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Motivation to Act: A Critical Evaluation of the Actor-Entrepreneur's "Why" in a Post-COVID-19 Landscape

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Abstract

COVID-19 has had a devastating impact on the global performing arts, particularly for live performance, such as theatre. Graduating actors and musical theatre graduates have faced a scarcity of opportunities to launch their careers, and this is having a negative impact on their motivation and mental health. This article draws upon qualitative research gathered in 2015 with mid-career UK actors to codify the reasons or motivations for pursuing acting as expressed by the research participants. Ten different motivations to act were identified. Using theories of *flow* and *self-actualization*, this research evaluates the stated motivations to assess which might be sustainable in light of COVID-19 constraints on acting production and which motivations might contribute towards negative mental health. This is positioned for the arts entrepreneurship educator as a classroom exercise to help students articulate their motivations and as a way to open dialogue about personal resilience, mental health and structural inequality within the performing arts. The aim is to help position graduates more strongly towards sustainable career paths.

Introduction

As a researcher and teacher of arts entrepreneurship skills in Creative Higher Education (HE) in the UK, I am used to balancing knowledge of a highly precarious and volatile UK creative and cultural industries (CCI) sector against students' hopes, dreams, and aspirations of a viable career. In 1776, economist Adam Smith observed: "...the contempt of risk and the presumptuous hope of success are in no period of life more active than at the age at which young people choose their professions."¹ Much of my work has been with actors and musical theatre graduates for whom, like most creatives, the motivation to pursue such an uncertain career path is complex. This paper examines ten different motivations that were captured in qualitative interviews with mid-career actors pre-COVID-19 and asks: as an arts entrepreneurship skills educator, which motivations should be encouraged in students as we move forward into an uncertain post-COVID-19 professional terrain and which are not serving the actor-entrepreneur well, or may even be contributing towards poor mental health? Research conducted since COVID-19 began shows how the pandemic has opened up pre-existing fissures in the

¹ Adam Smith, "Wealth of Nations, Book 1: Chapter X," <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/smith-adam/works/wealth-of-nations/book01/ch10a.htm>.

CCIs and has led to discussion of the recovery from the pandemic as an opportunity to build a more equitable and sustainable CCI landscape.² In this way, I consider the thoughts and motivations of actors pre-COVID-19 and question which ones support a more sustainable career and positive mental health and which do not. I view the pursuit of a freelance acting career as a pathway of arts entrepreneurship in that the actor accepts risk in the hope of achieving creative objectives and utilizes a skillset of an entrepreneur to (1) understand a market, (2) position themselves within that market and (3) search out opportunities where they can fill a need by providing (acting) services.³ However, we know this is a precarious path, and therefore, like all entrepreneurial ventures, it needs to be undertaken on a firm foundation, including a solid and sustainable motivation for pursuing the path in the first place that will support, rather than undermine, the actor's efforts.

Many actors' commitment to pursuing acting, against overwhelming odds and with low reward, runs counter to the financial logic of *homo economicus* as a rational profit maximizer – a “self-seeking individual” – in that they appear to pursue a career path that brings few financial rewards, countering the neoclassical economics view that producers aim to maximize profit.⁴ Yet, paradoxically, it is largely viewed as a glamorous industry that many young people wish to enter, evident in the proliferation of training courses over the last twenty years. This is commonly understood and a trait shared with many other sectors within the CCIs.⁵

In this paper, I will consider how actors describe finding the psychological qualities of *flow* and *self-actualization* through their acting. Additionally, I will also consider the various motivations that actors identify for why they pursue acting. By doing so, I aim to identify positive motivations to encourage young emerging creatives while also identifying negative motivations, or motivations that are less helpful towards developing a sustainable acting career.⁶ With the future of live performance uncertain for the foreseeable future, Creative HE has a duty to prepare graduates for what may be a slow or delayed launch into the profession, making the need for positive and sustainable motivations critical for actors' persevering through challenging times ahead.

Literature

The motivations for being an actor expressed herein must be understood in the context that even pre-COVID-19 acting was a precarious field. Some data will establish this. The UK performers' union Equity (UK)'s 2013 survey ($n = 3,804$) found that 37.7% of respondents earned less than £5,000 from acting in the previous year, while 11.2% earned nothing (a combined 48.9% of membership earned less than £5,000 from performance).⁷ Equally, 45.4% of respondents worked fewer than ten weeks of the

² Roberta Comunian and Lauren England, "Creative and Cultural Work Without Filters: Covid-19 and Exposed Precarity in the Creative Economy," *Cultural Trends* 29, no. 2 (2020): 112-128, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09548963.2020.1770577>.

³ Jerry Gustafson, "Teaching Entrepreneurship by Conservatory Methods," in *Disciplining the Arts: Teaching Entrepreneurship in Context*, ed. Gary D. Beckman (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2011), 69-81; Aaron P. Dworkin, *The Entrepreneurial Artist: Lessons from Highly Successful Creatives* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020); Gary D. Beckman, *The New Arts Entrepreneur: Navigating the Arts Ecologies* (London: Sage, 2013).

⁴ Ruth Towse, *A Textbook of Cultural Economics* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 22.

⁵ Nathan Kogan, "Careers in the Performing Arts: A Psychological Perspective," *Communication Research Journal* 14, no. 1 (2002): 1-16, https://doi.org/10.1207/s15326934crj1401_1.

⁶ Abraham Harold Maslow, "A Theory of Human Motivation," *Psychological Review* 50, no. 4 (1943): 370-396, <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0054346>; Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990).

