard to get on the same page as the director</td>
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<tr>
<th>Theme #10: The Impact of Marginalization (41.6%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Repeating Ideas:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>- I hate being stereotyped</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Black people are not allowed to be Black in certain settings</td>
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<td>- Our parents didn’t have therapy. No one told me therapy existed</td>
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<tr>
<th>Theoretical Construct: THE ACTING COMMUNITY</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theme #11: Support from Acting Community (91.7%)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Repeating Ideas:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Among performers there is less stigma against therapy and mental health issues than there is in the rest of the world</td>
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<tr>
<td>- I receive a lot of emotional support from my acting community</td>
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<td>- I had creative role models growing up</td>
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<td>- Acting teachers are just therapists, they help you become more aware</td>
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<tr>
<th>Theme #12: Emphasis on Collaborating and Relationships (66.7%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Repeating Ideas:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>- You learn to be the most creative when you are in collaboration with others</td>
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<tr>
<td>- It all starts with relationships</td>
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<tr>
<td>- I have a really good family and friend support system</td>
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<tr>
<th>Theoretical Construct: THE ROLE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theme #13: Embodying the Character (91.7%)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Repeating Idea:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- To capture the humanity of a character</td>
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<tr>
<td>- The core of acting is empathy</td>
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<td>- I have a lot of tools at my disposal, I see what each character needs</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Character development is a physical thing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Saying the words and hearing the</td>
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<tr>
<td>- It’s about being present</td>
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<tr>
<th>Theme #14: Self-Character Boundaries (58.3%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Repeating Ideas:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>- I don’t like playing multiple characters at once</td>
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<td>- I fully transitioned into my character’s</td>
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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ACTING AND MENTAL HEALTH

When speaking with the actors in this study, one theoretical construct that emerged was

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ACTING AND MENTAL HEALTH. The majority of actors in this study (83.3%) discussed the positive effect of acting on mental health. Several participants (41.6%) discussed the ways in which acting felt like an essential part of their identity (a constitutionally based pursuit of my happiness.) Participants seemed to suggest that acting and being creative was a fundamental part of the DNA, with one participant declaring, “to be human is to be creative.” Several participants emphasized that it was their pursuit in an acting career that gave them a sense of purpose and direction in life. One participant even explained that although she left a more lucrative profession to pursue acting, she is more content now: “I don’t have any money. I don’t have any status… But I’m so much happier” (P11). Participants (58.3%) also described their internal experience while acting in overwhelmingly positive terms (it’s pure bliss.) These actors used words and phrases such as “euphoria,” “intense high,” “zone,” “alive,” “joy,” “flow,” and “bliss” to describe their internal states when performing. Participants also communicated that acting allowed them experiences and roles that they would ordinarily not have access to (I’ve always viewed acting as a way to be stronger, braver, bigger, more intelligent than I am in real life). Participants described enjoying playing roles with different
identities than their own, identities including age, gender, and even species (e.g., playing a bird). Participants also emphasized that they were able to play characters with more desirable traits, namely those who were stronger, more assertive, and more powerful than they were in real life. “I get to do the things that I don’t get in real life,” explained one participant (P1).

In addition to the majority of participants identifying the positive effect of acting on mental health, many participants (58.3%) also discussed the inverse relationship between acting and mental health, or the positive effect of mental health on acting. These actors emphasized that they performed better and felt more creative when they prioritized their mental health. For example, participants (50%) felt that suffering in the service of the role was unnecessary and harmful (you don’t have to actually suffer to perform well). They explained that there is already enough suffering and hardship in the world; to seek out more painful experiences in order to better relate to a character is only detrimental to their mental health and to their craft. One participant explained that an actor who seeks out suffering ends up only playing suffering characters and ultimately limits their creative scope. Another participant echoed this sentiment, speaking of the benefits of good mental health on his creativity: “If I could resonate from my highest place of love and my highest place of joy, my creativity would explode out of the wall” (P8). Other participants (25%) discussed the balance between using one’s suffering to inform a character and making sure they are doing so in a safe manner (if you have a wound, it needs to be scabbed over and healed and scarred before you can use it). Participants discussed playing roles that touched upon their painful or emotional personal experiences. While having these experiences allowed them to connect more deeply with their character, participants noted the difficulties in recovering from these performances. Actors discussed several examples of the types of roles that required them to prioritize their mental health, including (a) roles that brought
up feelings of loss and grief, (b) roles with many similarities to one’s life circumstances, (c) roles participants deemed very “intense” and included themes such as rape and murder, and (d) roles which participants felt emotionally attached to and were not ready to leave. In each of these scenarios, participants emphasized the importance of safety when entering and exiting these roles, through understanding one’s triggers and by creating enough space to decompress after a performance.

In addition to speaking about the benefits of good mental health on their creativity, every participant (100%) spoke in more general terms about the ways in which they practice self-care through lifestyle choices. Participants described exercise (self-care through physical activity), forms of yoga (self-care through yoga/meditation), and a vegetarian or vegan diet (self-care through dietary choices) as several ways in which they supported their own mental health.

Participants also discussed the importance of finding things that brought them joy outside of the acting world (find things that make you happy that are not theater-related). Lamenting the lack of stability in the acting world and the pressures of auditioning, these participants emphasized the importance of reliable activities and hobbies that were unrelated to their career goals. One participant, emphasizing the importance of distracting himself from the pressures of an acting career explained, “have a hobby… escape from the craziness” (P10). On a similar note, participants also discussed the value of being alone (being alone and turning off my brain). In a career often defined by close contact with other artists, several participants explained how important it was for them to “decompress” and “turn off their brains.” Participants described being alone in nature, journaling, watching television, and reading as “reset buttons” and ways in which they were able to “find the simplicity in things.”
Participants (66.7%) also spoke about the value of psychotherapy and its impact on their mental health and their creativity. Several participants (33.3%) highlighted the importance of finding the right therapist. Specifically, these participants each spoke about the benefits of having a therapist with a connection to the arts (my therapist is creative and there is an unspoken language we share). These participants explained that because they share an appreciation for an actor’s unique struggles, these therapists make them feel better understood. Participants (50%) also discussed the positive impact of psychotherapy on their creative processes (therapy is a way to become more self-aware and to release creative blocks). Participant 2 explained how therapy has helped her become more self-aware which aids her in “not getting completely lost in a role.” Participant 7 echoed this sentiment and spoke about how therapy has helped her navigate roles that touched upon painful personal experiences. Finally, several participants (25%) spoke about using therapy as a way to monitor and evaluate their negative self-talk with regards to their career (therapy is a place to challenge negative thoughts). Participants discussed suffering from anxiety and low self-esteem due to the intense competition and constant evaluation they face as actors. For example, Participant 12 explained how she would frequently panic about auditions and assume the casting directors thought the worst of her: “they’re going to see that piece of hair and then think that I’m ugly, that I don’t care about this audition, that I would show up to set and my costume would look like shit.” In therapy, Participant 12 has used worksheets to challenge these thoughts and has come up with ways to self-sooth. Similarly, Participant 7 explained that she once believed that making a mistake while performing could ruin her career. Therapy, however, has helped her take a more rational approach, where she is now able to better identify and evaluate the validity of her thoughts.
THE VALUE OF SUFFERING

While participants spoke at length about the benefits of good mental health on their creative process, many also spoke about THE VALUE OF SUFFERING. The majority of participants (91.7%) discussed the positive effect of mental health struggles on acting. Participants emphasized the importance of personally relating to a character in order to create a more authentic performance (everything that’s happened in your life you can bring into your storytelling space). These participants explained how all life experiences, both good and bad, were valuable to their creativity. Several participants emphasized the importance of relating to characters with painful experiences. Many participants (83.3%) also discussed how some of their most creative discoveries emerged out of dire circumstances and negative emotional states (out of my anxiety comes a golden idea). One participant explained that he was more creatively prolific when unemployed and less financially stable, seeming to suggest that his creativity was a product of necessity. Other participants explained that they were often most creative when they were “drained,” “exhausted,” “anxious,” “sad,” or “depressed.” Many suggested that being creative was a way of “releasing” and channeling these emotions. One participant took a slightly different approach, theorizing that it wasn’t his negative emotions, per se, that sparked his creativity, rather, these emotions facilitated his desire to be alone, which allowed him to better connect to his creative impulses:

Participant 8: I do understand that when a person is sad, they go in their room and they lock the door. And they don’t come out until it’s over. And I think that that is where the creativity is. It’s not the sadness, but it’s the silence. It’s not the anger, but it’s the time alone that creates – it’s where the creativity is allowed to be heard.
For this participant, it was solitude that best facilitated his creative impulses. He seemed to suggest that creativity was something that was discovered not in the company of others, but by sitting and wrestling with one’s “darkness” and “loneliness.”

Finally, several participants (16.7%) believed that actors who have suffered are better able to connect with their audiences (you have to come from a hard life in order to get people to relate to you). These participants explained that actors who have come from over-privileged backgrounds and who have not known suffering are “disconnected from reality.” In the words of one participant: “you should be able to relate to the people you are trying to entertain” (P4).

In addition to speaking about the positive effect of mental health struggles on acting, a number of participants (66.7%) shared their concerns about therapy. A majority of participants (58.3%) were either uncertain or expressed concern over the effect of being in psychotherapy on one’s creativity (if I enroll in therapy what will it do to my creativity?). It should be noted that not all participants were enrolled in therapy; some participants were only speculating on what being in therapy would be like. Several participants wondered whether processing a traumatic experience in therapy would take away from an actor’s ability to incorporate that experience into their storytelling.

Participant 9: I think you could have someone make the case that if, let’s say, you went through a traumatic experience and you were able to incorporate that into your storytelling and you started therapy and that maybe could stifle your creativity behind that storyline.
Participant 5: I should probably deal with this past trauma to perhaps the detriment of my career.

Other participants who had not been in therapy before expressed more general uncertainty about what effect therapy would have upon their creativity.

Participant 3: I think [therapy is] one of those things where I certainly wouldn’t rule it out for myself. But I think everybody has their own way of achieving that creative place that they want to get to.

Participant 3: I’m not quite sure that [therapy] would be helpful to me. But I haven’t really had a chance to exercise it.

Participant 4: My thoughts on that are that I can neither agree nor disagree [with the impact of therapy on one’s creativity].

Several participants also expressed frustration with the therapeutic process and in the difficulties of applying the lessons they’ve learned in therapy to their acting careers (*maybe if I was better at therapy*). One participant spoke about the difficulty in transitioning from an emotional therapy session to an audition, while another participant spoke about the “exhausting” nature of processing one’s emotions in therapy. Finally, one participant explained that although she and her therapist frequently discuss her anxieties over auditioning, she does not feel like she is able to apply what she has learned: “for the next audition, I’m like, oh, I didn’t apply anything that me and my therapist worked on” (P12).
NEGATIVE EXPERIENCE OF ACTORS

In addition to participants discussing the ways in which suffering can positively impact their creativity, participants described in detail the negative experience of actors. Every participant spoke about actor’s internal struggles. The majority of participants (83.3%) discussed the negative effect of anxiety on their creative process (feeling insecure inhibits my performance). These participants explained that when they felt “insecure,” “anxious,” “under stress,” or “not confident” they felt more inhibited and less motivated to create. One participant emphasized that when anxious she ruminates on potential mistakes she could make while performing, which limits her creative freedom. Another participant explained that when anxious he felt creatively stuck, without a clear sense of how to move forward: “I bang my head against a wall” (P8). Several participants (33.3%) also described how many of their struggles are unique to actors and are largely experienced alone (actors are fighting their demons behind the scenes). One participant believed that actors are “all kinds of wounded people” who are “fascinated by escapism” and who are “seeking approval” (P6). Another participant echoed this sentiment, describing acting as a “tears-of-a-clown sort of industry” in which actors are “fighting their demons behind the scenes” (P1). A third participant explained that actors are put through an enormous emotional toll, however, there is an expectation that they take care of themselves. Finally, several participants (25%) spoke about the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on both their mental health and creative processes. One participant explained that it was very difficult for her to plan for the future and set goals “because the world could change tomorrow” (P7). The same participant explained that during the pandemic, auditioning for voiceover roles has become virtual; because there are more actors (from all over the country) who are able to audition, this participant believes her chances of booking a role have decreased. Another
participant spoke about the lack of creative outlets during the pandemic and how she feels disconnected to her fellow performers during virtual readings and performances:

Participant 5: And I find that [Zoom performances] are even more damaging to my mental health and I basically have been like, I am not doing remote shoots right now. Because if I’m not connecting to someone, it doesn’t feel real. And it doesn’t feel like I can even perform well.

Another theme to emerge when speaking with participants included: acting teachers and abuse. These participants (25%) shared experiences in which they believed their professors from undergraduate and graduate acting programs behaved in unethical ways by abusing their power over their students. Three participants explained that a “break you down to build you up” mentality was common practice in their acting programs (a lot of acting teachers think that the way to improve someone is to tell them that they’re shit). These participants described their professors in largely narcissistic terms: old men with fragile egos who “taught their methods as if they were the only way” (P12). The participants described a culture of “constant negative feedback,” which fostered unhealthy competition between peers and inspired fear and low-self confidence among the actors. One participant described the lasting harm of this approach: “I still feel very affected by it and I’m a couple years out of school” (P12). Participants also shared that acting teachers can often slip into the unwelcomed role of therapist (that acting teacher had no business psychologically taking that student there with no skills whatsoever to manage it). These participants shared experiences in which they felt pressured by their teachers to share personal
details of their lives. One participant described the dangers in being pressured to use painful material to inform a role:

Participant 11: A student might bring up the traumatic death of her father and then bring it into a scene and then they go home. Nobody is – there’s no professional to help process, to follow up with that person. These things happen all the time.

Finally, several participants described how acting teachers discouraged students from thinking about other means of making money besides acting (teachers are like, “it’s acting or nothing, do not support yourself in any other way). These participants described acting teachers who romanticized the “starving artist” lifestyle: “They’re like, you will suffer and starve and die until you book Broadway or a national commercial or a recurring role on a big TV show” (P12). One participant explained that she is now a few years out of college and attempting to unlearn many of these negative acting myths and become more financially secure: “I’m also just trying to undo that myth and start a retirement account and start a savings account and invest a little. And I feel like I’m so behind in that” (P12).

When speaking about their negative experiences while acting, a majority of participants (66.7%) also discussed the external struggles they have experienced. A number of participants explained that they wished they were given more support from the acting industry (I want more financial and mental health resources from the industry). For some participants, more support meant higher wages. These participants discussed the frequent low pay of acting projects and the pressure they experienced to work for free. One participant emphasized the negative emotional impact of low wages:
Participant 5: And it’s crazy, like when you’re not doing well financially, you’re not doing well mentally. It’s harder to do well mentally if you’re struggling. It’s harder to do well mentally if you feel you’re not good at your job.

For some participants, more support also meant more access to mental health resources. Several participants explained that they wished they could be in therapy or at least have someone in the rehearsal room they could speak with if they were playing a particularly challenging role.

Other participants (25%) highlighted the negative impact of the frequent rejection they have experienced as actors (there can be so much rejection). These participants explained that with so much rejection they often feel a “lack of control” over the direction of their careers, as well as feelings of embarrassment and deflation. One participant explained that rejection and auditioning is one of the main themes she discussed with her therapist:

Participant 12: I feel like a lot of things I talk about in therapy definitely stem from, like, auditions. You know, you put yourself out there and only get critiqued. And you can let a lot of that run off, but I think it can start to seep in a little more than I think it does in the moment

Several participants (41.6%) also spoke about the negative impact of marginalization on their mental health and on their creative process. Three participants shared their dissatisfaction for the limited types of roles they have been cast in and expressed a desire for more representation for actors of color (I hate being stereotyped). One participant explained that he has been “pigeon-holed” as the “Asian character” on many projects and stated that this further
exacerbates real-world micro-aggressions and racial prejudice. Additionally, one participant spoke at length about his experience as a marginalized Black man in mostly White acting spaces (*Black people are not allowed to be Black in certain settings*).

**THE ACTING COMMUNITY**

Participants also spoke at length about the ways in which they felt supported by and deeply connected to their acting community: THE ACTING COMMUNITY. Most participants (91.7%) discussed experiencing widespread support from their acting community. These participants felt that during difficult times they could often turn to their peers for help (*I receive a lot of emotional support from my acting community*). One participant, for example, shared how she would frequently reach out to other actors after a poor audition:

Participant 12: if I bomb an audition, then I can literally go crawl into a bathroom stall of the audition place and send a voice memo to three other actor friends and they will respond right away, saying all the correct stuff.

Other participants discussed feeling emotionally supported by the cast members and directors in their productions. One participant described working with directors who have emphasized the wellbeing of their actors, “I’ve met a lot of directors… who like to be on the same plane as other actors and really feel for them and look out for them, protect them” (P4).

A number of participants also described an acting culture in which topics such as mental health awareness and psychotherapy were openly discussed (*among performers there is less stigma against therapy and mental health issues than there is in the rest of the world*). These participants stated that actors frequently and even casually discuss the benefits of being in therapy. The participants also described a culture that emphasized supporting the wellbeing of its
actors. Several participants explained that because acting requires a deep emotional commitment, mental health awareness is frequently discussed:

Participant 1: in the social media groups that I’m a part of that are actor-related, there has been a lot more about mental health awareness days, and people even copying and pasting things, or even posting things, *if anyone just needs to chat or anything, I hear you, I see you, I’m available, just reach out, even though I don’t know you that well*. And that’s a trend I’ve seen happening a lot more.

Finally, one participant acknowledged the addition of intimacy coaches and its effect on actors’ wellbeing (intimacy coaches act as advocates and liaisons between actors and the production staff in regard to nudity, simulated sex, or other intimate scenes).

Participant 6: With the new safety and intimacy coaches, that’s kind of the new role in theater. It’s super helpful. There’s a level of enlightenment that we have now, in terms of protocols. So, I think that there’s more protecting actors from sexual abuse… protecting the safety and wellbeing and mental health of the cast.

While a number of participants discussed the ways in which they felt acting teachers inappropriately crossed boundaries and pressured their students to share personal details of their lives, several participants seemed to appreciate when their teachers took an interest in their personal lives (*acting teachers are just therapists, they help you become more aware*). These participants viewed their teachers as having a role similar to that of a therapist. One participant
emphasized that an acting teacher can help bring an actor’s awareness to the ways in which they are unconsciously making decisions about their characters.

Participant 5: That’s really an acting teacher’s job: to bring out the alternative choices. But also, to say, “That wasn’t a choice. You are dealing with something and it’s damaging your performance.”

A majority of participants (66.7%) also explained that crucial to both their creative processes and wellbeing was their collaborating with others and relationships. Five participants emphasized that they often felt their most creative when collaborating with other artists (you learn to be the most creative when you are in collaboration with others). These participants emphasized feeling more motivated to create when “bouncing ideas off of others” and when watching others experiment and create. Several participants also explained that when creating a character, they always begin by exploring they ways in which the character interacts with others (it all starts with relationships). These participants described a process in which their characters evolve over time, due to the ways in which both other actors and the audience responds.

Participant 11: It becomes a process of reciprocity that kind of grows and develops over time. If you play a character long enough, a character can evolve and change. And with a different group, you might play the same character with a different group of people, and then the character is slightly different because it’s an evolving construct.
The final theoretical construct to emerge was the ways in which participants discussed creating and inhabiting THE ROLE. The majority of participants (91.7%) discussed their approach to fully embodying the character. Many of the participants emphasized the importance of exploring the complexities within their roles in order for the character to become more fully realized and “human” (*to capture the humanity of a character*). Virtually all of the participants described beginning this process by searching the text for clues: the ways the character speak, the ways the character speaks about other characters, and the ways other characters speak about them. From there, they identify the character’s goals and objectives:

Participant 1: What is the motivation, what is driving them, what do they want in that scene? …if I play a character’s want and if I go after a concrete, specific objective then everything else falls into place

In order to breathe life into their characters, several participants also described searching the script, as well as their imaginations, for a character’s unique qualities. One participant explained that she enjoys identifying the things that make her characters “tick,” by understanding their “anxieties” and “sensitivities” (P7). Another participant described picking her favorite parts about her character and then letting them “shine through” (P12):

Participant 12: I love to have a secret feeling about all the other characters. So, anyone else I’m in a scene with, is there a secret crush there? Do they resent that person? Probably no one will ever know, but I’ll know.
Several participants also explained that they like to extrapolate from the given information about a character in order to imagine what the character would be like on a regular day:

Participant 8: I really like to figure out - what would my character be like on a regular day? Because the play is a heightened day. This is in the play because this was an amazing day. But if everything was hunky-dory, what would my character be doing then?

Several participants also discussed the importance of being grounded and present when embodying their characters (it’s about being present). One participant described her practice of “checking her bad day at the door,” in which she attempts to compartmentalize anything that may distract her from completely focusing on her craft (P7). Another participant emphasized that importance of remaining open and receptive to her partners, so that she can respond from a place of truth:

Participant 11: If I’m in a scene with you, if you’re talking, I’m supposed to be listening to you, not thinking of my next line, or oh, I screwed up that last line… a lot of actors forget that the best thing you can do is listen. It’s not talk. That’s what brings you into the scene. If I’m paying attention to you, that’s what will make me respond genuinely.

A number of participants (58.3%) also discussed the ways in which they understand and navigate the self-character boundaries when inhabiting a role. Several participants described “out of body experiences when acting, in which they felt they were able to shed their own identities in order to fully inhabit their characters” (I fully transitioned into my character’s brain). These participants described a process in which they “relinquish control,” “turn off filters and censors,”
and “get out of their own way” in order to more freely transition into their characters. One participant also emphasized the importance of putting on a costume when transitioning into character. He explained that when wearing his character’s clothing “something strange happens,” as a “new energy” is discovered and the transformation becomes “real” (P8).

Other participants acknowledged the impact performing a role has on their own identity (*The character will inform you. It changes who you are*). These participants explained that when acting they often “felt the most like themselves” and “benefitted as an individual.” One individual explained that even when not performing, she will frequently behave like the character she is playing, adopting the character’s mannerisms and idiosyncrasies. Another participant expressed a desire to return to a character she has played in the past, as she was eager to see “how [the character’s] words live in [her] again,” now that time has passed.

The majority of participants (75%) also described a strong connection between creativity and agency, or the ways in which they felt a sense of freedom when acting. A number of participants explained that many of their favorite acting experiences were instances in which they had freedom to create their role as they saw fit (*my favorite role because I was given the most freedom*). A number of participants also described the importance of following their creative impulses and working from a place of improvisation during the rehearsal process (*I try to be like a volcano that’s ready to erupt*).

**Discussion**

> All the world’s a stage,
> And all the men and women merely players;
> They have their exits and their entrances;
> And one man in his time plays many parts (Shakespeare, 1623, 2.7.139-142)
The metaphor linking the world with the stage is one that has captured the imaginations of poets, philosophers, and psychologists for centuries. Shakespeare comparing the world to a stage with men and women as its players, perhaps put it best. But drama is not merely a metaphor for human life; human behavior can be understood through roles.

Role theory points to the ways in which the act of playing and taking on a role is mysterious and complex (Ramsden & Landy, 2021). With a history throughout the twentieth century in the fields of anthropology, sociology, and psychology, role theory was developed by a number of theorists who believed that the dramatic metaphor of life as theater and people as actors can be applied to an analysis of social and cultural behaviors, as well as inner psychological processes. One founding theorist, Levi Moreno, maintained that life is not like theater, rather, life is theater.

Moreno (1960) saw human beings as role players, whose roles develop into a relational context through interaction with others. Moreno reasoned that a role has three primary dimensions: the psychosomatic, which pertains to the physical aspects of the self, the psychosocial, which pertains to one’s relationships in the social world, and the psychodramatic, which pertains to fantasy and inner psychological processes.

The ways in which participants in this study described creating and embodying their roles map neatly on to Moreno’s three dimensions. In Moreno’s first psychosomatic stage, roles are preverbal and are developed largely through one’s sensory experience. Many participants described approaching their characters in a similar fashion. Some emphasized how character development is a “physical thing” for them, as they approached their work by exploring their
character’s posture. Others spoke about exploring the ways their characters move through space, with one participant discussing the importance of being in nature while working on her character:

   Participant 2: When I worked on Puck monologues I would absolutely go into the forest and do it as the character and use the trees and talk to the trees and use the leaves and all of that stuff. So, it depends on what I need. Sometimes it’s just to hear the words. But sometimes I will try and find - especially if there’s a certain scene that happens outside, I love to sort of just go and be there as the character and be in that space.

