

Exploring psychological wellbeing in a sample of Australian actors



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Background

Psychological wellbeing has been defined as positive functioning (Ryff, 2014), i.e: **autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relationships, purpose in life and self-acceptance**. Wellbeing is also influenced by **mental health disorders**, as classified by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V)(American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Literature on the wellbeing of performing artists is limited, focusing on small pockets of research with musicians and dancers. Actors are under-represented, with a few small studies suggesting actors may be over-exposed to criticism, have higher levels of unresolved trauma, experience both satisfaction and uncertainty and may be subject to multiple sources of stress. Narrative evidence suggests actors may be resilient but vulnerable to depression, may misuse substances, feel extreme pressure to perform and be unlikely to seek help.

Aim

The aim was to explore what factors might impact the psychological wellbeing of adult, Australian professional actors.

Method

- South Australian professional actors were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling.
- Ten were male and 10 female, ranging in age from 22 to 66 years old, with self-reported professional experience ranging from 1 to 50 years ($M=16.05$, $SD=13.34$).
- The participants were interviewed in-depth about their experiences of being an actor, with a particular focus on psychological wellbeing.
- The data were analyzed using thematic analysis.
- Multiple checks of methodological rigor were carried out, including independent analysis by a second researcher.

Results

“They live a physical manifestation of the description of psychological un-wellness, I would suggest...inward-looking, reflective, disempowered, emotionally vulnerable...”

Greg (a participant)

Two categories of themes were established: **environmental** factors and **personal** factors. Within these, individual themes were described as having either **positive** or **negative** impacts on wellbeing or as **complex** experiences with aspects of both.

Environmental Factors:

- Power (negative)
- Lifestyle (negative)
- Fringe-Dwelling (complex)
- Engagement (positive)
- The Loving Family (complex)
- Taking Care of Yourself (complex)

Personal Factors:

- Pursuit (negative)
- Strengths (positive)
- Vocation (complex)
- Vulnerability (negative)
- Thoughtfulness (complex)

Overall, factors that **negatively** impacted actors' psychological wellbeing were helplessness resulting from being disempowered, a lifestyle of financial instability as well as insecurity of employment and alcohol misuse, high levels of perfectionism and burnout and traumatic experiences during rehearsal and performance.

Positive factors were high levels of engagement and personal growth, along with personal strengths of curiosity, empathy and flexibility.

The actors reported **complex** experiences having both positive and negative aspects, including:

- a sense of being special coupled with feeling de-valued,
- having a loving community coupled with transient social connections and competition,
- a lack of stigma around mental health coupled with fear about revealing difficulties,
- a powerful passion for their vocation coupled with feeling trapped and having a narrow identity,
- a high level of self-awareness coupled with self-criticism and an anxious imagination.

Discussion

Actors' experiences corresponded with wellbeing indicators: they showed **autonomy** via strong commitment to their careers in the face of criticism, difficulties with **environmental mastery** due to powerlessness, many experiences of **personal growth, positive relationships** complicated by transience, a strong **sense of purpose** complicated by identity disturbance when not working, and difficulties with **self-acceptance** as shown by high self-criticism.

The data also suggested actors may be vulnerable to certain **mental health disorders**, such as depression, generalized anxiety disorder, vicarious trauma and substance abuse. Actors also seemed to struggle alone and feel undeserving of help, as well being perfectionistic; making help-seeking less likely.

Conclusion

Multiple factors were found to both positively and negatively impact actors' psychological wellbeing, both in terms of Ryff's indicators of positive functioning and the DSM-V taxonomy of mental illness.

Actors may require specialist assessment and interventions due to co-occurrence of factors such as: transient social connections, a culture of self-management, repeated exposure to traumatic content, identity problems, powerlessness, self-criticism and alcohol use.

Future Prospects

More effort is needed to uncover the personal and environmental stressors facing actors, along with their strengths and the protective factors of the work.

The assessment of actors for specific vulnerabilities and strengths could be explored, along with appropriate intervention and support services.