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Living in Alternative and Inner Worlds: Early Signs of Acting Talent

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In an exploratory, qualitative study, 11 professional actors were interviewed about their childhoods to investigate the early predictors of acting talent. To control for verbal talent, scientists-turned-lawyers were selected as a comparison group. Participants were asked about their families, schooling, and training, as well as about their early propensities for play and imagination, their orientation towards fiction, and their emotionality and attunement to others' mental states. Actors' childhood memories differed from those of the lawyers in the following respects. The actors recalled greater engagement in *alternative worlds* (imaginary and fictional worlds) and in *inner worlds* (emotional and other mental states). Not surprisingly, then, they were also more likely to recall feeling different from others and unable to engage fully in school. Unlike the lawyers, the actors recalled practicing for their adult roles as early as age 4—by inventing and directing plays in their backyards. Unlike lawyers, actors chose their careers despite parental discouragement: although their parents valued the arts, they discouraged the choice of acting as a career. Taken together, the results suggest that an early interest in alternative and inner worlds and an identification of oneself as different from others are predictive of early and steady involvement in theater—a choice of career in which one can live daily in another world of imagined lives and in the other world of others' mental lives.

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What propels certain individuals to devote their careers to acting as if they are someone else, stepping into another's shoes, speaking with another's voice, and trying to create the illusion that they are that other person? What propels someone to choose to become a professional actor? In Elizabethan times, actors were seen as beggars, thieves, and otherwise untrustworthy or immoral (Brown, 1995). Actors have been labeled exhibitionistic, impulsive, hysterical, poorly integrated, narcissistic, and neurotic (Fisher & Fisher, 1981; Hammond & Edelmann, 1991). Very little is known about the childhood roots of acting talent, and this stands in contrast to what is known about the developmental precursors of participation in music (e.g., Bazzana, 2007), visual art (e.g., Milbrath, 1998), athletics (e.g., Bloom, 1985), and academic pursuits such as mathematics and science (e.g., Bloom, 1985; Csikzentmihalyi, Rathunde, & Whalen, 1993; Root-Bernstein, Bernstein, & Garnier,

1995; Winner, 1996). Here we take the first step in the study of the development of acting ability by investigating, retrospectively, the childhood correlates of acting talent, comparing a group of professional actors to a group of scholastically gifted individuals who first became research scientists or engineers and then turned to a career in patent law. This group was selected as a comparison group because, like the profession of acting, the profession of law calls for strong verbal skills. Thus, both groups should be highly verbally intelligent, yet unlike actors, lawyers do not create alternate selves and do not inhabit fictional worlds.

Theories of acting specify what kinds of skills the actor must develop (Chekhov, 1991; Hagen & Frankel, 1973; Hull, 1985; Mamet, 1997; Meisner & Longwell, 1987; Stanislavsky, 1950), and these theories (along with what is known about development in other art forms) were used to generate hypotheses about the cognitive, emotional, and social skills that should predict emerging acting talent. In addition, biographies and autobiographies of actors were scrutinized to check that our hypotheses were born out in the lives of well-known actors.

There are two major Western theories of acting—Method and Technique. Method theory, which is broadly defined as working from inner emotions to outer states, is the main approach to acting taught in the United States (Verducci, 2000); Technique theory, which is broadly defined as working from the outside physicality of the character to the inner emotions, is the main approach to acting taught in England. Method theory stresses the importance of actors' sensitivity to emotion and to others' mental states (Hull, 1985; Stanislavsky, 1950). Method actors learn to feel the emotions of their characters, to study emotions and link the emotions of their characters back to their own experiences and emotions. A character comes to life through the actor's understanding and creation of the character's inner life. The actor thus must have a well-developed ability to imagine others' mental states—an ability that psychologists refer to as having a "theory of mind." The actor must, throughout the play, learn and use the understanding of the character's inner motivations (Noice & Noice, 2006). The only way to avoid a clichéd performance is by understanding the intricacies of the character's underlying psychology (Chekov, 1991), and conveying those emotions and motivations onstage, while speaking the words of the script.