Several participants spoke about searching for visual inspiration, including pieces of artwork, in order to find an emotional connection to their characters, while others discussed listening to music as a way to find inspiration for their characters. One participant explained that she often creates a musical playlist tailored to her character, which she listens to before rehearsals and performances. Some participants also discussed an early stage in their process in which they would simply “say and hear the words” aloud, sometimes playing with an accent different then their own. The participants suggested that this stage allowed them to approach their characters nonjudgmentally so that they could be prepared for new discoveries and surprises.

Participants also discussed creating characters in ways similar to Moreno’s psychosocial dimension, in which identity is developed through relationships. These participants emphasized several important social factors, which included searching the script for clues on how their characters relate to others, responding to the other actors in rehearsal, and finally responding to an audience.
Participant 10: I think it all starts at relationships. It starts at the when, where, who, why, the given circumstances. It stems from the relationships that your character has, who is in the scene or in the film or play or whatever. That’s how you find who this person is, is how they relate to other people. And I think that you also have to look not only at the words, but what they’re doing.

Finally, a number of participants described creating a rich inner life for their characters, a stage similar to Moreno’s psychodramatic dimension. Many of the participants emphasized the importance of exploring the complexities within their roles in order for the character to become more fully realized and “human”:

Participant 1: What is the motivation, what is driving them, what do they want in that scene? …if I play a character’s want and if I go after a concrete, specific objective then everything else falls into place

In order to breathe life into their characters, several participants also described searching for a character’s unique qualities. One participant explained that she enjoys identifying the things that make her characters “tick,” by understanding their “anxieties” and “sensitivities” (P7). Another participant described picking her favorite parts about her character and then letting them “shine through” (P12):
Participant 12: I love to have a secret feeling about all the other characters. So, anyone else I’m in a scene with, is there a secret crush there? Do they resent that person? Probably no one will ever know, but I’ll know.

Several participants also explained that they like to extrapolate from the given information about a character in order to imagine what the character would be like on a regular day:

Participant 8: I really like to figure out - what would my character be like on a regular day? Because the play is a heightened day. This is in the play because this was an amazing day. But if everything was hunky-dory, what would my character be doing then?

Not all actors in this study stated that they use approaches that map onto all three of Moreno’s dimensions; some participants relied on more of an “inside-out” approach, similar to method acting, in which the development of a character’s inner life is prioritized, while other participants emphasized more of an “outside-in” approach, similar to the British-style of acting, in which a character’s mannerisms and behaviors are paramount.

The language of role theory, however, is helpful in understanding the various approaches actors may take when building their characters. According to Landy (1993), role is a basic unit of personality containing specific qualities that provide uniqueness and coherence to that unit. Role as a concept also applies to the “full range of human experiences through body and sensorium, mind and emotion, institution and spirit” (p.7)

Conceivably a “successful” actor, or one who is able to freely and authentically inhabit a wide range of roles, is one who has access to this full range of human experience that Landy
describes. Providing actors with the language of role theory, may allow them a new perspective and ultimately more freedom when approaching their character work. Encouraging actors to reflect upon which of Moreno’s three role dimensions they feel they are working from may allow them more agency in their approaches. For example, an actor who is working primarily from a psychosomatic approach may continue to explore and deepen the ways of interacting with the world through their sensory experiences, or if they would like to incorporate other approaches, they may choose to develop their character’s relationships (i.e., the psychosocial) or their character’s motivations and desires (i.e., the psychodramatic).

**Paradox and dialectics**

Human beings strive toward balance and harmony, and although they never fully arrive, they have the capacity to accept the consequences of living with contradiction and paradox. It is not ultimately the need to resolve cognitive dissonance that motivates human behavior, but the need to live with paradox (Ramsden & Landy, 2021, p. 85).

A second notable component of role theory concerns paradoxes. Paradox, Landy (1993) explains, is at the heart of the dramatic experience. An individual performing as a character is simultaneously in two diverse realities: past and present, rehearsal and performance, the studied moment and the spontaneous moment, fiction and nonfiction, actor and role, “me” and “not me” (Landy, 1993). Drama embodies the tension between these states of being. When an actor, for example, is encouraged to “stay in the moment” by a drama teacher, they are also cognizant that they have rehearsed the scene many times in the past. Past and present meet when one re-enacts a moment “as if” for the first time.
Perhaps the most significant feature of the dramatic paradox concerns the notion that the actor and the role are both separate and merged and that the nonfictional reality of the actor coexists with the fictional reality of the role. Landy (1993) highlights this tension and contrasts the experience of “en-roling,” or giving life to a role, with the experience of “de-roling,” or the death of a role. Actors in their roles are constantly living, dying, and being reborn again in new roles over and over. Landy (1993) writes, “the actor’s dilemma is not to choose between life or death, but to find a way to emerge into a state of being that holds life and death together, accepting the inevitable shifts in and out and among several roles (p.12).

The dramatic paradox that Landy describes also appears to apply to the different ways in which the participants in this study spoke about their experience as actors. For virtually every theme that emerged in the data analysis a contrasting theme, or what role theory would call a “counterpart”, was present. Whether the participants were speaking about the relationship between acting and their mental health, the impact of acting teachers on actors’ mental health, or views towards psychotherapy, paradoxes were present.

**Negative vs positive effects of acting on mental health**

One notable paradox that emerged from the data was the ways in which participants emphasized both the negative and positive effects of acting on their mental health. The majority of the negative aspects of acting appeared to be specific to the occupational hazards of the career (e.g., the low pay and frequent rejection), while the majority of the positive aspects appeared to be tailored to the experience of acting and taking on roles.

**The negative effects of acting on mental health.** Every participant in the study discussed the hardships they experience as professional actors. Their struggles ranged from inconsistent and low paying work to the stereotyping and racial prejudice against actors of color.
Many of the struggles the participants spoke about were consistent with the existing research on actor’s wellbeing (Barker et al., 2009; Maxwell et al., 2015; Robb et al., 2016).

A wish for more financial support and higher pay was a common refrain among the participants. A number of participants emphasized the anxiety and desperation they experience due to their lack of financial stability:

Participant 3: So much of an actor’s goal is to be working and to be working on a consistent basis. And with the unemployment rate for most actors being so high, that’s going to have some sort of impact on folks’ mental health. It would be nice to get more support.

Participant 9: Sometimes I would say within the acting community, if they compensated more fairly, even just minimum wage. Just minimum wage is not honored on a lot of projects. I think that would even be healthier for the overall actor.

Participant 5: And it’s crazy, like when you’re not doing well financially, you’re not doing well mentally. It’s harder to do well mentally if you’re struggling. It’s harder to do well mentally if you feel you’re not good at your job.

One actor also expressed a desire to seek out mental health treatment, but has been unable to do so due to a lack of financial resources:
Participant 6: if I had the means and resources, I think I would definitely be involved in therapy. Nothing comes to mind as to what I would speak about right away. But I think it would be helpful.

The fragile economic conditions described by the participants is consistent with the research on actor’s wellbeing. Research has shown that actors are in lowest quarter of average earnings of all occupational groups (Barker et al., 2009). Furthermore, all of the actors in this study reported working day jobs as a means of supplementing the inconsistent and low income from their acting.

In addition to low earnings, participants emphasized the lack of autonomy they experience in their work. Several participants discussed the pressure to accept low pay, due to the scarcity of work.

Participant 9: There are so many jobs that just aren’t even paying per se. And I think there is definitely, like, an aura of desperation within the acting world. And sometimes it can make actors feel like they have to work for free.

Other participants highlighted the frequent rejection they experience. These participants explained that with so much rejection they often feel a lack of control over the direction of their careers, as well as feelings of embarrassment and deflation.

Taken together, the low compensation, high competition, and frequent rejection described by the participants, paints a portrait of a career filled with uncertainty and intense occupational strain. The reported negative impact on their mental health is also consistent with models of
work conditions as detriments of health. According to the job demand–control model of Karasek (1979), occupational strain occurs when high job demands combine with low opportunity to influence tasks and procedures, resulting in poor employee health. This culture of intense demand, combined with the perception of high insecurity of transient work could act as a chronic threat, heightening psychological anxiety, thus leaving the actor more vulnerable to the impact of occupational strain.

Further exacerbating matters appears to be the racial and ethnic stereotyping the participants of color reported experiencing. Several participants expressed a strong desire for more representation for actors of colors and that being pigeonholed in certain roles, further exacerbates real world microaggressions and racial prejudice.

Participant 1: There are times when you are pigeon-holed and stereotyped in certain things. You know, even if you do get cast and it’s not a rejection, maybe it’s not a role that you see yourself playing or that you want to play. And I found that, at least for me, my race and ethnicity is a lot of times in this industry more focused on than my humanity.

One participant spoke at length about his experience as a marginalized Black man in mostly White acting spaces. This participant explained that although “safe spaces” have been created in various acting environment, these spaces are designed to protect White people’s feelings. He explained that his opinions and experiences are not always welcomed: “a lot of times when they say it’s a safe space it’s a lie…. Which means I’m going to keep my mouth shut” (P8). In response, this participant decided to create a group for Black actors, which he
named “Communion,” a space where Black actors are encouraged to speak openly about what they previously had bottled up:

Participant 8: The very first “Communion,” four people went to tears for reasons of being able to say things in a room with other actors that they’ve never been able to say. Or hearing someone else saying it and realizing that someone else is having the same trauma.

**Positive effects of acting on mental health.** Despite the difficulties highlighted above, the majority of participants also communicated the positive effects of acting on their mental health. These participants stated a strong belief in the importance of acting for their self-esteem and personal growth.

Many participants discussed the ways in which acting felt like a fundamental part of their identity, or as one participant put it, “to be human is to be creative” (P1). Several participants also emphasized that it was their pursuit in an acting career that gave them a sense of purpose and direction in life. While several participants lamented the low pay of acting work, one participant explained that she left a more lucrative profession to pursue acting and is now more content now: “I don’t have any money. I don’t have any status… But I’m so much happier” (P11).

Many participants spoke about experiencing personal growth through playing different roles. Participants spoke about the importance of playing roles with traits that they aspired to have in their own lives. They spoke about acting as a way to be “stronger, braver, bigger, [and] more intelligent” than they are in real life. They also discussed the uncertainty over playing
“intimidating” and “challenging” roles and the subsequent joy in learning that they were indeed capable. One participant described the experience of playing a warrior and a leader, roles that he ordinarily struggled to inhabit in his “real life.”

Participant 1: During these quarantine months, I recently played the lead role of Malcolm in a feature film adaption of Shakespeare’s Macbeth… and the way that he would lead armies, lead people, and that he sort of closes the play as well and sets the tone for things, that’s something that I would never be able to do in real life even though in real life I am in a leadership position, in real life I am an army officer veteran, and like how people respond to me in a script - scripted reality versus reality. And a lot of times, and I don’t know if I’m just making excuses for myself, but a lot of times I tie that back to the race, ethnicity thing.

This participant speaks at length about the limitations he experiences in life, which he partially attributes to racial and ethnic prejudice. Even when put in a real position as an army officer, he struggled with being a leader. Yet, through the roles of Malcolm, he was able to access this split off parts of himself.

Another participant, who described himself as “high spirited” and “full of joy,” discussed playing the character of Bobo in the play “A Raisin in the Sun,” a subservient, stuttering character with no narrative arc. On the surface, this role appears to offer an actor little to work material with. And while the participant explained that this role posed many challenges, it stood out for him as a memorable experience, perhaps because this character was so different from the high energy and joyful role the participant normally played in real life. While the participant
never explicitly stated that he wished to be more like Bobo, he did emphasize the difficulty he often has connecting to his inner world and with sitting with silence: “Most of the time when we’re in the experience of joy, we’re not being quiet enough to let our thoughts do the talking, or to listen to our thoughts, or to hear our thoughts” (P8).

Finally, one participant spoke about the experience of sharing an experience of sexual assault with a character she played. Prior to playing the role, the participant spoke about sexual assault in a “discreet” and “modest” way. The role, however, provided her with a new way of thinking about and discussing these experiences:

Participant 5: Her first entrances she is running with the umbrella and her hair is wet from the rain, having just been molested on her way over. That was really fun for me, because for girls I think we’ve all sort of been molested, someone has grabbed us inappropriately on the subway, it’s just happened. And doing that I was like, oh my god, I’m really having fun talking about something so horrible… And now when I talk to my girlfriends about like pretty horrible stuff, like worse than that, I try to keep the mood light and absurd, because it’s already dark, so like having it be more absurdist is kind of a coping mechanism.

Another paradox to emerge from the data appears to be the ways in which participants described their feelings of autonomy. Although participants reported intense uncertainty over their financial security and the directions of their careers, they did report experiencing a great deal of freedom when actually performing.
A number of participants explained that many of their favorite acting experiences were instances in which they had freedom to create their role as they saw fit. One participant explained that he prefers to write and direct his own acting roles in order to have complete control over his “fantasy world.” Another participant favored enrolling in beginning acting courses, where actors are encouraged to “experiment” and “play.” Other participants emphasized the positive impact of working with directors and creative teams who granted actors more creative control.

A number of participants also described the importance of following their creative impulses and working from a place of improvisation during the rehearsal process. One participant outlined the differences between working from her “heart” rather than her “head” (P2). She explained that when working from her “head” she is often focused on the character’s lines, actions, and objectives, and feels somewhat limited in her creativity, whereas when she is working from her “heart” she is able to “let go of that stuff” in order to become more attuned to the character’s truth. This participant also stated that forgetting your lines in rehearsal was actually a positive sign, which indicated you were more in your heart and “just living in it.”

Several participants also discussed the importance of “breaking rules” to their creative processes. One participant compared his creative process to playing jazz, in which a performer must first “learn their scales” in order to then “toss all of that out of the window” and improvise within an established framework (P8). A second participant echoed the importance of not having any rules when being creative:

Participant 11: Creativity is essentially about having no rules. So, if you are someone who is attracted to rules and things being systematic, that to me is sort of the opposite
tendency of what happens in the creative process. The creative process is not about breaking rules, it’s that rules are irrelevant. There are no rules…

Using the framework of role theory, Landy (1993) links an actor’s improvisation to a form of adult play. Through free association, an actor’s imagination leads them to an unpremeditated form of expression through word, sound, or movement. Furthermore, Landy (1993) also states that improvisational activity implies that “roles are not simply given to the players at birth, but also generated by the players. Improvisers are creative beings whose greatest creation, perpetually in the making, is their own identity” (p.18).

In sum, the sentiments of these participants likely reflect the larger trend in the acting community in which actors must wrestle with the amount of autonomy and control they experience with their careers. It may be that the lack of autonomy they experience with regards to the direction of their careers (e.g., the performances/roles they are cast in and the wages they receive) is counterbalanced by a great sense of freedom and autonomy when given the opportunity to create and perform their roles.

**Questionable training practices vs support from acting community**

Another paradox to emerge from the data concerned the ways in which participants emphasized the emotional support they received from others in their acting community, while also highlighting the detriment impact of questionable (and at times harmful) training practices.

**Questionable training practices.** One troublesome finding appeared to be the accounts of psychological abuse and questionable training practices by acting teachers. Several participants shared that it is common practice for acting teachers and directors to expose actors to
traumatizing scenarios without any afterthought to their effect, a theme that has emerged in other research as well (Seton, 2010).

It has been documented that vulnerability and openness are encouraged and cultivated by acting teachers, in order for their students to produce a greater sense of authenticity in their performances. However, what many teachers neglect to do is harness these gifts in a healthy and sustainable manner (Seton, 2010). Researchers have noted how some teachers encourage their students to use their own trauma histories to bring more emotional depth to their characters, yet do not possess the training or knowledge to identify mental health related risks.

Furthermore, actors in the early stages of their careers, especially those who are young and impressionable, may have a strong desire to appease the demands of an authority figure and are therefore more vulnerable to direction that may be injurious to their psychological well-being (Seton, 2010). This same sentiment is reflected by one of the participants in this study:

Participant 11: One problem I’ve had is that acting teachers can slip into the role of therapist. And acting students can allow that. Because many of them are young, in their twenties, I was like this in my twenties. There was a TV show that was showing an acting class recently, and I was like, wow, that acting teacher had no business psychologically taking that student there with no skills whatsoever to manage it… But, I think a lot of acting teachers slip into this kind of Svengali – they almost treat the class like therapy, and kind of therapy-like things. And I think there’s a danger there. And actors tend to be very open too. Because they’re told you have to be willing to explore anything. You have to be willing to go anywhere emotionally. You should go to your uncomfortable places.
Seton (2010) notes the detrimental impact of this approach by highlighting how the lack of resolution of a newly formed or reopened traumatic experience may result in manifesting or intensifying of maladaptive tendencies such as substance or behavioral addictions. Furthermore, maladaptive coping techniques may be normalized in an industry where the stereotype of the emotionally unstable actor is embraced and subsequently reinforced. While the participants in this study were not asked directly about alcohol and substance use, several participants commented on the alcohol and substance abuse they have witnessed in other actors, which they perceived to be a means of coping with the stresses of acting.

Another participant described a “toxic” undergraduate acting culture in which drama professors appeared to use foster the “starving and suffering artist” mentality among the students. This participant explained that she attended a “cut program,” in which students were required to re-audition after their sophomore year in order to continue to be a drama major. Because cuts were guaranteed (due to a surpass of students and a limited number of available spots), competitiveness, envy, and resentment were reportedly rampant among the student body: “we were bred to be competitive with each other” (P12). The participant explained that even after she graduated and moved to New York, she continued to struggle with feelings of envy and resentment towards other actors, which she attributed to her drama program’s auditioning style.

This participant also explained that her undergraduate drama professors actively discouraged their students from considering a backup plan for their acting careers. As a freshman in college, she reportedly wanted to declare a minor in Writing Literature and Publishing, but was actively discouraged by her professors and advisors from doing so:
Participant 12: [They were like], if you pick a minor, then you’re weak. You’re an idiot. If you have a back-up plan that’s not acting, you’re going to seek it. You must never, never have a back-up plan. Like, it’s theater, and you will starve until you get that.

The participant went on to explain that she was even lied to about whether she would be able to graduate if she declared a non-theater minor.

Participant 12: And I really wanted it, and I talked to my advisor about it, and I just kept getting discouraged. Eventually, I was literally lied to. Where they were like, you don’t have enough credits. And then senior year comes around and I’m like, oh, I have more than enough credits? But, now I don’t have the pre-requisites that I could have. So, I ended up not graduating with a minor I wanted. Because they were like, it’s acting or nothing. Do not support yourself in any other way.

This participant explained that today she is working hard to undue the “myth of the starving artist,” by becoming more financially literate and has opened a savings account and has begun to invest small amounts of money.

Drama training programs’ lack of emphasis on financial management skills is a theme that has emerged in other research as well. In a survey of 530 trained actors, Maxwell (2015) found that only 75 (14.2%) had received training in financial management. Maxwell (2015) also noted a tendency for trained actors who had not received training in financial management to report that financial stress was “constantly an issue” more frequently than those who had
received such training. Training in financial management therefore appears to have an ameliorative impact on the work-related stressors of an acting career.

**Support from acting community.** While a number of participants discussed the need for stricter boundaries between acting teachers and students, several participants appeared to welcome their teacher’s interest in their personal lives. One participant likened an acting teacher to a therapist, in that their role is to bring an actor’s full awareness to the ways in which they inhabit a character, thus enabling them to have a greater range over their creative choices:

Participant 5: My old actor teacher he used to hate what you’re doing right now [the interviewer has his hand over his mouth], I would sit in class like this, watching, and she would be like, “No what are you – no, you’re hiding yourself.” And I was even incorporating this into my acting, I would be like, oh my god, I would respond to people like this. This is obviously so amateurish, but like literally covering my face, literally protecting myself from having people know my emotions… An actor teacher really points out all of the flaws in your performances, but it’s not because – there are a million ways to perform a character and to bring something to life, there are no wrong choices, unless it’s not a choice. And that’s really an acting teacher’s job: to bring out the alternative choices.

In addition to the perceived support from acting teachers, a number of participants described an acting culture in which the topics of mental health and mental health treatment are destigmatized and spoken about openly. Participants described a growing trend in the acting
industry, in which actors offer support to their peers. One participant noted that he has seen an uptick, particularly on the internet, in discussions around mental health awareness:

Participant 1: And in the social media groups that I’m a part of that are actor-related, there has been a lot more about mental health awareness days, and people even copying and pasting things, or even posting things, if anyone just needs to chat or anything, I hear you, I see you, I’m available, just reach out, even though I don’t know you that well. And that’s a trend I’ve seen happening a lot more. And I think it’s been accelerated a lot by the pandemic and everyone has been isolated from each other. And I think there has been an interest in connecting even if by Zoom, just to see someone’s face, just to connect. I think as a whole they’d be very receptive to me if I did it.

Negative vs positive effects of suffering on acting

Another paradox that emerged from the interviews was the ways in which participants described both the negative and positive effects of suffering on their acting. The negative effects of suffering included the potential to be retraumatized by a role, as well as the limiting of one’s creative scope. The positive effects of suffering appeared to include an improved ability to relate to one’s character as well as an audience.

The negative effects of suffering on acting. A majority of participants emphasized that they performed better and felt more creative when they prioritized their mental health. Additionally, participants felt that suffering in the service of a role was unnecessary and even harmful. They explained that when seeking creative inspiration, there is already sufficient access to the suffering and hardship in the world and to seek out more painful experiences in order to
better relate to a character is only detrimental to their mental health and to their craft. One participant explained that an actor who seeks out suffering ends up only playing suffering characters and ultimately limits their creative scope. Another participant echoed this sentiment, speaking of the benefits of good mental health on his creativity: “If I could resonate from my highest place of love and my highest place of joy, my creativity would explode out of the wall” (P8).

Other participants discussed the importance of maintaining an equilibrium between using one’s suffering to inform a character and making sure they are doing so in a safe manner. These participants discussed playing roles that touched upon painful or emotional personal experiences. While having painful experiences allowed them to more deeply connect with their character, participants noted the difficulties in recovering from these performances. They discussed several examples of the types of roles that required them to prioritize their mental health, including (a) roles that brought up feelings of loss and grief, (b) roles with many similarities to one’s life circumstances, (c) roles participants deemed very “intense” and included themes such as rape and murder, and (d) roles which participants felt emotionally attached to and were not ready to leave. In each of these scenarios, participants emphasized the importance of safety when entering and exiting these roles, through understanding one’s emotional triggers and by creating enough space to decompress after a performance. One participant summed up this dynamic, stating:

Participant 2: Successful actors are the ones that are able to allow themselves to feel things really deeply, but equally in order to sustain that you have to have the other side of it and the ability to deal with it, not just to go there, but also to come back.
The participants’ sentiments regarding needing to heal from one’s painful experiences before utilizing them creatively can be better understood through role theory. Ramsden & Landy (2021) discuss the importance of “aesthetic distance,” or the marker of the relationship between an actor and a role and a group of actors from their audience. They explain that in the most distanced forms of theater, or those that are highly stylized, such as ancient Greek drama, the actor plays the role as an abstraction and removes themselves from an emotional identification with the character. In the least distanced forms of theater, such as with method acting, the actor merges with the role, presenting themselves as the character.

The theory goes on to outline that in everyday life, we present ourselves along a continuum of overdistance, an overabundance of thought; aesthetic distance, a balance of feeling and thought; and underdistance, an overabundance of emotion. In the case of the participants who experienced an intense connection with their characters, they appear to fall in the range of underdistance. Fortunately, these participants seemed to recognize the lack of distance between their selves and their roles and understood the need to create more separation. Indeed, role theory recommends that the optimal form of expression is the midpoint of aesthetic distance, in which one is able to express feeling without the fear of becoming overwhelmed, and to be able to reflect upon an experience without the fear of completely shutting down emotionally. In the case of these participants, healing from and processing their painful emotional experiences appeared to be their way of successfully achieving this desired equilibrium.

**The positive effect of suffering on acting.** In addition to discussion the negative effect of suffering on their creative process, the majority of participants also discussed the positive effect of mental health struggles on their acting. These participants emphasized the importance of
harnessing negative life experiences in order to better relate to their characters and to ultimately create a more authentic performance:

Participant 10: I feel like the more life experiences you have, the better you can approach these characters and give them humanity that you might not have realized before. If you know what it’s like to go through some shit, even if it’s not specifically the shit your character goes through, you can still relate that, you can still draw parallels, you can still give a great performance just due to your own experiences even if they’re not the same as the character.

