How Method Actors Create Character Roles

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This paper studies character-role creation by Method actors to begin developing a sociological understanding of artistic creativity and shed light on the construction of social roles. Portrayals on film or stage reflect but also importantly shape audience’s understandings of social life. How do actors create these portrayals? The analysis of interviews with and observation of Method actors shows that they employ a variety of creation strategies, which are shaped by artistic conventions and transmitted in educational settings and professional interactions. Striving to create lifelike portrayals, actors draw heavily on culturally available images and end up reproducing existing typifications and cultural mores.

KEY WORDS: cultural objects creation; Method acting; artistic creativity; roles; strategies of action.

INTRODUCTION

Most studies in the production of culture perspective focus on the effects of market and reward structures, gate-keeping, and decision chains on the careers and activities of culture producers (for review, see Peterson, 1994). Examining the institutional organization of art worlds, sociologists have paid little attention to the immediate process of cultural creation. Uncovering the interplay between structure and agency, such investigations would provide a compelling alternative to the prevalent understanding of creativity as the extraordinary capacity of talented individuals.

1A previous version of the paper was presented at the 2001 Annual American Sociological Association Meetings in Anaheim, California.
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The objective of this paper is to analyze the practice of one particular type of cultural creation and explore what initial hints such cultural creation offers about a sociological perspective on artistic creativity. I examine a case of character-role creation by contemporary American theater and film actors. The portrayals of characters in film and on stage, conveying distinct images of human identity, motivation and action, are among the most pervasive popular cultural objects. As meaningful entities, they reflect but also importantly shape audience’s understandings of social life (Griswold, 1994). How do actors create these portrayals? Using themselves as instruments of creation, how do they match their individuality to scripted character roles? How do they represent what they are not and do not know? To answer these questions, I analyze 50 published interviews with established actors, 15 face-to-face interviews with graduate student actors and 3 months of participant observation with a Basic Method Acting class at the Actors Studio. I examine the practice of creation as an interplay between structuring conditions for acting and actors’ individual capacities to act, imagine, and evaluate. I argue that, because of the conventions they follow, Method actors strive to reflect collectively shared understandings about the social world and end up reaffirming and reproducing existent typifications and cultural mores.

While explanations of artistic creativity proliferate in psychoanalysis and cognitive psychology, sociologists have avoided conceptualizing creativity. From the psychoanalytical perspective, individual creativity is traced to the repression of libidinal desires (Freud, 1947). The psychological accounts of creativity emphasize the cognitive capacities of humans to symbolize and abstract (Gardner, 1982). Such explanations commonly define creativity solely as an internal capacity.

In contrast, this paper proposes to connect the micro individual and macro social levels and examine artistic creativity as structured agency. This conceptualization entails a widely accepted claim that structures both enable and constrain action (Giddens, 1984; Sewell, 1992). Simultaneously, it shifts the empirical focus to the artist’s “process of social engagement” (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998:963), in which one’s capacities to act, imagine, and evaluate (i.e., agency), interact with forces that constrain and enable those capacities (i.e., cultural and social structures). Applying this framework, the first part of the paper lays out the structuring conditions for character-role creation by Method actors. The second part of the paper focuses on the

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3I use the term structures to refer to social structures (i.e., social organizations, networks, and interactions) as well as cultural structures (i.e., collectively shared understandings). Cognitive structures most likely also matter in cultural creation (for review, see DiMaggio, 1997), but are bracketed in this analysis. Agency refers to an individual’s capacities to act, evaluate, and imagine.
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interaction between agency and structures. It describes the actor’s practice of creation—a process that entails the identification and execution of strategies for character-role development and enactment during rehearsals and performances.4

Specifically, after describing the data and methods, I first identify the culturally and historically specific acting techniques and criteria of excellence and show how they are transmitted by social structures. In the second part, I describe a repertoire of strategies of action that Method actors use to develop and enact character roles. I find that actors both automatically and deliberately incorporate cultural elements depending on their accessibility, institutionalization, emotional force, resonance, and usability for action (Schudson, 1989). To produce compelling performances, actors have to match the available strategies with the requirements of a scripted character role and master the execution of these strategies. As actors align their portrayals with recognizable reality, which is considered the essential task in Method acting, their creative expression involves reproducing existing cultural images.

Analysis of Method acting also contributes to our understanding of social role construction by building on Goffman’s dramaturgy. While Goffman uses the theater analogy to develop a model for social interaction, his benchmark is the English theater school, which emphasizes the conscious design of appearances and thus primarily outward compliance to roles. In contrast, as Hochschild (1979) has argued, the principles of Method acting underscore so-called deep acting, improvisation, and intense use of personal resources to produce verisimilitude. As such, Method acting implies a qualitatively different dramaturgy. Applying insights from the character-role creation process by Method actors, I conclude by drawing some parallels with the ways people create and perform social roles in everyday life.

DATA AND METHODS

In this study, I seek to identify crucial facets of the artistic creative process by looking at the ways that established and graduate student Method

4 In this analysis, the terms actors, character roles, and enactments denote analytically separate entities. Actors are theater and film actors who typically create one character role in any single play or feature film. Throughout their careers they create multiple character roles. Each character role that actors create involves multiple enactments. Enactment refers to playing the character role either during stage rehearsals, in performance or during any takes on the movie set. Also, many character roles (e.g., Hamlet) are enacted by different actors. Unless in monodrama, any enactment of any character role should be understood as a product of interaction between all actors who are simultaneously present on the set/stage. In the text, I sometimes abbreviate the phrase character roles as roles or characters.
actors describe what they have done to develop and perform character roles. I draw on my observations of a class of student actors over time as they engaged in these creative processes.

To document the importance of formally established acting techniques, I focus on those actors who draw from the particular style of acting known as Method acting, which is most likely the prevalent acting style in contemporary America (Vineberg, 1991). For the analysis of character-role creation by established actors, I selected all interviews with actors published in *Film Comment*, a bimonthly Lincoln Film Society Publication, from 1977 to 1997. This generated a population of 50 interviews, among which 34 were interviews with American Method actors. Of these, 88% were Oscar winners or nominees. Thus I refer to them as professionally established actors.

In each published interview I first identified all the parts where interviewees talked about creating their character roles. From these I transcribed all the actions related to the process of character creation (e.g., “using childhood experiences,” “observing at a party,” “watching movies and reading books about the time period,” “using fantasy to create the character’s history”). This resulted in a compilation of 101 items. I then grouped these actions into five strategies extracted from the official tenets of Method acting (Vineberg, 1991): observation (tenet 1); identification of character’s motivation (tenet 2); use of actor’s own personality (tenet 4); improvisation (tenet 5); and use of objects (tenet 7). To better represent the data, the names of these initial categories, except “improvisation,” had to be slightly revised and an additional category, “imagination,” was added to account for the actions describing the use of imagination, which could not be classified into any of the existing categories. (For a detailed description of the classification procedure, see the Appendix).

The final six strategies effectively summarize all the descriptions provided by the respondents. On the basis of the fact that these categories closely correspond to the Method acting tenets and that they summarize the narratives by both the professional actors and by student actors, I am confident that this is a reliable and effective classification. Nevertheless, Method actors not included in the sample may deploy strategies that fall outside of these categories. Thus, it is best to understand that Method actors have at their disposal a repertoire of strategies and that the six strategies derived in this analysis represent the core of their repertoire, rather than a deterministic list of all available alternatives.