A study by Nemiro (1997) revealed the central role for actors of understanding their own and others' mental states. Nemiro found that actors create their characters by making connections between their own lives and those of their characters. The actors in this study also thought about their character's needs and objectives, and determined what other characters in the play would think about their character. This study demonstrates the

extent to which actors must focus on understanding their own and others' emotions, desires, and goals, and also the extent to which actors practice living in other worlds.

Actors must not only have a well-developed ability to enter into and understand the inner world of others. They must also have a powerful imagination, because the people whose minds they inhabit exist only fictionally. And, of course, actors must have a strong verbal memory because they must commit hours of lines to memory, and must be able to imitate other's gestures and intonations as they create particular characters. In the present study, we explored whether actors recalled showing signs of these kinds of abilities and proclivities as young children, and we also queried them about the role of family and school in their early development.

We explored the childhood correlates of acting talent using a retrospective interview method, asking professional actors to reflect about their childhoods. The interview protocol we developed was based on the kinds of questions posed by Bloom (1985) in his retrospective study of the childhoods of talented adults in a variety of domains. Our questions probed the following: an inward focus on the mental life of self and other, imagination, involvement in the alternative realms of play and fiction, social skills, cognitive skills, mimicry, experience of school, early engagement in creating theater, and the role of parents.

METHOD

Participants

Eleven professional actors who had been members of the professional actors union, Actor's Equity, for at least 10 years, and who had acted on Broadway, off-Broadway, and regional stages, agreed to an in depth interview. Ages ranged widely, from 42–85. Ten scientist-turned-lawyers (referred to hereafter simply as lawyers) formed the comparison group. These lawyers were thought to form an ideal comparison group because they, too, had chosen a highly verbal profession. Although lawyers must, like actors, have strong verbal skills, there are no other obvious similarities between lawyers and actors (especially given that the lawyers studied here were not litigators and, therefore, did not "perform" in court). We expected the lawyers to look similar to scholastically gifted individuals studied by Bloom and his colleagues (Gustin, 1985; Sosniak, 1985). Any differences between the actors and lawyers would not, however, be attributable to differences in verbal abilities.

Procedure

We interviewed participants either in person or via e-mail. There were no differences in the quality of the

interviews conducted via e-mail or in person: both methods yielded detailed answers to all of the questions we posted. In both kinds of interviews, we followed up on specific questions, as needed.

RESULTS

Inner Worlds: Emotions and Other Mental States

All good actors must discover the psychological reasons for why characters do and say what they do (Caruso & Kosoff, 1998). Actors must continually analyze the characters they portray, asking themselves “Who is this character? Why is he doing what he does?” (Hagen & Frankel, 1973). Actors must ask themselves “What would motivate me to behave as the character is behaving?” (Hagen & Frankel, 1973, p. 161). Method actors, in particular, are taught to actually feel the emotions that their characters are portraying. Understanding the character’s mental states is extremely important, but according to the Method approach, understanding without empathy—without concurrently feeling the emotions of the character—will result in detachment—the characterization will not feel alive (Hayman, 1969). Living, existing, and feeling with a character is how true and powerful characterizations are built (Stanislavsky, 1950). The core principle of the American Method approach to acting training that one must be attuned to characters’ emotions and develop empathy for them (Hull, 1985).

This core principle resonates in the published self-reports of actors. For example, Marlon Brando (1994) reported “I am endlessly absorbed by human motivations. How is it that we behave the way we do?” (p. 83). Ingrid Bergman felt sorry for the maids who worked for her aunts, would imagine what went on in the minds of various salesgirls and others that her aunts interacted with, and felt sympathy for others who were mistreated by her aunts (Bergman & Burgess, 1980). Like Bergman, and in contrast to the lawyers, it was hypothesized that actors would recall having been keenly aware of others’ mental states, as well as aware and sensitive of their own emotional reactions to events.

To probe whether actors were strongly drawn inner mental worlds as children, we asked the following questions: (a) “Were you especially attuned to others’ emotions/motivations?” and (b) “Were you considered highly sensitive?”

