

# Psychological Perspectives on Acting

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Psychologists know surprisingly little about the cognitive and affective underpinnings of acting, and this stands in sharp contrast to what has been learned about the psychological skills involved in music and the visual arts. In this article, the author discusses findings on the childhood precursors of acting talent and outlines a program of research she is initiating to test the hypothesis that acting training fosters strength in reading others' mental states, feeling others' feelings, and regulating one's own emotions in an adaptive manner. This research has implications for understanding the malleability of these outcomes and expertise in these abilities.

*Keywords:* acting, theatre, theory of mind, empathy, emotion regulation

Acting is a strange phenomenon, but one that we take for granted: Actors pretend to be others, for the audience's enjoyment, without the intent to deceive. Acting is a universal human activity, and one that is uniquely human—no other animals create dramas, not even nonhuman primates. We are all actors to some extent, trying out different roles as we interact with others. In Shakespeare's words, "One man in his time plays many parts" (pp II. VII. 139–140). However, the roles people enact in their personal lives are typically fairly interrelated, and most are based on people's own personalities, desires, and emotional ranges. Actors, however, must play many unrelated kinds of roles. In the last few years, Charlize Theron has played a prostitute serial killer (*Monster*, 2003), the first woman to sue successfully over sexual harassment (*North Country*, 2005), an immortal superhero (*Hancock*, 2008), and herself, as an Oscar winner (for *Monster*, in 2003). How does she manage to portray these roles in such a realistic fashion? Does she possess unusual cognitive and affective skills that make this possible? And if so, what were the earliest signs of these skills in her childhood? Were these what drew her to acting training, or were these skills learned through acting training? In this article, I explore the early signs of acting talent and then discuss the psychological skills I believe to be necessary to act and that are therefore likely to be fostered by acting training—theory of mind, empathy, and emotion regulation.

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## Previous Work in the Psychology of Acting

Thus far, psychologists have focused primarily on one aspect of acting—the verbal skills that make acting possible. Noice and Noice (1997, 2006) have demonstrated that when nonactors are taught to use techniques that actors use to memorize their lines—the careful and extensive elaboration of a script, perspective taking, and self-referencing—their memory skills improve. This improvement spans age ranges (from college students to 85-year-old adults) and types of text, including plays and dialogues. By defining the types of skills actors use to memorize their lines and then teaching nonactors those skills, Noice and Noice have developed a program to increase the memory skills of individuals of all ages. Other researchers have demonstrated that when young children act out stories in the classroom, their oral comprehension of the stories and their language and reading skills are strengthened when compared with those of children who simply read the same stories (see Podzlony, 2000).

## Childhood Correlates of Later Acting Talent

Although memorization of lines and other verbal skills are clearly essential to acting, these abilities do not, in my view, lie at the heart of acting. One could have stellar verbal memory and other verbal skills, yet still not be able to create convincing and honest portrayals of characters on stage, to "live truthfully under imaginary circumstances" (Silverberg, 1994, p. 9). I argue here that without the ability to understand deeply what a character is thinking and feeling, to feel the emotions of that character, and to create and regulate emotions in oneself, one will never be considered a great actor.

To determine whether professional actors showed signs of these skills in their childhood, I and my coauthor (Goldstein & Winner, in press) compared childhood memories of professional actors with those of nonactors by conducting a qualitative retrospective interview study. The participants were 11 professional actors who were members of the actor's union (Equity) and who had acted on Broadway, off Broadway, and regional stages. We asked the same set of questions of 10 patent lawyers. We chose lawyers as our comparison group because like acting, the legal profession requires

high verbal skills; however, unlike acting, it does not require the ability to take on fictional roles. All participants were interviewed either in person or by e-mail.

We asked all participants about their attunement to others and their emotional sensitivity, with questions such as “Were you especially attuned to others’ emotions/ motivations?” and “Were you considered highly sensitive?” (Goldstein & Winner, in press). We also asked about their childhood involvement in pretend play, role play, and dressing up in costume, with questions such as “Did you have an imaginary playmate?” “Did you daydream a lot?” “Did you role-play and pretend play a lot?” “Did you like to dress up in costumes?” and “Were you asked to perform for parents/friends, or did you do this spontaneously, or not at all?” Last, we asked about their tendency to memorize books and their peer relationships.