In addition to relating to their characters, several participants believed that actors who have experienced suffering are better able to connect with their audiences. These participants explained that actors who have come from over-privileged backgrounds and who have not known suffering are “disconnected from reality.” In the words of one participant: “you should be able to relate to the people you are trying to entertain” (P4).

Many participants also discussed how some of their most creative discoveries emerged out of dire circumstances and negative emotional states. One participant explained that he felt more creatively prolific when unemployed and suggested that his creativity was a product of necessity:

Participant 1: It’s funny, whenever I’m most financially stable and stuff is good at home, I tend to write less and I’m not as daring in my auditions and not as bold. And the times when I’ve been most prolific in writing for myself to perform in, or I’ve gone big in
terms of auditions, the choices I’ve made, I think that’s happened during my periods of unemployment.

Other participants explained that they were often most creative when they were “drained,” “exhausted,” “anxious,” “sad,” or “depressed.” Many suggested that being creative was a way of “releasing” and channeling these emotions. One participant took a slightly different approach, theorizing that it wasn’t his negative emotions, per se, that sparked his creativity, rather, these emotions facilitated his desire to be alone, which allowed him to better connect to his creative impulses:

Participant 8: I do understand that when a person is sad, they go in their room and they lock the door. And they don’t come out until it’s over. And I think that that is where the creativity is. It’s not the sadness, but it’s the silence. It’s not the anger, but it’s the time alone that creates – it’s where the creativity is allowed to be heard.

The same participant also reflected on how it was easier for him to write poetry when feeling sad:

Participant 8: most of my poetry was about sadness and loneliness. And then I got a girlfriend and then no more poems [laughs]. And I couldn’t write a poem about happiness. And I think because when you’re happy, you go and be happy.
For this participant, solitude appears to facilitate his creative impulses. He seems to suggest that creativity is the product of his ability to wrestle with his inner “darkness” and “loneliness.”

One way of considering the ways the participants discussed the relationship between suffering and creativity is through Diamond’s (1996) discussion on creativity and the “daimonic,” in which the author describes how creativity can be understood as the subjective struggle to give form, structure, and constructive expression to inner and outer chaos and conflict. According to Diamond, anxiety, as well as anger and rage, are experiences closely connected to creativity. Anxiety, he writes, can be thought of as one of the “demons” one does not want to deal with, and so it is either denied or avoided. Furthermore, anxiety is related to the fear of the unknown, of the unconscious, and of death. Creativity, therefore, requires making use of this existential anxiety. One can either attempt to avoid this anxiety or face it head on and confront that which underlies the anxiety. In the words of Diamond, “that which we had previously run from and rejected, turns out to be a redemptive source of vitality, creativity, and spirituality” (p.181).

**Value of therapy vs concerns about therapy**

The final paradox that emerged from the interviews was the ways in which participants described both the benefits and detriments of actors being in psychotherapy treatment.

**Value of therapy.** A majority of participants spoke about the value of psychotherapy and its positive impact on both their mental health and creativity. Several participants highlighted the importance of finding the “right” therapist. Specifically, these participants each spoke about the benefits of having a therapist with a personal connection to the arts. These participants explained that a therapist who has an appreciation for an actor’s unique struggles is able to make their patients feel less alienated and better understood:
Participant 7: My therapist was a performer; she knows what the stress of tech week does to a person. She knows that having an agent drop you is really hard to deal with. Without even me going into too much detail about it, as soon as I said it, she knew what that meant.

In addition to feeling like the right therapist can understand the occupational hazards an actor faces, this participant explained that her therapist has helped her navigate her frequent feelings of competitiveness and envy. She explained that she has benefitted from taking a new perspective in which she attempts to focus on “comparing yourself to yourself” and not to others in the industry. This participant believed that her therapist was well-equipped to help her with these struggles because of an “unspoken language” shared between them.

Participant 12 shared this sentiment, emphasizing the importance of not wasting time educating a therapist on the particulars of the acting industry: “In therapy, I have forty-five expensive minutes for you to field this past weeks’ trauma and I don’t want to waste my time on a backstory.” In addition to wanting to prioritize her time in therapy with relevant topics, this participant also shared that therapy felt like a space in which she does not have to defend and rationalize her lifestyle to others. This participant explained that she often feels like she has to justify her decision to pursue acting to friends and family. She also explained that she feels like her identity as an actor becomes jeopardized when the majority of her income is made through methods unrelated to performing. In therapy, however, this participant feels that her actor identity is never in question.
The participants’ responses suggest an appreciation towards working with therapists who are self-disclosing with regards to their own personal connection to the arts and who also appear to practice supportive and validating therapeutic interventions, a theme which has been noted in other literature as well. Acuña (2016) discusses the actor’s need for more active support in session, which often includes strategies on how to effectively function in an industry where actors face denigration and rejection on a regular basis. Acuña (2016) notes that therapists working with actors often chose therapeutic approaches aimed at containing, validating, and supporting their clients. The author highlights the importance of validating the actor’s struggle and acknowledges the unique challenges associated with being a professional actor.

Participants also discussed the positive impact of psychotherapy on their creative processes. Several participants explained how being in therapy has helped them navigate the boundaries between self and character. The potential negative effects related to the self-character boundary have been documented, with researchers noting that when actors embed aspects of their own lives, personalities, and experiences into their character, there is a risk in over-identifying with the character (Hannah et al., 1994). Furthermore, actors may have difficulty identifying the line between self and role and may bring their personal issues, rather than the character’s, onto the stage. One participant spoke about how therapy has helped her navigate roles that have touched upon painful personal experiences:

Participant 7: I feel like there is something that we as actors draw on from life experience that then is applied to our parts. If like the person in the play lost a parent and you have, you can kind of do that without going into dangerous territory. I feel like therapy has been really helpful with that for me. Because like I mentioned with my sister, suicide was
a thing I wasn’t even comfortable saying, and now it’s like, okay I can draw on that feeling I had without drawing up the incident and triggering myself to approach characters who are dealing with that or in that state of mind.

According to this participant, therapy can help one cope with the retraumatization that can occur when a role touches upon an actor’s personal traumatic history. The research suggests, however, that many actors – as many as eighty percent according to one study (Love, 2018) – are not seeking out mental health treatment. Furthermore, the acting community is often ill-equipped to recognize and aid actors who are experiencing traumatization in their work (Burkhart, 2018). While therapy was able to help this participant navigate an emotionally challenging role, it may be that the majority of actors experiencing trauma symptoms within the context of their role remain untreated and continuously triggered.

Finally, several participants spoke about using therapy as a way to monitor and evaluate their negative self-talk with regards to their career. These participants discussed suffering from anxiety and low self-esteem due to the intense competition and constant evaluation they face as actors. For example, Participant 12 explained how she would frequently panic about auditions and assume the casting directors thought the worst of her: “They’re going to see that piece of hair and then think that I’m ugly, that I don’t care about this audition, that I would show up to set and my costume would look like shit.” In therapy, Participant 12 has used worksheets to challenge these thoughts and has come up with ways to self-sooth. Similarly, Participant 7 explained that she once believed that making a mistake while performing could ruin her career. Therapy, however, has helped her take a more rational approach, where she is now able to better identify and evaluate the validity of her thoughts.
**Actor’s concerns about therapy.** A majority of participants were either uncertain or expressed some concern over the effect of psychotherapy on their creative process. It should be noted that not all participants were enrolled in therapy; some participants were only speculating on what being in therapy would be like. Reflecting the sentiments discussed by Diamond (1996), several participants wondered whether processing a traumatic experience in therapy would take away from their ability to incorporate that experience into their storytelling. Other participants, who had not been in therapy before, expressed more general uncertainty about what effect therapy would have upon their creativity.

According to Diamond (1996), it is a common fear among artists that therapy may interfere with their creative process. While many of these participants were not able to elaborate on why exactly therapy may stifle their creativity, this may be an indication of the largely unconscious processes occurring when taking on a role. Kris (1962) stated that creative work can be understood to have two distinct phases, “inspiration” (i.e., unconscious) and “elaboration” (i.e., conscious). Kris described the inspiration phase as having much in common with regressive processes in terms of id impulses and drives. During this phase, the artist may experience feelings of rapture and of being driven by outside forces. For the actors hesitant to enter therapy and uncertain as to why, it may be due to their fear of disrupting the unconscious elements of their creative work.

Several participants also discussed there being stigma attached to mental health services within their communities. It is notable that the two participants discussing mental health stigma are actors of color. Extensive research has shown that racial and ethnic minority groups who already confront prejudice and discrimination because of their group affiliation, suffer further stigma when faced with the burdens of mental illness. The potency of the stigma of mental
illness is one reason why some ethnic minority group members who would benefit from mental health services elect not to seek or adequately participate in treatment. Furthermore, research suggests that the consequences of stigma are worse for racial and ethnic minorities compared to racial and ethnic majorities since the former often experience other social adversities such as poverty and discrimination within policies and institutions. According to the experience of the participants in this study, the acting world appears to be one such institution that further stigmatizes actors of color, due to the lack of representation, type-casting, and the absence of “safe spaces.”

**Limitations and Future Research**

Due to the nature of this study and the population examined, several limitations should be taken into considering when reviewing and interpreting the results. While there are a number of benefits to qualitative research, including the emphasis on a participant’s subjective experience, one weakness may be the challenges in generalizing the experiences of twelve individuals to all actors. The twelve interviews conducted are likely only a microcosm of the vast diversity of experiences among actors. Given the limited sample size of this study, future studies should seek to increase the total number of participants in order to better extrapolate findings. Furthermore, all of the research participants were a self-selected sample of actors who were willing to talk to speak about their mental health and acting experiences. They may differ in important ways from other actors who were not as interested or comfortable sharing personal experiences in an interview. The study also suffers from the limitations of all self-report studies in that the participants’ responses may have been influenced by social desirability; participants may have felt pressure to adjust their attitudes towards psychotherapy and mental health, as they knew they were speaking with a researcher in a clinical psychology doctoral program. Finally, as with any
group, characteristics may vary based on location, culture, age, and many other demographics. While the sample for this study is a fairly diverse one given its small size, the results gathered must still be considered geographically limited as groups were conducted in only one state in the northeast region of the United States. Additionally, not every possible ethnicity, race, and sexual orientation could be included in such a small sample.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore actors’ attitudes towards the connection between creativity and mental health, a topic that has received little attention in the psychological literature. The preexisting research that does exist on actors, however, is notable for its contractions. For example, some studies portray actors as psychological healthy individuals, who are characterized by their empathy, agreeableness, and openness to new experiences (Hammond & Edelmann, 1991; Marchant-Haycox, 1992), while other studies have taken a more pathologizing approach to the personality of actors, suggesting they are more likely to be confused about their identities, more vulnerable to stress, and narcissistic than others (Henry & Sims, 1970; Barr et al., 1972). Furthermore, the research on the psychological effects of acting has been both limited and inconsistent in its findings. Some studies have highlighted the psychological benefits of taking on a role, including improved sensitivity, awareness, self-understanding, and interpersonal skills (Goldstein & Winner, 2009; Burgoyne et al., 1999) while others outlined the potential risks in acting, including the impact of prolonged negative emotional states and the possibility of being traumatized when one's personal history is triggered (Geer, 1999; Burkhart, 2018). The purpose of this study, therefore, was to better understand the experience of actors through an analysis of their responses to six open-ended questions.
The data that emerged from the interviews yielded a narrative filled with contradictions and paradoxes, which was perhaps unsurprising given the inconsistencies of the research past. For virtually every theme that emerged in the data analysis a contrasting theme was present. Whether the participants were speaking about the relationship between acting and their mental health, the psychological impact of acting teachers on their students’ health, or their views towards psychotherapy, paradoxes were present. The actors in this study seemed to capture the complexity inherent in the process of creating and performing a role.

Perhaps, how an actor handles any anxieties associated with these paradoxical states has the potential to determine whether their careers and even their broader life circumstances are sustainable. According to Landy (1993) it is the capacity to live with the paradox of order/disorder, and have the courage to continue, in spite of not being in control, that enables a person to creatively participate in life.
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Appendix A – Electronic Dissertation Flyer

**Actors, Please Participate in A Psychology Research Study!**

**THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CREATIVITY AND MENTAL HEALTH**

**Who?**
We are looking for adult actors (21+) who have been working in the industry for at least three years.

**What?**
To participate you will be asked to: (1) complete a short demographic questionnaire and (2) participate in an approximately 60-minute online interview in which you will be asked about your beliefs about the relationship between creativity and mental health. No participant names will be associated with any of the research findings. Each participant will be compensated $20.00 for their time. Payment will be sent through participant’s preference of Venmo, Paypal, or Zelle.

**Why?**
Our research team is interested in the ways in which actors view the relationship between creativity and mental health and the ways in which actors support their overall wellbeing. In addition to providing valuable data, some of this information may be used to help tailor treatment to the specific needs of the acting community.

**Why Not?**
Some of the questions will ask you to reflect on your own emotional state, which may bring about feelings of distress. Participation is completely voluntary, and you may decide to withdraw at any time. You may also wish to speak to someone about these feelings, and we can provide you with a list of resources and information about referrals to a mental health professional.

**Where?**
The questionnaire and interview will both be scheduled at your convenience and completed online.

**How?**
If you want to get involved, please contact: alexander.seife@my.liu.edu

**Long Island University – Post**
Alexander J. Seife, M.S., Principal Investigator
Eva Feindler, Ph.D. Co-Investigator
Danielle Knafo, Ph.D. Co-Investigator
Alisa Hurwitz, Psy.D. Co-Investigator

Long Island University - Post
720 Northern Blvd.
Brookville, New York 11548
Appendix B – Demographic Questionnaire

Demographic Questionnaire

Name:

Email address:

Age:

Gender:

Race/ethnicity:

How would you describe your socioeconomic status?

How long have you considered yourself an actor?

Is acting your primary profession?

Are you a member of any actor unions? If so, please specify.

What type of acting work are you involved in (e.g., film, television, theater, voice-over, commercial)?

In addition to acting, do you work any other jobs? If so, please specify.
Appendix C – Informed Consent

LONG ISLAND UNIVERSITY – POST
Informed Consent Form for Human Research Subjects

You are being asked to volunteer in a research study called The Raw Material of Beauty: A Qualitative Study of Actors’ Perceptions of Creativity and Mental Health, conducted by Alex Seife, a student in the Clinical Psychology PsyD program, under the supervision of Dr. Eva Feindler, Ph.D, faculty member of the Clinical Psychology PsyD program. The purpose of the research is to better understand how actors view the relationship between mental health and creativity.

As a participant, you will be asked to answer questions in a semi-structured interview that will take approximately one and a half hours. Interviews will be held in a private space agreed upon by Mr. Seife and yourself. You will be asked some demographic questions, such as information about your age, gender, socioeconomic status, affiliation with actor unions, and sources of income. The interview questions will focus on your perceived rewards and challenges of the acting profession, the ways in which you support your mental health, and your beliefs regarding the connection between suffering and creativity. To thank you for your participation, you will be compensated $20.00 upon completion of the interview. Additionally, participating in the study has the benefit of helping expand people’s awareness and the research literature on the experiences of actors.

The interview will be recorded so that the investigator can transcribe and review your answers in the interest of accurately representing what you have said. The recordings will not be shared or made available to anyone beyond the investigator and faculty sponsor and will be destroyed after the three years of storage in a secure location.

Your identity as a participant will remain confidential. Your name will not be included in any forms, questionnaires, etc. This consent form is the only document identifying you as a participant in this study; it will be stored securely at the clinical psychology PsyD program at Long Island University available only to the investigator and faculty sponsor. Data collected may be destroyed at the end of a legally prescribed period of time or stored for further research. Results will be reported using pseudonyms and will focus on commonalities between actors.

If you have questions about the research, you may contact the investigator, Alex Seife, (914) 522-1916, alexander.seife@my.liu.edu, or the faculty sponsor, Dr. Feindler, (516) 299-3212, eva.feindler@liu.edu. If you have questions concerning your rights as a subject, you may contact
the Institutional Review Board Administrator, Dr. Lacey Sischo, (516) 299-3591, lacey.sischo@liu.edu. Your participation in this research is voluntary. Refusal to participate or discontinue participation at any time will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Your signature indicates you have fully read the above text and have had the opportunity to ask questions about the purposes and procedures of this study. Your signature also acknowledges receipt of a copy of the consent form as well as your willingness to participate.

**Consent to Audio Record and Transcribe Your Interview Responses**

With permission, we would also like to audio/video record your interview, and transcribe the responses. Please indicate we have (or do not have your permission).

**Permission to Audio-record**

__ YES. You have my permission to audio-record this participant’s interview responses.

__ NO. DO NOT audio-record this participant’s interview responses.

**Permission to Video-record**

__ YES. You have my permission to video-record this participant’s interview responses.

__ NO. DO NOT video-record this participant’s interview responses.

**Permission to Transcribe**

__ YES. You have my permission to transcribe this participant’s interview responses.

__ NO. DO NOT transcribe this participant’s interview responses.

___________________________________________ Typed/Printed Name of Participant

___________________________________________ Signature of Participant

______________ Date
THE RAW MATERIAL OF BEAUTY

Appendix D – Hierarchical Data Organization

HEIRARCHICAL DATA ORGANIZATION

I. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ACTING AND MENTAL HEALTH
   A. The Positive Effect of Acting on Mental Health (83.3%)
      1. A constitutionally based pursuit of my happiness (P1, P3, P4, P5, P11)
         - it’s a positive correlation. (T1, P1)
         - I do feel a positive affect. (T12, P1)
         - I think first and foremost by always pursuing acting. It’s quite literally a constitutionally based pursuit of my happiness. It’s something that I enjoy doing. And as long as I always have it in the back of my head that I’m taking steps to do what I love doing, then that keeps me more or less balanced. (T40, P1)
         - And when there’s nothing else, instead of focusing on the news or on what I can’t do, it gives me a sense of purpose. I wake up in the morning and do something I enjoy, and even if other stuff I’m doing in life is not exactly what I want to be doing, (T15, P1)
         - I think being creative is very helpful to mental health. (T1, P3)
         - a lot people say that music is therapy, and this goes all the way back to biblical times where music has been soothing to the soul. (T2, P3)
         - I think that there is a strong connection between mental health and creativity because the ability to create sometimes comes from a strong connection to your mental health and a strong – a healthy relationship with your mind and brain and everything. (T1, P4)
         - I think that they are directly related. I think that to be human is to be creative. (T1, P5)
         - For me, not having a creative outlet would be impossible; I’m always searching for a creative outlet. Whether it’s painting, or writing, or just reading other people’s creative works and trying to bring them to life even in my own bedroom. It’s really the question of: are you able to express yourself? And without that you have nothing and without creativity I don’t think you can express yourself. (T2, P5)
         - when you feel that your natural tendencies and natural inclinations towards creativity are stifled then it can feel like it may lead to a depression. (T2, P11)
         - But now I’m happy. I don’t have any money. I don’t have any status. I have nothing that I had when I was a teacher. But, I’m so much happier and it’s just less hard. (T75, P11)
         - And so, for me, when I sort of un-bottled the genie, if you will, my mental health greatly improved. I just was a happier person, but that’s for me. (T3, P11)
         - it’s much less hard to support my own emotional wellbeing since I’m happy with the life that I’m living. (T72, P11)
      2. Creativity provides a useful outlet (P1, P3)
         - creativity provides a useful outlet (T2, P1)
         - But during the pandemic, during quarantine, over the past – over half a year, people have been creating their own content and the phrase that is tossed around a lot by people, including myself, is that we did this to just stay sane in this period, having cabin fever and not having a whole lot. (T14, P1)
         - I feel like I’m doing something productive in this time, rather than sit around and watch things happen. It’s also a good distraction for me from not only my regular work, which I have been working from home pretty much entirely since mid-March, so it’s a good distraction from that. (T15, P1)
         - I see her mood versus my mood throughout this time and I definitely feel like I have more of an outlet through acting. (T41, P1)
         - I think people who enjoy being creative find that it is a good release for them and it’s a way to communicate and a way to express emotions in a way that’s not harmful. (T3, P3)
         - art can be very powerful and constructive in acting out, so to speak, in ways that are not harmful to other people. To be creative and tell great stories, it can impact people on a profound, visceral level. (T4, P3)
      3. It’s pure bliss (P3, P4, P5, P6, P8, P9, P11)
         - I think a lot of artists would say there’s a feeling of euphoria, sometimes, when you are in that creative groove. (T5, P3)
         - And you feel an intense high when you’re able to create and you’re able to release that energy. It doesn’t always come, that muse, but when you have it it’s a really good kind of energy field. And I feel the same way about improvisation and acting too. (T6, P3)
- When I’m at my most creative my experience is very positive and almost like I’m in my zone, like I can’t be taken down from the level I’m at. Like I feel kind of unstoppable in that I’m able to do the work that I know that I’ve been training almost my whole life to do, and I don’t really have negative feelings going. (T3, P4)
- “the synapses popping off in the brain,” literally you feel just so alive. (T6, P5)
- Right now, it’s mostly been with teaching acting and not with performing. But, there’s that thing everyone says where you feel that spark, like you feel that connection just flowing through you as you do it. And I’ve been teaching virtually since COVID hit and I’ve been coming up with little acting exercises and I don’t know where’s that coming from, but there’s this spark of creation. I think because there is so little stimulus for us right now that if you’re honing in on your craft, it’s like becoming a lot more freer right now. (T3, P6)
- But, now with teaching it’s been so – my creativity being given to the children I’m teaching and seeing them get it – it sparks that. (T5, P6)
- It’s pure bliss. It’s literally the high that I’m chasing after. It’s the thing you get when you bow and the audience is applauding for you. (T4, P6)
- When I’m at my most creative there is a sense of joy (T8, P8)
- I do think there is a moment of bliss, as well as just joy at the fact that I am creating a thing, that may not be centered itself around the thing that is being created, if that makes sense. So, yeah, I’ll just stay with the word “joy.” The things that I’ve created were from a place of joy, even if they were sad things. (T10, P8)
- I love theater because once it starts it has to keep going until it’s over. And I think that’s the high that most people love out of theater. And to continuously live as this character the whole time. (T18, P8)
- I would say, they always talk about that “flow” state. And I think it’s for this to always happen, but especially within theater. It can happen too with film, but with film there is a lot more stop and go. (T4, P9)
- But, also exhilaration. If you feel like you are creating something unique, that is exhilarating. It sounds kind of like bipolar disorder, because of these extremes. (T11, P11)
- I don’t think creativity brings feelings of anger. (T13, P11)
- And you notice there will be certain shows where you’re in a flow state and you’re just so present on stage that you’re not in your head, you’re not thinking about your lines, you’re not thinking about the choreography, you’re not thinking about the song, there’s not anxiety, there’s not stress, you’re just present and you’re there, and everything you say and do is coming from a place of truth. I would say that for me, that’s the most special moment, when I’m not in my head. I feel that’s my most creative as well, because that filter of right and wrong is gone, and it’s more just about being and storytelling. (T5, P9)

4. I’ve always viewed acting as a way to be stronger, braver, bigger, more intelligent than I am in real life (P1, P6, P9, P11)
- you get to play characters that are, you know, braver, stronger, more intelligent, more expressive, more creative than you are in real life. (T4, P1)
- I get to do the things that I don’t get in real life. If it’s a lead role in a film, if it’s a lead role in the relationships with the other people in the film. (T8, P1)
- that’s something that I would never be able to do in real life even though in real life I am in a leadership position, in real life I am an army officer veteran, and like how people respond to me in a script - scripted reality versus reality (T9, P1)
- I have a project right now where it is, I’m trying to create roles which I don’t normally get to play and it’s like the action hero and creating that reality is when I am most creative. (T11, P1)
- where I can be more creative than I am in real life. (T15, P1)
- I think that the very definition of acting is you get to experience a sort of a beginning, middle, and end, a journey, all in one short time period. (T18, P1)
- I’ve always viewed acting as a way to be stronger, braver, bigger, more intelligent than I am in real life. I think the opportunity to play roles that I wouldn’t otherwise get to play in real life. I always see more for myself than what I am doing in real life and whether it’s fantasy, film, screen, or stage, it gives me that opportunity at least for the life of that production to do that. (T43, P1)
- So, sometimes something that seems really intimidating, you might be capable of. So, I think it can be a learning experience when you get a character, where you’re like, wow this is really challenging. And then you end up learning that you are able to do it. (T13, P9)
- I think sometimes you surprise yourself of what you might have made assumptions about going in. (T14, P9)
- Iago is one of my favorite characters that I got to play. Because he was just larger than life, so big, just trying to be a bird is like a very interesting process. And I think it was exciting because that was one of the strongest characters that I portrayed that summer. (T12, P9)
- It was great fun because it’s so not this middle-aged woman. (T26, P11)
- It was a very gender queer cast and I played [name of female character] slash [name of female character], in like a dress and everything. And that’s something I never known I would have done. (T12, P6)

