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Psychological Self-Awareness and Micro-Expression Analysis: Strategies to Safeguard Screen Actors from Role Residual Emotions

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Abstract

Actors easily overlook the importance of understanding themselves, leading to varying degrees of harm to actors due to residual emotions from the characters. Psychology, like acting, starts from human nature. One needs to understand oneself, and relying solely on daily behaviors and demeanor is far from sufficient, because some behaviors may seem unexplainable to ordinary people. Behind a behavior lies all the experiences a person has had from birth to the present. Therefore, we need the professional knowledge of psychology to enrich ourselves, so that we can think from a more comprehensive perspective. Long-term emotional immersion in fictional roles often blurs the boundary between performers and characters. Micro-expression analysis provides an effective tool for actors to capture their suppressed subconscious emotions. Building solid psychological self-awareness can help actors reduce the risk of mental disturbance triggered by lingering role feelings. Many performers struggle to detach from intense, negative roles after shooting and lack systematic methods for emotional separation. This research integrates acting theories and psychological mechanisms to explore feasible strategies for on-screen actors. It also offers new references for actor training focusing on mental health protection.

Keywords

micro-expression, acting, self-awareness, human being

1. Introduction

There were numerous news reports highlighting the significant harm that residual emotions can inflict on actors after performances. Many actors, due to prolonged portrayal of a character or deep immersion in a role with a sorrowful undertone, have been unable to emerge from the character, leading to mental illnesses such as depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, and even suicide attempts. This has caused widespread panic. However, some argue that Drama Therapy is the conscious use of drama and/or theater processes to achieve therapeutic goals. It is an actively participatory, experiential practice method. The theoretical foundation of drama therapy encompasses drama, theater, psychology, psychotherapy, anthropology, gaming, as well as interactive and creative processes. It provides participants with a context to narrate their own experiences, set goals, solve problems, express emotions, or gain emotional catharsis. Yet, few emphasize the need for actors to understand themselves sufficiently, to utilize actors' existing knowledge of psychology and art to gain a deeper understanding of themselves, and to comprehend human beings from the actor's own perspective. As the ancient Chinese saying goes, "Know yourself and know your enemy, and you will never be defeated in battle."

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Although we are not at war, this principle can also be applied to the creation and portrayal of characters, understanding our vulnerabilities, facing them squarely, accepting them, protecting them, or changing them. In summary, "better understanding oneself" serves as a foundation for creating characters and protecting actors themselves. It also acts as a bridge between portraying a character and protecting ourselves [1].

2. Theoretical Background

Actors do not directly imitate emotions; instead, they evoke authentic experiences within themselves through bodily movements and the performance of specific tasks. This method helps avoid false impressions in acting, making emotional expression more natural and conforming to a logical pattern. Actors must "unleash their nature," break free from the constraints imposed by social norms, return to an instinctive state, and perceive the primal desires, thoughts, and emotional impulses of the character. This raw instinct helps actors grasp the core inner drive of the role [2]. Emotional expressions are permitted. Actors must construct the social attributes of the character (such as identity, background, and values) and transform instinctive impulses into actions that align with the character's specific traits. Actors must find a balance between the character and themselves. When portraying complex characters, actors must understand the character's internal moral conflicts (such as the clash between responsibility and desire) to deliver a more nuanced performance.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Three-Level Logic for Creating Characters on Screen

Tony Barr abandoned the intense style of dramatic acting and proposed a three-level logic for creating characters on screen: 1. Basic character traits: An actor's unique aura serves as the foundation for authenticity on screen; the actor cannot completely hide behind the mask of an overly dramatic character. Regardless of what the character does, the fundamental element remains the actor themselves.2. Small, unconscious physical habits: replacing artificial, exaggerated stage gestures with small, spontaneous, hidden movements to create a more realistic character image;3. Suppressing internal desires and human needs: categorizing a character's motivations into concealed, restraining impulses rather than overt, dramatic appeals. Concealing internal conflicts is the essence of close-up acting. Internal monologues in films and television series are internal musings, not theatrical recitations; film comedy relies on precise suppression of rhythm and rejects absurd exaggerations [3]. Barr's theory highlights subtle, hidden body movements for realistic screen performance. It also proves that internal hidden desires rather than exaggerated outbursts carry screen emotional weight, which supports this paper's research on micro-expression and actor mental regulation [4].