⁷ Equity (UK), "Equity Membership Survey Summary," <http://www.equity.org.uk/documents/2013-equity-membership-survey-summary>.

year as an actor. Similar results can be found in Casting Call Pro and Mandy Actors UK surveys.⁸ There is ample evidence to show that this scarcity of opportunity is not shared equally across the industry, with much of the research specifically into UK actors' careers highlighting gender inequality, class inequality and a lack of diversity.⁹ Even when actors do manage to secure an acting job, there are many reported problems in the work environment, with 58% of female and 52% of male theatre actors reporting direct experience with bullying, harassment or discrimination while at work.¹⁰ Given these factors, it is unsurprising that the Mandy Actors' 2018 survey of actors found that 63% of women and 48% of men struggled with anxiety, 59% of women and 61% of men suffered from stress and 37% of women and 36% of men reported having suffered from depression.¹¹ A 2015 Arts and Minds study ($n = 5,000$ UK actors) found that 20% had actively sought help for mental health issues.¹² These data point to serious structural problems within the industry, including low pay, inequality, harassment and bullying. Even pre-COVID-19, many UK actors were already struggling.

Given all this, it is logical to question why actors would pursue such a precarious pathway. One explanation is that an actor willingly participates in a risky economy lured by the status and rewards of success.¹³ The arts (like sports) continue to be seen as a way for young people to achieve fame and fortune, which is linked to strongly held beliefs that the arts are a meritocracy.¹⁴ Presenting the arts as a *winner takes all* economy encourages many young people to pursue a precarious path in the hopes of being a "winner."¹⁵

⁸ The Stage, "More Than 75% of Actors Earn Less Than £5k Per Year – Survey," <https://www.thestage.co.uk/news/2014/75-actors-earn-less-5k-per-year-survey>; BBC, "Low Pay and High Stress: Survey Lifts Lid on Life as Struggling Performer," <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-46356689>.

⁹ Deborah Dean, "Recruiting a Self: Women Performers and Aesthetic Labour," *Work, Employment and Society* 19, no. 4 (2005): 761-774, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2338.2007.00446.x>; Deborah Dean, "Performing Industrial Relations: The Centrality of Gender in Regulation of Work in Theatre and Television," *Industrial Relations Journal* 38, no. 3 (2007): 252-268, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2338.2007.00446.x>; Keith Randle, Juno Kurian, and Leung Wing-Fai, *Creating Difference: Overcoming Barriers to Diversity in UK Film and Television Employment* (Hatfield: Creative Industries Research and Consultancy Unit, Business School, University of Hertfordshire, 2007).

¹⁰ Federation of Entertainment Unions, "Creating Without Conflict," <http://www.musiciansunion.org.uk/Files/Reports/Campaigns/FEU-Creating-without-Conflict-Survey-Report>.

¹¹ BBC, "Low Pay and High Stress."

¹² The Stage, "Mental Health Issues Affect 20% of Showbiz Professionals, Survey Finds," <https://www.thestage.co.uk/opinion/2015/mental-health-issues-affect-20-showbiz-professionals-survey-finds/>.

¹³ Andrew Ross, *Nice Work If You Can Get It* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

¹⁴ Rosalind Gill, "Unspeakable Inequalities: Post Feminism, Entrepreneurial Subjectivity, and the Repudiation of Sexism Among Cultural Workers," *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society* 21, no. 4 (2014): 509-528, <https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxu016>; Dave O'Brien and Kate Oakley, *Cultural Value and Inequality: A Critical Literature Review* (Swindon: Arts And Humanities Research Council, 2015); Angela McRobbie, *Be Creative: Making a Living in the New Culture Industries* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018); Kate Oakley and Dave O'Brien, "Learning to Labour Unequally: Understanding the Relationship Between Cultural Production, Cultural Consumption and Inequality," *Social Identities* 22, no. 5 (2016): 471-486, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2015.1128800>.

¹⁵ William J. Baumol and William G. Bowen, *Performing Arts- The Economic Dilemma: A Study of Problems Common to Theater, Opera, Music and Dance* (New York: The Twentieth Century Fund, 1966); Richard E. Caves, *Creative Industries: Contracts Between Art and Commerce* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000); Pierre-Michel Menger, "Artistic Labor Markets: Contingent Work, Excess Supply and Occupational Risk Management," in *Handbook of the Economics of Art and Culture vol. 1.*, ed. Victor A. Ginsburgh and David Throsby (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2006), 765-811; Françoise Benhamou, "Artists' Labour Markets," in *A Handbook of Cultural Economics, Second Edition*, ed. Ruth Towse, 53-58. (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2011); David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker, *Creative Labour: Theoretical Synthesis* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011).

This is not to say that extrinsic goals, such as fame, money, or the “adoration of stars” are the only motivators for young people who want to be performers; there is also a strong lure of the promise of self-expression from the arts and a draw to the intrinsic satisfaction of being creative.¹⁶ Amabile et al. and others contributed much to understanding motivation in relation to work, particularly operationalizing what appear to be “labors of love” rather than profit-driven enterprises.¹⁷ Together, they define the major features of motivation as “intrinsic motivation (self-determination, competence, task involvement, curiosity, enjoyment and interest) and extrinsic motivation (concerns with competition, evaluation, recognition, money or other tangible incentives and constraint by others).” One type of motivation does not rule out the other, with the authors observing that “creative artists, for example, may be strongly intrinsically interested in the artistic problem before them and, at the same time, be strongly motivated to win the recognition of their peers and the public.”¹⁸

A decision to go from a pursuit of performance for intrinsic satisfaction to a pursuit of it as a path for employment is often clouded in a lack of understanding of what that pathway entails, as described here by French scholar Jérémy Sinigaglia:

Beliefs in the ideology of the gift and of predestination, in the inevitable consecration of the talented, constitute an *illusio*¹⁹ that is necessary in order to belong in the artistic field. These beliefs are particularly strong when combined with a very low level of knowledge of concrete job realities.²⁰