5. **A strong link between mental health and creativity** (P2, P7, P8, P9)
- I think there’s a really strong link, especially in any form of creativity, but specifically to the acting profession. Our bodies, our minds are really the only tools we have to use. And mental health is so connected to that. It’s connected obviously to the way your brain is working, but it can also be connected to how your body is feeling physically. (T1, P2)
- I feel like as an artist and a performer and a creative that mental health is so closely associated with everything from the way we approach character to how we hold ourselves in space with other people. (T1, P7)
- I don’t think creativity is based on the degree of health of a specific mind. But I do think creativity may express itself differently in a different state of mind, as well as creativity may be more vivid and expansive and apparent in certain types of mind states. But I think everyone regardless of their mental status is equally creative. (T1, P8)
- I think that the beauty of art and life and everything is that, you know our existence alone is all stemming from nature and nurture. (T17, P9)

6. **Acting is a really spiritual thing for me** (P8)
- Acting is a really spiritual thing for me. And so, I try to explore all of my characters from deep within the character, opposed to what the character is wearing. (T34, P8)
- In the last ten years have become very spiritual. (T61, P8)
- I look at all those things in myself as a part of God and I try to explore my godliness and I’m focused on allowing my godliness to express itself through me. (T62, P8)
- But I really think my purpose now is to allow the spirit that is what I am to have full reign through my physical. (T63, P8)
- I’m just really focused on the inner-me and allowing that to explore all the moments. Being quiet, being still, and paying attention to the present moment as much as I can. I think that’s where most of my focus is. (T66, P8)

B. **The Positive Effect of Mental Health on Acting** (58.3%)
1. **If you have a wound, it needs to be scabbed over and healed and scarred before you can use it** (P2, P5, P7)
   - Sometimes if it’s a role that is particularly heavy, part of my prep will also be going through with myself and making sure that I know I can go in and out of it safely. (T18, P2)
   - But I’ve definitely played characters that touch upon my personal experiences, and sometimes difficult personal experiences. Like, for example, and I don’t mind sharing this, I lost one of my best friends to suicide when I was twenty, so anytime that comes up in a role, that’s sort of a flag for me to know: okay this is something that’s going to have some sort of a trigger and a response from me, and so I have had to learn different tools for myself to deal with that, to make sure that I can give a truthful, invested performance. (T25, P2)
   - If you have a wound, it needs to be scabbed over, and healed, and scarred before you can use it quote unquote, if you want to and need to. You don’t want to use any raw, fresh wound because then it will keep bleeding and that will be a problem. (T26, P2)
   - For me it’s about finding the right tools and that can be having my people I can go talk to before rehearsal or after a rehearsal to decompress, it can be going home and just having a cup of tea and stepping out of it, it can be journaling about it, it can be songwriting sometimes. (T27, P2)
   - Successful actors are the ones that are able to allow themselves to feel things really deeply, but equally in order to sustain that you have to have the other side of it and the ability to deal with it, not just to go there, but also to come back. And I think “tortured artist” for me refers to the people that haven’t figured that second part out yet, the coming back part. (T50, P2)
   - We talked a lot about not banking your personal worth on being an actor. And knowing who you are as a human being is equally as important as being a good actor. Because you can’t have one without the other and you also need to be able to separate the two. (T24, P2)
there were just so many similarities and it was so personal because it wasn’t script-based it was all improvisation essentially So that character specifically, I wasn’t able to let it go, because I didn’t think it was finished. (T59, P2)
- the character didn’t really get an ending. It just, sort of stopped. That was part of what made it really hard for me is when I feel like things are unfinished in some way, I have a really difficult time with that. I know now that about myself as a human. (T58, P2)
- It comes back to not being able to come back out of it. When it starts to permeate your own life and doesn’t stay with the character. It’s the danger of doing an intense part, whether it’s a murderer or someone who is raped or whatever it might be, and you go home at night and you can’t get out of that place. Maybe if it happens for a night it’s a part of the process, but if you get to a point where it’s happening every night, you either have to step away from that character or you need to find your way to cope with that. (T51, P2)
- it’s especially happened with characters who I have really loved and have been so intrigued by and you want to live there so much because there are aspects that are really enjoyable. I think I’ve also learned that the danger for those is that when I do have to leave those characters behind because the show has ended or whatever, that then becomes really hard to leave behind. Especially if it’s a character who I’ve found a lot of similarities in myself. Those for me tend to be the ones that are a bit trickier and who have lingered with me the most. And I’ve certainly had experiences where I have not dealt with it well and have allowed things to eat away at me or whatever. I don’t think you can necessarily put a time frame on anything like that. (T55, P2)
- It took a really long time to let that character go. And even looking back on it, I have other tools now that I maybe could have tried to use, but also for me it’s just time. And I think that there are characters that can linger with you and stay with you. And then if it becomes impossible for you to live your life, or if it’s totally consuming you, then it’s a red flag moment of okay I need to be aware of this, I need to talk to someone, I need to do what I need to do to get myself out of here. (T56, P2)
- This character had a unique circumstance and touched on a lot of really emotional, personal parts of my life. (T57, P2)
- people are so concentrated on getting you there, that they don’t always talk about the getting you back parts, and I think that’s something that’s so important to know as an actor. (T62, P2)
- Actors tend to be pretty emotional. You know, if you have a rage problem, which I’ve seen happen, you shouldn’t be working on a rage-driven character, right? (T34, P5)
- I think that reading plays and watching movies and performing as characters who are going through similar things as you is so important. And they recommend that for regular people, right? They tell them that if you’re going through loss then read books on loss. But if it starts to get to be too much and two years after someone’s death you’re still dwelling on it and you’re still having nightmares and still all these things, like, don’t do that. (T37, P5)
- They’re like, I just lost my son, I can’t play a character who just lost their son. That’s just too much for my mental health. (T38, P5)
- So, it’s good to do something that is completely not what you’re going through. Not just because – it’s back and forth between – you just don’t want your mental energy being spent thinking about something or physical energy being spent, like, stirring up the same emotions you have difficulty keeping down. You want to find that balance and just live in it. (T39, P5)
- So, particularly it’s really obvious with loss, because if you lose someone and then you’re playing a character who has lost someone, you have to have already dealt with that before you can really bring it all the way to the front. Because otherwise you will never be fully willing to access what it means to have lost someone. Because it’s going to disrupt what’s going on in your personal life. (T48, P5)
- If you’re able to be aware of it so completely and fully and know what that means for a person, and what it means for your character, you would know as yourself, like I [name of participant] know what I means to lose someone, so do many people, so like, I know how to bring that to a character. But if you’re not dealing with it in your own personal life and you’re in denial about certain aspects of what that means, you’re not going to have as well-rounded a performance as you should. (T49, P5)
- But it’s not, it’s a fucking distraction. And like, really, anything that damages you as a person is not going to make you a better actor until you’ve dealt with it. (T60, P5)
I don’t necessarily want to play stuff that I’ve been through. But, at the same time, like, your range is not necessarily going to be amazing if you’re carrying this stuff that is informing every role you play. So, yeah. The suffering artist thing is kind of garbage. (T62, P5)

So, Miss Julie, at the end of the piece she deals - she commits suicide. And at the time, I was dealing with – my sister had attempted suicide. She survived, but as an actor I was like very blocked to that. I knew that. (T19, P7)

2. You don’t have to actually suffer to perform well (P2, P5, P8, P9, P10, P11)

Yeah, suffering artists is stupid. I think you naturally suffer because you have to deal with more things on a day to day than people who work in a regular office do. (T63, P5)

I don’t think you have to actually go through it, you can go through literature. We live in a time where you have access to suffering. You can make yourself suffer in thirty minutes, watch something terrible on the internet, and you’ll be distraught. So, I don’t think you need any of that stuff and I think it’s only detrimental, because then you end up – I know a lot of actors who walk around really, really stiff and play a certain type of character, but it’s because they’re stiff in their real life. (T61, P5)

Ultimately, part of your training is not suffering but learning how to be fully empathetic and sympathetic with people. And learning what that stuff looks like, whether that’s through watching other TV or documentaries or reading books and learning how to feel. You know, that’s your job. You don’t have to actually suffer to perform well. (T59, P5)

I personally think focusing on your own mental health and happiness is healthiest. I think that should be your number one priority even over storytelling. (T23, P9)

You know with Method Acting, where actors get so involved with the character to the point where they lose themselves and their behavior becomes self-harmful, I don’t think that that is worth it for the art. (T24, P9)

I would personally say that therapy is essential for one’s mental health over their artistic quality. I would prioritize that. (T25, P9)

And especially prioritizing your mental health and focusing on that first, even, before worrying about acting, etcetera. (T34, P9)

I think there’s enough roles and stories to be told, that I don’t think you need a quote unquote tortured, jaded past to tell a story accurately. (T28, P9)

I do think that’s the exact beauty of acting is the fact that everyone has their own story and their bringing their own life experiences to the character and I think that’s what makes it so special. (T29, P9)

I think that one of my favorite things about storytelling is that you’re going to have so many different narratives being told and so many different writers and directors and there’s just a huge spectrum of stories to be told. And I think that each character has a different skill set that’s needed. (T26, P9)

I won’t say you have to suffer, but I will say that if actors are basically drawing on their experiences, their sense memories, their emotional memories of things, then clearly the more you have to draw upon, it’s like tools in a tool belt. How personal you’ll be. So, I do think life experience is very valuable. It certainly has been for me. So, if you have to suffer now, but, you know you might not be able to play a suffering character as well. If you suffer a lot, then you might not be able to play a happy character as well. So, you got to have joy in there too, you see what I’m saying? That’s what the balance is about. (T68, P11)

I acted a role when I was twenty-two. I could look at that role now and see so much more nuance, and also bring to the table so much more emotional – such a larger emotional repertoire, because I’ve lived more. (T67, P11)

I want to be able to live in my highest joy and then I would assume right now that would make my creativity go to my highest ability. If I could resonate from my highest place of love and my highest place of joy and that my creativity would explode out of the wall. (T46, P8)

So, I do think that there is some balance in the thing that I’m trying to discover. But I do think that it’s a scary thing that if we do need to be in a harsh, physical state in order to be creative, I don’t think that’s healthy. And I would love to be able to exist in a place of joy and be ultra-creative at the same time. (T48, P8)

I definitely think it’s a myth. I think it’s terrible that we would feel that our creativity comes out of hardship – not hardship, but of existing in a place of turmoil and dementia. (T55, P8)
I don’t think that you need to have experienced the loss of a child to play a parent that loses their child. I don’t think that’s a necessity. (T49, P2)

- Obviously, you can’t be an angry motherfucker all the time. (T35, P10)

C. Practicing Self-Care Through Lifestyle Choices (100%)

1. Being alone and turning off my brain (P2, P4)
   - Even if I can’t go into a forest and talk to a tree it’s more of finding something that will help me find the simplicity in things and just sort of tune out all of the other crap that is going on. (T17, P2)
   - For me it’s a reset button as well and it makes me feel very calm. And especially when I’m in New York or another big city, I can get very overwhelmed and very in my head. So, part of it is just having that as a human being to go and sit and sort of decompress for a while. But I think there is something for me in just having your feet on the ground and not on a floor and just sort of reconnecting with the basics, I guess. And just calming down and turning off my brain. (T23, P2)
   - Sometimes it comes to the being alone place, okay, do I want to journal about this, do I want to write a song about this, or do I just want to go home and make myself a cup of tea and zone out to Netflix tonight? I think sometimes for me that can be very powerful, whether it’s watching a movie or reading, but escaping into a whole other world can help me leave my reality or the reality of the character behind, to find something else to be investing in. Sleep is really important for me. I don’t necessarily need eight hours every night, but being really tired for me is really hard. (T53, P2)
   - just finding something that helps me step away from it, so again to remind myself that like, I am a human person outside of this character (T54, P2)
   - I’d like to think that I’m very self-aware and just know myself. Sometimes it’s not enough for me to just sit with myself around other people. Sometimes that complete separation from everybody really gets me to sit and think and really get deeper into my head and think about the things that have been going on in my life, just get back to myself. (T30, P4)

2. Self-care through physical activity (P1, P5, P7)
   - a lot of physical activity. Because acting, while active, is not always as physical. So just to get some exercise in as well (T42, P1)
   - I do all the same things that I think anyone would do to keep their mental stability, which is just working out. (T67, P5)
   - Exercise, for sure. That’s a big one. (T32, P7)

3. Self-care through yoga/meditating (P4, P8, P9, P12)
   - I really enjoy yoga and meditating. (T57, P12)
   - So, I do a lot of yoga. I don’t meditate as much as I used to, I used to meditate an hour a day, now it’s like eight minutes here, twelve minutes there, three minutes over there, you know what I mean? When I feel like I need to meditate or when I feel like I’m having a moment of let me just sit here in the silence sort of deal, (T63, P8)
   - And also, yoga and meditation are also tools I really like. (T39, P9)
   - Yoga, running, dogs, coffee, walks [laughs]. (T3, P9)
   - And also, just taking time for being alone and doing other things like running and yoga aside.. (T39, P9)
   - I like to try to take time to meditate every so often. Kind of just spending a lot of time with myself. Taking a step away from hanging out with friends if I know that I haven’t spent a lot of time with myself in a while. Just doing the things that make me happy, that I enjoy, and relaxing. (T29, P4)

4. Find things that make you happy that are not theater-related (P9, P10)
   - And I think checking in – and I know for myself personally, mental health is something I really do try to focus on and focus on what makes me happy and things that I can control. (T1, P9)
   - I feel like a lot of my professors have said, find things that make you happy that are not theater-related. So that when you’re not working, you’re not auditioning you have something else to focus on besides that. (T34, P9)
   - Exercise, sleep, have a hobby, have hobbies, things used to escape from the craziness. (T32, P10)

5. Self-care through dietary choices (P7, P8, P9)
   - I’m vegan now. (T64, P8)
I’ve been a vegetarian for a long time, I’ve noticed that what I fuel my body with will affect my mental state. I also discovered that frequent exercise – I love running and cardio, really helps me with stress. (T39, P9)

Because I also have an autoimmune disease, I eat well; I don’t eat gluten or dairy, which has been really helpful for my mental state as well. (T32, P7)

6. **My faith has become a critical part of my life** (P3, P10, P11)
- my faith has become a kind of stay centered during all this. I thank God that I’ve been able to survive through this pandemic with fruitful work that has been able to pay the bills. (T22, P3)
- my faith has become a critical part of my life. (T27, P3)
- my faith has helped me deal with the highs and lows of life. You know, I realize that there is a sovereign creator out there that loves me and wants what is best for me. (T28, P3)
- I do think that faith is important. And it can affect people in a negative way, so many things are done in the name of religion that are not right in our society. But I do think that faith, simple faith, can be very helpful to a person’s mental health. (T29, P3)
- I’m religious, I go to church. (T30, P10)
- I think blasphemy is real. So, if I have to say something like G-slash-D, like god damn in a script, I’ll ask the director, “is it okay if I don’t say that?” And most of the time everyone is like, yeah if you don’t want to say that it’s fine, it’s pretty cool. Sometimes you got to say what you got to say. And obviously, it’s not me saying it, so it’s okay. I can do it if I have to and I’ll be okay. God is not going to be like, you, you, you know – I’m going to be fine.  (T33, P10)
- You definitely get characters who are not religious at all, or who are against the religion you have, and that’s just part of the bag, that’s just part of the deal. That’s when the acting comes in, when you have to do something that you’re not. And it’s okay, you can still draw parallels between things you’ve done and things your character has done, even if it’s not the same. So, even if I’m playing a character who is not religious, I can still take a moment in my life where I felt a certain way about my religion, I can take that to drive a certain section of a character. (T34, P10)
- I’m also Buddhist and I’m a big believer in: you’re in charge of your own life, you’re responsible for your own life. (T71, P11)

7. **I like to solve my problems in creative ways** (P1, P6, P11)
- To a degree creativity is a creator of necessity. You have to find creative ways to work, creative ways to make a living, creative ways to be relevant again, creative ways to be financially well off, creative ways to be happy. (T39, P1)
- Mostly I just make lists. I’m not sure that eases my mental chatter. But, like figuring out my budget. That can be a creative thing. (T37, P6)
- I love the moon cycles because it’s like, there’s the new moon which is dark and then it goes to the full moon and then all of the other things in between. And it’s really just good for goal setting. You can reflect in little chunks of time. So, I can see where I’ve been between the moon cycles. And set intentions and goals and accomplish them in that amount of time. Maybe it’s just a goal making device, but it’s super helpful. (T38, P6)
- I read self-help books like candy. I really love listening to inspirational speakers. I feel like I’m getting therapy like on my own. I’m reading and trying to educate myself and connect to some of the things that are being pointed out in the book. (T33, P6)
- So, identifying your problem and making it creative. And solving it in creative ways. Through some of the things she worked with me on I developed ways, creativity, to deal with my problems. Like, journaling, I use listing, just things that she taught me. You can list it out, you can draw it out, you can color it out. But, like, physically solving it has been really helpful for me. (T35, P6)
- And to me that’s sort of where you can get creative as a scientist, is in theory and theorizing. (T22, P11)
- I think also a job I had as a behavior specialist. I worked with autistic adults to try and come up with treatment plans for them, adjust their maladaptive behaviors. It was, in a way, a great place to test my creativity. But, there weren’t necessarily the resources to develop those ideas. (T24, P11)
- Exactly that way. By being the one to support my own (T69, P11)
I’m going to be my best boyfriend. I’m going to take myself on a lovely walk in the park. I’m going to make myself a cup of tea. I’m going to feed my cats so that [name of participant] doesn’t have to [laughs]. (T70, P11)

D. The Value of Psychotherapy (66.7%)

1. *Therapy is a way to become more self-aware and to release creative blocks* (P2, P4, P5 P6, P7, P10)
   - I think it can be a good tool to help with unpacking things and help with being in touch with yourself and not getting completely lost in a role. (T30, P2)
   - I think it’s more of a therapy as a tool can be used to make you more aware of who you are as a person and how you respond to other people and get through the day. And I think those are all tools you can use in the creative process. To me I guess it’s more of the way they work. (T32, P2)
   - I guess if you find that it is stifling your creative process then to me the first question is to go: oh, is this actually stifling my creative process, or have I been using something unhealthy to create my creative process in the past that I just need to work through now and find another way in? And that is a question of knowing yourself well enough to be able to do that. (T35, P2)
   - I’ve tried different therapies and right now I’m in therapy, but that’s mainly because of the quarantine. I don’t find it necessarily super-duper helpful, because I think I’m pretty well connected to my own thoughts at this point. (T69, P5)
   - As someone who has not been in therapy – well, I did anger management a long time ago. But, I could imagine it would, because maybe the goal of therapy is to like find – is to help – is self-help, like help from within. As someone feels better about themselves, they are probably more inclined to be more imaginative and creative. Because if they’re not, I imagine they would feel more blocked. I feel like the more blocked you feel, the less you’re going to put out. In terms of your imagination, or in terms of your creativity. Anything you can do to release that block, I don’t see how you can lose. (T14, P10)
   - I’m an advocate for mental health and I wouldn’t tell anybody that they should - if they need some help they should reach out and do something if you can afford it (T2, P10)
   - I guess I would look forward to it, because I feel like I haven’t always had the best opportunities to release anger in a sense. So, when there’s an avenue where I could do that, and it’s justified, and it’s for a good cause, well then, hell yeah. (T16, P10)
   - They are pretty big advocates for health, especially if you want to pursue this career, according to them. And I agree. (T21, P10)
   - I think what could be helpful about it is maybe someone is acting in a way where – I’m thinking of someone who may have problems at home and what they are giving to the character, maybe they are holding back or something. Or maybe there is a boundary they are not coming to because they have some trauma or something. But a therapist could help them work through that. They then might be able to have that experience and work through that barrier. (T15, P4)
   - I don’t think so. I think it can help channel it. (T18, P6)

   - I feel like there is something that we as actors draw on from life experience that then is applied to our parts. If like the person in the play lost a parent and you have, you can kind of do that without going into dangerous territory. I feel like therapy has been really helpful with that for me. Because like I mentioned with my sister, suicide was a thing I wasn’t even comfortable saying, and now it’s like, okay I can draw on that feeling I had without drawing up the incident and triggering myself to approach characters who are dealing with that or in that state of mind. (T26, P7)
   - But, on the same token, if you’re not in therapy, doing that kind of work on your own can be very triggering and can be really detrimental to how you bring up these incidents on yourself. Like, we’ll tell our students all the time, like, if that actually happened to you recently do not draw on it. Draw on it five years later when you’ve processed it and moved on. (T26, P7)

2. *Therapy is a place to challenge negative thoughts* (P7, P11, P12)
   - I really work on in therapy, like, telling myself stories, like, I’ll think this, but is that true? Like, they’re going to see that piece of hair and then think that I’m ugly, that I don’t care about this audition, that I would show up to set and my costume would look like shit. You know, just a
bunch of – and I’m like, is that true? If I was a casting director and someone’s hair was like this, would I hate them? Probably not (T19, P12)
- we worked on self-soothing. Where it’s like, I’ll get into this anxiety spiral and not be able to pull myself out of it. Then this worksheet is like, hey if you’re anxiety spiraling, you can do this, this, this, and this. And I’m like, this is so good, I will do this. (T21, P12)
- Yeah, therapy and the tools I link to therapy. (T57, P12)
- And also, just reminded myself, what’s the worst thing that can happen? I was in college, so it was like, who’s really seeing this that’s going to make or break my career? And I was like, no one, so if I don’t hit a note perfectly, it’s not a big deal. (T21, P7)
- Yes. But, only because I’ve worked – I was taking singing lessons once a week, prior to the pandemic. And putting in the work. And also learning that every voice – everyone can sing. Whether you’re Beyoncé or whoever you are. Everyone has a voice. So, no I’m not going to be your next Idina Menzel, but I can definitely do an ensemble role and not cry. (T22, P7)
- you can get really self-deprecating. But, instead of doing that, it’s like, oh where do I want to be? Because I’m myself and we’re not even going in for the same parts, ever. Like, you can’t compare yourself to other actors that way. (T25, P7)
- Because therapy, other than positive psychology, is about fixing problems, right? So, it’s almost like the focus is on the negative. (T38, P11)

3. My therapist is creative and there is an unspoken language we share (P2, P7, P11, P12)
- I think it can also really make a difference whether or not you have the right therapist, because I know, at least for me, when I started it was fine, and then I started to realize that I was not with the right therapist for me, and so I needed to switch to a different one. And I think I felt very stifled, more so as a person when I found out that that therapy relationship wasn’t working. (T31, P2)
- I do think that if you do get into a relationship with a therapist that is not working for you, again it becomes more of a danger to you as a human person and not as a specifically creative person. (T34, P2)
- But, I think that it’s also knowing that if it is that strong feeling of, no this therapy relationship is not working for me – because I think that if it is stifling you creatively then it’s also stifling you as a person. (T35, P2)
- Absolutely. I see a therapist once a week. And she is a creative – or she was a creative, so I found that that has actually been really helpful because there is an unspoken language we have and we have the same shared language. (T23, P7)
- Yeah, at least when it comes to the subject matter of auditioning and creating and things like that. Because my therapist was a performer, she knows what the stress of tech week does to a person. She knows that having an agent drop you is really hard to deal with. Without even me going into too much detail about it, as soon as I said it, she knew what that meant. (T24, P7)
- And same with like, she’s really good at talking through the, um, the career is competitive in and of itself, but not being competitive in the sense of self-comparison to other people, but only comparing yourself to yourself, which is like something I’ve had to learn. (T24, P7)
- I feel like once you connect with a therapist, why would you want to change that person? (T31, P7)
- Therapy once a week. (T32, P7)
- I think definitely, depending on the therapist. It really depends on the therapist. (T36, P11)
- You know, you had from way back when you had Freud and you had Gestalt therapy, which is like perfect for actors. Like, live in the moment! Those kinds of therapies are wonderful, I think, for creative types. (T37, P11)
- I’m just thinking in such a limited way, there are actually many more ways that I can solve this problem. That was a valuable and practical way that creativity could be used in therapy. Opening up the mind to other possibilities. (T47, P11)
- I kind of vetted to make sure they – I mean neither of them were in theater or performing. I know a lot of theater friends prefer to go to someone who is an ex-actor turned therapist, that’s really helpful for them and I can see how that’s really helpful. I just like to make sure that they are, like, creative people who, like, vibe with it. (T23, P12)
- they feel creative to me. I feel like they understand what I’m putting down. I guess if it were someone who was more academic or not very creative, that would be very hard and a little detrimental. (T24, P12)
I just don’t want to have to explain myself so much. Like, when they have too many questions about the process. (T25, P12)

they understand theater because they live here they walk passed, you know. They have this understanding, they’ve heard of this stuff. I think it’s like a time saver (T26, P12)

as a creative-slash-artist, I feel like I’m always really defending myself. You know, especially in the years where I don’t make all of my income from acting, that feels really terrible. And in therapy I want to be able to say that to a person who I think will still consider me an artist, and won’t be like well… (T28, P12)

in therapy, I have forty-five expensive minutes for you to field this past weeks’ trauma and I don’t want to waste my time on a backstory. (T29, P12)