3.2 Micro-Expressions and Self-Awareness

According to cultural norms, individuals may suppress genuine emotional expressions and display false expressions based on the situation or intention. Suppressed expressions can manifest briefly in the form of micro-expressions lasting only from 1/25th to 1/5th of a second [5]. Such an ultra-short length makes micro-expressions hard to hide and the most real reflection of hidden inner feelings. Guo et al. investigated the dynamic characteristics of lip corners, as well as traits related to sincerity and smiling. They discovered that genuine smiles are characterized by higher starting points, peak points, variability, overall duration, and rate of change, yet often exhibit lower initiation, rate of change, and symmetry [6]. When actors fully know their own subconscious small movements, they can spot bad habits like frequent blinking or nervous hair-pulling that damage on-camera performance and adjust them in advance. Gender and facial expressions change orthogonally [7].

3.3 Micro-Expressions and Ego Defense Mechanisms

Micro-motional English (MMES) expression. These opposite signals continue from 1 / 25 second to 0.5 seconds and are not recognized by the human eye at the general reading speed. A regular expression appears when the visitor activates the self-defense mechanism during the consultation, and the fear, the threat, and the unconscious feelings are hindered. The author proposes the concept of the sensor to explain the psychological process: the ego allows temporary forbidden emotion and then shows a neutral expression immediately. In this study, the different types of micro-representations correspond to classical self-defense mechanisms (repression,

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rejection, reaction formation, prolapse, and isomerization), respectively, and respond to transactional micrographs for the visitor's surface language data and hidden unconscious collisions. Standardized clinical video coding allows you to ensure that there is a constant discrepancy between the language data and the simultaneous microsignal and can accurately regulate the internal impact that interferes with visitors [8].

In addition, it is important to note the difference between a crying man and a crying woman, as there is an interaction between facial expression information and gender information. For example, participants typically analyzed angry expressions on men's faces and pleasant expressions on women's faces more quickly and accurately [9], and happy female faces were classified by gender faster than angry female faces [10]. Previous studies have also presented neurophysiological evidence of the interaction between facial expressions and gender. Studies involving event-related potential (ERP) recordings have demonstrated an interaction between facial expression and gender in the N170 component, which is sensitive to faces [11]. Functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) has shown that in female participants, the left amygdala was more active when remembering a fearful female face, whereas in male participants, the right amygdala was more involved in remembering a fearful male face [12]. Gender and expression processing interact with each other. On one hand, when a male facial image is presented, judgments about angry expressions are made more quickly. On the other hand, when a facial expression indicating happiness is presented, gender classification for females occurs more rapidly than when a facial expression indicating anger is presented. Gender influences whether it will encourage encoding hundreds of facial expression features or intervene in that process. Nevertheless, gender processing is influenced by facial expressions at more stages, including the early (P1) and late (LPC) stages of emotional processing [13]. Therefore, when utilizing micro-expression acting, one must also pay attention to gender differences [14].

4. Discussion & Synthesis

From 1900 to 1938, Stanny proposed the organic unity of psychology and form as the core axiom of a complete system, which fully foreshadowed the emergence of the core proposition of cognition: relying not only on psychological illusions and emotions; relying on bodily actions and sensory spatial perception to actively generate inner feelings; and rejecting the separation of inner expression from external physical craftsmanship [15]. Many people agree with the first and second points but have different views on rejecting the separation of inner expression and external body language. Because humans are complex creatures, they exhibit various behaviors in daily life that are unimaginable to humans or other creatures. Sometimes, the reason for these behaviors is simply “he is just that kind of person,” which is his personality. In addition, ordinary people encounter various things every day that affect their behavior and demeanor, both good and bad, and coupled with the large amount of social interaction required by the uniqueness of actors, their emotions are influenced by various uncontrollable people and events every day. Of course, actors should maintain a sense of responsibility during filming and always play their own roles, but it is undeniable that there are too many different factors that can affect them, so the idealized idea of truly becoming another person is difficult to achieve in reality. Furthermore, the current filming environment is getting worse and worse, and things that should be filmed in forests and real ancient buildings have become green screen sets, making the work of actors more difficult and challenging.

