

PERSONALITY TRAITS OF BRITISH ACTORS

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Abstract: *We live in a society where the entertainment industry has gained a major significance. Actors are an important part of the society, especially because of the characters they impersonate, which tend to become role-models for young men and women around the world. The purpose of the study is to investigate some personality traits of twenty-two British actors. They were investigated with two questionnaires, which measure extraversion, neuroticism, rigidity and emotional empathy maturity. Comparisons based on gender have been made. The results indicate that actresses are more emotionally mature and more neurotic than actors, whereas male actors are more extravert than actresses. We obtained no significant difference for rigidity. The results are discussed with reference to the demands and rewards of acting.*

Key words: *actors, personality traits, extraversion, emotional maturity, neuroticism.*

1. Introduction

Actors receive a great deal of interest nowadays. Performing arts are a field towards which more and more youth turns to. Actors are an increasingly large social group that exceed a great deal of “power” over the audiences. Many teenagers look out for actors as their role-models. The online journal *The Telegraph* published in 2009 an article suggesting that one in four adolescents are influenced by celebrities more than by the people they know.

Actors been studied over the years by many psychologists (Nettle, 2006; Kogan, 2002; Phillips, 1991; Drake, 2009; Nowakowska, Strong, Santosa, Wang & Ketter, 2005; Chyatte, 1949; Caprara, Babaranelli, Consiglio, Picconi & Zimbardo, 2003; Catron, 2017; Vulova, 1996). Whether the subjects of the research were professional actors or students interested in the acting career, terms like “emotional adjustment”, “neuroticism”, “communication”, “agreeableness” or “extraversion” were common to all authors.

The term “maturity” usually means the stage where the growth is completed. Nevertheless, maturity is an expression also used in psychology and it designates that phase of personality development which corresponds to biological and psychological

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maturation (Alexander, 1948). Alexander states that emotional maturity can be expressed in beliefs, traits and behaviours, such as: overcoming insecurity, having emotional growth and self-confident attitudes, not being centred around the self, having a productive and creative work, showing generosity, being in the position to both receive and offer, spending personal energies for the sake of others, being altruistic and responsible, being able to deal with problems, requiring occasional help and advice from others.

In time, several definitions were given to empathy. Gîrlaşu-Dimitriu (2004) emphasises some of them, including: 1) taking over someone's role; 2) listening with "the third ear"; 3) emotional knowledge; 4) imaginative entrance into someone else's interior life; an effort to view and experience things from another person's perspective; entering someone else's feelings and experiences; taking over someone else's perspective.

So, empathy is a person's capacity to place itself in another's position, to experience things by placing itself in another's frame of reference. Generally, empathy is relevant for acting and represents the actor's ability to comprehend and interpret a character, to understand his emotions, thoughts, behaviours, values or goals. The actor becomes a character. While acting, he doesn't express himself, but he plays in an artificial context, in a fiction where audiences also participate. The personality of the character isn't mobile, the role and its coordinates are well determined (Pocan, 2014).

Extraversion refers to the extent of which people are sociable and outgoing, whether they enjoy being with others, whether they are enthusiastic, action-oriented and exuberant, whether they seek risky situations and excitement or they express their emotions clearly (McCabe & Fleeson, 2012).

Extraversion refers to the organization of the personality in the following directions: the predominant orientation towards the exterior, the capacity of attachment to objects and people, the open attitude towards communication, the adaptability to the environment. An extravert person has positive emotions, assertiveness, sociability, the tendency to seek stimulation in the company of others and talkativeness.

Extraversion is a psychological trait that's very useful in jobs requiring a great deal of interaction with other people. Acting itself seems like it must be an extroverted pursuit. Actors are constantly on display. Furthermore, any actor must audition on a regular basis to get work. In England, actors do not sign contracts with a single theatre, but they are hired for some specific roles and plays. So, it may be possible for an actor to go to auditions many times a week. During these auditions, actors are constantly exposed to large groups of people, who are also auditioning for the same job. Extraversion helps in social relationships. A study conducted by Argyle and Lu (1990) found that extraverts enjoy and participate more in social activities and this correlates with happiness.

