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Actor and identity. Actor's psychological sense of identity

Streszczenie

Artykuł stanowi próbę zrozumienia zjawiska poczucia tożsamości jednostki poprzez psychologiczną interpretację fenomenu „bycia aktorem”. Zastosowano oryginalne podejście do badania zjawiska koncepcji siebie, którego twórcą jest kanadyjski psycholog Rene L'Ecuyer. Metoda ta pozwala badać zjawisko koncepcji siebie w perspektywie rozwojowej, od dzieciństwa do starości. Jest metodą typu idiograficznego, za której pomocą otrzymuje się dane natury jakościowej i ilościowej.

Badania empiryczne prezentowane w tym artykule zostały przeprowadzone w środowisku aktorów zawodowych oraz studentów szkół teatralnych. Wyniki badań ukazują różnice w koncepcji siebie w obydwu grupach osób badanych. Różnice te przejawiają się w liczbie wypowiedzi zaklasyfikowanych do struktur, podstruktur i kategorii, dotyczących koncepcji siebie oraz w stopniu ważności poszczególnych dymensji. W grupie aktorów zawodowych zmianie ulega hierarchia ważności dymensji koncepcji siebie. W badaniach zidentyfikowano dwie formy rozwoju koncepcji siebie. Pierwsza forma to faza rozwoju, druga – to poziom rozwoju koncepcji siebie, który autorka proponuje nazwać poziomem poczucia tożsamości.

Słowa kluczowe

aktor, tożsamość, analiza jakościowa

Abstract

The article adopts an original approach to studying the phenomenon of the concept of “self” whose creator is the Canadian psychologist Rene L'Ecuyer. This is an idiographic method which generates data of both a quantitative and qualitative nature. The empirical studies presented in this article have been done in the milieu of professional actors and among students of theatrical schools. The results of the studies show differences in self concept in both groups. The differences between the group of students and the group of actors are of a qualitative nature and concern the number of utterances in the categories of structures, substructures and self-concept and the degree of importance of certain dimensions. In the group of actors, a difference in the hierarchy of importance of the dimension of self-concept is established. Two kinds of differences verify the hypothesis on the development of self-concept. The first is the phase of development, and the second – the level of development of self concept which the authoress suggests calling the level of the sense of identity.

Keywords

actor, identity, qualitative analysis

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Introduction

Due to the profession that actors choose, they are doomed to intensive experience related to the processes of self-identification. With the ability to be „any man” (Duvignaud, 1987) an actor may experience being the same but not an identical person, being themselves in spite of playing somebody else.

This is illustrated by the following words uttered by an actor: „When I act, I feel fully myself.” Paradoxically, when actors create characters on stage (similar or different from their own personality and appearance) they may become more aware of the sense of being themselves.

Being similar to or different from the character they create makes actors reflect on their own identity and evokes the question „Who am I?” The possibility of becoming someone else, not only themselves, is not an identity-generating factor, but it does inspire questions on the condition of human nature – „Who is a man?” Playing roles is a confrontation with actors’ „I”; it is participating in the world of a different man, in the sphere of different values and meanings. An offer of a role gives a chance to expand one’s own „I” with somebody else’s mentality and to go beyond the boundaries of one’s own „I”. This allows actors to obtain a non-subjective and non-individual perspective, which helps them to develop their own „I” or even to go beyond their immanence and transcend towards objective values. Being an actor does not need to entail an identity crisis or the destruction of identity, nor does it cause narcissistic concentration on their own „I”.

Empirical research on actors’ conception of „I”

The idiographic method of self description created by Canadian psychologist Rene L’Ecuyera was used in this research (the method is known under its test name of GPS). Answers to the open question: „Who are you?”, which allows for any form of description, were collected and then analyzed in terms of the quantitative and qualitative factors of their contents.

The texts were classified according to a 43-element model of self concept (Table 1, p.7) designed by L’Ecuyera (L’Ecuyer, 1978, L’Ecuyer, 1992).

Table 1. Experiential-developmental model of the self concept

Structures	Sub-Structures	Categories
MATERIAL SELF	Somatic Self	physical appearance and traits physical condition
	Possessive Self	possession of objects possession of persons
PERSONAL SELF	Self Image	Aspirations activities (listing) feelings and emotions interests capacities and aptitudes qualities and failings
	Self Identity	simple denominations role and status consistency ideology abstract identity
ADAPTATIVE SELF	Self Esteem	Competency personal value
	Self Activities	adaptative strategies autonomy ambivalence dependency actualization lifestyle

The objectification of psychological data was obtained in this manner by means of a categorized model of the subject's personal perception. Subjective data, obtained on the basis of internal experience, was referred to the dimension of „self concept”. The definitions of 43 dimensions of „self concepts” are an attempt to operationalize the terms in the author's own research (Kociuba, 1996).

Quantitative indices and qualitative (hermeneutical) interpretations of the sense of answers were obtained from the data analysis. The topic of the research was actors' concept of self and the main aspects of its development.