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The influence of the Method school is seen in the work of such renowned actors as Marlon Brando, Robert De Niro, Jane Fonda, Dustin Hoffman, Paul Newman, Al Pacino, and Shelley Winters.
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To maximize the diversity of data, I complemented narratives from established actors with face-to-face, semistructured interviews with graduate students who participated in Basic Method Acting class at the Actors Studio. In the interviews, which ranged from 45 to 90 min, I asked respondents to select one character role they had performed and to explain how they developed and enacted that role. I analyzed this information using the same coding procedure as for the published interviews. I also asked student actors to describe how they would recognize that a particular performance was a good one. Combined with the information from published interviews, I used these answers to understand the criteria of excellence shared by practitioners of Method acting.

Moreover, I conducted a 3-month participant observation of the Actors Studio Basic Method Acting class, whose members I interviewed. During the class sessions I observed interactions between graduate students and their teacher and watched how students prepared for and performed scenes from plays. From class interactions I acquired information on how students are taught to develop character roles, and I observed how they actually do so during rehearsal and performance. Before and after classes I socialized with students and used these opportunities to ask for clarification and/or interpretation of class activities. Observations were especially useful in assessing the validity of the interviews because I could compare actors’ actual practice against their narrative accounts.6

STRUCTURING OF CHARACTER-ROLE CREATION

I propose that actors’ creation process entails the identification and execution of character-role creation strategies. The identification and execution of strategies result from the interactions among cultural conventions, social structures, scripted information about character roles, and actors’ agency. Specifically, Method actors share in the culture of Method acting, which is relayed to them through educational settings and professional interactions. The culture of Method acting (i.e., collectively shared repertoire of conventions, expectations, practices, symbols, etc. about Method acting) is a source of creation strategies available to actors. To portray any given character

6I use the terms theater acting and film acting interchangeably. While I recognize that there are differences between theater and film, the two are very similar in the character-role creation process with uniform Method acting tenets and criteria of excellence. If indeed there are differences in creation strategies, I should be able to document these when I summarize the frequencies of strategies adopted in the case of established actors (whose accounts are primarily about film roles) and student actors (whose accounts are primarily about theater roles). However, I find no such differences (see Table I).
role, actors need to identify available creation strategies, match them with the scripted character role, and execute them in character-role enactments. Identification, matching, and execution of strategies depend on actors’ individual capacities to act, evaluate, and imagine, but they are also structured by interactions within the acting art world (Becker, 1982) and with directors and fellow cast members on the set. In this framework, artistic creativity is conceptualized and examined as structured agency.

Consider a young actress, Laura, who has been given the part of the Bride in Federico Garcia Lorca’s Blood Wedding, a tale of a blood feud that erupts when a bride runs off with her former lover on her wedding day. Laura must discover how to create the character of the Bride so as to deliver an effective performance on stage. Because of her training in Method acting, which promotes actors’ reproduction of recognizable reality, Laura aspires to create a believable, lifelike portrayal by using some concrete creation strategies she acquired during her schooling and professional training and previous acting experiences. One strategy suggests that she look at the text for cues about characterizations in time, locale, class, and relationships between characters. Other strategies include relying on personal experiences, observing people around her, using costumes and props, improvising, and imagining. From the text, Laura learns that the Bride is a Spanish maiden from a wealthy family, but as a New Yorker in her 30s, Laura cannot personally relate to her character’s circumstances. Nor can she easily observe in her immediate surroundings anyone from the early 1900s, the time period of the play. She can infer, though, that a wealthy girl from that time would probably be educated and carry herself with elegance. To get beyond simple typifications, she decides to read a novel set in rural Spain at the turn of the twentieth century. She rents a video of a film production of Blood Wedding to get additional ideas. She imagines how this girl grew up in a Catholic, patriarchal family and what happened in her childhood, so as to create a concrete life history of the Bride, which provides a basis for her motivations and justification for her behavior. Once she receives the Bride’s costumes, this additionally shapes her gestures and movements. Wearing a corset, for example, she cannot be very free in her movements. Once stage rehearsals start, Laura also incorporates the insights discovered during improvisation and tryouts. Throughout this process, she is guided by direction and suggestions from the play’s director as well as by observing and talking with fellow cast members. All in all, Laura’s creative capacities are structured by her own judgments and by the director’s and cast’s understandings of what Laura would have done and felt if she really were a Spanish maiden from the early 1900s whose passions lead to tragic bloodshed.
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Conventions: Cultural and Social Bases for Method Acting

The character-role creation process is not a mere product of an individual’s capacity to act. In fact, such capacity is enabled as well as constrained by the available cultural ideas of what acting entails and what its criteria of excellence are. In this sense, actors’ character-role creation is largely dependent upon culturally and historically specific acting conventions. For most actors in contemporary America, these conventions derive from the tenets of the Method acting technique, based on the principles of Konstantin Stanislavsky, a Russian actor and director whose approach emphasizes the internal as opposed to external preparation of actors. It thus differs from conventions available to actors in other cultural and historical circumstances, such as the English School of acting, Bertold Brecht’s epic theater, or Japanese Noh drama. Method-acting conventions are summarized in the following tenets:

1. The Method sees as the actor’s essential task the reproduction of recognizable reality—verisimilitude—on stage (or screen), based on an acute observation of the world.
2. The Method seeks to justify all stage behavior by ensuring that it is psychologically sound...providing a unifying motivation for [a character’s] behavior.
3. It places a high premium on the expression of genuine emotion.
4. It identifies the actor’s own personality not merely as a model for the creation of character, but as the mine from which all psychological truth must be dug.
5. It encourages the use of improvisation as a rehearsal aid, and even in some cases as part of the performance, in an effort to keep acting spontaneous (and therefore lifelike).
6. It promotes intimate communication between actors in a scene, and therefore moves toward the performance ideal of a true ensemble.
7. It stresses the use of objects both for their symbolic value and as emissaries from the solid, material world.
8. Finally (though this last consideration is more often implied than stated), it demands an almost religious devotion on the part of an actor, based on...the power of truth in acting. (Vineberg, 1991:6–7)

Vineberg draws on Robert Lewis’s Method or Madness? (Lewis, 1958) and Advice to the Players (Lewis, 1980); Charles McGraw’s Acting Is Believing: A Basic Method (McGraw, 1966); Edward Dwight Easty’s On Method Acting (Easty, 1994); and Uta Hagen’s Respect for Acting (Hagen, 1973). Although his list does not include Stanislavsky’s original texts, An Actor Prepares (Stanislavsky, 1936), Building a Character (Stanislavsky, 1949), and Creating a Role (Stanislavsky, 1961), all of his sources draw upon Stanislavsky’s System and, more
The Method tenets provide guidelines and practical suggestions for the character-development process. Hence, we can expect actors to try to identify the underlying motivation for the character’s actions (tenet 2), draw on their own personalities (tenet 4), use intense observation (tenet 1), use improvisation (tenet 5), and use objects such as dress and props to illuminate their characters (tenet 7).

The tenets of Method acting also specify the criteria of excellence. They advocate expression of “genuine emotions” (tenet 3), “truth in acting” (tenet 8), and the “reproduction of recognizable reality—verisimilitude” (tenet 1). These criteria of excellence are historically specific. For example, in the 30s and early 40s, most great actors were those with “eccentric personalities” that showed on stage and screen as “bold, bigger than life, every speech and movement carefully underlined” (Vineberg, 1991:52). Even earlier, in the mid-eighteenth century, the idea expressed in the acting theories of Diderot was to “detach human nature from social action, by separating actor from act” and “withdrawing [actors’] own feelings” (Sennett, 1976:109, 113), all quite in contrast to contemporary Method acting.