Therefore, rejecting the separation is very idealistic. The only way to truly embody reality is to give one's utmost effort, and actors should strive to understand themselves to the greatest extent. They need to recognize that different performance methods are required in different situations, and they must have a certain understanding of themselves and know how to protect themselves to the fullest, both physically and mentally. They should make judgments based on their own habits and emotions, regardless of whether the performance is from the inside out or from the outside in. The possibility of harming an actor from the inside out is much greater than from the outside in. It requires stirring up and utilizing a large amount of the actor's inner emotions and memories. If an actor immerses themselves for too long and doesn't know how to handle it, they are prone to developing psychological disorders. However, performing from the outside in requires extensive daily observation of the behaviors and manners of different types of people. Otherwise, any role will only be the same.

Therefore, facing oneself, understanding oneself, accepting oneself, and ultimately allowing oneself are very important for an actor. The actor's dilemma (actors need to mobilize their true emotions to experience

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reality but cannot fully indulge themselves or be consumed by their roles; performances must remain controllable, distant, and repeatable social artistic behaviors) is a conundrum that Stanislavski tried to solve throughout his life, and it is also a core issue in Vygotsky's psychology. When an actor challenges a role with negative emotions, they will inevitably suffer some psychological harm. However, from a different perspective, as humans, we may suffer psychological harm every day. What should people do when faced with things that make them feel down? They can find friends to play, chat, eat delicious food, exercise, and so on. As an actor, they may not be able to eat too much to gain weight, and they cannot be too far away from the shooting location during filming. At this time, self-discovery comes into play, constantly exploring oneself and one's hobbies and interests. There are always things that can be done within certain limits. Knowing how to act normally and efficiently is also what an excellent actor needs to possess [16,17].

5. Conclusion

An actor needs to learn to accept and allow everything to happen, to allow their own body to feel, to cry, to laugh, to jump, to run, to fail, and to succeed. Many things in the world have no absolute right or wrong; it just depends on whose perspective you are standing in to view it. The biggest taboo for an actor is to criticize their own role. Some actors may think they never thought they could play this role, because it is completely different from their usual self. Perhaps it's just that this actor has never noticed this side of themselves. Everyone could have thousands of faces, and no two faces are alike, but they are all based on one person. Some expressions, some body language, and some things they just don't want to do or don't agree with, due to their upbringing, moral values, etc., but it doesn't mean they can't do those things. Through constantly experiencing different things, you may find that humans cannot be defined, only bound by ourselves. This essay takes the self-cognition of actors as the starting point, combining psychology and performance theory to explore the relationship of 'knowing oneself-understanding humanity-shaping roles-protecting actors'. Self-cognition is the foundation for understanding the motivations of character behavior and an important prerequisite for achieving authentic performance and maintaining the mental health of actors. This paper primarily focuses on theoretical analysis, linking actors' mental health to their roles and daily life creations. It emphasizes the importance of self-exploration in performance, providing new insights for actor training and performance education. Simultaneously, it aids actors in exploring and utilizing healthier creative methods, enhancing the authenticity and watchability of their roles while minimizing the negative impact of residual emotions on themselves. However, further empirical support from actors and audience feedback is still needed. In the future, combining actor interviews, psychological assessments, and drama therapy practices can explore the effects of different training methods on actors' self-awareness, role portrayal, and mental health, thereby further refining relevant theoretical and practical research.

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