I’ll go home and talk to my aunt and they, like, don’t know what Broadway – you know what I mean? They don’t know what Broadway is, what off-Broadway is. So, it’s helpful to have people where I’m not just teaching them for fifteen minutes to get to my problem. (T27, P12)

One of the things I really liked about therapy, and I know some of my fellow performers have as well, is as much as I feel like I can talk to and depend on my friends to be able to go and talk to someone that is – you don’t have any stake in the relationship, you’re not worrying about how you phrase things when you talk to them. It can be really beneficial. (T38, P2)

II. THE VALUE OF SUFFERING
A. The Positive Effect of Mental Health Struggles on Acting (91.7%)
1. Everything that’s happened in your life you can bring into your storytelling space (P1, P4, P6, P9, P10)
   - you are going to bring aspects of your own self into the character, but it’s not going to be entirely you because it is written by someone else with different ideas and you’re playing this imaginary circumstance, so you get this blend of constructed reality, your own personality, how your personality would handle that particular situation. (T21, P1)
   - in creating a character I get the sides and the breakdown of the character to begin with. I try to learn – if they tell me what the origin of the character is, like a little backstory, (T5, P4)
   - I’ll do some research and try to just apply the experiences I’ve had in my life to that. Just trying to use the experiences I’ve had to create that character and then it usually takes me to thinking, okay, well how would this character act in any given situation? (T6, P4)
   - I always try to find connections between myself and the character first to operate from a place of truth and then figure it out from there. It’s taking the facts given by the playwright and then adding on imagination to that. (T7, P6)
   - I do think that having these experiences I’ve been through are helpful for me to access with characters. (T31, P6)
   - I think through a period of trial and error. As a kid I was super into like feeling it. (T8, P6)
   - I do think that’s true that as an artist, everything that’s happened in your life you can bring into your storytelling space. (T21, P9)
   - I do think that if I had a specific character who had a really difficult backstory and let’s say maybe rape was involved in the storyline, if that individual had a life experience with that, I think it could be easier to tune into that and give it a more authentic performance. (T27, P9)
   - frequently they’re asking about how you personally can relate to that. (T31, P9)
   - I think that on a day to day basis, we are just analyzing human behavior and I think that in and of itself there is a lot of self-analysis and self-awareness. (T32, P9)
   - I definitely feel like within the acting world, which is a creative one, I think we are very in tune with our mental state, which I think helps bring awareness of that. And then, on top of that, I think this profession, you want to be very self-aware as to how you’re feeling mentally. (T1, P9)
   - I feel like it could definitely help you. I feel like the more life experiences you have, the better you can approach these characters and give them humanity that you might not have realized before. If you know what it’s like to go through some shit, even if it’s not specifically the shit your character goes through, you can still relate that, you can still draw parallels, you can still give a great performance just due to your own experiences even if they’re not the same as the character. So, I think if you’ve suffered, which many of us have, and if you’re not as fortunate as other people, it
does make you stronger in a sense. You got to keep going, you got to be a survivor, you know. (T29, P10)

2. **Out of my anxiety comes a golden idea** (P1, P2, P3, P4, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10, P11)
   - It’s funny, whenever I’m most financially stable and stuff is good at home, I tend to write less and I’m not as daring in my auditions and not as bold. And the times when I’ve been most prolific in writing for myself to perform in, or I’ve gone big in terms of auditions, the choices I’ve made, I think that’s happened during my periods of unemployment. (T39, P1)
   - I think that there has been a lot of examples of people not having the best mental health and obviously that can affect their creative processes. But sometimes, I feel like it kind of makes room for some more unorthodox or unordinary discoveries or like pieces of art that can be groundbreaking as well as something that someone in their right mind can do, or even better, you know what I’m saying. (T1, P10)
   - it’s trying to create something beautiful out of your pain or trying to create something relatable out of your pain, because for me it’s a way of releasing it. (T48, P2)
   - Sometimes I think in life, sometimes harmful events can help people channel their creative muse in that way. (T8, P3)
   - Anytime you can draw on some real experience or some real aspect of suffering it can really breathe an incredible amount of life into the performance. So that when people see it they are impacted on a real visceral level. (T25, P3)
   - I think that if people have had bad experiences in their background I’m sure that the actor could most likely draw on those experiences in their past – that they can imbue a certain sense of reality to the performance as a result of the suffering and adversity. (T26, P3)
   - a lot of creativity might come from not having a very good mental health history. (T2, P4)
   - Like, somebody who has had this tough upbringing, like very bad life and turned it into something incredibly good because they had that suffering. (T26, P4)
   - Like I know that out of my anxiety comes, like, a golden idea. (T18, P6)
   - I mean it’s really idealized. I mean, like, Jim Carrey lived in his car before he began. And he wrote out that check for himself and then became famous. And a lot of people struggle, like, I even do it. Like, there’s nights where I’ll be like, --- -
   - “I’m not going to eat dinner tonight.” It’s late and I’m not going to waste food, you know? Um. I think struggle is important to have a place to come from. Artistically, I think art comes out of struggle. I don’t think that a perfect person can really access some of the things that people have gone through who have struggled. (T30, P6)
   - And then the next day I come back, like, creatively drained and exhausted and then from there something wonderful happens. (T10, P7)
   - I know when I was younger, when I would be in more of a saddened or depressed mood, I would find myself wanting to create. Or having a higher desire to express myself creatively. Where if everything was hunky dory, I wasn’t driven to create, if that makes sense. When I felt like I was having the best time of my life, I wouldn’t go, “let me go write this down.” But it’s those moments when a struggle is happening and it’s like I need to record this or I need to get this off my chest. (T2, P8)
   - Somebody who’s at peace, may not be – from my experience, when I was at peace I was not driven to create. (T3, P8)
   - I don’t know if I had a hope of what it would do. It just felt like I was driven to do it. I got to write this down. I got a huge notebook of poems and after the page, after I would finish, I wouldn’t go back and revisit it. (T4, P8)
   - But it wasn’t something I was planning on putting in a book and sharing with the world. Maybe it was a form of self-therapy, but that’s just me throwing that out there right now. (T5, P8)
   - I also enjoyed, this may sound weird, but I enjoyed the frustration of finding the creativity sometimes. I think I may enjoy that. Of the search for the creativeness. But, I know that moment when I go “Ugh!” that’s such a juicy moment. And sometimes I live for that moment. And sometimes I’m willing to climb a mountain to be able to just go “Yes!” (T25, P8)
   - as a young poet, when I got happy the poems disappeared [laughs]. (T47, P8)
   - I can’t not acknowledge that it doesn’t help or seem to be a driving force behind creativity. And I say that as most of my poetry was about sadness and loneliness. And then I got a girlfriend and
the only thing there is: you, your mind, and your thoughts. And you have to sit in those things. And I think if that wasn’t the case, if we could feel happiness and then go in solitude, the creativity to me would still be the same. (T58, P8)

I do understand that when a person is sad, they go in their room and they lock the door. And they don’t come out until it’s over. And I think that that is where the creativity is. It’s not the sadness, but it’s the silence. It’s not the anger, but it’s the time alone that creates – it’s where the creativity is allowed to be heard, if I can say it like that. (T59, P8)

And most of the time when we’re in the experience of joy, we’re not being quiet enough to let our thoughts do the talking, or to listen to our thoughts, or to hear our thoughts. And I think when someone is in the state of depression and they’re being quiet for thirty minutes, they are just hearing it run and run and run and run.

I think that’s what the difference is: it’s not the craziness, it’s the solitude that allows the creativity to be unleashed. (T60, P8)

When you’re happy you go run outside and go play with the flowers and trees and whatnot. But, when you’re sad or hurt or depressed, you cave in and you go to solitude and you go to darkness and you go to loneliness. (T57, P8)

she was an alcoholic and she was being interviewed – and she said she was holding onto the liquor thinking that the depressive state that she was in and the issues that she was having was allowing her to be creative. And then she said, they were talking about God, and it was like, it’s really crazy that we feel like God or the supreme being would put us in a place of desperation so that we could enjoy the thing that we want to do, as if, if we started to feel better the thing we love doing would get worse and I think that really resonated with me. (T45, P8)

I do think there’s always that stereotype of like, oh the broken artist, an artist who has a specific upbringing or life story that’s maybe different from your average person. And I think that sometimes we can equate that to great story telling. (T20, P9)

I think the more creative people I know are the ones who struggle the most with mental health, or who are at least the most forthcoming with their struggles with mental health. I don’t know if that’s a chicken before the egg kind of thing, if you’re creative because of that, or if you have to turn to creativity because of that. (T1, P12)

I feel like sadness can bring out creativity. (T12, P11)

“tortured artist” is specifically using a moment of pain to create art. (T47, P2)

3. You have to come from a hard life in order to get people to relate to you (P4, P5)

“You can’t be funny if you grew up with an in-ground pool.” And he’s playing to that idea that somebody who grew up with all this privilege doesn’t have anything that other people will relate to, like the common audiences who look to movies and TV as this spectacle as this thing to take them out of maybe the bad experiences in their life. And he is saying there that you have to come from a hard life in order to get people to relate to you. (T27, P4)

you should be able to relate to the people you are trying to entertain. (T28, P4)

If they’ve led a pretty privileged life up until then, like have not lost anyone, not even a grandparent, not even been bullied, I think it’s harder for people to know what that looks like and to have a weight on your shoulders and stuff. (T58, P5)

I think any actor will tell you – I mean, I guess people feel strongly one way or the other about it. But, I don’t – I think that suffering is not good. But to have never suffered is – it certainly makes it harder for some people to then do the dramatic work that you need to do. (T57, P5)

But you do have to be a person. I don’t think you can grow up to be a billionaire. If you’re disconnected from reality and from people from low class, middle class, upper class, if you don’t know all of those people, even just through literature, then you’re not going to be able to perform or be creative as those characters. (T62, P5)

4. There’s always an inspirational or emotional trigger for my creativity (P2, P5, P11)

I think there’s always some sort of inspirational trigger, and for me that depends – sometimes it can be a particular emotion, a strongly felt emotion, sometimes it can be seeing another performer (T2, P2)
- So, I definitely had very emotional triggers. When I’m songwriting, which is another thing I do, it tends to be the much more emotional triggers. (T4, P2)
- I also tend to be a very visual person, so I love to go and try and find pictures that inspire me. If it’s a show that’s already been done, maybe find some pictures of that. (T14, P2)
- I try to create a musical playlist for my character that I try to listen to before rehearsal or before a performance. (T15, P2)
- there is something creative that can be unlocked in people when in an emotional state, (T46, P2)
- they won’t necessarily ask you “how are you going to get to this emotional place in this scene?” but it is messed around with. (T43, P2)
- I also really like to get into nature somehow, which is really hard in New York. Especially, when I was living in London, there was a great park that I could go to and absolutely drink the Kool-Aid, kind of weird, but we did a lot of talking to trees in grad school. There were things about that that I found really helpful. (T17, P2)
- But sometimes I will try and find - especially if there’s a certain scene that happens outside, I love to sort of just go and be there as the character and be in that space. (T22, P2)
- I would listen to the music of “The Office,” you know that opening – and that would make me happy and that supported by emotional being. (T73, P11)

B. Actors’ Concerns about Therapy (66.7%)

1. Maybe if I was better at therapy (P5, P7, P12)
- It is hard, I will say, on days where I have a breakthrough in therapy or really emotional in therapy and then have to go to an audition or something, because it’s – on the breakthrough days it’s like, great I’ve made progress, awesome, here I go! But on the days where I would leave the session in tears, it would be really hard for me then to leave that and then go back to that later, because it was like after that hour session I still had more thinking to do. (T23, P7)
- So, in the privacy of, I’m pointing to where I film, right there and on my computer, it’s easier for me to think about what I learn in therapy. (T20, P12)
- maybe if I was a little better at therapy it could. I just go in with the same problem every week and we talk it through and I’m like, great, I’ll be better next time. And then for the next audition I’m like, oh, I didn’t apply anything that me and my therapist worked on. (T16, P12)
- And then I’m super anxious and that paper is nowhere to be found and I just sit and have anxiety. So, I guess to be better at therapy I would use the tools that I pay to get [laughs]. (T22, P12)
- And then you have to go and fucking deal with it, and no one wants to deal with it! [Laughs]. Nobody wants to deal with what they are going through emotionally. Because it’s exhausting, right? Like, why can’t I just be good at this, I feel like I’m doing it right, I feel like I’m doing well. (T53, P5)

2. If I enroll in therapy what will that do to my creativity? (P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P9, P11)
- I think you could have someone make the case that if, let’s say, you went through a traumatic experience and you were able to incorporate that into your storytelling and you started therapy and that maybe could stifle your creativity behind that storyline. (T22, P9)
- Yes, big time. It’s a big reason why so many artists in general refuse to go to therapy. They believe that their pain is really valuable to and informs their work. And I think why many artists do go to therapy, to get over something that is pulling them back from pushing further. (T27, P5)
- while therapy is important for actors, you know a lot of people go to therapy and are afraid they’ll be put on medication, you’re going to have to work through trauma, all of these things that are really going to fucking affect you short term, or long term, in your own life, which is obviously going to affect your acting. And to find a place where you’re like, I like my acting right now, I’m doing really well, and then say to yourself like, but actually I should probably deal with this past trauma, to perhaps the detriment of my career, is kind of a huge – it’s just a weird thing when creativity is intertwined with your career obviously. Because then you don’t want to get help and stuff. Because it’s one thing to say like, oh I’ll just be creative in a different way, but it’s entirely another to say, I will relearn how to be productively creative, successfully creative. (T32, P5)
- which we do talk about pretty regularly, particularly the therapy thing. Because people do kind of want to suffer a little bit, or like after they’re through with suffering or while they’re in it, they’re like, “This is going to be great for my acting.” (T60, P5)
- I haven’t been in therapy since I was a child, but it’s always been in the back of my mind, like, if I enroll in therapy what will that do to my creativity? (T18, P6)
- I’m thinking like Heath Ledger. I don’t know if he was seeing a therapist or not, like the final years of his life. But it could be argued that if he was they weren’t giving him the advice he needed. And it only caused him to worsen his condition. I don’t exactly know. (T16, P4)
- I remember when I was younger, and I got into Buddhism, I was like, can actors be Buddhist? Can that work? Because I was thinking meditation, if I became kind of calm during meditation, would that make me a worse actor? (T78, P11)
- I do believe that there can be an effect. I don’t necessarily say that it could be a negative or positive. I think for anyone to be in therapy it could change their process in some way. (T14, P4)
- I think it could – I think it’s one of those things where I certainly wouldn’t rule it out for myself. But I think everybody has their own way of achieving that creative place that they want to get to. (T15, P3)
- I’m not quite sure that it would be helpful to me. But I haven’t really had a chance to exercise it. (T16, P3)
- I don’t know that it necessarily impacted my creativity. (T29, P2)
- I don’t know, at least in my personal experience, if it’s affected my ability to create. (T33, P2)
- My thoughts on that are that I can neither agree nor disagree. Because I have seen cases in which that is exactly what is going on. (T25, P4)

III. NEGATIVE EXPERIENCE OF ACTORS
A. Actors’ Internal Struggles (100%)
1. Actors tend to be very vulnerable people who are put into vulnerable situations (P1, P2, P11)
   - And actors tend to be very open too. Because they’re told you have to be willing to explore anything. You have to be willing to go anywhere emotionally. You should go to your uncomfortable places. So, it’s a slippery slope. (T52, P11)
   - And actors tend to be vulnerable and trusting, particularly female actors, tend to be very, well, I guess I just got to take it. (T57, P11)
   - I think by virtue of the trade actors open themselves up to being vulnerable in different ways and that is a very sought often status and condition that actors try to achieve. And when they do that they open themselves up to attack and hurt and all sorts of things when they’re on stage or on set, thinking alright there’s a safety net of this production, we’re in a safe space playing. And then the thing that transitions when you’re done with that acting job it may not compartmentalize the way an actor might hope it will. (T32, P1)
   - I hear about and I talk to people who get sort of lost in their role a little bit, whether it’s the aggressor or the victim. (T33, P1)
   - the Me Too movements, the racial reckoning and stuff. In the past, and still to some extent now, it’s not surprising that the Me Too Movement came out of the entertainment industry first. People are put in positions that are triggering at the least, to assault at worst. (T34, P1)
   - I do try to avoid projects that are to my standards too dark and I’ll go for more uplifting ones. (T35, P1)
   - growing up, there have been experiences I had when I was younger that I wish I had the wherewithal to say, “Stop, we need to come at this from a different way.” But thankfully I was never put into any harmful situations. (T44, P2)
   - sometimes you will be given tools to get to an emotional place, the hope is to get there naturally instead of forcing something, but that doesn’t always work for you. (T45, P2)
2. Actors are fighting their demons behind the scenes (P1, P4, P6, P8)
   - We hear the tragic stories of people like the Robin Williams of the world and it’s often sort of a tears-of-a-clown sort of industry. (T30, P1)
   - That actors are fighting their demons behind the scenes. (T31, P1)
there is a complete understanding that we have to take care of ourselves and our mental states, because of the toll we are put through, or because of the emotions that it takes to live another person’s life authentically. (T18, P4)
- I think actors on a whole are a people that are fascinated by escapism of their own life, or just walking through other people’s shoes. (T19, P6)
- I think actors are all kinds of wounded people and I don’t think a normal person is fun to watch on stage. I think our scars and our wounds add to the characters. (T20, P6)
- I think we’re seeking approval. Some people are less obvious about it than others. (T21, P6)
- I think it’s universal, I think we’re just going about it in a different way. I think some actors know that and some actors don’t. But I think universally we are all looking for approval in our own way. (T23, P6)
- But I do think that artists are such quirky people that sometimes their anxiety, their depression, their OCD, whatever, is their quirk and the thing that sometimes helps their creativity. (T18, P6)
- And I’ve never, I’ve never personally thought about it because I feel like I’m always a high spirited individual. I’m always full of joy, for the most part, even when I’m depressed, I’m still laughing and having a great time. Even if it’s coming from a horrible place, I’m having a great time. So, I’ve never really thought about it, until seeing people like Robin Williams. And some of the other people who I think I’m my most – who are the most creative – or who I love their creativity the most. It seems like they were going through a rough time being creative, which is a surprise to me, because I’m like, wow you’re amazing. This doesn’t seem like a struggle, you keep popping out work. (T44, P8)

3. I’ve seen people turn to drugs to cope (P2, P4, P8)
- I’ve seen people turn to drugs to cope with it and turn to drinking, and to me when it starts to lend itself to physically and mentally dangerous activities that’s the point when you have to either step away from it or make the conscious choice of, okay, what in this character, this moment, this scene is getting to me and how do I maintain the integrity of the moment and the character without causing harm to myself? (T51, P2)
- people go down a path with a certain character and the only way they can get to a certain creative place is by being on a lot of drugs or whatever and it’s just so sad, because it never ends well. I do believe that there are ways to be a good, invested, emotionally available performer and still go home and live your life and be a human being and be okay at the end of the day. (T63, P2)
- Like, I can think of some actors who we associate with dependency on drugs and whatnot and they were still performing at this top level. (T2, P4)
- I still enjoy some marijuana from time to time. I think – I’m not saying that my creativity is based on marijuana, but when I’m high, all the creativity kind of just falls out of me sometimes, not gonna’ lie. (T65, P8)

4. Feeling insecure inhibits my performance (P1, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10, P12)
- acting as an industry can sometimes serve as a double edged sword, in terms of your confidence (T3, P1)
- I would say least creative is when I’m in a state of insecurity and anxiety about my performance. And then it’s like all these filters go up because you’re so nervous. That oh I might mess up, or oh I might do this, or oh I might do that. And then you start limiting yourself. So, a lot of it, I feel like, has to deal with self-confidence as well, as to that dictating my creativity. (T6, P9)
- I think to a degree I had a lot more anxiety with musical theater, singing is something I have a weird relationship with. And it definitely stifled my creativity. Because there is this shield of feeling insecure and anxious about my performance that I think really could inhibit me from giving a full out performance. (T18, P9)
- I’ve had friends say that maybe my anxiety with singing is something I could work through. With maybe performance therapy, if there was someone that could help me with that. So, I definitely think that therapy would be very helpful for one’s creativity for sure. (T19, P9)
- When I’m at my least creative, I feel not motivated to get a job done. Even if I have something that I have to do, I feel like the things I do I’m in my head, like overanalyzing everything, being a
rejectionist, it just seems that much harder to get these jobs done and to put something into the world that I’m proud of. (T4, P4)
- But all of this mental chatter happens. (T18, P6)
- It’s like I don’t want to get out of bed. I’m useless, I’m going – it’s the mental chatter that gets in your head. And it stifles your creativity. Because all you’re getting is “you’re worthless,” “you’re bad” and “you’re not cut out for that” and you can’t feel good when all that mental chatter – yeah. (T6, P6)
- Well, I was in a musical and I’m not much of a singer. So, that was a challenge in and of itself, of like, just getting the courage up to sing on stage and not cry or throw up every time I had to do it. [Laughs]. (T17, P7)
- I definitely wanted to still cry and vomit each time. (T21, P7)
- it’s like when someone is not being specific enough to – obviously not too specific because then it’s pigeonholed – but when it’s like you want to do something, not like the right way, but your way, but you’re not sure if that’s what they want and therefore it could be like a miscommunication on both ends and then there’s tension that you didn’t intend on having. (T5, P10)
- So, it’s like they may not be able to communicate with you on what they want to see. And you have to guess, and you’re not confident with the guess because, you know, then it gets kind of muddy. (T6, P10)
- I used to film like twenty-five takes of the same scene and like the difference is like one blink. And I would go on and on and debate which one to send and really talk down to myself and get up and shoot it again because my hair was out of place. And now, I’m like, I’ll shoot it five times and I’ll send one and it’s going to be what it is. (T18, P12)
- it would really get to me, like, if someone got this, if someone got that. I would be looking at their website and listening to them sing and be like, I could do that. But now, when someone books something, I’m just like, I’m so happy for them and glad they got this, even if it’s something that I wanted. (T46, P12)
- It’s like, they’re really talented and they’re going to do a great job. It took me a long time to get there, but I feel so much better now that I’m there. (T47, P12)
- I think if I’m under a lot of stress and I’m frustrated and bogged down by frustrations, I think that’s when my muse is not at its optimum level. (T8, P3)
- For the most part, I find that when I’m frustrated I can’t get into a mental – when I’m frustrated or when I’m tense or nervous about something, that’s when my muse is not as likely to be at its peak. (T8, P3)
- I don’t know, sometimes when I feel that way, I bang my head against the wall. (T21, P8)
- So, finding a way to bring that to life was like grabbing a sledge hammer and hitting my pinky toe for a while. It was frustrating. (T24, P8)
- And I think that when you are not feeling comfortable, you can’t be creative, because you’re not thinking about anything else. (T11, P5)
- And I had to sing and dance, those are not my bag. So, I would say that, because it’s not the things that I purely do. It’s not something I would ever do again, because it’s not something that I would pursue. (T13, P10)
- But I feel like it’s a psychological thing because the reason I don’t sing on stage is because I was told when I was little that I didn’t have a good voice by my father. So, when he was in the audience, I would be like, “Oh shit. Dad’s here.” Like, that’s when my brain went a little panicked and I wasn’t able to control my emotions as much, when I knew he was sitting in the audience. (T21, P7)