Historically and culturally specific conventions and shared understandings of how to create character roles are transmitted through structural settings. Acting schools and professional networks relay these cultural understandings to actors, who further disseminate them either as teachers, fellow cast members, or actors-turned-directors. In case of Method acting, a student of Stanislavsky, Richard Boleslavsky, created the institutional bases for what is today known as the Method. In 1923 he immigrated to New York where he founded the Laboratory Theater and began teaching the Stanislavsky system to American actors. One of the members of the Laboratory Theater, Lee Strasberg, developed further the Stanislavsky system, which became popularly known as “the Method.” In 1948, Strasberg became the director of the Actors Studio in New York, “the first Method school for professional actors. . . By the 1950s, under the influence of the Actors Studio, the Method had established itself as the preeminent acting style of Americans” (Vineberg, 1991:5–6). The Actors Studio was crucial in institutionalizing the genre and educating generations of actors. Also influential were private acting studios that Strasberg developed in Los Angeles and New York, run by acting teachers who had studied with him. Many of his other associates or important, show how it was appropriated by American Method acting teachers and students. Thus, Vineberg’s list is a good source for getting at widely shared conventions about Method acting in the United States.

8The authentic reproduction of reality emphasized in the genre of Method acting can be also seen as part of a more general movement in the arts and material culture at the turn of the twentieth century emphasizing the pursuit of authenticity (Orvell, 1989:xv). Examining societal conditions that contributed to the popularity of Method acting is beyond the scope of the present analysis but an opportunity for future research.
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disciples also established their own acting studios or professional workshops where they disseminated the Method.

While educational experiences leave an important imprint on actors' understanding of character-role creation, the knowledge of conventions is reinforced through everyday interactions with fellow participants in the acting art world (Becker, 1982). In addition, creation processes for any given character role are shaped by stage or film directors and fellow cast members. These provide direction and/or feedback that helps align the actors' portrayals with representations collectively deemed as true-to-life. (Verisimilitude, after all, is the ultimate goal in Method acting.) Such structuration implies that professional interactions on the set also induce actors to reflect collectively shared understandings of human identity, motivation, and action. As a consequence, typifications and cultural mores become embodied in the portrayals of character-roles and subsequently received by audiences. The likely unintended consequence of Method actors' creativity is the reproduction of existing cultural images.

In sum, the historical specificity of Method Acting, its institutionalization and dissemination through schools and professional interactions, and the implications of its criteria of excellence point to the twofold influences of cultural and social structures on the character-role creation process. First, educational experiences and professional interactions socialize actors into principles and expectations of Method acting as part of the Method acting culture. Second, the cultural and social circumstances in which the creation process occurs influence the kinds of portrayals created. Collectively shared understandings about the social world and human behavior at the particular time and place in which a character role is situated (i.e., typifications and cultural mores) shape the selection of cultural material that gets incorporated into that character role.

THE PRACTICE OF CHARACTER-ROLE CREATION

You get the script and you analyze it. You dig into it to discover where the character is coming from, what his background is, what he does, what his desires are, what his fears are, how he lives—analyzing what the author had in mind. All that is homework. And, then, of course, you have rehearsals, where you find out what the other actors are going to do, what works best. And then, once the cameras roll, there's always that little something that is improvisational, spontaneous. (*Film Comment*, 1978 [Harvey Keitel])

The actors’ narratives and field observations of their character development and enactment process show that actors draw on a repertoire of creation strategies which includes (1) identification of character role; (2) transposition from personal experiences; (3) use of cultural resources; (4) physicalization; (5) improvisation; and (6) imagination.
Identification of Character Role

Identification of a character role is the most frequently mentioned strategy used by actors in my sample. As interviewees acknowledge, this is because the process of character role development usually starts by reading the play or film script. The script provides the basis for typifying a character, attitudinal relations to other characters, and behavioral ways of interacting.

Complete information about one’s character is not available from the script or director, but actors can glean clues from the character’s described conduct and appearance. They make connections between the setting and the character, and they rely on what the character says about himself/herself and what others say about him/her. In the Actors Studio class I observed that actors build the identity of their character also through interactions with other cast members during rehearsal and by responding to how others formulate their characters.

All in all, actors make connections between the given information and the aspects of thinking, relating, and behaving that they infer from this information in terms of the typification process. The basis of interactions is the ability and inclination to “apprehend the other by means of typification schemes . . . [such as] ‘a man,’ ‘a European,’ ‘a buyer,’ ‘a jovial type,’ and so on” (Berger and Luckmann, 1967:30). For example, creating Maerose in Prizzi’s Honor, Anjelica Huston relied upon a typification of an Italian woman.

Maerose is someone who gets up in the morning, puts on the full stick, and stays that way. A lot of Italian women are like this. Not long ago I was part of a seminar that included Gina Lollobrigida. You can tell from looking at her that she gets up every morning, puts on her makeup, perfects her hair and nails—creates herself. (Film Comment, 1987)

Research in culture and cognition suggests that the execution of the identification strategy is facilitated by the modularity of cultural material, that is, by its compartmentalization into specific domains or around specific roles (for review, see DiMaggio, 1997). If cultural content pertaining to one role is stored within a distinct memory domain, once actors typify their character role, they ipso facto interpret certain aspects of this type’s conduct, tastes, manners, emotional reactions, ways of relating to others, and so forth. As soon as one student actress preparing for her part of the bride in Lorca’s Blood Wedding typified her character as a wealthy young woman from the early 1900s, she could infer the attitude, posture, and the manner of speaking and dressing of her character by drawing from the identified domain.

I would think [the character] was living in the nineteen hundreds, so what kind of dresses did they wear? They had to wear tight corsets, so she would not be as free in her movements. She was wealthy, so she probably carried herself elegantly. You just
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think of how they grew up, what they lived like, and that can help because, obviously, if she is wealthy she will hold herself a different way. She’d hold her head a different way than if she were poor. (Laura)

Drawing on typifications to establish the identity of a character seems also to suggest that institutionalized, widely shared cultural images are more accessible than the noninstitutionalized, more idiosyncratic ones. Institutionalization, then, is one of the criteria for selection of cultural elements to be incorporated into character roles. Nevertheless, actors evaluate the suitability of many possible elements. As I observed in the Actors Studio class, they are aided as well as constrained in this process by their own ideas of what constitutes a believable character as well as the ideas of their teachers and fellow actors. Judgments are conveyed through phrases like “I don’t think [this character] would react like this” or “what you’re doing is not consistent with [the character’s] objective.” These assessments are largely based on people’s preconceived notions about social roles and identities, which reflect social and cultural mores and structure the execution of the character-role identification process.

Transposing From Personal Experiences

Theater and film acting rely on the generalizability or virtuality of cultural schemas (Sewell, 1992). Creating a character role typically requires actors to generalize the cultural content they already know to novel situations. Actors often cannot literally use their own experiences and existing cultural knowledge, but transpose those to the scripted circumstances. Rebecca, a student actress, described how the transposition of cultural schemas works:

I was doing a monologue, and it is about a brother who has cerebral paralysis, and I am his sister. I am working on this, trying to make a fictitious brother, imagine him ... and it wasn’t working. I don’t have a brother and I haven’t been in an experience like this. I was trying to remember people who I had seen like that, and I couldn’t invest enough and [the director] said, “Who is the person you care about most in the world? What if they were doing to that person what they are doing to that boy?” And, wow! It just came to me. That’s what I needed to do. It is a translation. You use the effect of how this brother is making the character feel. (Rebecca)

Likewise, Christopher Walken used an analogy to transpose his reactions from a situation that he personally experienced (i.e., being alone in a summer camp) to his character’s reality of being at war in Vietnam in Deer Hunter.