Therefore, a need to prepare creative graduates as entrepreneurs to succeed in challenging freelance markets pre-COVID-19 has only been exacerbated by the pandemic.²¹

Methodology

The research discussed in this article explores findings of a pilot study undertaken as part of my Ph.D. to examine barriers to sustainability experienced by mid-career UK actors. The purpose of the pilot

¹⁶ Teresa M. Amabile, "Motivation and Creativity: Effects of Motivational Orientation on Creative Writers," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 48, no. 2 (1985): 393-399; Greig De Peuter, "Beyond the Model Worker: Surveying a Creative Precariat," *Culture Unbound* 6, no. 1 (2014): 263-284, <https://doi.org/10.3384/cu.2000.1525.146263>; Jérémy Sinigaglia, "A Consecration That Never Comes: Reduction, Adjustment, and Conversion of Aspirations Among Ordinary Performing Artists," *Biens Symboliques/Symbolic Goods: Revue de Sciences Sociales Sur Les Arts, La Culture Et Les Idées* 1 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.4000/bssg.103>.

¹⁷ Teresa M. Amabile, Karl G. Hill, Beth A. Hennessey, and Elizabeth M. Tighe, "The Work Preference Inventory: Assessing Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivational Orientations," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 66, no. 5 (1994): 950, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.68.4.580>; Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci, "Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development, and Well-Being," *American Psychologist* 55, no. 1 (2000): 68-78, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066x.55.1.68>.

¹⁸ Amabile, Hill, Hennessey, and Tighe, "The Work Preference Inventory," 964.

¹⁹ Illusio here is referring to Pierre Bourdieu's concept. As agents engage in competition in a field, they must recognize that there is value in competing in this particular game. Illusio is a recognition that the game is one that is worth playing, cf. Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action* (Redwood City, Stanford University Press, 1998).

²⁰ Jérémy Sinigaglia, "A Consecration That Never Comes."

²¹ Roberta Comunian, Alessandra Faggian, and Qian Cher Li, "Unrewarded Careers in the Creative Class: The Strange Case of Bohemian Graduates," *Papers in Regional Science* 89, no. 2 (2010): 389-410, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1435-5957.2010.00281.x>; Jennifer C. Lena, "Making It Work: The Education and Employment of Recent Arts Graduates. Annual Report 2014," *Strategic National Arts Alumni Project* (2014); Ruth Bridgstock et al., "Creative Graduate Pathways Within and Beyond the Creative Industries," *Journal of Education and Work* 28, no. 4 (2015): 333-345, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315317786>; Elizabeth Blackwood, Lotte Latukefu, and Mark Seton, "Actor Training in Portfolio Careers: Flourishing in a Creative Career Beyond 'Luck'," *Fusion Journal* 15 (2019): 18-26.

study was to test the following: the research questions found in Appendix A, qualitative interviewing and coding methodologies, assumptions emerging from the literature review and to generate theories that would be tested in a larger and subsequent round of qualitative research (for future publication). This paper examines a noteworthy finding of the pilot study, that of the various motivations expressed by actors for *why* they pursued acting, which in light of the COVID-19 pandemic was considered worth re-exploring and re-contextualizing. This research is *abductive* in that it starts from observation and then aims to develop and provide an explanation for what has been observed while recognizing that other explanations may exist.²² The social world of the speaker is considered, how they construct reality, how they give meaning to their world and crucially how this construction and interpretation of their world is expressed through their language – and in this case, it is the language that the pilot study participants used to *explain* their motivations for commencing and continuing an acting career that was of research interest.²³ This research makes no claims to positivism or an objective “truth” but rather sits squarely in a research paradigm of interpretivism providing an informed and theoretically guided interpretation of findings while also acknowledging that other interpretations may be possible.²⁴ The pilot study and main study were cleared through the ethics clearance process of Goldsmiths, University of London.

My positionality within this research is that I was a professional actor for 25 years and worked in higher education training actors for over a decade. Therefore, my position is that of an *insider researcher* or one who has existing (*a priori*) knowledge of the field they are studying.²⁵ An insider position can be an advantage as it allows for easier rapport with the interviewees and for interview conversations to be deeper due to trust and a shared language; at the same time, there can be a loss of objectivity from closeness to the subject. Allan Hegelund writes that in ethnography, or the study of a group of people or culture, neutrality as a researcher is both impossible and undesirable as “it is exactly the particular, individual point of view, with all of its subjective biases, idiosyncrasies, and distortions, that gives the ethnography its edge, its enlightening effects, its power.”²⁶ Therefore, the findings presented herein are filtered through my own experiences as an actor and educator, and while I provide an interpretation of these findings, there may be other interpretations available as well.

As this was a pilot study for testing and theory generating purposes, it was predetermined that nine would be a suitable sample size – large enough to capture a variety of points of view but not an overwhelming amount of data to analyze. Nine mid-career London-based actors were interviewed between February and June 2015. All were at least ten years into their acting career (mid-career and late-career) and consented to take part in an hour-long semi-structured mixture of face-to-face, telephone and Skype interviews.²⁷ All signed consent forms to participate in the research, and findings were anonymized to protect their identities with their recordings and transcribed interviews stored on a password-protected computer in accordance with granted ethics clearance.

Sampling started with individuals known to the researcher and then a snowball approach was used to source additional actors: a research participant recommends someone else who would be good to speak with, thus gathering participants like a rolling snowball.²⁸ As the research purpose was

²² Patricia Bazeley, *Qualitative Data Analysis: Practical Strategies* (London: Sage, 2013).

²³ Norman Blaikie, *Designing Social Research* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000): 25.