The research was based on the foundations of perceptive and phenomenological conception, according to which the problem of self must be considered in categories of self-concept.

The research was conducted on a group of 30 students at theatre schools in Warsaw, Cracow and Lodz and on a group of 30 professional actors from the three cities.

The aim of the research was to assess the presence of differences in the dimensions of „self concept” between students from theatre schools and professional actors. The following questions and hypotheses were posed:

1. Is the students' concept of self different from the professional actors' concept of „I”?
Are the differences of quantitative or qualitative?

2. What changes in the concept of self take place in professional actors depending on their age and seniority?

The research hypotheses are as follows :

Hypothesis 1: There are statistically relevant qualitative differences between the group of students from theatre schools and the group of professional actors. The differences were noticeable in a number of statements on individual dimensions of self concept and qualitative differences in the importance of the dimensions (category, substructure and structure of self concept).

Hypothesis 2: The changes in the conception of „I” in the group of professional actors are manifested in the evolution of dimension significance of self concept and in the change in meaning of the content of statements referring to a given dimension of self concept.

Analysis of results

1. Professional actors refer to themselves much more frequently than students in relation to their role and social status as well as with reference to the system of general values.

Senior actors are characterised by a larger number of statements that refer to their sense of value, i.e. continuity in time, coherence of self-understanding and statements referring to the activities of adaptation to the environment, defence of their own „I” and activeness, which stimulate development. Actors describe themselves with reference to personality, adaptation and non-personal dimensions.

2. In spite of these differences, there are substantial formal similarities in the profile of self concept in both groups. Both students of theatre schools and professional actors have a higher profile in such categories as: *emotions, feelings, coherence, ideology, abstract identity, personal value and sensitivity*.

On the basis of the significance analysis of self concept, one must notice that the following differences between groups were present: central level of importance (central dimensions were present in more than 70% of subjects) in the group of actors covered as many as 7 categories, while in the group of students it covered only 1 category.

The significance analysis of subcategories indicates that in both groups it was „7” *Personal* and „1” *Adaptive* that occupy central positions, which proves the similarity of self concept in both groups. A fundamental difference between the group of actors and the group of students is noticeable in the significance of the *Me – Not me* structure, which was central only in the group of actors.

Detailed analysis of the results

A change in the level of significance of categories in the substructure *Picture of oneself* and substructure *Identity of I* is an interesting result of the research. Both of the groups that were examined produced a similar result, proving the central level of importance of these structures. On the other hand, detailed analysis indicates that in the group of actors there were significantly more categories within the substructure *Identity of I* that proved to have a central level of importance. This means that for professional actors references to the *role and status of actor, internal coherence, ideology and abstract identity* are very important to their self-description.

These categories are more important for them than for students of theatre schools. Categories from the substructure *Identity* did not achieve a central level of importance, which means that they were not as important for their self-description, while categories in the subcategory *Picture of oneself* were predominant: simple enumeration of activities, advantages and disadvantages, interests and tastes, descriptions of feelings and emotions.

Such a result leads to the conclusion that a development in the concept of self took place within the *Personal I* structure. This form of the development of the concept of self may be called the development from *The Picture of Self to Identity off*.

On the basis of the research results, one may identify one more form of directional development of the concept of self that may be called „from Me to Not-Me”. The measure of this development form of the concept of self may be the importance of the *Me – Not-Me* structure, which holds a central level of importance for the group of actors and a medium level of importance for the group of students (i.e. it is present in less than 70% of the students). Professional actors make their descriptions through references to other people and there forebuild their sense of identity on people and values that are outside their „I”.

The perception of their own person is in the background of the biggest picture, in the context of other people. The position of the *Reference to others* structure at the center of importance is an indicator of this form of the development of the concept of self (with the substructure *The opinion of others on I* at a medium level).

Qualitative analysis of the content of descriptions

The above analysis of the results is supported by a qualitative analysis of the contents of the actors' descriptions. The analysis of their statements, classified as *Personal I* and *Me – Not-Me* structures, indicates that in the group of professional actors one may ob-

serve a further development of the concept of self that runs from the *Personal I* structure to the *Me – Not-Me* structure.

The group of actors is diversified in terms of the range (level) of the development of the concept of self, depending on their age and seniority. This form of development may be defined as the development that transforms from the stage of concentration on oneself to the stage of decentralization and extra-personal identification.

The intra-group differentiation proves a homogeneous and unidirectional development of the concept of self in the group of actors. This form of development is indicated by various levels of importance among the dimensions of the concept of self and changes in the actors' statements.

The concept of self among actors who have worked in theatre for 5-10 years is expressed primarily in terms of activities related to work and emotions accompanying their own professional activity. „Being an actor” is the most important point of reference for this group. The category of *coherence* concerns primarily the description of their internal state, with special attention to understanding themselves and the perception of surrounding changes.