Inner World Results

Consistent with prediction, actors recalled attunement to others’ mental states and emotions (8); but contrary to prediction, so also did the lawyers (6). Two actors

reported that this attunement happened on two levels at once, one an immediate level, and one a distanced, meta-level. One of these actors described the following experience: “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.’”

In addition to this interest in others’ emotions, actors also reported a high level of appreciation for their own emotions, labeling themselves as “sensitive” as children (9). In comparison, only four lawyers reported being emotionally sensitive as children. One actor reported testing himself to see how much emotion he could handle,

When I used to go to a movie, . . . some sort of . . . Walt Disney flick, if there was a frightening scene in it, I used to come back and go to my room and turn the lights out . . . and test myself to see if I had been frightened or not.

Another actor recalled his “two brothers who thought I was too ‘sensitive.’” Another actor described how, as a child, he was “always extremely affected by the energy in a room, and quite quiet, interestingly enough, as I soaked it all in.”

Imaginary Worlds

Actors must be able to create a complete imaginary world from an incomplete sound stage or set, and must be able to imagine themselves as someone else (Hull, 1985) in the middle of a state of affairs that they may have never experienced (Chekhov, 1991). This involves fantasy, play, and pretense (Meisner & Longwell, 1987). Every movement on stage and every moment between characters is the result of imagination. The acting theorist Stanislavsky believed that only through the submersion into the imaginary world of the play can an actor create a realistic character. The imagination must be developed if the actor is to be successful. Creative fantasy and immersion into the world of the play allows the actor to interact with that world believably. And having a strong emotional imagination allows the actor to recreate the proper emotions onstage (Chekhov, 1991; Stanislavsky, 1950).

Two questions probed whether actors were drawn to creating imaginary worlds as children: (a) “Did you have an imaginary playmate?” and (b) “Did you daydream a lot?” We expected that the actors would be more likely than the lawyers to recall having created imaginary companions (Taylor, 1999) and to recall a great deal of daydreaming.

Imaginary World Results

Contrary to prediction, actors were no more likely than lawyers to recall having had an imaginary companion

(only one lawyer and one actor had such a companion). However, as predicted, most actors reported daydreaming as children, but so also did the lawyers: Eight actors reported daydreaming often, compared to six lawyers. One actor answered “Yes! Still do.” Another actor reported long-term “waking fantasies,” which, although not real, went on for a long time and affected the actor’s behavior. Although actors recalled daydreaming, this memory did not sharply distinguish them from the lawyers, who also daydreamed as children. However, because our lawyers were also scientists, it is possible that their high level of imagination was linked to their ability to work successfully in the sciences, as Root-Bernstein et al. (1995) showed in their longitudinal study of scientists.

Attraction to Fiction

In order to probe whether actors were strongly drawn to other-created alternative and fictional worlds as children, we asked them: (a) “Did you like to watch movies?” and (b) “Did you like to read? Fiction? Nonfiction?” It was hypothesized that the actors, but not the lawyers, would recall having been drawn to the world of fiction, preferring novels and films over nonfiction and documentary film.

Attraction to Fiction Results

As predicted, there was a striking difference between actors and lawyers in their recollections about their relationship to literary fiction. Ten actors reported reading and enjoying fiction as children, compared to only three lawyers. One actor recalled, “I read a lot and I could do a little poetry. And then I got hooked on Shakespeare.” Another actor reported that “I read plays, mostly.” In contrast, lawyers reported that they preferred nonfiction. “Almost never did I read fiction, except when required for school,” one lawyer told us. Another lawyer answered that he liked “to read, but did not do it much while growing up.” Instead, he said, he concentrated on sports. However, when the medium was film, lawyers were as drawn to fictional worlds as were actors: nine actors and eight lawyers recalled often watching movies.

Social Skills

We examined actors’ social lives as children, asking whether they were introverted and alienated. Given that acting is an inherently social activity in which one must be able to collaborate with others, one might predict that, as children, actors would be extroverted (rather than shy or introverted) and have many friends, in contrast to lawyers. However, some work has shown that introversion is related to creativity across the lifespan

(Feist & Barron, 2003); hence, one might also expect actors to be introverted. We favored the hypothesis of actors as introverts: because actors are drawn to imaginary and pretend worlds, we expected that they would recall living inside their imaginations as children—social introverts rather than extroverts. If actors are introverted as children, they should also recall having felt alienated from those around them, in comparison to lawyers.