²⁴ David E. Gray, *Doing Research in the Real World* (London: Sage, 2021).

²⁵ Robert Merton, “Insiders and Outsiders: A Chapter in the Sociology of Knowledge,” *American Journal of Sociology* 78, no.1 (1972): 9-47, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-24984-8_19.

²⁶ Allan Hegelund, “Objectivity and Subjectivity in the Ethnographic Method,” *Qualitative Health Research* 15, no. 5 (2005): 660, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732304273933>.

²⁷ Gray, *Doing Research in the Real World*.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

exploratory of the field of UK professional acting, there was an aim to gather diverse opinions and experiences of work across the performing arts sector with experience in stage, film, musical theatre and voice-over captured. For this data gathering, diversity of acting experiences was prioritized over other criteria of diversity, such as demographics.²⁹ A breakdown of the interviewees appears in Appendix B and C. The final sample skews towards women, who in acting are frequently marginalized by the time they reach mid-career.³⁰ It is obvious viewing through 2021 eyes the limitations of the data collection undertaken in 2015, especially in light of much recent literature highlighting various intersections of inequality in acting. This 2015 pilot sampling was driven by a multiplicity of experience across the sector. If repeated today, I would place a greater focus on trying to capture more diverse viewpoints based on race, gender identities, diverse body types and ability/disability in the actors' interviewed. While acknowledging the limitations of this data pool, its strength is in capturing viewpoints of mid-career female actors and their reduced career opportunities.

All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and uploaded into *NVivo* version 11. A "descriptive coding practice" was utilized, whereby sections of text were coded with a word or short phrase describing the main idea of the statement.³¹ Codes were then analyzed, reviewed and filtered. This process of abductive research, starting from observation, found a frequent code for "motivation for acting" from most participants which was deemed worthy of further analysis, eventually leading to this article.

The material examined was viewed through a theoretical framework of two psychological concepts: *flow* and *self-actualization*. "Flow" originates in the theoretical work of Csikszentmihalyi and is an optimal state where mental focus is strong, energy is high and there is a strong sense of involvement and enjoyment in the process of the activity.³² Flow is also described as being "in the zone." Experiencing flow in the workplace leads to a sense of achievement and satisfaction. We will see in the words of actors below many positive feelings associated with the job of acting. To illustrate what this looks like in the research findings, for many actors their first experience of flow came early, for example when the actor mother of one of Participant A's classmates came to lead a drama session with the class:

I was five years old, and she came and did some work to the Nutcracker Suite. We had the music [...] and then we did all sorts of things to it. And absolutely, that was my first sort of experience of it, apart from going to the pantomime. And I thought, 'Yeah, I'd do this. This is nice. I like doing this.' I was really happy. I absolutely loved it.
(Participant A)

The experience of flow is unlike anything else:

When I'm doing the job, I love it. I can't think of anything more exciting, more Technicolor, more engrossing, mentally stimulating, terrifying, so you've got to push through your fear so you feel like you're growing. I truly love it, but I don't get to do it often enough. So, it's that constant thing of, I want to pursue this. I want to keep doing it.
(Participant I)

Here, we see the conflict of being an actor: the appeal of flow and the scarcity of opportunities to experience the phenomenon.

²⁹ Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1990).

³⁰ Dean, "Recruiting a Self: Women Performers and Aesthetic Labour."

³¹ Bazeley, *Qualitative Data Analysis*.

³² Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*.

The concept of self-actualization was introduced by Goldstein who described it as a motive to realize the full potential of the individual; this desire was viewed as the primary individual motivator.³³ For Maslow, self-actualization was the highest order of his widely known Theory of Human Motivation, and it was the drive to achieve self-actualization that motivated the individual to ensure all their other basic human and social needs were met in order to achieve self-actualization—seen as a state of being fully alive and finding meaning in one's life.³⁴ Here are two self-actualization narratives from actors in this study:

...to most of us it is a calling. I mean, you wouldn't go through this unless you really, really wanted to do it. If I could find something else that I wanted to do as much, I would do that. But I haven't found a thing that is as rewarding and that I love as much.
(Participant E)

I think really from a very early age it didn't occur to me that I would do anything else, which was bizarre, really...
(Participant A)

The actors interviewed did not use the words *flow* or *self-actualization* to describe their motivations for pursuing acting, but they did describe the experience and sensations matching the terms; however, as we will see below, flow and self-actualization are not the full picture. There are multiple reasons why actors are motivated to act, which tell a more nuanced story of why they continue to pursue their craft under such challenging circumstances. Below, I present ten categories of actor motivation that were coded in the interviewees' statements to highlight the complicated and intersecting motivations.

Findings

Identity of Being an Actor

For many actors, being an actor is their primary identity, i.e., they identify very strongly with their work. In the first example, Participant B described acting as an irrevocable part of her identity, like being a mother:

I think for me it was motherhood. It's very hard for young actors because you define yourself by what you've played lately or what your jobs are. When I got to be a mother, that's irrevocable [...] And then I realised I am an actor, whether I'm employed or not.
(Participant B)

The ability to see oneself as an actor, whether currently employed or not, appears as a key coping mechanism, allowing actors to persevere through difficult periods without losing this primary identity.

Acting as a Choice

Some actors are confident having actively chosen acting as their path; as Participant A said, "it's not that I can't do anything else. I actually can do lots of other things, but I choose not to on the whole." Other actors described acting as something that they are powerless over. There was a sense that acting chose them, rather than the other way around, while also signaling that this was not always an easy partnership, as explained by Participants I and B:

³³ Kurt Goldstein, *Human Nature in the Light of Psychopathology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1947).

³⁴ Maslow, "A Theory of Human Motivation."