5. During the pandemic it’s been hard to set goals that are achievable (P5, P7, P10)
- During quarantine my voice has gotten like way lower and more scratchy. And it’s got nothing to do with anything I’m doing, I’m doing like the same practices every day, it’s just where I’m at mentally. (T28, P5)
- I can’t make anything that’s simple or measurable or relevant, because the world could change tomorrow. (T12, P7)
- But now, with the pool so large, because they can cast actors from literally anywhere and any time zone, it’s really hard to – I felt like I was going up against three hundred actors for a role and now I feel like I’m going up against three thousand, just for the same part. (T14, P7)
- And then so much of this industry has to do with things that are out of your control. And as someone with anxiety myself, that has taken a lot of practice for me to be like, okay, what can I control? (T5, P7)
- Yeah, least creative, I feel really tired. Um, very – I’m normally a very focused and concentrated person. And when I’m not feeling creatively inspired I feel very distracted. I’m also a very goal-oriented person and I feel like right now in particular it’s very hard to set goals for yourself that are achievable and attainable. (T11, P7)
- I’d say it’s a joke. Not to make fun of it, sometimes when I do something it’ll be like, “oh, I’m suffering.” But, no, I think especially now in the pandemic, all artists are suffering because they might not have the original thing that they did. Like as an actor, things have obviously slowed down in the pandemic. So, suffering, we haven’t been able to do the thing we love, we haven’t been able to make money doing the thing we love, and we don’t know when we’ll be able to do those things again. (T27, P10)
- And a lot of us are suffering because of that. So, a lot of us have had to seek financial stability through other means, whether it be labor jobs, or service industry jobs, or things that we might not enjoy and therefore takes a toll on us, because we’re doing what we don’t want to do. And to me, I’ve had to do that my whole fucking life, so it’s just all about keeping your head down and moving forward and not letting things stop you. (T28, P10)
- so right now with the pandemic, with no creative outlet whatsoever, these Zoom readings that they have actors doing right now for scripts, or Zoom performances, are just fricking terrible and not creative at all. (T14, P5)
- And I find that they are even more damaging to my mental health and I basically have been like, I am not doing remote shoots right now. Because if I’m not connecting to someone, it doesn’t feel real. And it doesn’t feel like I can even perform well. (T14, P5)

B. Acting Teachers and Abuse (25%)
1. A lot of acting teachers think that the way to improve someone is to tell them that they’re shit (P7, P11, P12)
   - I’m not someone who agrees with the “break you down to build you up” mentality that some of the older professors do. (T8, P7)
   - I’ve had a couple of professors do this, where I feel like they – and they are not doing it maliciously, to like intentionally hurt you, which is something I’ve come to know, learn. But, it’s that constant negative feedback. Or constant, feels like berating feedback on a performer for things that are maybe out of their control. Or, things that they are aware of and they are working on. And there have been so many rehearsals where I’ve just been like, you know, constantly being told negative things, where I end up leaving crying. (T10, P7)
   - But, I don’t particularly like to work that way. I don’t find it – it works for some people, but for me when I get into that negative, tired headspace and then a director is telling you like, yes that’s what we want, well, then how am I ever recreating this? Because I feel like shit [laughs]. (T10, P7)
   - I also think about how toxic my school was. I got my BFA in theater and this lends itself to larger organizations too, like the bigger theaters, the bigger producers, directors, the bigger schools, just money is their main concern and mental health is not their problem. So, that’s like, absolutely not. (T34, P12)
   - Not to mention the abuse. A lot of acting teachers think that the way to improve someone is to tell them that they’re shit. (T56, P11)
   - I cannot say enough negative things about my school, they are horrible. Just a bunch of crotchety old white dudes trying to pretend like the work they did off-Broadway in 1981 has any relevance to today. (T39, P12)
   - they just really pit us all against each other. We had a cut program. So after our sophomore year, we all had to re-audition to continue to be in the major. So, that was toxic as hell. And it made it hard to support each other, when we knew there was X amount of spots, and there was X amount of us, and people were going to get cut. (T40, P12)
   - They would teach us these methods as if they were the only way. You’re going to respect me and my teaching. (T41, P12)
   - it just really knocked everyone’s confidence. (T42, P12)
   - I still feel very affected by it and I’m a couple years out of school. (T43, P12)
THE RAW MATERIAL OF BEAUTY

- And it was run by a similar archetype of people, where it was ego, my way or no way. (T48, P12)
- I just kept getting discouraged. Eventually, I was literally lied to. (T51, P12)
- with my peers, I wish we were more supportive, but it just wasn’t our fault. We were really bred to be competitive with each other. (T45, P12)
- when I was sixteen I would have given anything, anything in my life to be admitted into his advanced acting class. Finally, I got in and it was like, okay, this word is law. (T49, P12)
- I had a few dance teachers, and I don’t consider myself a dancer, but I felt so much better about myself in that class and about my progress than in some of my acting classes, where I just could not do it right. (T44, P12)

2. That acting teacher had no business psychologically taking that student there with no skills whatsoever to manage it (P7, P11)
- No. I actually feel like – I’m actually a member of an off-off-Broadway ensemble and we create new work and that kind of stuff. And I feel like a lot of the artistic directors and the people of power within the company try to take on the role of therapist. To me, it’s like a bit of disconnect because, one, you’re not a therapist. My therapist is my therapist. And, two, that doesn’t make me feel safe, it actually makes me feel like you expect me to share when I don’t necessarily have something I want to talk to you about, you know. Like, it’s that weird, please trust me, and I’m not there yet. (T28, P7)
- Yeah, especially in the last couple of months with the election and everything, they were like, we’re going to hold space for anyone who wants to, like, come in and talk. And then if you went to that to be a listener they would call on you and be like, do you have anything to add? Well, in that space, no I came here to listen and support my other ensemble members and now I’m being put on the spot and I feel like I have to say something intelligent or, you know, supportive or anything, when I just came here to be a supportive bystander really. To be an ear instead of a voice. (T29, P7)
- one problem I’ve had is that acting teachers can slip into the role of therapist. And acting students can allow that. Because many of them are young, in their twenties, I was like this in my twenties. (T50, P11)
- that acting teacher had no business psychologically taking that student there with no skills whatsoever to manage it. (T51, P11)
- But, I think a lot of acting teachers slip into this kind of Svengali – they almost treat the class like therapy, and kind of therapy-like things. And I think there’s a danger there. (T52, P11)
- The dangers are teachers who are overstepping their bounds. Boundary issues – what we would call in clinical practice. I think the dangers are boundary issues. Which includes the teacher and the student after class getting together. Boundary issues where things are allowed to go on in class in the name of a character that is maybe uncomfortable for the actors doing them, but they are told, you know, that’s the character. Again, there are these ethical issues that come in. (T53, P11)
- And acting teachers who are taking actors into their personal lives and asking them to interact in these very personal ways, if that’s in the wrong hands that can really do some damage. (T55, P11)
- Yeah, so I think abuse of power, just like anywhere. (T57, P11)

3. Teachers are like, “it’s acting or nothing, do not support yourself in any other way” (P7, P12)
- I personally hate the, like, starving, struggling artist mentality. I don’t think it’s fun, I don’t think it’s necessary. I’ve had teachers from Europe who explained just getting in and doing it and not sleeping for days. Like, yes while that sounds beautiful, it’s also like how, why. You can eat and still do art, in my opinion. Not that I want the glamorous life, because I know it’s not that, I know it’s really hard work and grueling and the grind is real, but I prefer to know that I have a place to come home to with a roof over my head and food on the table. (T27, P7)
- That’s the big issue, at least in the theater community. You’re spending hours and hours in rehearsal, or on set, days on set, you come home, you sleep, you shower, and you do it again. You can definitely let a couple of days go by where you haven’t done your daily meditation, or your routine, or your journaling, or whatever it is for you. And I felt like I’ve had to cancel therapy sessions when I was in shows for that reason. Like, today is my only day off, no I don’t want to talk to my therapist, I want to do my laundry and meal prep. (T30, P7)
- I feel like that’s not encouraged at all. They’re like, you will suffer and starve and die until you book Broadway or a national commercial or a recurring role on a big TV show. (T54, P12)
- they were like, it’s acting or nothing, do not support yourself in any other way. (T52, P12)
- myth of the starving artist. I don’t have to be poor. I don’t have to be broke, living paycheck to paycheck. I started to educate myself about finance, literally just this year. (T53, P12)
- It was a huge thing going into college, where like, if you pick a minor, then you’re weak. You’re an idiot. If you have a back-up plan that’s not acting, you’re going to seek it. You must never, never have a back-up plan. Like, it’s theater, and you will starve until you get that. And I’m literally writing it down being like, Yes! Starve and hate your life! (T50, P12)
- Because I think they’re unhappy and suffering and they want everyone else to be too. Maybe. (T56, P12)
- I’m also just trying to undo that myth and start a retirement account and start a savings account and invest a little. And I feel like I’m so behind in that. Because of exactly what you’re talking about, the myth, you have to starve and suffer, and be broke, until you make it big. (T55, P12)

C. Actor’s External Struggles (66.7%)

1. I want more financial and mental health resources from the industry (P3, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9)
- I’m hoping and praying that in the future I’ll have more opportunities on film and television sets to improvise and be compensated for it. Because unfortunately the sad truth is if you work as a background actor and you improvise on set, they don’t have to pay you for it, unless they ask you to read a line. So basically, what you’re giving to them, you’re giving to them for free. (T7, P3)
- I wish there was more support, especially for people who are completely devastated by all this. (T23, P3)
- it could come from the unions or it could come from sources that are perhaps connected to the unions. It could come in that form. Resources that are funded by the union membership. (T24, P3)
- So much of an actor’s goal is to be working and to be working on a consistent basis. And with the unemployment rate for most actors being so high, that’s going to have some sort of impact on folks’ mental health. It would be nice to get more support. (T21, P3)
- And it’s crazy, like when you’re not doing well financially, you’re not doing well mentally. It’s harder to do well mentally if you’re struggling. It’s harder to do well mentally if you feel you’re not good at your job. (T54, P5)
- It’s weird to have something that should just be a creative or emotional outlet be tied up with money and your success and how you’re viewed by your peers. (T55, P5)
- I know that in 1984 on Broadway the guy playing the lead part suffered from this breakdown every night and I know that that eventually hospitalized him. So, I think that you’re maybe playing a part to that capacity then they should like have somebody be on site for you. (T29, P6)
- if I had the means and resources I think I would definitely be involved in therapy. Nothing comes to mind as to what I would speak about right away. But I think it would be helpful. (T34, P6)
- I mean, I really wish that, like, I had insurance. Like, if I’m in show, that I could guarantee there would be a therapist involved. Or a discount or a deal or something. (T27, P6)
- I think that universal healthcare should be a thing. (T28, P6)
- Not as much as they could. I think based on the amount of work that we need to do on characters and on ourselves, we don’t really have the time. (T30, P7)
- I know they have certain free resources, like the Actor’s Fund does have a counseling group, but you have four sessions for free and then they pair you with someone else, to my knowledge. And that to me sounds, I don’t know (T31, P7)
- Or if it didn’t work, then that can also be very discouraging. So, I feel like making it more affordable, or just talked about. In our rehearsals we always have a deputy, or stage manager, or someone you can go to if you’re feeling uncomfortable. And I’m not saying that every show
should have a psychologist on staff, but sports teams have psychologists on staff and things like that. So, I feel like there’s a way to cultivate that energy, just stronger in the rehearsal room that isn’t really talked about. (T31, P7)

- I came in for the read and then they sent me back home, so they didn’t have to pay for me to be there for that week. (T22, P8)

- There are so many jobs that just aren’t even paying per se. And I think there is definitely, like, an aura of desperation within the acting world. And sometimes it can make actors feel like they have to work for free. (T35, P9)

- I think if we all stood more united and recognized that this is a job, this is a profession, we deserved to be paid. You know, if that’s your life pursuit and that’s your profession. I think if we all collectively stood stronger in that way, then free labor wouldn’t happen as frequently. (T36, P9)

- It’s this weird balance because you want to be grateful, because you know how competitive it is and you want to be grateful for the opportunities given. But sometimes I do think that there’s this huge gap of really, really low paying jobs and then, like, the top A-B-C-D-E-list celebrities, their financial status is great and then all the rest is so, so low, and no pay. And I don’t think that’s healthy for the community and for that profession. (T37, P9)

- Sometimes I would say within the acting community, if they compensated more fairly, even just minimum wage. Just minimum wage is not honored on a lot of projects. I think that would even be healthier for the overall actor. (T38, P9)

2. There can be so much rejection (P1, P9, P12)

- There’s a lot of rejection that comes with the industry when you audition and sometimes you think you’re right for a certain role and when you get it it’s a great confidence boost (T4, P1)

- Because in this business specifically, there is a ton of rejection. And there are a lot of factors you can’t control. I think in my free time personally I try to do things that bring me happiness and joy, because sometimes the career can have a lot of letdowns. (T2, P9)

- Especially the actor world and the theater world, there can be so much rejection (T34, P9)

- And then just in terms of my own experience, I feel like a lot of things I talk about in therapy definitely stem from, like, auditions. You know, you put yourself out there and only get critiqued. And you can let a lot of that run off, but I think it can start to seep in a little more than I think it does in the moment. (T2, P12)

- I’ve gotten to like the final round in some callback thing. And it’s like I’ve been working on the material, I felt really good about it, I feel really creative about it, and then I get to the final work session and the bigwig director is like “that sucks, do it like this,” and you’re like so embarrassed, feel like you wasted all your time. You need the money and the job, so I’m just like being a little robot and taking their notes. It’s just like the spark is gone, it feels bad. (T5, P12)

- I love when a director doesn’t agree with what I do and it’s like “why don’t we try it this way,” kind of in a process like that. But, it’s definitely when they’re like, “That’s all wrong.” “Terrible.” “Clearly if you read the scene, it’s actually like this.” (T6, P12)

3. Let’s just talk about something else besides how I don’t fit into this dress (P12)

- It’s especially hard when you’re doing costume fittings. That’s when I always, even as far as I’ve come, it’s always the worst day. I’ll still get up and just have lemon water and then go to my costume fitting. And then feel fat and then cry. It is what it is. And then by the time I’m wearing the costume in the show, it’s kind of fine. But, yeah, costume fittings are just terrible. (T61, P12)

- I know they don’t mean it in a bad way. It’s just their business is to fit garments on a body, and if the bodies are bigger, they’re going to say it. And it’s like – to them it’s not a personal attack, by any means. (T62, P12)

- They were like, don’t worry, the girls who play “character name” are usually really skinny. I was like, okay. Okay, great. So, just comments like that. I think she meant it to be nice. But, I’m going to kill myself [laughs]. (T63, P12)

- Just more inclusive language. Honestly, just less language. They just talk so much. Just talk less. Or, not talk less, I would love to get to know you, let’s just talk about something else besides how I don’t fit into this dress because most girls are skinnier. (T64, P12)

- Another thing that comes up for me is body image in a profession that is so image-focused. (T59, P12)
- we had a fitness program in college and we had to log our exercise and what we ate. And I’m like, that’s so fucking messed up. And so, that’s another thing that I’ve been trying to improve mentally around. (T60, P12)

4. *It was hard to get on the same page as the director* (P1, P6, P8)

- And working with younger directors who were just out of school, which was difficult as well. And especially in that play, dealing with the language, the story – yeah that was just more a recent struggle in just understanding the concept and the language and just what we were doing with the show. (T13, P6)
- But I think it was the concept of what we were doing that made me try and figure out, like, how does this character fit in the world and why am I a male playing [name of female character] and just trying to get on the same page as the director. (T14, P6)
- not being able to articulate his vision, which was really cool, but it was hard for everyone to get on the same page. (T15, P6)
- It was one of those moments where it wasn’t done maliciously, but we were rehearsing outside of the process. As a group just trying to figure out how scenes go. And it was with these people, and I’m still friends with them, with people in the cast. (T16, P6)
- And I don’t know what this says about society, or maybe just the age group, but a lot of the student and more independent productions tend to run edgier, tend to run darker. And maybe it’s their own process working through things at a younger age and they’re in this place in life. And then as you get older, and more mature, and the more established you are, the more settled you are, the more Hallmark-y the movies and the productions tend to be. I think there is sort of a generational and demographic trend in who does what sort of things. (T36, P1)
- Ironically the more professional a production gets the more that is happening. Less so when it’s a younger or a student production. And I think it sort of reflects the generational differences, you know, the view of the alt-Hollywood tradition which is a more myopic view, versus the younger generation which are more open and view the world with more diversity, equity, inclusion. (T6, P1)
- I didn’t feel like I had the appropriate time to explore my character. (T23, P8)

D. *The Impact of Marginalization* (41.6%)

1. *I hate being stereotyped* (P1, P4, P10)

- But then, conversely, there are times when you are pigeon-holed and stereotyped in certain things (T4, P1)
- my race and ethnicity, I find that that is, um, a lot of times in this industry more focused on than my humanity. So, it pulls it fairly or unfairly into like higher focus. (T5, P1)
- I’m just making excuses for myself, but a lot of times I tie that back to the race, ethnicity thing. In real life there are always perceptions and micro-aggressions and perceptions that become reality and this notion that art reflects life, life reflects art, chicken and egg sort of thing (T10, P1)
- I hate being stereotyped in certain roles and people stereotyping, like, the Asian character on their project, and so the last thing I want to do is stereotype anyone or anything else that in real life I don’t identify with. (T26, P1)
- I think the ways in which I wish there was more support would be in representation for like people of color, like Asian-Americans. I would like to see support for people who we haven’t seen on screen so much to come out and do their thing. (T23, P4)
- I definitely think it’s important for there to be representation because if we are trying to reach a world in which every single person is equal, no matter what, and has the same rights, then I think what we want to show in our productions, which are like fantasy, is exactly that. We should show a life in which people on screen are – there’s no boxes you can put them into, they can be in every role. That I think is the ideal way to get there. It’s by showing that anyone can do anything. (T24, P4)
- I played this character who was a Dominican from New York, and I’m a Dominican from New York. I was the only person in the fucking city, because [southern U.S. state] is very white and I was basically the only person who could play that role. It was very obvious. And it was the first time I got to play someone who was not only Latino, but specifically one of my heritages. And it meant a lot to me that I got to play someone who in real life is someone I could be. (T10, P10)
- It was just the first time I got to play someone who was one of my ethnicities. (T11, P10)
- It was great to get representation. (T12, P10)

2. **Black people are not allowed to be Black in certain settings** (P8)
- I created an actor group called “Communion” for Black actors. And it’s because we need therapy. And I started to realize that we need therapy and that certain spaces don’t allow us to – are not therapeutic. So, I tried to create a moment of get this off your chest, for specifically Black actors. And so, I do think everyone is concerned about everyone’s wellbeing, but I don’t think there is an active drive to be therapeutic to actors, if that makes sense, for actors. (T52, P8)
- Black people are not allowed to be Black in certain settings. And the first, the very first “Communion,” four people went to tears for reasons of being able to say things in a room with other actors that they’ve never been able to say. Or hearing someone else saying it and realizing that someone else is having the same trauma of I’ve being going through this and I have to do it all on my own. And there’s another person going, I’ve been doing the exact same thing. (T53, P8)
- I had people off and on Broadway, I had a lot of regional theater people, and they were all saying things that they had never been able to say for the very first time. And that to me was a sign that there was no therapy for this group to release stress or decompress or say how they feel. So, I think the form of therapy that we’re doing, or that Equity is doing, to create a safe space that nobody’s feelings get hurt, but it doesn’t allow anyone to get off their chest how they feel at the same time. And so, specifically with the Black community, a lot of it is just bottled in and it never comes out. And there’s never really a space for it to come out. (T54, P8)
- A lot of times when they say it’s a safe space, it’s a lie [laughs]. It’s a lie. And I’ve been quick to find out the hard way, because I’ve been focused on being more open with everybody, it’s my personal goal to be more open. And I’ve said things that made me realize that this space wasn’t as safe as I thought it was. Which means I’m going to keep my mouth shut in the safe space, which now the space isn’t safe anymore. Yeah. (T71, P8)
- Not directly. I think when I’m in a specific setting with a group of people and I’m in a safe place, that we will make sure that in this situation that we’re all okay. (T51, P8)
- I think a lot of Black people are saying, I’ve been going through trauma that I should get assessed. And that doesn’t have anything to do with acting, as much as it has to do with the actor. Of just, I have been through some crazy stuff and I should probably talk to somebody about it. And it’s not like I will be a better actor if I go get therapy, it hasn’t been anything like that. I think I would like to get therapy and potentially, maybe it would allow me to live in my characters better, I don’t know. But, I’m not seeking – and none of the people I’ve talked to in my acting community have said, I’m going to get therapy so that I can be a better actor. I haven’t heard anybody phrase it like that. I just think that in the Black community, most of my actor friends are Black, because I’m Black. But, we’ve gone through a different trauma that we’ve not dealt with. And so, it’s time for us to have therapy, actor or not actor, it’s just time for us to have therapy. (T50, P8)
- And even as a Black male, as a Black person right now, most of our art has been centered around the turmoil of living in this country. And even – almost everything that we’ve created has come from that place. Mostly because that’s the place we’ve been put – I don’t know what happy art from Black people looks like yet [laughs]. We haven’t had the chance to live in a state that would allow consistent joy, so maybe that has a lot to do with it, that the art that I have been consuming from my people has always been how to get over, how to get over… that’s a song right there [laughs]. (T6, P8)

3. **Our parents didn’t have therapy. No one told me therapy existed** (P6, P8, P10)
- I am black, so therapy ain’t talked about at all [laughs]. It has been coming up recently, but not really. I can’t recall any times in any acting situation where therapy has just come up on its own. (T49, P8)
- there are different communities that see therapy in different ways. And I didn’t think about it until it was coming out of my mouth that specifically in the Black community therapy is not a thing. Our parents didn’t have therapy. No one told me that therapy existed. And I know you’re asking like, based on the actor community, but as an individual no one said therapy, the word therapy was never brought up to me. And the benefits and the reasons – the benefits from therapy and the reasons why people should have therapy, that has never been brought up to me. It’s been something I’ve had to explore myself. As well as what are the negative stereotypes behind therapy
itself. Or the type of person that needs therapy, I think that’s the stereotype where you have to be crazy in order to need therapy. (T67, P8)
- oh yeah, Black people don’t do therapy. (T68, P8)
- I have more Black friends who are doing therapy now, but I remember being and White people being like “I have therapy tomorrow” and I was like, “What.” “No, I just came from therapy,” just real calm, real easy, real cool and collected like that. (T69, P8)
- I’ve never talked to a therapist, I’m thirty-six, I’ve never talked to a therapist and I know a lot of that has to do with the stereotypes that have been generated for me as a Black person. That I think are unique to Black people. (T70, P8)
- when I was younger or a kid, therapy meant that you’re crazy and that you need to see someone because you’re fucking nuts. And obviously now it’s not the case. It’s also just in the community of minorities like myself, we’re like it’s not supposed to be that way. If I go to therapy they’ll look at me differently. They’re going to make fun of me because they’ll thing I’m fucking crazy. And I’m not – so I’m not going to do that. I’m not going to get help because I don’t need it, you know. But like I’m saying, it’s like the ego. I’m not going to seek help because I don’t think I need it. But you got to be bigger than that sometimes, you know. (T23, P10)
- I feel like as time goes on, even like a few years ago, people would be made fun of for going to therapy and getting help. (T22, P10)
- Because I was pretty depressed, I was diagnosed with depression and anxiety in middle school. And then I was off my medication and then went back on it my junior year of high school. But that was never really spoken about. (T1, P6)