Several other studies, based on Big-Five Model, show that, generally, women score higher than men in overall extraversion. However, it's important to take into consideration the fact that Extraversion has several facets. Women score higher at Enthusiasm, Warmth (intimacy and closeness in social relations), Gregariousness (the preference for other's companionship) and Positive Emotions (the ability to feel positive emotions like joy, happiness, love, and excitement), while men score higher than women in Assertiveness (which reflects traits like agency and dominance) and

Excitement Seeking (Weisberg, DeYoung, & Hirsch, 2011). Furthermore, males were not only found to be more assertive, but had slightly higher self-esteem than females (Feingold, 1994).

Another important dimension of the study was neuroticism which can be expressed by tendencies toward depression, shyness, doubt, anxiety, emotional instability, guilt, mood disorders or loneliness. Being such a broad personality trait, neuroticism is related to the degree to which a person experiences the world as distressing, threatening or unsafe. In these terms, neurotic people tend to feel general discomfort in quite a wide range of situations of everyday life.

Neuroticism emphasises great nervous, mental and physical activity in stressful situations, irritability, fluctuating mood and fatigue. Costa, Terracciano and McCrae (2001) argue that women reported themselves to be higher in Neuroticism than men, having higher levels of anxiety, depression, self-consciousness and vulnerability. Another study conducted by McLean and Anderson (2009) examines evidence for gender differences across a broad range of relevant factors (biological, temperamental, cognitive, environmental, stress and trauma) that indicate why women report greater fear and are more likely to develop anxiety disorders than men. Furthermore, a study conducted by Murray and Tracy (1935) shows that mature actors are above average in neurotic tendency.

The last variable we were interested in was rigidity, which refers to the refusal to appreciate a different point of view than the personal one. Emotionally, rigid people show lack of empathy (Jeffrey, 2016). On the other hand, rigidity can also be defined as the perseverance in one's habits, attitudes, beliefs and concepts. Furthermore, a rigid person has some mental sets that are constructed based on prior experiences, from which the person never turns.

2. Objectives and Hypotheses

The main objective of our study was to emphasize the existence of significant differences between male and female actors, regarding the four personality dimensions: empathy, extraversion, neuroticism and rigidity.

We issued four hypotheses, as follows: (1) We presume there are significant differences between male and female actors regarding empathic development; (2) We presume there are significant differences between male and female actors regarding extraversion; (3) We presume there are significant differences between male and female actors regarding neuroticism; (4) We presume there are significant differences between male and female actors regarding rigidity.

3. Sample and Method

Using the Questionnaire for Emotional Empathy (QMEE, Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972) and the Questionnaire for Extraversion, Neuroticism and Rigidity (E.N.R., Brengelman, 1960). We questioned 22 British actors, who perform on stage, in London's theatres. The sample is made of 15 men and 7 women, aged between 20 and 40 years old.

All 22 participants were asked to sign an informed consent for participating in this research. Data analyses were conducted in SPSS 13, using Mann-Whitney U test for independent samples.

4. Findings and Results

4.1. Hypothesis 1

We presume there are significant differences between male and female actors regarding empathic development. We used the protocols of QMEE. When computing tests for normality of distribution, we obtained -.008 (Skewness) and -.91 (Kurtosis) indicators, which lead us to use Mann-Whitney U Test for independent samples. We used a grouping variable as follows: 1 – female group, 7 subjects; 2 – male group, 15 subjects (Mean rank for group 1 = 15.57, mean rank for group 2 = 9.60). Mann-Whitney U = 24.00 was significant for $p = .04$. The results show that actresses are more empathic than actors.

For actors it's important to understand other people and to empathize with the character specifically assigned to them. The source material for this odyssey is the script, which provides a sketch of who the character is, a road map of where he's going in the course of his story. Memorising the dialogues is not enough, it's only a part of acting. The rest, the actor must fill in with his own inputs. These inputs come from understanding what makes a character unique, what drives him to do what he does and what his emotions in particular situations are. The actor's job is to lend his emotions to his character, to make him truly come alive.

A lot of research, emphasised by Lennon & Eisenberg (1987), has shown that generally, women are more empathetic than men (Parsons & Bales, 1955; Greif, Alvarez & Ullman, 1981; Dunn, Bretherton & Munn, 1987; Toussaint & Webb, 2005). These studies argue that even from infancy, mothers speak to their little girls about feelings; they train them to keep the balance of emotions and play a caring role in their families, while boys are trained, stereotypically, in the directions of actions and decisions. Women are more in tune with the psychological state of the companions. In this context, the confirmation of our first hypothesis becomes clear.