I'm now nearly 20 years on from doing it and probably never will give it up because it's not mine to give up. It's in me. But at the same time, I can't be my former self and have this as the all-encompassing source of all happiness. Because she is—he is—I'm not going to say she, let's make it non-gender specific—a really hard lover.

(Participant I)

I always say it's like malaria. You keep getting attacks of it again and again. You think you're safe and then the bug comes back and you're sweating and shaking and auditioning. So you can't get away from it if you're infected. I believe that.

(Participant B)

Pain as Motivator and Sorting Mechanism

While there is a pleasure in working (an experience of flow), there is also a pain in the inability to work: “if you want to be working and you're not, it's incredibly frustrating” (Participant A). For others, there is a sense that this pain separates those who are “real” actors from those who are not; that those who are “real actors” are able to navigate their way through the pain and frustration while those who are not “real actors” get selected out in the process. There is an inherent declaration in these statements that the speaker is a “real actor” because they have been able to tolerate this pain, while others who have started on the path and abandoned it are not “real actors.” Their pain is a validation of their status. For example, as Participant B explained:

Just know yourself, and if you're an actor you'll stick it, and if you're not an actor, however talented you are—and there are so many talented people I have seen who have left the business because it hurt too much—you won't stick it.

(Participant B)

This statement makes a clear distinction between being “an actor” and someone who is “not an actor,” with the ability to endure hurt being ultimately a greater necessity than talent.

In this next example, not only is acting compared to a disease, or bug, but there is a discussion of the hurt being a mechanism to eliminate actors from the profession:

If you've got the bug, you've got to do it, and if you don't, you don't. And if you don't, you'll learn, because you can't because it will hurt too much and it will winnow you out.

(Participant B)

Participant F acknowledged how much of acting is beyond one's control but indicated that only a small number of people can endure all the challenges that it brings:

It's things beyond your control. So, you have to learn that. That's a harsh lesson to learn. You can't be 6' if you're 5'1". You can't be size 4 if you're a size 20. And it's horrible. You stare your insecurities in the face all the time. And that's the reality of it. And if you can ride that wave, then great, but a lot of people can't. They can't face not earning the money, they can't face that lifestyle choice and they can't face waking up every morning anymore having to face all of that. Because it's easier not to.

(Participant F)

Participant F says that harsh lessons, insecurities and lifestyle challenges drive people out of the profession of acting, which raises questions about the individuals who are not driven out by this. The same participant goes on to say that it is only the love for acting that can make it tolerable:

...don't stay in the game if your heart's not in it. Get out because you'll be miserable. It's not worth it. It doesn't pay enough, it's long, cold hours and it's antisocial hours. There's no glamour in it. You have to love it to be in it.
(Participant F)

Acting and Religion

Many actors drew comparisons between their work and the church. Here we see two discussions of acting as a kind of religious calling:

I grew up Catholic. I was an altar boy. There's a ceremony thing going on there. I don't think I can say more than that. I certainly like that when you're working, your life, if that's what you're called to, is very much on your own terms, isn't it?
(Participant C)

It is a vocation in that nobody is going to be an actor who doesn't really want to do it. You've got to really want to do it to do it, and for most people it's anathema. So, I would say it's definitely a vocation. There are other vocations that aren't very well paid. Anything to do with religion.

[INTERVIEWER: "Clergy, or even academia is not terribly –"]

Yes, and I would say it is on a par with those sorts of things in terms of one's personal spiritual life, if you like. It is that.
(Participant A)

Here the flow state is described in religious terminology:

I said the other day it's my church. It is. I love the connection with other people, I love the research. When it works, which is not often, it's like being at mass. You just lift. You connect with the world and the universe and it's wonderful.
(Participant B)

Group Bonding and Teamwork

Part of the religious experience of acting seems to be the group dynamics of working with other people to achieve common goals. For some, this is again a religious calling to be part of a communion of people:

So, I really gotta go with it's a two-way vocation. You have to be called on by another company of actors and directors, or makers, or creatives, and you have to be willing to keep the call within you while you wait on another customer at this restaurant, that shoe store, this computer store.
(Participant C)

For others, this is a simpler relationship, one driven by the pleasure of working with others, and described in language that evokes sports or communities:

I like other actors. I like working in a team. I'm not interested in a solo career. I really, really like working in a team with other people.
(Participant A)

I like working in community with other people. I like being in relationship with other people, other performers, other actors, in the space together creating something.
(Participant D)

Here, there is a recognition that group work requires a subjugation of the personal ego to conform to the creative vision of another. This is seen as a positive thing:

What I love about being an actor is I learn all the time and I have to redefine myself every single job I do, because every single job I do is never about me, it's about working with the company. So, I become less and less of an ego, which is quite interesting because people think actors have these great egos, so they can't afford to have if they're going to work. I'm more of a person who just conforms to someone else's creative vision.

(Participant F)

Lifestyle Of Acting

In some instances, what motivates actors to continue pursuing acting work is that the lifestyle is very attractive. It represents bohemian ideals such as freedom and adventure and is often contrasted to *humdrum* occupations.³⁵

I like not having a Monday to Friday 9-5. I think I would shoot myself. And I think that's what keeps most actors in the game, that they don't conform, that they like being free with their time. I can wake up and go, f*ck it, I'm not working today, I'm going to go watch a movie, like I did this week. I've got an audition tomorrow, I'm going to shift my diary...that's really a good way to be.

(Participant F)

I like the hours, actually. I like the hours of working. I like the fact that you're under a certain pressure, but you're not under pressure to reach targets or things like that. That's not the kind of thing for me. I can't really imagine doing anything else.