IV. THE ACTING COMMUNITY
A. Support from Acting Community (91.7%)
1. Among performers there is less stigma against therapy and mental health issues than there is in the rest of the world (P1, P2, P3, P4, P6, P9, P10, P12)
   - A positive trend, yes, yes. (T7, P1)
   - I think absolutely. I haven’t been in therapy myself. (T27, P1)
   - I do think it is more normalized in the acting industry in than say the legal industry or education. I think in certain segments of the industry it’s used as a tool pretty regularly in terms of arts therapy and stuff like that. (T28, P1)
   - if I felt like I ever needed a helpline or more support, I do feel like there are a lot of resources both in terms of industry associations and the unions and obviously the medical colleges and stuff, where they teach about it. If I feel like if I needed it, it would be there (T37, P1)
   - And in the social media groups that I’m a part of that are actor-related, there has been a lot more about mental health awareness days, and people even copying and pasting things, or even posting things, if anyone just needs to chat or anything, I hear you, I see you, I’m available, just reach out, even though I don’t know you that well. And that’s a trend I’ve seen happening a lot more. And I think it’s been accelerated a lot by the pandemic and everyone has been isolated from each other. And I think there has been an interest in connecting even if by Zoom, just to see someone’s face, just to connect. I think as a whole they’d be very receptive to me if I did it. (T38, P1)
   - For sure in grad school, we talked about it a lot. (T36, P2)
   - especially among performers there is less of a stigma against therapy then there is in the rest of the world, just because we have to be so in tune with our emotions and sometimes go through crazy shit, like eight days a week if you’re in a Broadway show. So, anytime it has been talked about it’s always been talked about in a positive light. In a: this is another tool for you to use if it’s something that you feel is needed. (T37, P2)
   - even when I’ve been out in the professional word, so many people I know, it can just be a casual conversation kind of thing like, “Oh at my therapist last week…” or whatever, it’s not like a thing, it’s just an aspect of this person’s life. Even friends that I have that are in therapy, who happen to be performers but also have serious mental health issues, it’s not anything that’s stigmatized, it’s just a thing that they do in their week because it’s how they get through the week. (T39, P2)
   - Oh, for sure, at least in my community. I don’t know that it’s overtly always talked about, but I think I’ve been lucky enough in most of the projects I’ve worked on, especially if they’ve had a really emotional element to it. (T40, P2)
- People have been very open about giving you what you need, or you’re open about giving other people what they need. Also, just talked about, even in the sense of like, make sure that you know you, and if you need to get help then there are therapy sources available for you if this is affecting your mental health. (T41, P2)
- I think that it’s starting to get a little bit more traction. I think a lot of people think that there’s stigmas with those people who have some sort of mental illness. (T17, P3)
- Mental illness shouldn’t be seen – shouldn’t be given that stigma that it has been given. Especially when suffering and adversity is all really a part of life. (T18, P3)
- I think sometimes you hear people say that they talk to a therapist or they talk to an analyst. (T19, P3)
- I would definitely say with friends of mine and with some productions I’ve been in, it’s welcomed. There is the understanding that really anyone can benefit from therapy. (T17, P4)
- I would honestly think in this community more so than many others. Like, because actors are kind of showing their soul, and bearing their experiences, bearing their lives for everybody, (T18, P4)
- I think generationally therapy is very, like, “Oh yeah, my therapist…” (T24, P6)
- Absolutely. I think there’s been a huge step forward in the way theater is being made and protecting mental health and trying to be better. (T25, P6)
- With the new safety and intimacy coaches. That’s kind of the new role in theater. It’s super helpful. There’s a level of enlightenment that we have now, in terms of protocols. So, I think that there’s more protecting actors from sexual abuse. And so, I think there’s a lot of things in different pockets of the theater world, but all doing the same thing in terms of protecting the safety and wellbeing and mental health of the cast. (T26, P6)
- I would say within the theater community, yeah, just like acting in general, that world. I would say mental health is regularly discussed. I think there’s a lot of awareness. I think, especially within our current time period there is even more attention on it in general. But also, specifically within the theater community, I do feel like we are very comfortable about talking about emotions and feelings. (T30, P9)
- And mental health is definitely on the forefront I would say, within the theater-acting community for sure. (T33, P9)
- Oh, one hundred percent, one hundred percent. I definitely feel like – they always talk about that. (T34, P9)
- And people I worked closely with were regularly in therapy and would talk about it. Talk about, like, things that they would share with their therapist, nothing too specific, it’s not my business. Yeah, people would go to therapy. (T17, P10)
- Kind of both. Sometimes they would talk about things that happened that made them feel a certain way. (T18, P10)
- But obviously it came into the conversation because of work, because of things that happened at work. (T19, P10)
- Yeah. I think now it does. (T22, P10)
- And now, obviously everyone has flipped scripts about that, where they’re like, no that’s the real thing we should be paying attention to, mental health. And not shutting things down because it might offend us, or our egos might be damaged. If you need help, it would be wise to listen to somebody else and maybe seek that advice. I think we do a pretty good job now of advocating for it. (T22, P10)
- And then that probably started working for a number of people, and then they probably started talking about it, and people became more aware and thought, oh this is good because it can stop a lot of bad things from happening. So, yeah, I think it’s just good work that spread through word of mouth. (T25, P10)
- I think also social media pays a big thing in that too because people can post about stuff now all the time. People have a good attitude, or a good experience, or a good day and they put it out there, and then people see it. (T26, P10)
- I would say, most of my friends have therapists or if they don’t, they’re like, ugh, I need to get a therapist. (T30, P12)

2. *I receive a lot of emotional support from my acting community* (P2, P3, P4, P5, P11, P12)
Yes. I would say they do. Not so much in a way that they are making it mandatory, or like really suggesting that people go to therapy, talk to someone. But I feel that whenever it’s brought up, maybe someone has a hard time at home, they receive a lot of support from others. (T20, P4)

I would say more specifically fellow actors and directors. I’ve met a lot of directors who are on the same – who like to be on the same plane as other actors and really feel for them and look out for them, protect them. (T21, P4)

As of right now I haven’t felt a lack of support from the acting community. (T22, P4)

Definitely having the support system of the people I know that I can talk to about things. (T52, P2)

Right now, I have a boyfriend who I’ve been with for five years and we met in acting class. And we’re both actors and it’s nice to have someone who is in the industry, for me. (T64, P5)

But it’s nice to have someone I can talk to completely openly about stupid things like jealousy. (T65, P5)

The only thing I need is socialization. So, I call my actor friends. I have a little Zoom Shakespeare group where we meet and it’s lots of fun. (T76, P11)

And friends, and being around friends. (T74, P11)

Peer to peer, absolutely, more than anything. (T33, P12)

I haven’t met a more supportive group of peers ever, and that’s a yes. (T35, P12)

if I bomb an audition, then I can literally go crawl into a bathroom stall of the audition place and send a voice memo to three other actor friends and they will respond right away, saying all the correct stuff. (T37, P12)

It just feels very supportive in a way. (T38, P12)

And just having pretty much everyone I know is in the field or in a similar field. I just know who I can trust and dump stuff onto. And I know that I can also be their support system. (T58, P12)

I feel very open with my group of friends. Like, I think about my little brother who has a history of mental health issues, but he’s so embarrassed by it and can’t turn to any friends about it. But then my friend group chat is like, I’m having the worst… We’re just much more open about it? (T31, P12)

Just always an open ear, good advice. (T36, P12)

And sometimes it can be – for me it’s about leaving behind the group of people you’re with, if it’s a specifically lovely experience, and it’s something we encounter all the time in the industry, is getting really close to people for a comparatively short amount of time. And with Skype and Zoom and social media it is easy to keep in touch, but there’s always something different about leaving. And some of those people you end up not keeping in touch with and that’s the thing that’s always really difficult for me, if I felt particularly close to people in a project. (T61, P2)

I had a great relationship with the ensemble too. It was a good vibe with everyone involved. It was a fruitful production when I look back on it. (T13, P3)

3. I had creative role models growing up (P6)

middle school and high school are pretty tumultuous times for a lot of people, in terms of figuring out who you are. And then in terms of my development, I don’t think I would be the person I am today if I didn’t have the community of other actors and professionals that guided me and were role models for me. (T1, P6)

But I know it was super helpful in terms of just having the will to live, to do things, you know. (T1, P6)

So, for a while, beginning in high school I had a life coach up until my freshman year of college. It was super helpful. She was very helpful in my growth and success. (T32, P6)

She came in at a really important time. I think I was sixteen and just going through a lot. And she provided – her whole thing was creativity coaching. (T35, P6)

I don’t think I would be who I am today if it wasn’t for her help. (T35, P6)

Absolutely. I haven’t even thought – just reflecting on it now, I’m like, oh yeah those are things she taught me. So yeah, I’m using them subconsciously. (T36, P6)

4. Acting teachers are just therapists, they help you become more aware (P5, P7, P11)

Oh my god, big time! And if you go to any acting class, like, acting teachers are just therapists. You know? And different people, different methods. They might not make a show of having an actor talk about something personal, but every acting teacher knows about their students’ lives.
And they know how far to push it. And if you don’t know the details of their lives, you can still tell what’s going on. Because they’re different week to week. (T33, P5)
- But in their role, they won’t even realize that they’re pulling away a little bit, basically. And the acting teacher has to say, “Hey, are you aware that you seem to be upset by this? That you seem to be upset by that particular scene, in that moment? Is it the words, is it the touch? What’s going on?” They’re like, “You don’t have to tell me.” Well, some acting teachers do want to know. But, it’s very much, they’re pointing out you. You are informing the character. Like, “This character is very excited to get married, but every time you say the word marriage, you make a face.” That sort of thing. And people don’t realize they’re doing it, it’s crazy. An actor teacher really points out all of the flaws in your performances, (T50, P5)
- that’s really an acting teacher’s job: to bring out the alternative choices. But also, to say, “That wasn’t a choice. You are dealing with something and it’s damaging your performance.” (T52, P5)
- And I told the director, the director is my mentor. And I was like, “Look, here’s what’s going on in my family, just so you’re aware.” And he was very supportive of the whole thing. (T19, P7)
- I think a good director can do that, because as actors you come in with an idea of your character. And a good actor pays attention to that [laughs], we all have egos too, so we might be like, I know better what this character is. So, a good director can actually get actors to be open to that. (T48, P11)

B. Emphasis on Collaborating and Relationships (66.7%)
1. You learn to be the most creative when you are in collaboration with others (P5, P6, P7, P10, P11)
- I think as a performer you learn to be the most creative when you are in collaboration with others, which I don’t think is necessarily true for other artistic fields. (T3, P5)
- So, that’s probably the most creative that I get is working off of others. (T9, P5)
- connecting with other people is really the most important thing. (T68, P5)
- Because you have to be with people. (T14, P5)
- So, for actors, acting class is the creative outlet. People are willing to pay tens of thousands of dollars a year on acting classes because they need it for their mental health. They need it to be constantly working, watching other people experiment and all that stuff. (T10, P5)
- I love being in a space where I’m with people who love to create as much as I do, who challenge me in ways in a positive space. (T7, P7)
- I love coming into the room and doing a little group check in and warm up and then jumping in creatively. (T9, P7)
- With the pandemic I feel like – at least with when I feel most creative, it’s when I’m in the room with other people. And right now, that’s not possible. Whether it’s auditioning at home from you know, communicating via the small little box instead of feeding off of people’s energy in the room. That’s something that’s been really hard to grasp a hold of. (T13, P7)
- I feel like whenever I’m put in a situation where I can bounce my ideas off of other people, feeding off the energy in the room. Like being on set, or just hanging out with some friends that have made – that write their own work, just being in those environments where the energy is good and it’s like everyone is saying “Yes,” and no one is shutting down anything, and everyone is just building on top of each other. (T3, P10)
- we’re just going for it, and we get the leeway from the director to just try things that might not be directly in the script or not, and just to see where that goes. And as long as everyone is like on the same page and just going with it and like don’t stop, just keep going, it’s like that lighting in a bottle sort of thing, you know. (T4, P10)
- I don’t think I realized how much support of your peers is valuable in this – until the last three years when I was doing it on my own. (T58, P11)
- I think you gain that support by going on auditions, by being in plays, by keeping in touch with actors, by encouraging each other. (T59, P11)
- I guess there are online communities of actors. But, really the best way is to go out and be in stuff. And you make friends in the hallway of an audition. And that is very important. I didn’t appreciate that when I was younger as much as I do now. (T60, P11)
- the concept brings out the cast. And the cast was really diverse, from different walks of life. So, connecting with them, with this through line was really cool and helpful. I don’t think I would have necessarily been friends with these people if it weren’t for the show. (T17, P6)

- I don’t think I would have met the people and seen different outlooks and creativities and things like that if I didn’t get out of that area. (T2, P6)

- I think actors pretty easily and readily form communities. (T66, P11)

2. It all starts with relationships (P5, P8, P10, P11, P12)

- you see how people respond, and that influences the character. Or, your fellow actors, how they respond to that character. (T30, P11)

- it becomes a process of reciprocity that kind of grows and develops over time. If you play a character long enough, a character can evolve and change. And with a different group, you might play the same character with a different group of people, and then the character is slightly different because it’s an evolving construct. (T31, P11)

- Because if you go see a play, it’s going to be different every single time you see it. The person that saw a show on opening night and then if you go on closing night, those are two different plays. And they’ve become that by people finding little gems or getting more relaxed and expressing themselves differently. (T18, P8)

- and that everybody responds to you with a brand-new energy. (T39, P8)

- I’m not a thousand percent sure what the audience saw, but when the door opened there was an exchange of energy, where they all knew that my presence and the energy I was giving off was about to destroy whatever was happening on stage. And I sent that out to them and they looked at me and they sent it back to me. (T42, P8)

- I think it all starts at relationships. It starts at the when, where, who, why, the given circumstances. It stems from the relationships that your character has, who is in the scene or in the film or play or whatever. That’s how you find who this person is, is how they relate to other people. And I think that you also have to look not only at the words, but what they’re doing. (T7, P10)

- So, yeah, relationships is where it has to start, that’s how you can truly build upon your character. (T8, P10)

- It’s relationships between your character and the other characters. (T9, P10)

- Yeah, definitely when a rehearsal or a performance is going really well. There is definitely a lot of connection. Not a lot of second guessing, or shame, or embarrassment. It’s just, yeah, no second guessing. It’s going well, and I feel supported by the material and by cast members. The higher up team as well. (T3, P12)

- I think it all leads into each other. I think I’m connected with my art, with my training, only because I know I can lean on someone else. (T4, P12)

- because it seemed so outlandish, and then immediately realized, oh that makes total sense, of course they would. There are all these stories, especially with Shakespearean theater where people are dragged to performances and then sort of mock an actor for, you know, the loss of character’s child or a major loss in particular, where they will scream or laugh or make moan, and people think that that’s kind of funny because it’s kind of crazy, and then when they experience loss they realize, oh my god I made the exact same crazy moan that the actor did. (T20, P5)

3. I have a really good family and friend support system (P5, P7, P9, P10, P11)

- I really love friends and family. (T3, P9)

- And prioritizing my family and friends really helps with my mental state. (T39, P9)

- I also have a boyfriend who is very aggressive about telling me, like, “You’re lying to yourself” or like, “That’s nice that you think that about your mom, but you’re wrong.” You know, that sort of thing. And I do the same for him. And that’s really great. But that’s what I do, mainly read and act and work out. And get called out by my boyfriend. (T69, P5)

- And then, I’m fortunate to have a really good family support and friend support system. (T32, P7)

- I have very easy communication with my family. (T31, P10)

- I think more actors would say they wish they had more support of their families. Because a lot of families are not crazy about you deciding to be an actor. (T61, P11)

- I think keeping other friends who are artists, not actors, and talking about other art basically, is really important. (T66, P5)
V. THE ROLE
A. Embodifying the Character (91.7%)
1. To capture the humanity of a character (P1, P2, P3, P5, P7, P8, P10, P11, P12)
   - The basic character prep work I do – I do the basic journalistic “Five-W’s.” I think about who the person is. What their occupation is. Where and when it takes place. And then most of all the why. What is the motivation, what is driving them, what do they want in that scene? And then I use that really to inform everything else and, you know, the main thing is the want, if I play a character’s want and if I go after a concrete, specific objective then everything else falls into place and to a certain degree, so that it doesn’t get to be too much of an intellectual exercise, (T20, P1)
   - when you explore the humanity of that character and you empathize with that character, it really softens it up and brings a different tone to it. (T23, P1)
   - I liked that it was a lead role, but that it was also a complex role, and I think that playing a victim in a very human sort of way (T22, P1)
   - Because so much of it is also a character conversation of: what is the mental state of your character? (T42, P2)
   - But some things that I always come back to no matter what is going into the script and finding any clues that I can in the script. The way that my character speaks, the way that I speak about other characters, the way other characters speak about me, and then I go to action and objective. A favorite one of mine is finding the characteristics of my character, that’s something that really came about in grad school. The way we sort of did it, and I really enjoyed it, was having three main characteristics for your character, and having one of them be slightly off, doesn’t really go with the other two characteristics, just to add another layer of complexity to that character. (T13, P2)
   - I think from the inside-out. A lot of people will say from the outside-in, but I would say from the inside-out. There’s a lot of approaches to acting and I’m not going to be the one to say that one approach is better than the other, but I think from the inside-out there is something about your soul that is going to come through in whatever that character is, how would they behave under these circumstances. (T9, P3)
   - “to capture the humanity of a person, it doesn’t have to be that deep.” Just how would they behave in that moment in that time. (T10, P3)
   - Well, I think first of all it was a character that I could really dive into. (T12, P3)
   - What I liked about the script was that art imitates life and it captures a lot of dynamics (T14, P3)
   - It depends on what I’m doing, like whether it’s commercial, TV, theatre, you know, single camera, multi-cam, and also what the expectations are for the style of the show. But ultimately, I really like to search for keywords and track sort of repeated themes while reading a text. And that helps me inform the mental tone of my character. I like to look for words that other characters use to describe me. (T25, P5)
   - I feel like for approaching different characters they tell us to not diagnose our characters mentally with anything, unless it specifically says so in the script. But, knowing what makes a person tick sometimes gives them certain anxieties or certain things that come up in the roles themselves, which I think is really interesting, to not diagnose or prescribe, but to be sensitive as a human to what makes people tick. (T3, P7)
   - But, for TV, film, theater, anything like that, I usually start by answering all of the basic questions. Who is this character? Who are they talking to? Objectives. Tactics. Breaking it down that way. If it’s a play, I usually prefer to read the full-length version, just to get the full backstory of the character. And then for TV, you rarely get the opportunity to do that, so you’re doing a lot of that creative work on your own. But, I will take the time to write out a little character bio, or if not fully write it out, then think it through – what this person is going through and where they’re going. (T15, P7)
   - the moment that I’m going to be seen for the first time, I really try to live in and grab the last week and condense that down into one moment. (T32, P8)
   - I really like to figure out - what would my character be like on a regular day? Because the play is a heightened day. This is in the play because this was an amazing day. But if everything was hunky-dory, what would my character be doing then? (T36, P8)
- why did I say this? And look at what the other characters said and why did I respond with these words? And what am I hoping that these words do to the character to get whatever it is that I want? And I do that with every single line. (T37, P8)
- As far as theater is concerned, I will read a play backwards and forwards. And when it’s time for me to learn my lines, I learn just my character’s lines. And I learn the whole thing as a huge monologue. And there are certain sentences I meditate on, to try and figure out what the deeper meaning was inside of that sentence. Sometimes I would just repeat one sentence until I figure out what that sentence was trying to say. And this is just me learning my lines and learning the character and seeing what the character was trying to get off his chest. (T26, P8)
- Bobo was saying that he was at the train station and he waited at the train station. So, I went and just imagined what time I got to the train station, how furious I was looking for my man to show up. And then sitting in the moment where I realize that he wasn’t going to show up and I still stayed at the train station for three more hours, just sitting in that feeling. And then talking myself through, what I wished happen, what actually happened, what I have to do now, and then just letting all those emotions just ball up inside of me. (T28, P8)
- And I think I attack each character the same, I just try to figure out – not necessarily, what they want is important, but really, it’s what have they gone through that’s creating what they want. And how do I replicate that inspiration of desire? How do I find in myself this want? I think once you find out what the want is, that’s fine, but why do I want this is so important for me. (T29, P8)
- It came out of me just rethinking about “The Wiz” all the time, thinking about a person made out of straw, thinking about a person who hasn’t walked in a time that I cannot remember. (T16, P8)
- I use the person’s speech to sometimes try and figure out what their mental state is. I use what they’re talking about and then I just explode those moments. (T27, P8)
- He stutters a lot during his speech; does he have a mental problem? Or is he really scared? And I just sat inside of these things. (T31, P8)
- And that’s something we have to be careful of – when we’re told – when we have characters – when they describe a character and they’re like, oh they’re angry or their blah. Someone that sounds one dimension, but people aren’t one dimensional. So how am I going to approach this in a way that can humanize this? (T15, P10)
- I’ll familiarize myself with the resources available. And then I usually like to find my favorite thing about a character. Something will either tickle my fancy with them, or something that I really relate to, or something I definitely don’t relate to, but that’s why it’s funny to me. And I try to thread that through the scenes and stuff. (T8, P12)
- I like to pick my favorite parts of them and let it shine through. (T10, P12)
- I love to have a secret feeling about all the other characters. So, anyone else I’m in a scene with, is there a secret crush there? Do they resent that person? Probably no one will ever know, but I’ll know. (T11, P12)
- that’s what I love about theater, is that I know I can just bring – not that it’s the best Maria ever, but it was just my Maria. And, yeah, just my favorite. Been done so many times. I can just find that one little special thing. (T12, P12)
- an actor is somebody who inhabits any type of human experience (T16, P11)
- I won’t take a character – I just don’t audition for characters I’m not interested in bringing to life. (T35, P11)
- we like to play roles that we like and relate to. (T32, P11)
- I think I, as an actor, don’t want to tell stories in the world that I don’t feel add something of value to the world. (T16, P11)

2. The core of acting is empathy (P1, P11)
- I think this quote is attributed to Natalie Portman, I think she said that “Empathy is the actor’s job.” And I think that just sort of as a self-selecting group I think actors tend to be more empathetic, and when you unlock all of those emotions and try and tap into all of your experiences in life, traumatic and not, to get into character it’s definitely something that comes up. (T29, P1)
- the core of acting is empathy. (T64, P11)
- if you’re not an empathic person, you’re probably not really an actor, you’re somebody who wants to be famous. (T65, P11)
- actors tend to be very empathic, empathetic, they tend to be people who are supportive of each other. (T62, P11)
- I don’t think you’ll ever meet an actor who hasn’t been in therapy. Just because actors tend to be emotionally sensitive types. (T49, P11)

3. I have a lot of tools at my disposal, I see what each character needs (P2, P3, P5, P6, P9, P11, P12)
   - I have a lot of different tools at my disposal. I try and see what each character needs out of all of the tools that I have. (T12, P2)
   - I used to assign a different action to each line, and now that’s more become looking at a scene as a whole and thinking about different actions or tactics the character might use in the scene, and not try to prescribe when they happen. (T16, P2)
   - And then if there are any external elements that you can enhance the character with, but a lot of that stuff is put on the page for you. (T11, P3)
   - And then if it’s a script, if it’s not improv and it’s a script, then you read the script and take what the author tells you about the character. And then, for me, I start to think, here, how he sounded. I think of characters in other plays or other things, or in life, that remind me of the character, and bring bits and pieces of those. (T27, P11)
   - Definitely start with whatever source material I have. So, if it’s like a film, it will be more of an open, you know, I probably have the script and whatever the director has said in the character breakdown. (T7, P12)
   - I’m often really surprised in how much color I can find in the text. I’m very text driven. Everything is derived from the text. And that’s just my classical training. (T26, P5)
   - If it’s a character I have to imitate, like Ruth Bader Ginsburg, that’s just watching, watching, watching, and trying to get the things that make that person recognizable. (T25, P11)
   - Where sometimes I feel like with film, it’s a little more based off of character motivation and actions, instead of impersonation. So, I feel like there’s a huge variance as to the process, depending on what character you’re playing. (T11, P9)
   - So, I think it’s just, I go to the extreme and then I whittle it down to my method I guess. (T9, P6)

4. Character development is a physical thing (P7, P8)
   - And another part of character development is a physical thing (T30, P8)
   - Bobo’s posture was really like this the entire time, his voice was different than my voice, his voice resonated from a different part of his body than my voice resonates from mine. And those things – I do think about how I stand, but like where my voice comes from, I don’t actively think about that, sometimes. (T41, P8)
   - How do they hold themselves? It’s silly, you pop in your closet and actually act out what you’re doing. (T15, P7)
   - But, because I’m a dancer, I would hide behind, I took it from more of a body place. (T21, P7)
   - Before I went on stage, I would just dance it out to get more comfortable and then pop on, do what I had to do, and then leave. (T21, P7)