I remember once when I was a very young child I was sent to a summer camp: it seemed as if I had been abandoned, that I was never going to find my way back...
remember thinking: I will never get home again. I will never see anybody again, I am miserable. I doubt I was 10, but I can still remember what a horror that was…. I must say, I did think of that at the time of making the film: Where am I? I’m never gonna get out of here. (Film Comment, 1992)

Walken’s statement also provides some insights into the selection of cultural elements, suggesting that very memorable and emotionally charged images (“I can still remember what a horror that was”) are used to create character roles. It is likely that those events, which are more salient to an actor’s personal identity or were acquired in more emotionally intense circumstances, are more potent and will be selected more often than the less emotionally charged ones.

Transposing the known onto the unfamiliar does not come naturally, nor is it arbitrary. It is a skill that actors hone through exercises in acting classes and during rehearsal time. And while known cultural elements can be transposed in creative ways (Sewell, 1992), such creativity is not limitless but structured, as the notion of structured agency implies. In those circumstances where situations in a script (or imagined by a director) unambiguously define the kind of feeling or action to be enacted, creativity in transposing is quite constrained. A clearly defined relationship between Rebecca’s character and the character’s brother dictated feelings of unconditional love and commitment as the only appropriate response. In contrast, when contexts in a script allow for multiple interpretations (since not everything is clearly defined), transposing can be more creative. Walken could, for example, transpose from his experiences of rage or apathy or horror to portray the reality of a character in the Vietnam War.

Use of Cultural Resources

The use of actual cultural resources, such as forms of ideational and material culture found in books, museums, films and through observing and talking to people, is a frequently reported strategy. This strategy connects the aspects of cultural appropriation and creation by highlighting how the expansion of actors’ personal cultural toolkits (Swidler, 1986) contributes to the creation of new cultural objects in the form of character roles.

As specified, actors tend to begin by identifying their character in terms of broad types. But while a stereotype might be “a good place to start” (Film Comment, 1990c), the main goal of Method actors is to create a believable character and to approximate real life as closely as possible. “The idea is to get the character consistent and credible,” Kate, a student actress, emphasized. In order to do so, actors need to develop the specifics of a character by using cultural resources that they have at their disposal. These resources
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include material culture (e.g., books, films, music), conversations related to life in specific times and places, and observations of people. While many of these ideas and images are already part of actors’ personal cultural toolkits, situations arise in which actors need to expand their toolkits by actively searching for ideas and images that will enable them to create a convincing character. The teacher at the Actors Studio encouraged students to collect objects, images, or music and “work with them to articulate the character.”

The choice of when to rely primarily on the known images and when to expand personal toolkits depends largely on actors’ understandings of how close a character role is to their own personality and cultural background. Actors would adapt their strategies to this character-actor distance. Differentiation between automatic and deliberate selection is useful in understanding these processes.9

Automatic Selection of Cultural Images

When identified character roles are very close to actors’ personal lives, they would act as themselves—as individuals, not theater/film actors. They would automatically select images from their personal cultural toolkits in a habitual manner. They would rely on schemas that provide default assumptions about ideas and events, their characteristics and relationships, which are stored in memory (DiMaggio, 1997). Such automatic selection might even be encouraged by directors (or teachers) since Method principles suggest that actors use themselves as a “mine from which all psychological truth must be dug” (tenet 4). I observed this also in the Actors Studio class. Once, for instance, the teacher was not happy with the reactions of one student actor rehearsing a scene with his colleague. She interrupted, “You are running away from what’s happening to you! React as if someone was doing this to you.” Such an intervention apparently required of that student to react as himself and not as his character and, consequently, to draw automatically from his personal cultural toolkit to construct the line of action.

A student actor describing his role of Eugene in Grease, illustrated how he used his own experiences to develop the character.

When I was developing the behavior of Eugene, who is a nerd, my imagination went to behavior of a nerd from my own sense of being a bookworm and not being included and wanting to be included. . . . That came from my own experience. . . . I was pretty much a nerd myself in school growing up, and Eugene was probably like that. (Jay)

9This differentiation is informed by DiMaggio’s (1997) distinction between automatic and deliberate cognition and could be paralleled with Swidler’s (1986) discussion of culture in settled and unsettled times.
Deliberate Selection of Cultural Images

When actors face character roles that are unlike themselves or unfamiliar to them, they must actively search for new cultural elements. In these circumstances, some elements that immediately (automatically) come to mind (e.g., cultural stereotypes or actors’ personal experiences) might be overridden after deliberation. In her description of how she created the character of an Irish woman from the 1920s, Heather, a student actress, illustrates such deliberate selection.

One actress’s grandmother was Irish, and she would come to talk to us about life in the twenties. . . . In this case, where you had no knowledge about life at that time, in that country, you had to find out everything. What we have also done was to look at pages and pages of pictures of the Irish countryside, because the play was taking place in a specific town in a specific county, so even if you had an idea of what Dublin was like, it wasn’t that. We looked at pictures of people wearing clothing. . . . I also read a couple novels by Irish women writers, some of them were even contemporary Irish women writers, just to get some sort of feeling of that culture. (Heather)

Heather’s description nicely illustrates a strategy of deliberate selection of images to build a character. Since cultural material required to create an Irish woman from the 1920s was not part of her personal toolkit, Heather needed to expand her cultural knowledge by searching for new images from a variety of sources. At first, Heather had some (stereo)typical idea of what living in Ireland in the 1920s would be like and relied on that during the initial improvisation of a scene in class. However, knowing that her character had to be specific and lifelike, Heather deliberated and transcended the level of the stereotypical. Thus, to portray a character outside the culture she personally knew required deliberation and conscious effort. Harvey Keitel agrees:

You have to work harder because you are unfamiliar with the environment. And that information isn’t readily available. For The Duellists, I read Will and Ariel Durant’s The Age of Napoleon, and other books. I had some previous films about the period, like the Russian War and Peace and Desiree, screened for me. I went to France, to the museum there, and tried to get a feel for that time. I met with someone who was an expert on that period; he gave us a lot of information on the structure of the military then. (Film Comment, 1978)

Between Automatic and Deliberate Selection

In many cases, however, actors have to portray character roles that are neither very distant in terms of time and place nor simply within their own experiences. In such situations, actors start by drawing upon their existing ideas and images but find that they have to expand the range of known
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behaviors and attitudes. Often they do this by acute observation of people, as did Richard Gere for his role in *American Gigolo*:

> I’ve known gigolos all my life—all my show-business life; they’ve been around my life. I’d never explored them in that way. But once you key into that, you think, “Oh, yeah, that guy,” and all these things come back to you. What was he doing at that party? How was he looking? Was he talking a lot? How was he smoking? What kind of cigarettes was he smoking? [The character] starts to fill up that way, bit by bit. *(Film Comment, 1980)*

Acute observation is included as one of the Method acting principles (tenet 1). In our conversations, student actors were very aware of this acting convention, substantiating that cultural structures influence their creation process. They mentioned that “registering of what is going on around [them]” was a valuable resource that they could always draw from. If their character reminded them of a person they knew, a friend, their mother, or even a total stranger on a subway that made an impression, they could “take” some of that person’s mannerisms that they have observed and “give” them to their character. Or, they might do “field work” in the setting represented in the film or play. To prepare for his part in *Black Rain*, for instance, Michael Douglas “would hang out with the New York homicide detectives” *(Film Comment, 1990a)*.