(Participant H)

There is a focus on creation and the opportunity to be in control of their work using the language of self-actualization:

What I like about being an actor is that I get to create, that I'm independent. I'm freelance, so I can pick and choose what I do and don't want to do. I get to explore, learn lots of various things, travel all over the place, meet really interesting people. I get to challenge myself in a way I wouldn't usually challenge myself.

(Participant F)

Glamour and Spontaneity

Acting is unpredictable, as Participant F explained: "you wake up in the morning, you don't know where you're going to be in the evening," which is exciting. There is glamour in the spontaneity of acting that can always take the actor in a radically different direction:

³⁵ Caves, *Creative Industries*.

I love the idea of the phone call as much as I love the idea of something coming through my door. I truly will never leave that. That will never leave me, that excitement that your life could change. That's another thing that I would say that's really-- my life could change this afternoon. I could get a job that pays me x amount and takes me somewhere else in a way that somebody who has a very mapped-out career will never have that, ever. I do like that. I like that element of change and surprise.

(Participant I)

Superiority of Being an Actor

There is also a superiority that the path trod by the actor is more meaningful or worthy than many other career paths:

There's no return in the arts other than a creative and emotional and a tangible one where you actually feel like you've had an experience rather than sit in front of a computer and go on Facebook and think you've got a life.

(Participant F)

In that sense, it is quite a luxury being an actor, because you're getting paid for something you really love doing. It's not many people that have that opportunity.

(Participant A)

I think if you want to do it, if it's where you feel your passion is—I mean, we're lucky in that sense. I mean, we may not get to do it very often, but at least we have a passion. Most people out there don't have any passion for anything, and they just do a job because they have to earn a living.

(Participant A)

Again, the work is viewed as superior to many other occupations as it allows for a deep understanding of the self and an ability to meet “amazing people”; as Participant I said: “You will meet some amazing people and you will learn stuff about yourself which some people who stick behind a desk in an office job never get the luxury to find out.”

Discovery and Insight

When actors take on a new role, they often begin a process of character research, engaging in primary and secondary research to learn more about the world of the character they will be inhabiting. This research activity can give the actor considerable insight into the lives of others, as Participant E explained:

I love the fact that quite often it will make you research into a whole different life that you knew nothing about. So you often learn completely different stuff. You're looking into someone else's world and walking in their shoes for a while, exploring their feelings.

(Participant E)

Researching and inhabiting new characters encourages continuous learning as described by Participant D:

I like the possibility of discovery. I like that I have the ability to work on various types of projects, be it the physical theatre, acrobatics, text, solo work.

(Participant D)

Exhibitionism of Acting

Some actors thrive on a kind of exhibitionism, a desire to perform for an audience and be seen by an audience, which is highly satisfying:

I certainly like the aspect of performing in front of a crowd. That's absolutely the best thing, I think.

(Participant G)

I love the obvious, which is being on stage performing. I mean, that's obviously why we do it...

(Participant H)

Here it is coupled with language that seems to be describing flow related to performing for an audience:

I like performing in front of an audience. I like that reaction. And particularly working in theatre, I love that buzz, that adrenaline rush that you get.

(Participant E)

Discussion

Mental Health Impact of Findings

In discussing these findings, I think it's appropriate to start by asking "which of these motivations are sustainable motivations?" or more generally, "how do motivations impact mental health?" I offer the following interpretation of the empirical findings presented above. I would suggest that (a) the *Identity of Being an Actor*, whether in work or not; (b) the enjoyment of *Group Bonding and Teamwork* of acting (viewing it as a communal activity engaged in with others); and (c) being motivated by the possibilities for *Discovery and Insight* that acting can bring, are all healthy motivations that are sustainable and contribute towards positive mental health. I categorize liking the *Lifestyle of Acting* and the *Exhibitionism of Acting* as neutral qualities – while these motivations can be enjoyed from acting, if there are limited work opportunities then being denied the lifestyle of being an actor could lead to frustration (though there are other freelance jobs that allow for similar control of one's own time). Likewise, while there is nothing inherently wrong with enjoying being seen by an audience, if work is in short supply, this motivation may not easily be realized. Again, there are other jobs and activities that can bring similar enjoyment, such as teaching. The motivations that I would view as less sustainable or healthy for the actor's mental health would be: (a) *Acting as a Choice*, where the actor thinks that some kind of external force has chosen them to be an actor, I think robs the actor of agency and, in situations where they are unable to find work as an actor, could lead to frustration at being given the desire and not the opportunity; (b) *Pain as Motivator and Sorting Mechanism* I find troubling as I believe that valorising the ability to endure hardship or suffering, a bohemian attitude towards the life of an artist, is neither healthy towards mental or physical health nor is it sustainable without the possibility of long-term harm; (c) romanticising the *Glamour and Spontaneity* of being an actor seems problematic if, for example, a pandemic erases all opportunities to work; and finally, viewing (d) a *Superiority of Being an Actor* compared to other workers suggests a lack of understanding of the range of other jobs/careers, but also is problematic if the thing that makes you superior – acting – is in short supply, which could lead to frustration. In summary, I would categorize the motivations found in this empirical study in Table 1 below.