4.2. Hypothesis 2

We presume there are significant differences between male and female actors regarding extraversion. We obtained -.23 (Skewness) and -1.04 (Kurtosis) and using the same grouping variable we applied Mann-Whitney U test (mean rank for group 1 = 5.79, mean rank for group 2 = 14.17, U test = 12.50), significant for $p = .005$. The hypothesis was confirmed and the results show that male actors were more extravert than actresses.

Some studies found that actors are high on extraversion, compared with regular people (Hammond & Edelmann, cit. in Nettle, 2005). This fact was explained by Hill & Yousey (cit. in Nettle, 2005, p. 376) by the relation between "their orientation towards social attention and reward".

We believe that the explanation for these results is the fact that extravert men usually choose performance careers more than women. First of all, high extraversion in men as

actors may be related to their orientation towards social attention and reward (Hill & Yousey, 1998, cit. in. Nettle, 2006). Second, studies have argued that there are differences between men and women regarding their expectations to success, meaning that status characteristics, including gender, affect how people evaluate their own performance in a variety of tasks (Berger et al., 1980, Ridgeway et al., 1985, cit. in Barbulescu & Bidwell, 2012). Furthermore, those beliefs can affect career-related decisions. Due to sociocultural impact, men are expected to choose a suitable career set, assuming the earner's role in their family (Kushwaha & Hasan, 2005). In third place, extraverted people report higher job satisfaction (Judge, Heller, & Mount, 2002) and are less affected by distracting factors or stimuli (Eysenck & Graydon, 1989) than introverted people. This also relates with the fact that women tend to choose careers that do not affect their family life or the upbringing of their children, thus trying to balance work and family responsibilities (Beauregard, 2007).

4.3. Hypothesis 3

We presume there are significant differences between male and female actors regarding neuroticism. We obtained .71 (Skewness) and -.11 (Kurtosis). Mean rank for group 1 = 16.50, mean rank for group 2 = 9.17, Mann Whitney U test = 17.50, significant for $p = .01$. The hypothesis was confirmed and results show that actresses were more neurotic than male actors.

Acting is a career that demands extraordinary emotional openness, while inevitably involving a steady stream of possible rejections, occasionally interspersed with short-lived success. This instability could make actors more vulnerable to emotional problems (as many high-profile Hollywood breakdowns would suggest).

4.4. Hypothesis 4

We presume there are significant differences between male and female actors regarding rigidity. We obtained -.26 (Skewness) and -1.35 (Kurtosis). Using the same grouping variable as before, we obtained mean rank for group 1 = 11.50, mean rank for group 2 = 11.50, Mann-Whitney U = 52.50, $p = 1.00$. The hypothesis wasn't confirmed, furthermore, there was equality between the two groups.

As we argued before, rigidity refers to the way life principles are internalised. But a career in acting requires the transformation of different structures by thinking about them and acting on them in new ways (Jackson & Sorensen, 2006). We argued that a rigid person is not usually adaptive and enjoys stability and little fluctuations, but this field of work is actually all about fluctuations, adaptation, impersonation of different characters and bringing them to life. So, actors are, in fact, adaptable people, creative, imaginative, in search of new challenges. We can therefore conclude that this is far from being a personality trait dominant in an actor.

5. Conclusions

The objective of our research was to emphasize the existence of significant differences between male and female actors, regarding the four personality dimensions: empathy,

extraversion, neuroticism and rigidity. Our study highlighted that there are such differences. Male actors are more extravert than actresses, while female are more neurotic and empathetic. No significant differences were noted regarding rigidity.

Acting involves a large range of skills. Among these skills, imagination, emotional facility, physical expressivity, communication skills, improvisation or emulation are really important. That's why we considered of real interest to establish some typical personality traits of actors.

Actors are in charge of creating a character from the words on a page. They understand what others are thinking, desiring, feeling and believing. They use empathy in response to someone else's emotion. They must use their emotion regulation skills. Although every actor comes to the job with his personal emotions, he then has to figure a way to control them and replace them with the emotions that are correct for the job.

In the end, acting it's not just following what the script or the director says. Actors use a set of complex psychological skills to create realistic portrayals of character that we, as a society, value highly.

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