The concentration on themselves seems to be a necessary effect of confronting oneself with a given role or a response to the social image of an actor. This brings a need for self-definition and knowledge about oneself, becoming aware of one's own specific characteristics. The answer to the question „Who am I?” is something vital that constitutes a certain professional and life necessity for this group.

In the group of young actors who have 5-10 years of stage experience, the following types of statements are predominant:

Actually, I am a person who keeps asking himself who I am. I am definitely emotional. I am a very sensitive person. I identify with my profession.

The identity of the group of actors who have been doing their job for 11-25 years is expressed in terms of their professional role, the value of their work and profession, the dates of adjusting to professional life and in terms of social and humanistic values. When people from this group talk about themselves, they talk about the need to participate in tradition as well as the sense of generational and cultural continuity. Personal value is expressed here in terms of the awareness of their abilities and their limitation and the need for external evaluation by other people. The description of self is done from the perspective of ideal values of political and social life. The statements are characterised by generalizations. It is characteristic for people from this group to define themselves in terms of objectives, obligations, necessity, labor and service.

Among the statements of actors who had been performing for 11-25 years, the following statements were present:

A am a comedian and I carry all the consequences of me being a comedian. I experience myself on stage. As far as my life outside the theatre is concerned, I cannot open myself before myself to write about it.

I am an unequal man. In my own life I create contradictions. I know who I am now, but tomorrow or in few years' time,,

In fact, I am a man full of contradictions.

I am a man who has the psychical luxury of doing what I like and what I want. It is related to doing the job I wanted to do and that I do.

In the group of actors whose job seniority was over 25 years, their own cognitive perspective loses its importance with age and other people's perspective gains significance. There is change in perception of the world from personal to extra-personal. Their own subjective point of view of the world and themselves is no longer a central point of reference. People in this group describe themselves in terms of reference to other people, in terms of the necessity to live in harmony with others, and in terms of a sense of security and responsibility.

The concept of self in this group is organized around several main, predominant categories, with people who describe themselves using 2-3 categories. The decrease of importance of such categories as *Coherence* and *Ideology* may be explained by the fact that for these people it is not their own person, with its characteristics and lack of internal coherence, that is important. Even what they are becomes less important to them. Their own concept of self becomes insignificant. On the other hand, the context in which this „I” functions is increasingly important. This context influences self-perception. The following words of an actor epitomise this notion: *I am an actor. Today, a year before my retirement, I consider my way as positive. When I play in Amadeus and the audience applause after the play, I feel happy and moved. I have not wasted my life.*

The most senior actors identify themselves with realizing certain values. Their sense of identity is manifested in experiencing values beyond their own „I”. An actor from this group answers the question „Who am I?” in the following way: *Many years in theatre. Sometimes I love it dearly. I am sick and bored with routine and lack of taste. This is an illness of theatre: bad taste, contempt for the „ordinary ones” in the audience. I like working with young actors. I like their fighting spirit. I think it is a decisive moment for the young and for us, the elderly. We need to re-invite theatre, repertoire, vividness and music. I think it's gonna be OK. My son was born. This fact changed all the values in my life.*

The following statements have been recorded from the group of the most senior actors:

It is most important that I am privileged to work in this profession. That I stumble over everyday life in its all colours. This means that I still am.

I think that identity is joining a stream of affairs while walking through generations, in the current that you accept.

I never stop feeling to be the one I was. I feel anointed. I think that there is an appointment, an internal imperative, the necessity to see things in a child-like way, naiveness on demand. I have never regretted my choice, the choice of my job.

I do not feel that I am only an actor. I mean, I do not feel this outside the stage. In my opinion, an actor is a certain mental state, a certain readiness to express others' thoughts. I think an actor does not conduct himself. There is a certain duality. I know that I am doing something that surprises me, however, I am still on the alert about it. It is impossible for me to forget that I am someone different than a role. This may happen to amateurs. A well remembered text makes their way, they are taken by the inspiration; there is a distinction between who I am and who I may become on stage. But this does not mean that I am someone different.

Summary

On the basis of the author's own research, two levels of the concept of self may be enumerated: the stage and the level. „Stage” development is a quantitative increase of knowledge about oneself. „Level” development is not development defined by our own

„I” and what an individual knows about himself, but development motivated by values from outside the „I”, i.e. by extra-personal assignments and objectives.

The level of the sense of identity – a higher level of the experience of one's own „I” is, according to Max Scheler, the awareness of one's own identity, obtained not only from the contemplation of oneself, but also from the experience of dialogue with another man and the divine Absolute.

In the search for a real sense of identity, one may use a theatre metaphor. The recognition of one's own „I” may happen in a way that transcends the perception of self, by rejecting other masks of the concepts of oneself.

Discussions on the psychological aspects of being an actor and the search for the answer to the question „Who is an actor?” may lead to understanding the phenomenon of the awareness of human identity .

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