Table 1 - Evaluation of actors' motivations

Encourage	Neutral	Discourage
Identity of Being an Actor	Lifestyle of Acting	Acting as a Choice
Group Bonding and Teamwork	Exhibitionism of Acting	Pain as Motivator and Sorting Mechanism
Discovery and Insight	Acting and Religion	Glamour and Spontaneity
		Superiority of Being an Actor

Pedagogical Implication of Findings

The intention in examining these motivations is not to prescribe how actors should be motivated towards their entrepreneurial path. Rather, the intention is for arts entrepreneurship skills teachers in creative HE to have open, honest and transparent discussions with creative graduates about their own personal motivations for pursuing their arts entrepreneurship path. In the process of asking students to articulate their motivations, we may be able to assist them in identifying the individual motivations that will increase resilience over the next few years, and identify those which are less likely to support them on what may be a long and challenging pathway. In pre-COVID-19 times, Equity (UK)'s 2013 member survey found that 45.4% of respondents worked fewer than ten weeks of the year as an actor; given that it may be several years before even this level of production is resumed, the creative graduate's motivation must be one that can sustain them for an extended period of trying to launch a career.³⁶ Given this scarcity of work, most actors must subsidize their arts entrepreneurship work through working in other fields, which could be a service job waiting tables or making coffee or an entrepreneurial "side hustle." Either way, economic shortfalls requiring additional work outside of acting can be demotivating and negatively impact the persistence required to follow through as an entrepreneur on their primary pathway of acting.

As educators, we do not need to program or police student's motivations, nor are the categories presented in this research exhaustive of actors' motivations, but the sharing of the data in this article with students could open a discussion or launch an exercise asking them to drill down and articulate their own motivations for pursuing an arts entrepreneurship pathway. A further discussion could ensue as to the uncertainty of the next few years and what motivations might prove to be more sustainable and contribute towards resilience. Finally, a discussion around mental health and its impact on motivation, especially when encountering scarcity of opportunity or other barriers, would be fruitful for all young arts entrepreneurs.

Classroom Application of Flow and Self-Actualization

Discussions with students about their motivations are also opportunities to present concepts of flow and self-actualization and have students reflect on where they experience these feelings in their lives. Focusing more on these positive feelings and their source, and less on the negative motivations and maladaptive ways of thinking, like glamourizing suffering or persisting where others have failed, could help students to be more resilient.

³⁶ "Equity Membership Survey Summary."

Looking to the Future

Taking this one step further, I question whether the lack of opportunity since the pandemic struck encouraged (or forced) actors to find other sources of flow and self-actualization in their lives. For the COVID-19 graduating classes who have left their training with constrained opportunities to enter the creative field, has the lack of opportunity forced them to find other activities to do, and in so doing, has it reinforced a “portfolio career approach” with multiple streams of income to support them?³⁷ In my teaching, I have found that students often resist the idea of portfolio careers. First, because they believe they will not need it as they will find success in their chosen field and, second, because they view the argument for portfolio careers, that it diversifies their income giving them an economic advantage, as running counter to ingrained bohemian ideals that equate poverty with a commitment to “art.”³⁸ Does a significant reduction in work opportunities grant educators an opening to reframe the argument for portfolio working away from economics and towards flow and self-actualization? In other words, could students be encouraged to locate other activities besides acting where they can also experience flow or a sense of self-actualization and build a portfolio of flow activities that would lead to diversification in their creative/work portfolio, thus positively contributing towards resilience and sustainability?

To further this idea, if actors were more selective and only went after the acting jobs most meaningful to them instead of pursuing every available opportunity to piece together a living, would this help in diversifying the acting field and create opportunities for those who are currently under-represented? It is inconceivable that the quantity of acting opportunities is going to increase in the next few years with the impact of COVID-19 and the accompanying contraction of the industry. So, instead of multiple jobs going to a small handful of actors (12.1% of respondents in the Equity (UK) 2013 member survey reported working more than 40 weeks per year), could actors choose to work less and thus share it more? This seems like a radical idea, but it is already being proposed by *Project Am I Right?* (projectamiright.org) in the United States, who are asking white, cisgender, non-disabled actors to consider if they are *really* right for a job before going up for it and encouraging them to be good allies by making space and amplifying voices different from their own through consciously choosing *not* to pursue certain opportunities. This could be viewed as a strong statement of allyship and has the potential to radically change how actors view their career path. If this kind of objectivity to the roles actors are truly appropriate for and truly interested in was coupled with the actor having a portfolio of other locations/activities where they could also experience the flow they feel when acting, then they could choose to act less but have a richer and more diverse career. This choice has the potential to be more sustainable personally but also more sustainable for the ecosystem of acting, as the opportunities would be available for a wider pool of participants. Returning to the classroom, this activity asking students to locate their motivations and identify their sources of flow and self-actualization has the potential to both change the individual actor’s pathway and encourage positive sectoral change.

³⁷ Comunian, Faggian, and Li, “Unrewarded Careers in the Creative Class”; Bridgstock, Goldsmith, Rodgers, and Hearn, “Creative Graduate Pathways Within and Beyond the Creative Industries”; Roberta Comunian, Alessandra Faggian, and Sarah Jewell, “Exploring Music Careers: Music Graduates and Early Career Trajectories in the UK,” in *Social Networks and Music Worlds*, ed. Nick Crossley, Siobhán McAndrew, and Paul Widdop (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 189-212.

³⁸ Hans Abbing, “Poverty and Support for Artists,” in *A Handbook of Cultural Economics, Second Edition*, ed. Ruth Towse (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2011), 344-349.

Limitations and Future Research

While ten different motivations for pursuing acting were presented in this research, the number of possible motivations for actors is, of course, infinite. A further limitation is that the motivations discussed in this research all speak to the individual and their unique experience and efforts without considering the broader inequality of the field in which they are situated. There is a danger that this research could be interpreted as saying that success or failure in acting is only dependent on individual efforts or actions, which of course is not true, as widespread structural inequality means that opportunities are not presented equally to all participants in the field despite their personal efforts.³⁹ This can be a fault of entrepreneurship literature, which suggests that the individual's agency and efforts are the prime determinants of success, without considering the structural constraints on certain individuals or the structural advantages given to others. For example, it is not solely *personal fortitude* that allows actors to endure the challenges of pursuing an acting career; it is often money, financial support and privilege. To frame it as only *personal grit* ignores the structural barriers and wide inequalities of the field.⁴⁰ In Creative HE this needs to be acknowledged more so graduates are not left blaming themselves for not working hard enough or sticking with it for long enough. There is need for further research in this area and greater transparency in higher education to discuss these issues.