In sum, the incorporation of cultural resources rests on automatic selection (i.e., habitual recall of the already appropriated cultural material stored in personal toolkits) as well as deliberate selection (i.e., purposive search for resources and evaluation of their appropriateness for a particular character role). The use of resources is certainly enabled by the culture and lines of action that one already masters. However, it is also constrained by the scripted information about a character role, and by what is deemed collectively appropriate for producing verisimilitude. To “ensure that [stage behavior] is psychologically sound,” as Method tenet 2 advises, every additional incorporated resource must be integral with the previous one and consistent with the gist of the character and the premise of the script. This certainly limits the possible range of actions and structures creativity.

**Physicalization**

Use of physical resources to develop character roles was mentioned particularly frequently. The Method acting tenet 7, suggesting that actors rely on material objects, can be seen as the basis for this strategy. During class rehearsals, student actors brought costumes and props to signal something about their character. In addition, props, dress, and shoes were talked about as sources of gestures and mannerisms. Sharon, a student actress, emphasized
how high heels and tight suits defined her character’s posture and “fleshed-out” the personality.

You get the shoes and you get the walk, it changes your whole body. [In this case] I had these really disgusting pumps… [The character] was a white trash but she wanted to be more, although everybody thought she was a joke… We fleshed her out… We tried a lot of different costumes and, of course, we tried the obvious, like Peggy Bundy… We wanted to be very obvious about her trashiness and then we decided, “No, that’s too obvious.” So we would hide the trash inside of her, underneath these clothes that just did not fit her, like these business suits. And we always got it too big or too tight, it just never looked right on her…. they sprayed my hair blond every night, because she wanted to be like trash, you know she had dark roots and then blond. If she wore jeans she had to wear high heels… you know those jeans with little bows on the bottom… (Sharon)

Execution of the physicalization strategy is possible because actors are able to infer something about the social location and identity of their characters from a mere physical manifestation. As Bourdieu (1984) illustrates in Distinction, bodies bear the imprint of people’s tastes, their lifestyles, and the material circumstances of their lives. Gender, class, race, age, sexuality, and so forth, are impressed in people’s bodies through such features as accent, poise, and movement.10

Actors described how they used pictures of gestures or posture to help them “flesh out the character.” Rebecca, a student actress, would go to the picture collection and Xerox pictures of women from the 1920s because that was the time period of the play she was working on. She would try out how the poses from those pictures could fit her character. Tangible gestures were particularly helpful for the embodiment of her character, which suggests that cultural elements, which are easily used in action, are incorporated into character roles more readily than the less practicable cultural material.

Furthermore, how were specific gestures selected from available alternatives? Allison, an acting student, showed me an old postcard picturing a woman reclining next to a tree. She explained how she accidentally came across this picture and she bought it because it reminded her of the character she was working on. She said that she “had a feeling” about her character and the “picture helped articulate that feeling.” In a way, the picture of a reclining woman resonated with Allison. The idea of resonance refers to the potency of cultural objects because they are relevant to receivers’ interests (Schudson, 1989). For actors like Allison, the images that resonate with the idea of what their character is like (established during the identification of character) will be incorporated more readily than others.

10 On gender and body, see Connell (1995) and the recognition of the body’s significance in hegemonic masculinity. See also Martin (1998) for an analysis of how the hidden school curriculum of disciplining the body is gendered and contributes to the embodiment of gender in childhood.
Imagination

Student actors identified two aspects of the character-development process in which the role of their imagination was crucial: creating a biography of the character and creating specific situational circumstances that were not provided in the script. These two were also listed on a handout entitled “Suggestions for a Rehearsal Process,” which was distributed to student actors by their teacher. To create a biography of one of the character roles she enacted, Jennifer Jason Leigh kept a personal journal, “written as the [character] would write [her] own diary.” This diary was “a source of [her] character’s concrete memories and experiences” (Film Comment, 1990b) which were, of course, imagined by Leigh. Student actors emphasized the importance of imagining a life history of their characters, which was also the practice of established actors. Jessica Lange, for instance, said of her role in The Postman Only Rings Twice: “I created a complete, concrete history of this woman. In my fantasy, I’d live out every detail of her life, from childhood up until the present” (Film Comment, 1981).

Creating situational details and improvising for a moment before they enter on stage was also suggested on the handout distributed to the Actors Studio class. One student’s story shows that some actors take great pains to imagine situations that will enable them to put on a lifelike performance, claimed as the ultimate goal of their activity.

I created a history for the character I played. I decided that he has known this other guy in the play for x amount of years. And I really sat down and I calculated . . . if he knew him for five years, what logically would make sense for him, how many years would he know his girlfriend and why, and then I also sat down and calculated [for one particular scene], OK, I get up on Saturday morning at eight, and it is very leisurely. I do my stretching, etc., and how long would it take for me to take a shower, have a cup of coffee, fall asleep again for a little while, wake up again and be at that restaurant by the time that I was supposed to be there. . . . And if it is going to be mid-day, what have I done to get to this mid-day point, and why do I want pizza, well, it has to be kinda lunch time, because I wouldn’t eat pizza at eight in the morning. . . . and the pizza was in the text. (Roger)

Improvisation

Improvising was a strategy listed among the Method acting tenets and actors themselves mentioned it frequently. Many established actors, such as Susan Sarandon, recalled how they improvised on the spot by taking in what happens on the set and between actors.

Michael [Marsden, the co-actor] never looked me in the eye, and I kind of incorporated that into the scene when I said, “You remember when we met, you didn’t know what color my eyes were. What color are my eyes?”—because he really never
focused on me. So in using who he was we came up with the idea that they probably
didn’t want to get real close, it was more like friends rather than two people who
were looking for some kind of intimacy. (Film Comment, 1993 [on her role in
Thelma and Louise])

If culture works “through the interaction of share cognitive structures
and supra-individual cultural phenomena . . . that activate those structures
to varying degrees” (DiMaggio, 1997:264), then immediate situational cir-
cumstances (such as the set, costumes, lighting, unexpected interactions with
other actors, etc.) provide cues that trigger corresponding cultural elements
in thought and behavior. 11 For Christopher Walken the actions in the dra-
matic Russian roulette scene in the Deer Hunter were triggered by the phys-
ical setting and situational details.

The atmosphere was very conducive. We were in the jungle, we were in the water, we
had been away from home a long time; we were ripe. [And] there was a guy smacking
me in my face. (Film Comment, 1992)

Executing the strategies of imagination and improvisation also implies
that action is not only contingent on situations, but situations themselves
are “constitutive of action . . . [and] appear to call forth, to provoke certain
actions already in our perception” (Joas, 1996:160; emphasis in the original).
Actors creatively respond to the contingencies of the moment. There are lim-
its to their creativity, however, imposed by the existing patterns of thinking
and cultural odds and ends that they have ready at hand. Selecting, finding,
and using a variety of cultural images that help develop specificity and detail
means relying on one’s capacities to access cultural resources and evaluate
alternative possibilities. But as the notion of structured agency conveys, this
ability is enabled and constrained by the content and availability of cultural
images.