To probe for social skills as children, participants were asked the following four questions: (a) “Were you extroverted? Introverted?” (b) “Did you have many friends, or few?” (c) “Were you lonely or not?” (d) “Did you feel different from other kids? If so, how?”

Social Skills Results

Slightly less than half of the actors (4) recalled being introverted, as did half (5) of the lawyers. One actor reported that she “had long periods of quiet. . . . I was an extremely sensitive child and always very afraid to make waves.” Two of the introverted actors reported that, although they were very shy or very introverted in their everyday lives, becoming involved in acting and being onstage allowed them to become more extroverted.

Although recollections of introversion did not differentiate actors from lawyers, almost every actor (10) reported feeling “different” from his or her peers, yet fewer (6) lawyers reported feeling this way. One actor reported that this difference came from being “fascinated especially by grownups. I would always hang out in rooms with grownups and not with kids.” Another actor described himself as “Always more cerebral. Lived in my head a lot. Didn’t care about anything with the suffix of *ball*—baseball, etc.—unless it was Cinderella’s Ball.” Another actor recalled, “No one really understood my passion for theater, so it was hard to relate.”

Memory

The question actors are most often asked is “How do you remember all of those lines?” (Noice & Noice, 2002). Spencer Tracy was reported to have had an extraordinary ability for memorizing printed material (Swindell, 1969), and Marlon Brando (1994) wrote of his mother’s songs, “I memorized as many as I could. To this day, I remember the music and lyrics to thousands of songs my mother taught me” (p. 10).

A series of studies by Noice and Noice (2006) has revealed the excellent memories that actors have, and their abilities to memorize high amounts of material. The careful and extensive elaboration of a script, perspective taking, and self referencing that occur as the actor develops a character are all strategies

that help with memorization (Noice & Noice, 2006). Acting requires a strong long term verbal memory, as actors must memorize long scripts and individual monologues. However, actors more often report that memorization occurs by “magic,” rather than by any concerted effort (Noice & Noice, 1997).

We probed actors for their recollections of an ability and delight in memorization of verbal texts. We expected that actors would recall an early tendency to memorize lines from books and movies. In order to gain information on verbal skills and memorization of works in childhood, we asked the following questions: (a) “Did you have a good memory for words and books?” and (b) “Did you memorize scripts or lyrics for fun?”

Memory Results

Actors were more likely than lawyers to recall having a good memory for books and words (9 actors vs. 2 lawyers), and to recall memorizing books, poems, and plays for fun in their spare time (7 actors vs. 1 lawyer). Actors reported “it always came easily” and “Absolutely—I know all the lyrics for any song I’ve heard just twice...and as for scripts...I can look at the page and see the words in my head, a lot of the time. Words are my greatest fascination.”

Mimicry

Actors, of course, are far more than mimics, but the ability to imitate others’ gestures and intonations is an important skill for an actor to have. Imitation is often used in children’s theatre classes (Siegler, DeLoach, & Eisenberg, 2006) as a way for children to understand the characters they are portraying. We predicted that child actors would show an early talent for mimicry, as this might be one way in which they could interact with others. We asked: (a) “Were you a mimic (imitating other’s behavior, speech, etc.)?”

Mimicry Results

Actors were more likely than lawyers to report mimicry as children (6 actors vs. 3 lawyers). One actor reported mimicking “mannerisms and speech,” and another reported, “I was always able to pick up on the way people spoke and acted and stuff like that, but then I think, eventually, it became more interesting to me of what it said about the person.” For this actor, mimicking others led to an understanding of others.

Experience of School

Because actors live in imaginary worlds, they are unlikely to like the fact-based reality world of the traditional

academic classroom. Jack Nicholson constantly pulled pranks on classmates during and after class. He brought in his football and threw it around class when the teacher wrote something on the board (McGuilligan, 1994). Spencer Tracy was reported to have hated school and to think often of running away (Swindell, 1969).