A sample of only nine cannot possibly cover the diverse range of experiences within acting and a diversity of race, gender identity and ability/disability are particularly missing from the sample interviewed here. Future research in this area should aim to capture a more diverse range of perspectives. Also, the interviewees were all over the age of 30, with the majority older than that, so it may be that the views expressed in this research do not reflect current attitudes and motivations of younger actors. This would be an important area for future research.

Conclusion

COVID-19's impact is still being understood and has highlighted the structural issues that were pervasive pre-pandemic, especially in the arts and culture sector.⁴¹ As (some) governments look at how to support the arts and culture in recovery, they need to be aware of "long-term implications of the crisis both in relation to the personal/individual and the ecosystem."⁴² In this way, rebuilding after COVID-19 needs to consider resilience and sustainable livelihoods.⁴³ To facilitate this, actors need to

³⁹ Irena Grugulis and Dimitrinka Stoyanova, "Social Capital and Networks in Film and TV: Jobs for the Boys?," *Organization Studies* 33, no. 10 (2012): 1311-1331, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840612453525>; Doris Ruth Eikhof and Chris Warhurst, "The Promised Land? Why Social Inequalities are Systemic in the Creative Industries," *Employee Relations* 35 (2013): 495-508, <https://doi.org/10.1108/er-08-2012-0061>; Gill, "Unspeakable Inequalities"; Keith Randle, Cynthia Forson, and Moira Calveley, "Towards a Bourdieusian Analysis of the Social Composition of the UK Film and Television Workforce," *Work, Employment and Society* 29, no. 4 (2015): 590-606, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017014542498>; Keith Randle and Kate Hardy, "Macho, Mobile and Resilient? How Workers with Impairments are Doubly Disabled in Project-Based Film and Television Work," *Work, Employment and Society* 31, no. 3 (2017): 447-464, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017016643482>; BBC, "Low Pay and High Stress."

⁴⁰ Ken Rea, "Nurturing the Outstanding Actor: Lessons from Action Research in a Drama School," *New Theatre Quarterly* 30, no. 3 (2014): 231-242, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0266464x14000475>; Orian Brook, Dave O'Brien, and Mark Taylor, *Culture is Bad for You: Inequality in the Cultural and Creative Industries* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020).

⁴¹ Comunian and England, "Creative and Cultural Work Without Filters."

⁴² Ibid, 121.

⁴³ Ibid.

be pursuing an arts entrepreneurship pathway for sustainable reasons, or motivations, that contribute towards resilience and positive mental health. As we educate creative graduates as arts entrepreneurs, we should help them focus on positive, sustainable reasons for pursuing their pathway and encourage them to discard unhelpful romantic/bohemian ideas of creative suffering and other maladaptive modes of thinking towards their careers.

While this empirical research has focused on actors, these findings are more broadly applicable to many other freelance creative workers in the CCIs, many of whom are facing similar challenges.

Appendix A - Semi-structured interview questions:⁴⁴

1. What do you like/dislike about being an actor and why?
2. What did you imagine being an actor would be like and what has the reality been?
3. What advice do you wish you'd been given at the start of your career?
4. Are you able to support yourself and your family through acting? If not, what gets in the way?
5. What actions have you taken that have resulted in work?
6. What, if anything, has prevented you from working?
7. Acting incomes tend to vary widely. How do you financially manage periods with no or little work?
8. Would you encourage others to pursue acting? Why?
9. What actions, whether on an individual level, an industry level, or a legislative level, would help make acting careers more sustainable?

⁴⁴ These questions were formulated in 2015. In the ensuing years, more research and understanding has highlighted structural inequalities within the field. If I was to repeat this research in 2022, there would likely be more questions exploring these structural barriers as mentioned in the body of the article above.

Appendix B – Participant Profiles

Participant	Date of Interview	Work Areas	Gender/ Age	Nationality	Race
A	02-08-15	Actor – Stage, TV, Voiceover	Female 50+	British	White
B	03-03-15	Actor – Stage, TV, Film, Radio, Voiceover, Training	Female 60+	American (resident UK)	White
C	03-02-15	Actor – Stage, TV, Film, Voiceover, Training	Male 50+	American (resident UK)	White
D	03-16-15	Actor – Stage, Physical Theatre, Circus, Street Theatre	Female 40+	American (resident UK)	Black
E	04-10-15	Actor – TV, Stage, Radio, Voiceover	Female 40+	British	White
F	04-18-15	Actor – Stage (previously Opera)	Male 60+	British	White
G	04-13-15	Actor – Stage, Physical Theatre, Devised Theatre	Female 40+	British	White
H	06-04-15	Actor – Stage	Female 30+	British	White
I	06-08-15	Actor – Film, TV, Training	Female 40+	British	White

Appendix C - Aggregate Interviewee Demographic Data

Gender	
Male	2
Female	7
Age	
30-39	1
40-49	4
50-59	2
60-69	2

Education	
Some college, no degree	1
Diploma or certificate	2
Bachelor's degree	4
Master's degree	2

Employment status	
Multiple jobs/sources of income	5
Acting is my only job	3
Not employed, looking for work	1
Household income	
Less than £20,000	2
£20,000-£34,999	2
£35,000-£49,000	2
£50,000-£74,999	2
£150,000+	1

Years acting	
10-19	4
20-29	2
30+	3
UK Drama School trained	
Yes	5
No	4

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