Actors were distinguished from lawyers in several telling ways. Actors recalled daydreaming as children more than did lawyers. They recalled higher levels of engagement in the fictional worlds of books and movies. In contrast, lawyers recalled a stronger attraction to nonfiction than to fiction. Actors also reported feeling more different from their peers, with one actor reporting, “No one really understood my passion for theater, so it was hard to relate.” Like gifted children in other domains, the children who went on to become actors were lonely, shy, and introverted (Winner, 1996). And despite the fact that lawyers are in a verbally demanding profession and must thus have strong verbal skills, actors recalled stronger memories for books and words as children. This finding is consistent with Noice and Noice’s (1997) research demonstrating that actors are able to develop intricate strategies for memorizing large numbers of lines.

The most striking differences between actors and lawyers was that as early as age 4, actors began to engage playfully in the profession they would later join. They recalled dressing up in costume and creating plays as well as engaging in a great deal of pretense and role play even without costume. They created performances for audiences of family members and friends at every opportunity. One actor remembered “acting out every part in the musical comedy albums my parents had in our living room.” Another actor remembered how much she “loved the mirror. I would act in front of it, dance, and so forth; I would put two mirrors together and pretend I was the Rockettes.” No lawyer reported this kind of childhood activity, nor did any lawyer recall engaging in any kind of playful form of law as a child.

From the results of this initial study, we concluded that actors showed a very early childhood proclivity to enter into fictional worlds created by others and to create their own fictional worlds (Goldstein & Winner, in press). These two activities are, of course, very much what actors do as adults: They read plays to understand the part they must create, and then they create the part. In addition, actors were engaging in actual acting as young as age 4.

### Acting and Theory of Mind

Reading, understanding, and then creating a part onstage, in a film, or on a TV show requires a deep analysis of the inner life of that character. To portray a character, actors must first have a genuine understanding of that individual’s mental and emotional life. In other words, actors must develop a good “theory of mind” so that they can grasp the inner workings of the characters they

must portray. Thus, it is likely that training in acting leads to advanced levels of theory of mind.

By *theory of mind*, I refer to the ability to accurately “read” or infer a person’s inner state given knowledge of the person’s facial expression, body language, prosody, verbal utterances, and knowledge of information available to the person in question (Perner, 1991; Wellman, Cross, & Watson, 2001). Most of what we know about the development of theory of mind focuses on children before the age of 6 (Flavell, 1999) and on individuals who have impaired theory of mind—particularly those with autism (Baron-Cohen, Wheelwright, Hill, Raste, & Plumb, 2001). In striking contrast, we know next to nothing about individuals with exceptional skills in theory of mind or levels of theory of mind in adulthood.

Actors are individuals likely to have strong theory-of-mind skills, either as part of their innate makeup or as learned from acting training (or both). Actors must repeatedly become different characters, and acting theorists from different schools have stressed the importance of training the actor to understand and analyze a character’s inner thoughts to create a realistic portrayal of that character. Konstantin Stanislavsky (1950), the famous Russian acting coach and theorist, believed that the voice and bodily movements of a character followed directly from an actor’s knowledge of the character’s thoughts. And Uta Hagen, the acting coach of such luminaries as Marlon Brando, wrote that she asked her students to consider, for each character they took on, “What does the character want?” and “What would motivate me to behave as the character is behaving?” (Hagen & Frankel, 1973, pp. 141, 162). Clearly, this kind of training seems likely to foster the ability to understand others. But it is also likely that acting training attracts individuals who are already skilled in this way of thinking. Work in my laboratory is currently investigating the links between theory of mind and acting at various ages. To disentangle learning from self-selection, I am currently conducting a quasi-experimental longitudinal intervention study of acting training in children and adolescents. A group of 8- to 10-year-olds involved in once-a-week acting classes and a group of 13- to 15-year-olds receiving daily acting classes at two high schools for the arts are being tested at the beginning and end of the academic year. Individuals receiving acting training will be compared with those receiving visual arts or music training. Both groups are receiving a variety of measures of theory of mind.

### Acting and Empathy

It is often claimed that acting teaches empathy, perhaps because actors must put themselves in the shoes of their character and feel that character’s feelings. Some kinds of acting training strongly encourage actors to feel the emotions of their character so that they can most convincingly convey the experience of feeling these emotions.

I define *empathy* as the ability to feel another’s feelings, similar to Bryant (1982) and Zaki, Bolger, and Ochsner (2008). This definition distinguishes empathy from compassion or sympathy for another person and from prosocial behavior. This definition also distinguishes empathy from the understanding of another’s emotions, which is actually a component of theory of mind. Even though empathy cannot exist without cognitive perspective taking and understanding of emotions (Batson et al., 2003), the two must be clearly distinguished.

