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Tamara C. Peters
Loyola College

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The Relationships Between Acting Experience, Self-Esteem, and Self-Monitoring

This study is an investigation of whether relationships exist to link acting experience with self-esteem and/or self-monitoring. Participants included 30 undergraduate students with acting experience and 30 without acting experience. The participants completed the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale and the Self-Monitoring Scale. Individuals with acting experience were expected to indicate having a higher self-esteem than those without such experience. However, no significant relationship between self-esteem and acting experience was found. It was also hypothesized that students who had experience in acting would score higher on the Self-Monitoring Scale than students who had not. A significant positive relationship did exist between acting and self-monitoring.

It takes a certain kind of person to willingly and eagerly get up on stage in front of countless friends and strangers. These people pretend they are someone else, display hidden parts of their personalities, and simply make fools of themselves. Actors distinguish themselves in their willingness and capability to portray a vast array of characteristics and emotions in front of an audience. Perhaps some underlying facets of personality account for this desire and ability to act. One factor that might play into acting is self-esteem. Self-monitoring might also be related to the behavior of actors.

In their effort to learn about the personality of actors, Fisher and Fisher (1981) did a comprehensive study of students, half of whom were performers. They found performing students to be extraverted, focusing on and interacting more with the outside world, people, and things. Hammond and Edelmann (1991) had similar results, finding that professional actors are more extraverted and sociable than non-actors are. Marchant-Haycox and Wilson (1992) went further and studied the differences between actors and other performing artists, including singers, dancers, and musicians, as well as a control group of non-performers. Their results also indicated that actors are more extraverted than the other performing artists are, and significantly more so than the control group.

Assuming then that extraversion is a key trait of actors, it can be used as a link to the areas of interest in the present study. For instance, Francis and James (1996) studied the relationship between extraversion and self-esteem with secondary students in England. They used the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) to measure the extent of the students’ self worth and found that good self-esteem was significantly associated with extraversion. In additional studies by Francis (1997), as well as Amirkhan, Risinger, and Swickert (1995), significant positive correlations between self-esteem and extraversion were also found using the alternative Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory (Coopersmith, 1981) with undergraduate students.
Self-monitoring, the use of one's ability to tailor self presentation and expression based on social cues, should have a relationship with acting since it was accounted for in the making of the Self-Monitoring Scale (Snyder, 1974). In fact, Lennox and Wolfe (1984) criticize the Self-Monitoring Scale for Snyder's assumption that acting ability in the theatrical-entertainment sense is similar to the way people modify their self-presentation in everyday life.

There is evidence that acting is associated with self-monitoring. Caldwell and O'Reilly (1985), using undergraduate business students, discovered that the extraversion and acting subscales of the Self-Monitoring Scale are significantly correlated. Once again, acting is linked with extraversion. The link may then continue from extraversion to self-monitoring. Extraversion, measured independently in a study of mostly British women, did have a significant positive correlation with self-monitoring (Furnham, 1989).

An additional link between self-monitoring and acting is social skills. Banks and Kenner (1997) studied 30 semi-professional actors, 30 undergraduate drama students, and 30 non-actors. Although they found no significant differences in extraversion or self-esteem between the groups, they did find that semi-professional actors tended to be more socially skilled. There was a strong correlation between the number of productions actors participated in and their level of social skill. In another study, Anderson (1987) compared social skills and self-monitoring of undergraduates in New Zealand and the United States. Social skills had a significant positive relationship with self-monitoring in both countries and with both sexes. This link supports Snyder's findings (1974) that stage actors do score significantly higher than non-actors on self-monitoring.

In the previously mentioned study by Hammond and Edelmann (1991), questionnaires, including the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) and The Revised Self-Monitoring Scale (Lennox & Wolfe, 1984), were given to three groups. Participants included professional actors, amateur actors, and non-actors. The results for self-esteem were not significant, with all of the groups scoring relatively high. However, both actor groups scored significantly higher than the non-actors did on self-monitoring.

Participants in the present study were simply undergraduate students with acting experience. This would account for those who have had interest in and are capable of acting, even if they do not intend to pursue it in any form. In the previously mentioned studies the positive correlations between acting and extraversion, as well as the positive relationships of extraversion with self-esteem and with self-monitoring, suggest the possibility that acting experience would have significant relationships with self-esteem, and self-monitoring.

Therefore, the first hypothesis in this study was that participants with acting experience would indicate having a higher self-esteem than students who have no acting experience. The second hypothesis was that individuals with acting experience would score higher on self-monitoring than those without acting experience.

**METHOD**

**Participants**

Participants included 60 undergraduate students from a medium sized liberal arts college on the East Coast. Of these participants, 30 had acting experience and 30 did not. The ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 22 years. Students included 28 female participants and 32 male participants.

**Materials**

**Demographic Sheet.**

This questionnaire included questions on age, gender, and whether the participants had experience acting in two or more plays during or later than high school. In order to conceal the purpose of the study, there were also questions about experience playing on sports teams, writing or editing for a newspaper, being an officer of clubs, and working part time.

**The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale** (Rosenberg, 1965).

This scale measures the extent to which an individual values and feels content with himself. It includes ten statements concerning
how one feels about and views himself. There are four Likert-type answering options, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree for each statement. The scores range from 10 to 40, with 40 indicating a high self-esteem. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale has a reliability of .73.