We hypothesized that our actors would recall a dislike of school, and that they may have acted out by becoming the class clown. We predicted that our lawyers would recall having liked school. Research on other kinds of academically gifted individuals shows that they recall that school success came easily and quickly them (Gustin, 1985; Sosniak, 1985). To probe whether actors felt unengaged in the academic classroom, we asked: (a) “Were you easily bored in school?” and (b) “Were you the class clown?”

Experience of School Results

Five actors, but only two lawyers, reported boredom in school. Of the five actors who reported being interested in school, one was interested only when “teachers... really captivated me, because they were funny or they were theatrical.” Even though one would think that boredom would lead to misbehavior, or that actors would want to show off for classmates, only one actor reported being a “class clown.” In comparison, three of our lawyers reported being the class clown, disrupting their classrooms with antics. Clearly, being the class clown does not distinguish future actors from future lawyers.

Creating Theater

Signs of acting interest should emerge early, as do signs of interest in music or drawing (Winner, 1996). Because acting experiences are often not available during school, but are easily created at home, we expected that actors would recall making theatre for themselves as children. Katharine Hepburn, Lawrence Olivier, Ingrid Bergman, Spencer Tracy, Jack Nicholson, and Marlon Brando all began creating their own performances very early. Hepburn (1991) wrote

I also had a little theatre, which I had made out of a wooden box...I’d make up the stories. I also had a curtain, which I could open and close. I would give shows to my brothers Dick and Bob. They seemed to like it. (p. 50)

Bergman reported “I used to dress up...and my father helped me to put funny hats on, a pipe in my mouth, glasses, that sort of thing” (Bergman & Burgess, 1980, p. 17). She would then create original plays for the amusement of her father. Spencer Tracy “liked to put on penny-admission plays in the basement”

(Swindell, 1969, p. 7), and Jack Nicholson recalled watching Westerns at the movies, and then acting out the gun fights with his friends in the woods (McGuilligan, 1994).

To discover the amount of theater our actors had created for themselves as children, as well as how early interest in theatre emerged, we asked the following questions: (a) "When did you first start acting?" (b) "Did you role play and pretend play a lot?" (c) "Did you like to dress up in costumes?" (d) "Were you asked to perform for parents/friend, or did you do this spontaneously, or not at all? If so, did you enjoy having an audience?" and (e) "Did you make up your own songs? Plays? Stories? Puppet shows?"

Creating Theater Results

Before they were in formal acting lessons, the actors showed an early inclination for performance and pretend play. Although almost all typically developing children engage in pretend play (Harris, 2000), the actors took this play one step further. Eight actors report engaging in a lot of pretend and role play as children, compared to six lawyers. One actor reports "acting out every part in the musical comedy albums my parents had in our living room." Another actor remembered she "loved the mirror. I would act in front of it, dance, etc. I would put two mirrors together and pretend I was the Rockettes."

Seven actors reported that their pretend play often involved an element of costumes and dress up, but only one lawyer reports the same. One actor reported that

I would put on all of [her Grandmother's] costume jewelry and tie a blanket around my neck (age 4 or 5) and parade down her long halls, my younger brother dutifully holding my train...and then I would sit my royal-ness down in the throne and my little brother would interview me with a tape recorder, as the queen.

The same actor reports that dressing up in costume is "still the best part!"

In addition to what one might consider typical childhood pretend and role playing, nine of the actors report spontaneous performances put on for their families, with only three lawyers reporting the same. These were well thought out, elaborate affairs. One actor reports "When I was five...I used to produce shows in my backyard and in the neighborhood." Another reports "[I] acted [movies] out for my parents, with my brother." In addition, nine actors report being asked to perform by their parents, but only four lawyers report the same. Of those lawyers who were asked to perform, one recalls "not liking it at all." Both within and outside of the context of performing, nine actors report creating

their own songs, plays, stories, and puppet shows for themselves, with four lawyers reporting the same.