There are many reasons to suppose that actors may be particularly strong in empathy. Actors trained in Method acting (the major form of acting training in the United States today) are trained to feel the feelings of their character in real time onstage. Levy (1997) argued that involvement in theater can help children learn about morals and values, through its use as a “school for feeling” (p. 70). Educated emotions, Levy argued, respond more morally than uneducated emotions, leading to increases in empathy, although Levy’s definition of empathy in this case is closer to what I might call sympathy. Verducci (2000) also argued that because actors must read and understand the emotions and behaviors of the other actors around them, they gain an understanding of and empathy for others. And there is some empirical support to suggest that actors have higher levels of empathy than nonactors. Nettle (2006) found that professional actors scored higher than a control group recruited to help validate and normalize the Empathy Quotient, a measure of affective empathy (Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004). In my current research, I am investigating the claim that acting is tied to empathy. The students in my ongoing longitudinal study are being tested both on a self-report measure of empathy and on a new measure of empathy assessing the ability to feel another’s feelings, as separate from feeling compassion.

### Acting and Emotion Regulation

In most acting training, but particularly in Method acting training, actors must be able to generate and create appropriate emotions for a character during a particular emotional episode. A key aspect of many acting theories is the ability to recall and reuse emotional moments from one’s past to create a realistic portrayal onstage. Acting coach Lee Strasberg, one of Stanislavsky’s main disciples, believed that each actor should have a store of 10 to 12 affective memories that could be called up at any time in service of a part. Actors need to be able to call up an emotion on cue and to recall what a specific emotion feels like in real life so that they can reproduce it onstage. Actors also often improvise an unwritten scene before an onstage scene occurs to create the correct emotional state for the first moment on stage (Hull, 1985).

Thus, actors must have power over their emotions. The ability to understand and to control one’s emotions is referred to by psychologists as *emotion regulation* (Gross, 1998, 2002). Emotion regulation can occur in more or less adaptive ways. Although emotions are sometimes useful and desirable, there are times when people need to change or modify their emotions, and the strategy they choose to do so can be adaptive or dysfunctional. For example, if I am afraid of a dog in my neighborhood, I could regulate that fear in an adaptive way via cognitive regulation: I could remind myself that the dog is behind a fence. Such a response would be far more adaptive than if I chose to simply suppress my fear. Suppression of fear does not mitigate the physiological, inner expression of fear. Previous work has shown that when participants watch a disgusting movie but are told not to express their disgust, their sympathetic nervous system activity rises to an even higher level than that of participants who are allowed to express their disgust on their face (Gross & Levenson, 1993). Strategies of emotion regulation have important effects on health and stress, and therefore finding ways to encourage acceptance rather than suppression of emotions is important.

Because actors must use their emotions, both negative and positive, in their work, it is reasonable to hypothesize that actors should be particularly accepting of their emotions and less likely to suppress them. In my laboratory, I am now investigating the strategies actors use to create and control their emotions onstage and offstage in their daily lives. The students in my longitudinal study are also being tested on their emotion regulation strategies.

### Training of Actors

Preliminary findings from my lab have shown that actors have strengths in theory of mind and in adaptive emotion regulation, and my longitudinal study continues this work, looking at the direction of causality. In an effort to understand whether these strengths come from the study of acting, I am also conducting a qualitative study to determine what is taught in the acting classes attended by the longitudinal study’s participants. Acting classes are being videotaped and then coded in terms of habits of mind taught, either explicitly or implicitly, by acting teachers, using the methodology developed by Hetland, Winner, Veenema, Sheridan, and Perkins (2008) to analyze visual arts instruction. This study will allow me to determine whether acting classes actually train theory of mind, empathy, and emotion regulation; what other psychological skills acting may teach; and how these skills are imparted to the students. The work I have described has as its goal the discovery of the cognitive and affective skills that are developed by training in acting. In this article, I have tried to show briefly why I believe that actors should have strengths in theory of mind, empathy, and adaptive emotion regulation.

Despite its obvious popularity, we know shockingly little about the cognitive and affective underpinnings of acting. For example, in its first 4 weeks in the theater, the movie *Batman: The Dark Knight* made \$441,628,497. Yet, we still do not know how the actors created their portrayals or why the audience paid to see it. None of this information is yet in psychology textbooks. It is my hope, facing the future, that we will someday have a comprehensive psychology of acting and dramatic performance.

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