The Self-Monitoring Scale (Snyder & Gangestad, 1986).

This questionnaire measures the extent to which a person uses social cues to continually adjust self-presentation, instead of simply expressing one's true feelings. There are 18 statements dealing with how a person views himself in social situations, in his ability to act incongruently with what he believes, and in his overall acting ability. Participants answer either true or false for each statement. The largest score possible is 18 and that would indicate high self-monitoring. This scale has a Kuder-Richardson 20 reliability score of .70, a test-retest reliability of .83, and validity of .70.

Procedure

Participants in introductory theatre classes and in the current theatrical productions were given an informed consent form and the three questionnaires to fill out. This was done voluntarily, and data were collected anonymously.

RESULTS

The first hypothesis, that participants with acting experience would indicate having a higher self-esteem than individuals who have no acting experience, was tested using a two-tailed independent samples t-test. No significant difference in self-esteem levels was found between the two groups, t (58) = 1.09, p > .05. Students with acting experience had a mean self-esteem score of 32.57 (SD = 5.06), while the mean self-esteem score for participants without acting experience was 33.97 (SD = 4.87).

A significant positive relationship did exist between self-monitoring scores and acting experience. This was determined using an independent samples t-test, t (58) = 2.87, p < .05. The group of participants who had acting experience showed a mean self-monitoring score of 12.77 (SD = 3.36), while the mean self-monitoring score was only 10.33 (SD = 3.21) for students who had no experience acting. The effect size for this relationship was r² = .12.

DISCUSSION

Even though self-esteem was not significantly related to acting experience as hypothesized, it is consistent with the findings of Hammond and Edelmann (1991) and Banks and Kenner (1997). Although not statistically significant, it is interesting that the non-actors in the present study actually had slightly higher self-esteem than the students with acting experience. Since all scores indicated a high self-esteem, the sampled college population seems to have an overall high sense of self-worth and satisfaction.

As predicted, there was a positive relationship between acting experience and self-monitoring. Students who act have the skills to pick up on cues from others on stage and to react in ways inconsistent with how they are truly feeling. The results of this study indicate that they do the same off-stage.

Perhaps actors are inherently high self-monitors who simply transfer their natural skills to the stage. The other possibility is that having acting experience forces one to develop certain skills to continuously adjust one’s self-presentation. When he is on stage, a performer focuses entirely on presentation and the audience’s perception. As one becomes experienced at using this self-monitoring on stage, it may become more natural to generalize the behavior to life.

A possible longitudinal study might follow children’s self-monitoring in relation to acting experience to see which develops or occurs first. Children with higher self-monitoring might tend to participate in acting, or those who gain acting experience might improve in self-monitoring as they develop acting skills.

However, it might be irrelevant to do further studies on self-monitoring and acting if the criticisms of Lennox and Wolfe (1984) are valid. They asserted that Snyder’s Self-Monitoring Scale already assumes self-monitoring to be of a theatrical nature. Some of the true-false statements on the survey include, "I would probably make a good actor", "I have considered being an entertainer", and "I find it hard to imitate the behavior of other people" (Snyder &
Gangestad, 1986). With statements like these, it is not entirely surprising that people who have ever been involved in acting would score higher on this survey, regardless of their level of self-monitoring off-stage.

Another weak point in the present study was the lack of a test for extraversion. With so much of the hypotheses relying on the assumption that actors are extraverted, this specific population should have been checked. It is entirely possible that these students who act are not significantly extraverted. As a matter of general and informal observation made by the researcher, the majority of students who act are introverted.

Similarly, based on purely unempirical observations and implications, the researcher believes that students who engage in acting actually have a lower self-esteem than the average population. Though it might be assumed that people must feel good about themselves to be comfortable in front of an audience, it is not always the case. It is frequently students who feel that something is missing in their lives or that they are somehow inadequate that are drawn to the theatre. Acting offers an opportunity to be someone else for awhile. It also temporarily provides a tightly bonded social network, attention, and feedback, all of which serve as short boosts to the esteem. Actors tend to be super-sensitive to the slightest hint of criticism. Whether they get the part they want in an audition can make or break how they feel about themselves for months. It appears to the researcher that students who act are often seeking outside sources to give them self-worth, because they do not otherwise value themselves.

The lack of a significant relationship between acting and self-esteem one way or another in the two-tailed t-test might be due to the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. Although it is widely used, the self-report scale has questionable validity. This is partly due to the high amount of face-validity in the self-report. Because the survey is very direct and obvious, there is a tendency for participants to mark answers appropriate with a higher self-esteem. We know in our culture that it is better to feel good about oneself, so the tendency would be to agree with such statements. But in self-analysis, what one cognitively admits and what is actually true may be entirely different. This survey seems to over-simplify the complexity of self-esteem.

This research could be improved with better operational measures of each of the constructs. However, based on the sources currently available to the researcher, it can only be assumed that one of the personality traits that sets an actor apart is a high level of ability to self-monitor. Self-monitoring is probably not what accounts for a student’s desire to act, but the transference of this skill either to or from the stage is most likely related to the person’s ability to act.

REFERENCES


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