Moreover, the creativity of Method actors involves a paradox. Aiming
for “the reproduction of recognizable reality,” Method actors are creative in
transposing to novel circumstances and “putting structurally formed capaci-
ties to work in creative or innovative ways” (Sewell, 1992:4). But they don’t
transpose in order to come up with novel lines of action. Rather, Method
actors who excel at their craft are able to approximate the reality as truth-
fully as possible. In this process, they rely on intersubjectively agreed-upon
and collectively shared understandings about the social world and identi-
ies. Thus they end up reaffirming and reproducing existent typifications and
cultural mores. 12

11 See Fine’s (1979) analysis of idioculture, where he postulates the concept of “a triggering
event” as an explanatory device to determine selection of cultural items that constitute
idioculture.

12 See Willis (1977) or Corsaro (1992) for examples where creativity contributes to the repro-
duction of social structures.
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The Logic of Acting Practice

Rather than conscious planning tactics, *strategies* in this analysis should be understood as general ways to organize the creation process (Swidler, 1986). Certainly, actors deliberate and actively search for images to incorporate in their characters. But they also say that they are not aware of how they selected particular gestures or mannerisms for their character or how they could infer something about their character from his or her shoes. In fact, student actors as well as established actors all stress the role of intuition and trial and error in the character-development process. They say they experiment with different gestures and mannerisms, but ultimately it is something that “feels right” that they keep. Laura, a student actress, commented,

> A lot of [role creation] is just experimenting, trying things. And if something doesn’t feel right, you know that that’s not it and you try something else. But it’s amazing because once you do give a character a life and you are up there playing this person, those things just come to you, you find yourself, at least I do, I find myself doing things… you know if I had sat there for three hours trying to think of something, that never would have come to me. … A lot of it is natural because you breathe as this person, and then it just comes. (Laura)

Bourdieu’s (1980) notion of the logic of practice provides an analytical tool to account for this intuitive aspect of the character-development process. Although an actor’s effort to construct a character involves deliberation, logical analysis, inference from the text, and conscious selection of particular cultural items that are consistent with the image of the character, every narrative that I read or heard involved a certain element of indefiniteness. And even though improvising and using imagination are two strategies that can be inductively inferred from actors’ narratives, at their essence is “the use of tacit knowledge in an unconscious process” (Abolafia, 1996:26).

Observing enactment of character roles reveals that acting is not “a state of mind,” nor “arbitrary adherence to a set of instituted principles,” but rather “a state of the body” (Bourdieu, 1980:68). Ultimately, actors have

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13We should note that such trial-and-error exercises are structured through interactions with the director (or acting teacher). As I observed in the Actors Studio class, these structurations were bountiful. However, the guidance was also often very flexible; the teacher would not suggest anything concrete but just express her “hunch” that the scene should be done differently, as in, “This doesn’t work for me, I don’t know, it doesn’t click, try it again.”

14Thus, on a reflexive note, I should not be surprised that actors have found my questions of “how they actually do it on the stage” hard or even impossible to answer. Bourdieu (1980) might have suggested that asking such questions was confusing the actor’s point of view with the spectator’s point of view. I might have been looking for “answers to questions that practice never asks because it has no need to ask them,” quite possibly because “the essence of practice is precisely that it excludes such questions” (Bourdieu, 1980:82-83).
to have “the ‘feel’ (sens) for the [act]” (82). Indeed, inferring the social location of a character from physical embodiment; eliciting an array of cultural schemas from the same domain in which one prominent feature of a character is defined; transposing to novel circumstances; responding to situational logics; automatically selecting from cultural repertoires when improvising—all these are processes that flow from actors’ practical sense in the moment of character-role enactment.

In their narratives actors are likely to underplay somewhat the deliberative aspects of character-role creation. As I observed in the Actors Studio class, actors were asked to very consciously think about certain aspects of their creativity, such as the underlying motivation of their character’s behavior or relationships to other characters in the script. Taking this into account, I propose that “the logic of acting practice” is best understood when we envision the strategies of improvisation and imagination working together and often simultaneously with other strategies. Purposefulness and evaluation are permeated with intuition. The notion of the logic of practice, with the contradiction embedded in the term, is adopted precisely to imply that no clear boundaries can be established between the conscious and unconscious. Demarcations are only analytic strategies.

**The Social Ceremony of Acting**

Actors’ activity involves a range of individual capacities, including intuition, evaluation, and deliberation, but the structuring role of the social interactions with directors (teachers), other actors, and ultimately the audience must be underscored. A sociological perspective on acting suggests that actors’ creation processes could not be fully realized without the social context: “There is no acting without audience so that acting is a social ceremony” (White, 1993:123). This social ceremony unfolds through the social construction of reality that happens between the performers and the receivers. It is enabled because typifications are intersubjectively shared (Berger and Luckmann, 1967). If we take literally the theater analogy that

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15While for Bourdieu (1988) sports has been of great theoretical interest, my inquiry suggests that the process of character development in acting likewise reflects the “infraconscious mastery that agents acquire of their social world by way of durable immersion within it” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992:19).

16The purposive, evaluative, and intuitive agentic capacities correspond to Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998:962) understanding of agency as “the chordal triad” with “an iterational or habitual aspect, . . . projective capacity to imagine alternative possibilities, . . . [and] a practical-evaluative capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment.” In this sense, automatic selection of cultural elements brings the habitual aspect of agency to the foreground, while deliberate selection emphasizes the projective and practical-evaluative capacities.
Goffman (1959:17) employs in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, then on stage, “a performer can be fully taken in by his own act, he can be sincerely convinced that the impression of reality which he stages is the real reality. When his audience is also convinced in this way about the show he puts on, there are no doubts about the ‘realness’ of what is presented.”

What is considered real is “constructed in a cultural frame” (Schudson, 1989:169) since the notions of believable, credible, convincing, or authentic can only be defined relationally and thus collectively by actors and receivers. This ultimately means that an actor’s goal is to create a character role that will match the audience’s ideas and not reality as such. As Jeff, one of the student actors says,

> What you must go for is to some extent that cultural generality where people understand the type immediately. . . . People have to know. . . . You got to be quick in telling them who you are, where you are. They have to [recognize] the person. . . . I mean it has to match their ideas about what this person should be like. (Jeff; emphasis added)

As do actors in their character-development process, when they receive/consume cultural objects the audience members also draw on typifications, cultural mores, and shared ideas about human identities, motivation, and action. Thus, actors’ creations have only to “match [these] ideas” and not real life. For example, if Jack Nicholson plays an Italian mafia man, he does not have to be an actual Italian mafioso to be considered good in his part of Charlie Partana in *Prizzi’s Honor*. He has to be like the type of an Italian mafia man that the audience imagines. While it would be most interesting to uncover how such typifications are produced, this is beyond the scope of the present analysis.

Nevertheless, what this paper does suggest is that actors’ portrayals of character roles contribute to the social reproduction of existing typifications and images of human identity, motivations, and actions. It is important to note that many such typifications reify differences among social groups and draw social boundaries, which can ultimately influence people’s life chances. Knowing that U.S. film and stage portrayals are among the most pervasive popular cultural objects (with increasing global influence), affirming and reproducing typifications, even if it is only on screen or on stage, may consequentially shape audience’s ideas and understandings.