Parental Opposition

Parents do not encourage acting as a career choice, given there is no money or stability in it for the majority of professional actors (Kogan & Kangas, 2006). It is estimated that less than 1% of trained actors are making their full time living in acting at any one point in time (Noice & Noice, 1997). It is thus understandable that families do not encourage their children to go into acting. Reports from the biographies of actors suggest that actors must often go against their parents' will to become actors. Jack Nicholson and Spencer Tracy both report discouragement from their families when they decided to become actors (McGuilligan, 1994; Swindell, 1969). Katharine Hepburn's father needed convincing at first, as he "had been disgusted and heartsick over the fact that I wanted to act" (Hepburn, 1991, p. 81). However, interest in the arts comes from somewhere, so we expected that our actor group would have had parental interest in the arts, even though the parents may not have supported going into the arts as a career.

In contrast, we expected our academically talented group to be encouraged to follow their chosen academic path. Both mathematicians and neuroscientists studied by Bloom (1985) and his colleagues reported growing up in households with warm, loving, and conscientious parents, who encouraged them to follow their interests and work hard in school (Gustin, 1985); research neurologists recalled parents who were encouraging about their work and who helped them develop a strong work ethic (Sosniak, 1985). In order to probe parental encouragement or discouragement, as well as familial involvement with the arts, we asked the following questions: (a) "Did your parents encourage you to pursue acting professionally?" (b) "Did anyone discourage you?" and (c) "How much of a priority were the arts in your household?"

Parental Opposition Results

Seven actors reported that the arts held a "large or somewhat large" importance in their household, yet only one lawyer reported the same. However, although the arts may have held a large importance, only two actors reported encouragement from their parents in pursuing their acting career, and six reported active discouragement from pursuing acting as a career. For lawyers, although four were actively encouraged to go into the law and three were discouraged, all of the lawyers were encouraged to follow their own academic and career path, and were allowed to make whatever academic choices they wished to make.

DISCUSSION

In many ways, future actors present a very different profile from that of future academic stars who become scientists or lawyers. Perhaps the two most distinctive features of the profile of future actors is their attraction to fiction and the world of imagination and their emotionality. These proclivities are clearly related to the skills required to act—one must be able to enter readily into pretend worlds, and one must be able to feel emotions strongly. Nemiro (1997) reported the importance of emotion understanding in her exploration of actors' creative processes. These kinds of tendencies would serve to set future actors apart, and thus it is not surprising that they felt alienated from others as children. Most adults do not choose the life of an actor: it takes a very atypical person to choose such a life, and already in childhood these future actors felt atypical.

Cognitive skills related to acting also distinguish actors at an early age: they show an ability to mimic others, and an ability to memorize verbal texts, an activity they engage in for recreation. Finally, actors begin creating theater at a very young age. Although their parents take pleasure in their childhood theater antics, they actively discourage their young adult offspring from a career of acting. Actors persevere and choose their careers despite often strong parental opposition.

It is not surprising that the lawyers felt encouraged in their academic pursuits, even if they were not encouraged specifically to be lawyers, but the actors felt actively discouraged. Academically talented youth report receiving encouragement from parents (Gustin, 1985). However, theatre and film are notoriously difficult to break in to and make a living. What is interesting is that these actors persisted against this discouragement and decided to continue on this difficult career path. However, it should also be noted that although families may not have encouraged their children to go into the arts, the arts did hold a place of importance in the household for the actors, more so than for the lawyers. Kogan and Kangas (2006) reported that their actors came from homes with moderate interest in amateur arts, but that they were still discouraged from professional arts engagement. Our results support these findings.

Our actors and lawyers recalled very different kinds of childhoods and kinds of families. We recognize the limitations of the retrospective interview method. However, such an approach is a first step towards uncovering the early signs of acting talent. The next step would be to identify and follow actual child actors as they develop.

Despite lack of parental support, our actors recalled coping with boredom in school and coping with feeling

different from others by performing. We suggest here that an early affinity for fictional worlds and for the alternative world of others' minds, combined with emotionality, and the ability to imitate and to memorize, lays the groundwork for later professional performance. Children who go on to become actors as adults show many of the seeds of acting ability. Perhaps the most important of these seeds is an attraction to imaginary, fictional worlds. This may set the stage for the later performance of fictional worlds for the enjoyment and edification of others.

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