5. Saying the words and hearing the words (P2, P5, P7, P9)
   - So, a lot of it was just saying the words and just hearing the words. (T19, P2)
   - Sometimes it’s just to hear the words. (T21, P2)
   - So, it depends on what medium. For voiceover, for a character like a cartoon, they usually send a little picture and I try to figure out, is that a character in the higher part of my voice or the lower part? (T15, P7)
   - I was playing Iago from Aladdin, and so I would just spend hours, because it was such a specific character, so it was more studying his voice, his mannerisms, and learning how to embody that. (T10, P9)
   - whenever you’re playing an animal, it’s like a whole different world. And then number two, just vocally, I remember just learning how to like [parrot squawks]. That alone was a whole process. (T15, P9)
   - in the past two years I’ve gotten really heavy into not using my own accent for the first read, so I’ll do like an Irish accent or a British accent or like a snotty little boy voice for like a whole read through. Or like a hillbilly thing, like when you do that you really go up and down like crazy. So, I do that, and (T26, P5)

6. It’s about being present (P7, P11)
- There is always a practice in rehearsals and in shows where it’s like, check your emotions at the door, check your bad day at the door and be present. And that is for some people really easy and for some people really hard. (T2, P7)
- For me, it’s a quick little mantra of “your problems will be there when you’re done.” Of just like reminding yourself that you can put those things away for two, three hours and then come back and deal with them later. (T4, P7)
- The only thing I can control is how I show up. Whether that’s fully or if I’m not having a good day then voicing that in the room. Just being like, “Hey, today’s not my day.” So, just learning to be more – holding myself accountable in that way. (T5, P7)
- So, for me, it’s been holding myself accountable. I’m not usually the person to be like, I need help please! But, I’m trying to get better at, if I’m having an anxious day, then voice that. Being like, hey I’m really anxious today, I don’t know why, but I’m figuring it out, kind of thing. (T32, P7)
- I like women who are tough and strong, but also have some journey and discovery on their own. I feel like both of them were hurt by other people and then had to figure out how to re-ground themselves, which was cool. (T16, P7)
- I think what actually happens is, everything becomes more accessible because you don’t have as many layers pushing things down so much. That when I read something, a character, and they’re feeling sad, I can immediately access it. I don’t have to work so hard to access it. (T79, P11)
- And then with Buddhism, it doesn’t mean being unemotional, it just means letting things come and go. So, the emotion comes and then the emotion goes. It just means being – as far as I understand it. So, for me it’s all about self-responsibility and being where you are and being there present, fully. And, you know what, that is what you are supposed to do as an actor. If I’m in a scene with you, if you’re talking, I’m supposed to be listening to you, not thinking of my next line, or oh, I screwed up that last line. Meditation really helps you with that. So, I actually think it can be really beneficial to actors. Because a lot of actors forget that the best thing you can do is listen. It’s not talk. That’s what brings you into the scene. If I’m paying attention to you, that’s what will make me respond genuinely. And I think Buddhism can enhance that. (T80, P11)

B. Self-Character Boundaries (58.3%)

1. I don’t like playing multiple characters at once (P4, P5)
   - It was challenging because I had to basically make these two characters who were polar opposites of each other, or just one character who was just trying to go along with his day, do the best he could. And then one who was antagonizing that the entire time. And so, it was a lot of work to be in both of the worlds at the same time. (T12, P4)
   - It was challenging – it was a lot of work to make sure there were distinctions between the two characters, (T13, P4)
   - I don’t like playing multiple characters at once. (T40, P5)
   - It’s just like an interruption. If you’re going to bring it back to the creative thing, it’s like an interruption of your creative process. You’re like, cool, this is how I’m living my life for the next month. Or this is it for the next few days, this is who she is. And you can come in and out of it between scenes. Like, I’ll be myself between scenes. But there’s a character right here, ready to perform. (T43, P5)
   - I don’t like taking acting classes when I’m working. People sometimes think that that’s really terrible, like that you should always be taking classes, especially when you’re working. But I can’t be working on stuff that’s too different. I just can’t do it. I don’t know why. (T42, P5)
   - So, if I have to go back and forth it’s like, oh my god, I’ll keep this character here and her over here. This one here. And then myself will have to be pushed to the side for a minute and it will just be really weird in my own personal life. (T45, P5)
I need to do more warm-ups for the character who I guess is less like me, but also the character I am coming back to after switching into this other role. (T41, P5)

I guess like learning a new language. (T44, P5)

2. *Fully transitioned into my character’s brain* (P2, P4, P8)

- you fully transitioned into your character’s brain instead of your own. So, it’s like it’s no longer your own memory, it’s like it’s someone else’s memory that doesn’t exist in my [name of participant]’s conscious brain. (T8, P2)

- It’s more like a relinquishing of control, I think, is the best way I can think to put it. I have gotten out of my own way. There’s nothing in my “actor brain” that is trying to either over-analyze anything or steer something in a certain direction or stop something from happening. I do think that as actors we sometimes have to turn off the filters and the censors and even the fight-or-flight response. So, when this is something that happens for me as an actor it’s not that someone else has taken over, but it’s like I have gotten out of my own way. (T9, P2)

- And even in theater when I walk on the stage, I also have this out of body experience where it’s not, like, I don’t know who I am until I get back off of the stage. And then whatever the thing I was doing on the stage ends. But the thing that happens in performance-mode is its own thing and I’m just letting it out of me. And that feels really good. I can’t really explain – I don’t know if there are words. (T11, P8)

- I can’t really say all the time where the me is happening or where I am, while that’s going on. Because I don’t know if that’s always the same person in charge I think. (T13, P8)

- Now when I put the character’s clothes on, a whole different thing does happen to me. (T35, P8)

- And it was something strange that happened when I put the clothes on, it was like this is real, like now it has to happen. (T38, P8)

- when you put the hat, the tall hat on, there was just a new energy that you push out (T39, P8)

- I think the clothes helped me with just really not being [name of participant] anymore. This is truly not – rehearsal it’s still [name of participant] learning his lines, when I have the clothes on, it’s Bobo. There’s no [name of participant] anymore. (T43, P8)

- When I put the Scarecrow’s clothes on, the makeup on, it was really [name of participant] is gone at this point. [Name of participant] does not exist and this is actually the Scarecrow and everything I say is filtered through the Scarecrow, as opposed to filtered through [name of participant]. And I think the clothes and along with how I’m holding myself physically, I’m not [name of participant] anymore. I’m not acting. I’m the Scarecrow. And the Scarecrow is living. [Name of participant] is just a vessel for that. And I think the clothes, for me, take that to the next level. (T40, P8)

- it’s almost like questionable whether like, are the emotions being faked right now because they’re acting or did they just hit a place where they didn’t know they could get to because of all these different steps lined up and something just happened where they are now authentically showing that they got to a point? (T19, P4)

3. *The character will inform you. It changes who you are* (P5, P7)

- Even through the character I feel the most like myself. (T7, P5)

- I think that the most enjoyable part is being able to find not just yourself in a character, but the character in yourself – in like very surprising ways. (T19, P5)

- I think that’s really amazing to really get to the point where you as a person are being informed by the decisions you make for a character or role. (T21, P5)

- I think that’s the most fun – finding the colors and then benefitting from the performance as an individual. (T22, P5)

- Because the character will inform you, like I talked about earlier. It changes who you are with every character you perform as. (T35, P5)

- For me, I always find that I sort of behave like the character that I’m playing, just a little bit. And you try to be aware of it, especially if you’re playing someone who is really a monster. But, if I’m just playing a ditsy bimbo for a week, like, all of a sudden, I’m talking-to-everyone-like-oh-my-god. And you feel like your brain isn’t working as well because the character’s brain doesn’t work as well. And you just take on some of the character’s mannerisms and if the character is really stoic then you get that way. (T36, P5)
- as much as I loved doing Nina and Miss Julie, I feel like they were also my hardest roles that I’ve played. And roles that I’m not done with. I feel like in five to ten years, I want to come back to Miss Julie and same with Nina. In another five years I want to revisit her. (T18, P7)
- the reason I want to visit Miss Julie again is, I’ve done more work on myself, so I feel like I could do more work on her. And then for Nina, I feel like – I just did a Nina monologue the other day and with the pandemic and everything, her words ring so true to what’s going on right now, of like, all you have to do is keep going. It’s all about strength. And keep trying. So, I feel like, as I grow as an artist, it will be interesting to see how her words live in me again. (T20, P7)

4. **The character helped me get in touch with my identity** (P5, P6)

   - That was really fun for me, because for girls I think we’ve all sort of been molested, someone has grabbed us inappropriately on the subway, it’s just happened. And doing that I was like, oh my god, I’m really having fun talking about something so horrible. And somehow, I’m using it to manipulate – it was really informative because instead of being like discrete and modest about how much it sucks to be groped or whatever, from that point onwards I was like, I’m going to make it fun. (T23, P5)
   - And now when I talk to my girlfriends about like pretty horrible stuff, like worse than that, I try to keep the mood light and absurd, because it’s already dark, so like having it be more absurdist is kind of a coping mechanism. (T24, P5)
   - That show was super special to me, because I was playing an out, gay character. And at the time I wasn’t out of the closet. And so, it was a really weird dichotomy of playing gay, but also being in the closet. But also, representing this gay character. (T10, P6)
   - So, it felt like I was doing theater for a cause. And it helped me get in touch with my sexuality and it helped me eventually come out. (T11, P6)

5. **It was difficult portraying a character with a different identity than me** (P1, P4)

   - there was an LGBTQ aspect to one the characters I played and I don’t identify that way in real life, not that there is anything overt about it onstage, but I do have a hard time just sort of getting into the mindset of that and I know that there was some blocking and some physicality and stage combat that I wasn’t necessarily that comfortable with, but I did it. And I think that trying to find a character’s voice for me was difficult. (T24, P1)
   - If it’s not something I can identify with personally, my concern as an artist and also from an ethical and political-correctness standpoint is not to turn it into a cartoon version of that type. (T25, P1)
   - The most challenging role I’ve played was for a short film. I had to play this character who was actually like – we were trying to, I guess emulate the idea that he had this depression or just mental illness actually and that was the embodiment of the character. (T11, P4)
   - as well as trying to be the embodiment of a mental illness. Because I wouldn’t exactly say – I’ve never been diagnosed or anything. So, it was like I was trying to pull experiences I’ve never had to create. (T13, P4)

C. **The Connection Between Creativity and Agency** (75%)

1. **My favorite role because I was given the most freedom** (P1, P4, P5, P9, P11)

   - Probably when I write, produce, act, and direct in my own things, I create a world, a vision of either, um, in a way it’s a sort of fantasy world. (T11, P1)
   - I have always been doing this, to create and showcase opportunities for myself, creatively (T13, P1)
   - I always find joy in creating something for myself and creating this world, (T15, P1)
   - I think it was my favorite role because that one I was given the most freedom with the role. Like, my director basically told me like who I was, but then left it up to my interpretation. (T7, P4)
   - I could just give life to this person in any way I saw fit. (T8, P4)
   - I think it [being given freedom] is more rare (T9, P4)
   - since that was a college theatre production, where we weren’t getting paid or anything, there was like less responsibility to anyone higher up than us. Whereas the directors and things inside this industry for pay they are looking for a specific thing and if you are not up to giving them that specific thing then they will kind of argue with you and make sure you are onto the track to give them what they want. (T10, P4)
- I think it kind of depends on what type of character and how much freedom you get as an actor with the director. (T9, P9)
- So, your creativity and your creating a character is going to be influenced by whatever the director’s vision is for that character. (T29, P11)
- And that’s where it can be tricky, because again, as an actor, you feel like you have these instincts, but a director has a different vision. And it’s your job – in the end it’s your job to do the director’s vision, even if you think you might have – it doesn’t matter what you think essentially. (T28, P11)
- So usually if I have a problem playing it, it’s usually because my concept and the director’s concept are coming into, um – that’s for me where it’s difficult. (T34, P11)
- that’s why I direct. Because when you direct you can kind of set the vision. But, when you’re an actor, you do what you’re told, that’s your job. (T18, P11)
- The best thing to bring out creativity is to take a beginning acting course. Because all of those classes are just about playing. Really, you have to learn how to play again. (T39, P11)
- I find that personally when I make a script I’m a little too tied down into the details. (T8, P5)

2. When I’m stuck doing mindless, repetitive tasks I feel the least creative (P1, P2, P5, P11, P12)
- I think when I’m not doing things specifically related to acting I feel like it’s – I feel like the proverbial gerbil-in-the-wheel and you’re spinning your wheels with no real traction or progress, (T16, P1)
- very transactional, you’re doing the same thing over and over again. (T17, P1)
- We lose sight of that I think when you’re just stuck at work doing mindless, repetitive tasks over and over and over again. So that’s when I feel least creative. (T19, P1)
- when I’m stuck in either a mundane activity or – honestly, I experience it with catering a lot, especially if it’s a run of the mill job, where it’s just like fork goes here, would you like some more coffee, etcetera, etcetera. It’s mind-numbing. (T10, P2)
- I guess, I’m speaking of creativity as kind of having an artistic bent. Someone like me has an artistic bent and it can feel stifled when you are in an atmosphere like academia, where you have to kind of shut that down to, for example, think systematically and work in a systematic way and not create something new, but learn about what’s already known and build a little bit on that. (T1, P11)
- I was in a doctoral program. I just remember like I couldn’t even ask questions without making people uncomfortable. (T20, P11)
- I felt really stifled in that program, which is a shame. Because maybe with different mentors in a different program, it didn’t have to be that way. (T23, P11)
- I felt like I was kind of being told to stay in a box. (T21, P11)
- Cognitive-behavioral therapy, not so much. Because it’s very systematic. It’s like if engineers could design therapy, they would design cognitive-behavioral therapy. (T37, P11)
- okay I have to just hit all of the beats on this line. And like, here’s the adjective, here’s the noun, here’s the person I’m talking to, here’s my background, like all the details. So, you just fall back on what is the least interesting part of acting, at least to me. (T13, P5)
- I’m just hitting the marks that you’re supposed to hit, and I hate it. (T15, P5)
- the training is set up so that you can do the interesting part of acting which is making it your own. (T16, P5)
- The script work is obviously important, but I think it’s a means to an end, meaning the way that you get to be creative. (T17, P5)
- a lot of times in theater you are just in the ensemble - great, super fun! But, you just have to motivate stuff kind of out of nowhere. (T14, P12)
- you have to work a little harder to make it feel like you’re a real person. So, I love being in the ensemble a lot of the time, but it’s just those very specific instances where it’s like obviously I’m just playing set dressing and I feel like a bad actor, because no human being on earth has ever walked from there to there to just move a table. And I’m like wracking my brain being like, how am I going to make this look not stupid? (T15, P12)

3. You’re creating something new, there is no path, you’re experimenting (P2, P5, P8, P9, P11)
- In grad school, we always talked about “head” and “heart” and having to make sure that the two are combined, and for me I tend to navigate a lot towards my head first, so I try to bring myself to my heart, and I find that opening that up tends to be the more – I don’t know if it’s necessarily more creative, but it allows me to go in a different direction. As opposed to when I get too much in just my head, it can still be creative, but it’s much more straightforward. (T3, P2)

- it’s almost the difference between right brain and left brain, and trying to make the connection between the two of them, rather than them just being separated. (T5, P2)

- when I’m in my head, especially as an actor, that’s when I’m thinking about the lines and really thinking about my action and objective, and the backstory I’ve come up with. Bringing the heart to it, and when I know I’m in my heart and in that place, it’s when I’m able to let that stuff go, and concentrate on who that character is as a human and how they would respond to the world, rather than anything premeditated that’s already there. The heart stuff is just a bit more of the - how does this person live? If they’re out in the world, in their daily life, how might they do this thing? Or even if it’s in this scene, yes, I’ve done all of this work to create the character and know what they want and know the different ways they might try to get it, it’s that becoming malleable and for me it’s where I’m able to find the most truthful emotion of a scene, rather than trying to force anything or any kind of a response. (T6, P2)

- if you started to forget your lines you were probably more in your heart and there were definitely points in the process where that was a good thing, because you were just living in it. But also, I’d say even some of the performances I’ve done which have felt the most real, I don’t necessarily remember them, like I can’t remember the moment to moment of them. (T7, P2)

- I can also experience it when I’m trying to force myself to be creative, especially like, I’m working on a song right now and there have been times when I’ve sat down and tried to make sense of a certain section, or make sense of certain guitar run, or the chords or things, and it’s not working because I’m trying too hard. (T11, P2)

- there are also certain regrets I carry about impulses that I didn’t follow through on for that particular experience that I really wish I would have in retrospect. And I still will sometimes have not great days about something that happened in my past, but what gets me through it is trying to – even if it’s just the notion of don’t make that same mistake again, follow your impulses. That was a thing that taught me to follow my impulses as an actor. (T60, P2)

- The first word that popped in my mind was “driven.” When I’m being creative I don’t sit down most of the time and say, “I’m going to do this. And I’m going to do it now.” Most of the time my creativity is inspired. And then I feel led to go get the thing that popped in my head and manifest it into this paper. Or get it out, opposed to me coming up with it myself. (T7, P8)

- there is a moment of, especially for music, I don’t know if it happens with all of the other art forms, but in jazz when the song is currently happening and you are playing whatever you’re playing, there is a small out of body experience sometimes. It’s a let go at the same time that there is an effort in going on. It’s like I’m trying to do this, but I’m just letting it happen. I’m pushing it forward, I don’t know what’s about to come out, but I’m trying to squeeze the toothpaste tube and let whatever it is come out. (T9, P8)

- You have to put everything into the bottle. And then you shake the bottle up and let the bottle pour out the way the bottle is. And that’s whatever the beauty is. (T14, P8)

- But I think that the part of creation in film is still, I’ll say, moments of improv. Phrases, as opposed to an entire piece. But a moment – I’m just going to improv these three sentences and if I find something I like, I’ll try and do that again. It still has to be inside the character, I think. And as long as the character has allowed this thing to happen, you can still choose A, B, or C, as long as that’s who this character is. (T20, P8)

- And I try to be like a volcano that’s ready to erupt. And then when the door opens, I just try to explode the volcano. And then this is when the improv happens for me. I feel like I’m going back and forth between some of the things I do, because my brain is firing off, real crazy. (T33, P8)

- on-stage stuff was happening on stage that I didn’t know was going to happen. And it was just doing it. And people would go, “How did you think of that?” And I was like, “I didn’t think of that. I don’t know why it happened. I’m glad you enjoyed it. I hope I do it again.” (T12, P8)

- that was not a direction from the director, I did not think of it at rehearsal prior to, it just kind of happened that first day. And she was like, “I love that, keeping doing that.” And I was like, “I agree with you, I loved it too.” (T15, P8)
It just comes out of that place of understanding and then you just have to let it breathe. A jazz musician would say, you have to learn all these scales, all the rules, but then when the show starts, toss all of that out the window. And just trust and believe that you’ve gathered enough information and have gathered enough understanding about the piece that you’re playing and all the theory you’ve taken in and just let it go. Unleash it and hope it happens. And I think I take each character the same way. (T17, P8)

Especially as a musician. Stuff would happen where I didn’t do that, I don’t know who did that. I mean, I know I played it, but I can’t do it again. (T6, P8)

Creativity is essentially about having no rules. So, if you are someone who is attracted to rules and things being systematic, that to me is sort of the opposite tendency of what happens in the creative process. The creative process is not about breaking rules, it’s that rules are irrelevant. There are no rules. (T5, P11)

And so that’s sort of why it’s fun, and that’s why children – that’s why people often think children are very creative, it’s because they haven’t learned all the rules. (T6, P11)

So, you’re just sort of just making things, whether artistically or in your imagination. You are going beyond assumptions, you are going beyond rules, anything goes. To me, that’s the primary ingredient of the creative process. (T7, P11)

And that’s why it’s so different from anything else. And that’s why it’s so freeing. It’s because where in-life can you go where there are no rules? (T8, P11)

If you’re creating something new, there is no path. (T10, P11)

There shouldn’t really be any boundaries. There shouldn’t be ethical boundaries and yet we have them as actors. Because we also like to play people we admire or relate to. (T15, P11)

The rehearsal process for a film is the most creative I ever feel. (T4, P5)

I think the most enjoyable is getting to experiment and try things, which is why I really like the rehearsal process. (T18, P5)

When you’re improving within a structured script that someone else has made (T8, P5)

You’re finding the most at the beginning. (T45, P5)

It’s not following the expectations, which is what it is for performers. I think acting is so unique, creativity-wise. I think it is completely different from any other performance or artistic genre. Keeping that in mind is important. Nothing you will get from actors in your interviews will be about any other artistic form. It’s totally different. (T70, P5)

I forgot the lyrics. So, naturally that lent itself to creativity because then in the moment I had to improvise my way out of that situation. So, I think especially with theater, because it’s live, a lot of fails and mess ups can lead to some of the best moments on stage. So, in that way, it’s kind of interesting that - it kind of depends on each situation, but sometimes the mess ups lead to the most creative moments. Because you’re being forced into it. (T7, P9)

How does one cover that? It ended up being one of the funniest moments on stage. Just like, the amount of joy and ecstasy that we all felt when that happened and trying not to break. (T8, P9)

But the thing I learned about film in the last few years was, I’m still having that same joy and improv experience, I just have to replicate it. Which is a different task. (T18, P8)

4. Sometimes creative freedom can be scary (P11)

Sometimes freedom can be scary, right? And so, sometimes it can even bring anxiety. Because you are allowed to go places that might potentially feel unethical. Because rules also involve ethics, prosocial rules. It can be scary to follow an impulse that is a creative impulse, but will it bring me to a place where I’ll feel like shame on me? So, yeah, it can bring on feelings of shame, feelings of anxiety, fear. Feelings of – there are definitely negative states, feelings of anxiety about the unknown. (T9, P11)

I just had an ethical issue with that. I just didn’t feel right about that. (T17, P11)

I can’t help but wonder whether I was playing a little too loose and free in an area that I wasn’t knowledgeable enough about. That this whole thing about acting and bringing these delusions and hallucinations to life, with minds that were more fragile than I - (T45, P11)

Then my no rules is going to affect others, and that’s essentially what it came down to for me. (T19, P11)

You know it’s interesting because actors often think, would you be naked for this? And they think, well, if the part called for it, or, would you play a psychopath or a sociopath, or someone who
raped? So, these are the kinds of decisions that actors make. And I’ve often thought, theoretically, an actor is a shape-shifter. (T14, P11)
- So, yeah that whole thing with imagination with people who that line is not clear. I think that’s where maybe it can get tricky. (T46, P11)
- I felt like that fine line had been dropped. (T44, P11)

5. There are no wrong choices, unless it’s not a choice (P2, P5, P7)
- I think what grad school gave me was not only the tools, but the ability to be aware of it and to know within myself that playing those characters that have traits that we don’t really like – like I had to play a character one time who has really homophobic and that’s weird stuff to tap into. And it’s being able to go there and go there fully. Take whatever you need to from the shelf, but then be able to put it back on the shelf at the end of the night. And doing whatever you need to as a person to be able to do that. (T28, P2)
- And if you’re not in complete control of your voice and making the appropriate decisions for a character and deciding what voice that character has, you’re not really doing your job. (T29, P5)
- This is obviously so amateurish, but like literally covering my face, literally protecting myself from having people know my emotions. And that’s like harmless in the real world. All these things we do, completely not a big deal. But you can’t do it when you are developing a character. (T31, P5)
- there are a million ways to perform a character and to bring something to life, there are no wrong choices, unless it’s not a choice. (T51, P5)
- when your job is about showing the mental state of someone who isn’t you, then you have to be in control of your own mental state. (T56, P5)
- You don’t have to go to therapy, but you at least have to be aware of what you’re doing to hide yourself in the real world. Because everyone does that. And if you don’t know that, then pulling all of that in with you and to that character. Because you can’t drop yourself completely. You’re going to have your weird mannerisms that you’ve developed that comfort yourself or block yourself. (T30, P5)
- we put up blocks in our own personal lives, and then to tear them down sometimes means you can’t put the wall right back up, you have to deal with it before moving on in your own personal life. (T47, P5)
- With drama I think it’s much clearer; if you’re working on a dramatic scene and you’re supposed to cry, and you can’t cry, and you ultimately refuse to cry, there is a reason for that. Especially if you normally can. (T46, P5)
- But, I knew that I had some blocks up with that particular subject matter. And now I’m much more open and comfortable talking about it. (T19, P7)