Keeping in mind that criteria of excellence in acting are historically and culturally specific, we should emphasize not only that notions of authenticity are socially constructed but also that their importance changes over time (Orvell, 1989; Sennett, 1976). See the analysis of authenticity and production of country music in Peterson (1997). This analysis can only suggest an implication of actors’ cultural objects creation. Studies of cultural reception should more rigorously examine how successful execution of the Method conveys verisimilitude to the audience, and when and how it influences their perceptions.
Table I. Strategies of Character-Role Creation by Method Actors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies</th>
<th>Established actors (Total roles: 39; Total strategies: 101)</th>
<th>Student actors (Total roles: 15; Total strategies: 62)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identification of character</td>
<td>23 (23%)</td>
<td>14 (23%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transposition from experience</td>
<td>19 (19%)</td>
<td>11 (18%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of cultural resources</td>
<td>22 (22%)</td>
<td>12 (20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physicalization</td>
<td>14 (14%)</td>
<td>10 (16%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improvisation</td>
<td>12 (12%)</td>
<td>8 (13%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imagination</td>
<td>11 (11%)</td>
<td>7 (11%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a Among the 50 published interviews, 34 were with Method actors. Three of them talked about more than one character-role creation; thus, the number of roles is 39.

b Actors use multiple strategies to develop any one character role; thus, the number of total strategies is more than the number of total roles.

DISCUSSION

From narratives and field observations, I identified a repertoire of strategies that actors use to create character roles. Table I shows that these strategies are used in equal proportions by established actors and student actors.19 One has to be careful, however, when making inferences about the actual frequency and effectiveness of creation strategies for three reasons. First, I draw on respondents’ accounts, and while they are consistent with actual practice, as I was able to observe in the Actors Studio class, there may be omissions in the narratives. Second, the use of strategies is contingent upon the information provided to the actor in the script and by the director, which varies from role to role. Third, the choice of strategies hinges on the judgment about how similar a character role is to an actor’s personal experiences and cultural knowledge. All these factors render some strategies more useful than others for any specific character-role creation.

Moreover, the production of compelling performances depends on the successful execution of strategies and actors’ skills. While student actors might have extensive theoretical knowledge about Method acting, which allows them to identify the appropriate strategies of action, they might lack experiences in executing strategies. On the other hand, experienced actors might find it difficult to identify and execute strategies required for a role that was considerably different from roles they had performed in the past. In addition, the execution of strategies in role enactments does not depend merely on the individual actor but the whole acting ensemble and stage direction, which differ from role to role.

19 Both established actors and student actors use several strategies to develop any one character role. While it seems that student actors use on average more strategies that established actors, this finding is probably because I was able to get more elaborate accounts in the in-depth interviews with student actors but was limited to the published material for established actors.
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For all these reasons, the difference between more or less successful performances, that is, between more or less compelling representations of lifelike characters, is not just determined by the choice of character-role creation strategies. Rather, the key is in matching the available strategies to the requirements of a script, mastering the execution of these strategies, and receiving constructive guidance from directors and fellow actors in the process.

How do particular cultural elements get selected from available alternatives to be incorporated into a character role? The evidence shows that actors select those cultural elements that are more readily available, institutionalized, easily used in action, emotionally forceful, and resonant with identified interests. While these criteria are useful in describing the potency of culture (see Schudson, 1989), characteristics of cultural elements alone do not determine which images get selected. Not only the efficacy of elements, but also the scripted circumstances are significant. Actors distinguish between cases where they have to portray a character who is like them or what they know well, and cases when the character is “outside their culture.” When actor-character distance is narrow, more recent and more emotionally charged images are readily invoked. When actor-character distance is significant, cultural elements are actively sought and incorporated if they are institutionalized, resolved toward action, or if they resonate with an actor’s idea of what a character should be like. The deliberately selected cultural elements are discussed with fellow actors and directors and tried out during rehearsal. As one student actor commented, the goal is to achieve “a sense of authority, a sense of confidence [and] a sense of ownership” of the new lines of action, and ease with the new cultural material. Deep involvement and meticulous practice aid in this pursuit.

Construction of Social Roles: Toward a Method-Acting Dramaturgy

Applying insights from the character-role creation process used by Method actors, we can draw parallels to how people create and perform social roles in everyday life. While we can certainly learn from Method acting about social role construction, it is important to acknowledge first that the underlying interests and performance outcomes between the two are very different. Mostly, actors pursue strategies of character-role creation that will help them construct credible representations. People, on the other hand, tend not to be preoccupied about what makes their roles authentic. An actress playing a mother of a sick child needs to think about what will make her come across as a believable concerned care-taker. A mother will just worry about her sick child. If our actress is interested in the conditions and
understandings experienced by concerned mothers (which she most likely
has to be in order to produce a lifelike character), this concern is present
because she is worried about how her role will be perceived by others. More-
over, the “authenticity” of her performance depends upon its consistency
with the audience’s expectations of a role rather than the real identities and
circumstances of those occupying this role in the world.20

Despite important differences between stage and real life, dramaturgy
nevertheless provides an illuminating analytical framework for the study of
social interaction (Goffman, 1959, 1961). In particular, understanding how
Method actors create character roles provides insights into how people use
culture to construct social roles. Inferring from the present analysis, when
confronted with changed life circumstances (i.e., getting a job, becoming
a parent, immigrating to a new country), people search for new cultural
material and construct new lines of action that enable enactment of their new
social roles. They engage in cultural retooling, which requires identification
of and judgment about what the new social role entails, as well as deep
involvement and meticulous practice in taking on that role. One transposes
the known onto unfamiliar circumstances, retrieves new cultural material,
gauges its appropriateness, and imagines and improvises within situational
contexts. Such “role work” is creative, involving intuition, judgment, and
deliberation.

Furthermore, creative “role work” cannot happen in isolation. Dur-
ing the enactment in social contexts, others who have expectations of what
one’s new role should entail and how it should be performed provide cru-
cial feedback and thus structure the “role work.” With practice and deep
involvement, one acquires ease with and confidence about the new social
role until one is not a mere performer but becomes that role.

Such a treatment of social role creation based on Method acting sug-
uggests amendment to Goffman’s dramaturgy in three ways. First, Method
implies that people conform to roles not only outwardly, but also inwardly;
they engage in deep acting, not only surface acting (Hochschild, 1979). Ac-
cording to Method criteria, performing a role does not mean detaching from
it but infusing one’s activity with genuine efforts to portray the kind of
feeling, thinking, and behaving that we (and others) judge appropriate to a
particular role. Second, as the analysis of Method acting practice substanti-
ates, the script that actors work with certainly structures performances. But
the script is neither complete nor unambiguous. Rather, it asks for imagi-
 nation and leaves room for improvisation. Third, role performance is not a
straightforward realization by a single performer but results from an ongoing

20This paragraph draws substantially on the comments the author received from Robert Max
Jackson.
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negotiation among actors. Overall, we learn from Method actors’ craft that taking on social roles is a creative process, where individual capacities for action are shaped by cultural and social conditions.²¹

CONCLUSION

To match their resources to scripted character roles and to represent what they often do not know, Method actors draw on a repertoire of character-role creation strategies. Acting conventions relayed through organizational settings and interactions in the acting art world help actors identify these strategies and structure their execution. The overall creation process is shaped by what is collectively deemed appropriate for producing lifelike characters, espoused as the criterion of excellence in Method acting. The actors that achieve this standard creatively reproduce existing typifications.

In sum, character-role creation by Method actors is a process whereby individual capacities are both constrained and enabled by cultural conventions and social structures. Artistic creativity of actors is analyzed as structured agency. This framework provides analytical tools for future research examining the creation of cultural objects in other artistic pursuits, such as visual art, fiction writing, or music composition. These artistic activities might be similar to Method acting in their practical approach to creation, where artists draw on the received culture and are shaped by existing structures. At the same time, other artistic expressions would likely differ from Method acting in the kinds of creation strategies that they involve, and in the extent to which their creative outcomes involve the reproduction of existing meanings or the creation of novel ones. In any case, situated at the junction between cultural appropriation and creation, sociological studies of artistic creativity would explicate how artists create cultural objects that come to constitute and influence our understandings of the social world.

APPENDIX ON METHODOLOGY

Content Analysis of Published Interviews With Established Actors

I searched Art Index Retrospective and Art Abstracts databases to compile published personal statements of actors and actresses in which they

²¹Obviously, this is only an initial step toward a systematic comparison between role-construction on stage and in everyday life, which is beyond the scope of this research and should be pursued in a separate analysis.
focus on the process of character development and enactment. *Art Index Retrospective*, produced by the H. W. Wilson Company, is a bibliographic database that cumulates citations to *Art Index* volumes 1–32 of the printed index published between 1929 and 1984. *Art Abstracts*, also produced by H. W. Wilson, is a bibliographic database that indexes and abstracts articles from periodicals published throughout the world from 1984 to the present. In both databases, coverage includes periodicals, yearbooks, and museum bulletins on topics of advertising art, antiques, archaeology, architecture and architectural history, art history, computers in art, crafts, decorative arts, fashion design, folk art, graphic arts, industrial design, interior design, landscape architecture, motion pictures, museology, non-western art, painting, photography, pottery, sculpture, television, textiles, and video.

The databases most frequently cited interviews with actors published in *Film Comment*, a bimonthly Lincoln Film Society publication. Thus I used *Film Comment* as a source for the published interviews. I selected all interviews with actors published from 1977 to 1997, generating a population of 50 interviews. Among these I selected interviews with American Method actors by identifying those actors who either emphasized that they use Method technique of acting or reported that they studied with Method teachers or were listed as Method actors in Steve Vineberg’s book *Method Actors: Three Generations of an American Acting Style* (1991). Sixty-eight percent of the population (i.e., 34 interviews) passed these criteria. Other interviews included European or Australian actors (16%), actors of the 1930s and early 1940s (6%), and those that could not be classified (10%). Among the 34 interviews that I analyzed in depth, 88% were Oscar winners or nominees, so I considered them as professionally established actors.

In each published interview I first identified all the parts where interviewees talked about creating their character roles. From these I transcribed all the actions related to the process of character creation, which resulted in a compilation of 101 items (see example below). I grouped these actions into six categories and counted their frequency (Table I). To identify these categories (i.e., creation strategies), I first relied on the suggestions about strategies provided in the tenets of Method acting, including the following: observation (tenet 1); identification of character’s motivation (tenet 2); use of actor’s own personality (tenet 4); improvisation (tenet 5); and use of objects (tenet 7). To better represent the data, I revised the names of these categories, except “improvisation,” in the following ways.

Tenet 1 suggests “observation” as one of the strategies. Actors did talk about incorporating observations of people, but they also used ideas from pictures and books. Thus, I renamed this strategy “the use of cultural resources” to account for appropriation of a variety of cultural images.
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Tenet 2 suggests that actors should find “a motivation for character’s behavior.” Actors themselves also talked about “identifying the character’s objective,” using “descriptions of character in the script” or “getting instructions from the director” about who the character is. Thus, I renamed this strategy “identification of character.”

Tenet 4 suggests that actors should “use their own personality” in developing characters. Actors did not use such phrasing; rather, they said that they relied on their own experiences, or incorporated what happened to them personally. Thus, I renamed this strategy “transposing from experience.”

Tenet 7 suggests “the use of objects.” Actors referred to the use of props, clothes, and shoes. To capture the material and physical aspects of this strategy, and to distinguish it from the “use of cultural resources” strategy, I clustered such actions under the “physicalization” category.

In addition, several actors also mentioned how they used their imagination in creating character roles. Acts of imagination could not be collapsed into any other category, so I added a sixth category called “imagination.”

While the names of these strategies were chosen at my discretion, provided they followed the described content analysis guidelines, I am confident that other analysts studying character role creation by Method actors would produce a substantively similar classification.

Example of Coding Procedure

Source: Published interview, Film Comment, 1992, 28, no. 4
Actor: Christopher Walken
Role: Nick, Vietnam veteran, in the Deer Hunter
Extraction: I remember once when I was a very young child I was sent to a summer camp: it seemed as if I had been abandoned, that I was never going to find my way back. . . . I remember thinking: I will never get home again. I will never see anybody again, I am miserable. I doubt I was 10, but I can still remember what a horror that was . . . I must say, I did think of that at the time of making the film: Where am I? I’m never gonna get out of here.
Action: Using childhood experience
Strategy: Transposing from experience

Semistructured, Face-to-Face Interviews

To conduct face-to-face interviews with actors, I established contacts with a help of a friend who was enrolled in a graduate level Basic Method
Acting class at the Actors Studio. My friend introduced me to her class members. All but two agreed to participate, which resulted in a sample of 15 graduate student actors. The interviewees had a variety of backgrounds: 10 were women, 3 were foreigners, 3 were from minority racial backgrounds, 2 were Jewish, 1 was openly a homosexual. They were all in their mid-20s. I did not find that one’s demographic characteristics influenced responses in any patterned way. However, years of acting experiences enabled people to provide more specific answers about how their process of character development works. Ten respondents had more than 4 years of acting experiences.

Interviews lasted from 45 to 90 min (average was about 1 h) and were tape-recorded. I conducted 13 interviews in the school cafeteria where students hung out during their free time between classes. I met two people for the interview outside school; one in a coffee shop and the other in a restaurant. In the interviews, which were semistructured, I asked respondents to select one character role they had performed and to explain how they developed and enacted that role. I also asked them to describe how they would recognize that a particular performance was a good one. These were guiding questions, and each respondent developed his or her own narrative. I probed and asked for clarification when necessary. I transcribed each interview and coded it for actions related to character-role creation in the same manner as the published interviews. The coding yielded 62 items. I clustered them into the creation strategies in the same way as the data from the published interviews. In the information included in the text, names of the respondents are altered for confidentiality.

Participant Observation of a Method Acting Class

To check actors’ narratives from the interviews against actual practice, I also observed and interacted with the class of students that I interviewed. I asked my friend to introduce me to the teacher, and after I described my project to her, she gave me permission to be present in the class during those sessions/workshops when students were performing assigned scenes from plays. During these sessions I acquired information on how students are taught to develop character-roles through interactions with the teacher and fellow class members, who always provided instruction, advice, or suggestions on how to “flesh out the character” or “make the scene work.” I also was able to observe how students used the particular character-role creation strategies when they were preparing for and performing scenes from plays. These observations were used to assess the validity of the interviews with student actors, because they allowed me to compare the narratives against behavior.
During class sessions I assumed the role of an audience member. Unobtrusively, I sat in the back of the room and took notes about the observed class activity. Since the class was very spatially dynamic and other students were often observing those who were performing, I do not think that my presence affected the usual classroom activity. I did not engage in the class interactions, but I did socialize with the students before and after their class as well as in the school cafeteria, where I conducted most of the interviews. (I would write out the observations from these interactions after I got back from the field site.) I used the opportunities outside class to establish rapport with students that I eventually asked to interview. I also asked for clarification and interpretation of class events.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to Viviana Zelizer for her wonderful support and invaluable feedback on many drafts of this paper. Paul DiMaggio, Alexandra Kalev, Jason Kaufman, Erin Kelly, Michèle Lamont, Elisha Renne, the anonymous reviewers, and especially the editor of Sociological Forum, Robert Max Jackson, have each provided comments and suggestions that greatly improved the paper.

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