

TO: Professor Heddy Lahmann

FROM: Crystal Lucas-Perry

SUBJECT: Actor Well-Being in Higher Education Training Environments: A Qualitative, Arts-Based Inquiry

DATE: April 10, 2026

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to examine how actors in higher education training programs describe and make meaning of their well-being throughout the rehearsal and performance process. This qualitative, multi-method inquiry seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the pedagogical and institutional conditions that shape actor well-being in postsecondary training environments.

BACKGROUND AND KEY CONCEPTS

Existing research consistently demonstrates that performing artists experience elevated rates of depression, anxiety, and stress compared to the general population (Szabó et al., 2022). Qualitative studies further reveal that actors face significant threats to psychological well-being related to autonomy, precariousness, self-criticism, and emotional vulnerability (Robb et al., 2018). More recent scholarship examines the psychological complexity of character immersion, finding that actors rely on both automatic and active release strategies to protect their psychological health across the performance process (Brott et al., 2025). Within actor training specifically, Hartley (2024) argues that training environments must adopt trauma-informed pedagogical approaches that center student identity, agency, and boundaries, precisely because the student's body and positionality are the very material of the work.

Despite this growing body of scholarship, a significant gap remains. Most existing research focuses on professional actors rather than those in higher education training environments, and much of it examines isolated variables such as distress or anxiety rather than the holistic, evolving, lived experience of well-being across the full rehearsal and performance process. This study addresses that gap by centering actors in training and examining well-being not as a static outcome but as an ongoing, meaning-making process.

Three key concepts anchor this study:

1. Well-being
2. Meaning-making
3. Actors in higher education training programs

Well-being is understood broadly, not as a clinical designation but as encompassing emotional, psychological, relational, and embodied experience. Make meaning draws on a constructivist framework in which actors do not simply report their experiences but actively construct interpretations of them shaped by context, identity, institutional culture, and the language available to them. Actors in higher education training programs refers specifically to actors being shaped within university, conservatory, or similar postsecondary training structures, not professional actors or performing artists broadly, but emerging artists navigating the particular demands of institutional training environments. Hochschild's (1983) concept of emotional labor, the regulation and management of internal emotions to meet the demands of a professional role, provides the primary theoretical

framework for understanding the psychological costs that performance demands may place on actors in training.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative, multi-method design consisting of three complementary approaches: semi-structured interviews, self-study, and arts-based research. These methods were selected because they allow the study to approach actor well-being from multiple angles, honoring the complexity of embodied, relational, and institutional experience that a single method could not adequately capture.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews are the primary data collection instrument for this study. This method was chosen because it allows participants to narrate and interpret their own experiences in their own words while still providing enough thematic structure to ensure analytical coherence across interviews. Interviews are the primary site where actors' meaning-making becomes visible, making them the most direct method for answering the research question. Each interview will be conducted individually, lasting approximately 60 to 90 minutes, and will be audio recorded with participant consent. Recordings will be transcribed and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, an approach that acknowledges themes are not simply discovered in data but constructed through the researcher's active and transparent engagement with it.

Self-Study

Self-study is the second method and reflects a deliberate methodological choice rooted in the researcher's positionality. As an actor, registered drama therapist, and educator who has lived and worked inside these training environments, the researcher is not outside the world being studied. Rather than bracketing this positionality, self-study makes it part of the inquiry. The researcher's own situated experience is treated as data, documented through reflective memos and journals that track how proximity to the subject shapes interpretation. This approach aligns with the study's constructivist framework, in which the researcher's perspective is understood as an asset to be made transparent rather than a bias to be eliminated.

Arts-Based Research

Arts-based research is the third method and reflects the embodied, performative nature of the phenomenon under study. Acting is not only verbal or cognitive. There are dimensions of actor experience that language alone cannot fully access, and arts-based methods allow the study to meet that experience on its own terms. The researcher is currently conducting an independent study with the program chair that involves tracking her own rehearsal and performance experience in an Off-Broadway production through reflective documentation. The final arts-based presentation, whether through photography, visual art, or performance, will emerge from the research process itself. This approach is

methodologically grounded in the principle that form should follow what the process reveals.

These three methods were chosen over alternatives such as focus groups or observations for specific reasons. Focus groups were not selected because the sensitive and personal nature of well-being experience may inhibit disclosure in a group setting. Observations were not selected as a primary method because the internal, meaning-making dimensions of well-being are not fully visible through behavior alone. The combination of interviews, self-study, and arts-based research provides the most rigorous and appropriate pathway to answering the research question.

SAMPLING STRATEGY

This study employs purposive sampling, a qualitative sampling approach in which participants are selected deliberately based on their relevance to the research question rather than randomly or for statistical representativeness. Purposive sampling is the most appropriate strategy for this study because the goal is not generalizability but depth, seeking participants who can speak meaningfully and directly to the experience of well-being across the rehearsal and performance process within higher education training environments.

Participants will be actors currently enrolled in or recently graduated from university, conservatory, or similar postsecondary training programs. "Recently graduated" will be defined as within the past three years, ensuring that

participants retain meaningful recall of their training experience. Participants must have completed at least one full rehearsal and performance process within their training program in order to speak to the arc of experience the research question addresses.

The study will aim to recruit between eight and twelve participants, a range consistent with qualitative interview studies seeking thematic saturation rather than statistical significance. Recruitment will continue until thematic saturation is reached, meaning until new interviews cease to produce new themes or meaningful variation in the data.

Recruitment will occur through purposive and snowball sampling strategies. Initial participants will be identified through the researcher's existing professional network in educational theatre and drama therapy communities. Those participants will then be invited to recommend other potential participants who meet the study criteria. Recruitment materials including a brief study description and eligibility criteria will be distributed through relevant professional organizations, university theatre programs, and educational theatre networks.

The study is particularly committed to recruiting participants across a range of identities, including race, gender, and institutional context. As preliminary findings indicate, racialized and identity-based experiences shape how training is lived in ways that are central to understanding well-being. A sampling approach that attends to this diversity is not only methodologically sound but ethically necessary.

PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS

Since this study involves human participants sharing personal and potentially sensitive experiences related to their emotional and psychological well-being, ethical considerations are central to the research design. The researcher plans to submit a full application to the New York University Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to beginning data collection. No interviews or other data collection activities will commence until IRB approval has been granted.

Participation in this study will be entirely voluntary. All participants will be provided with a detailed informed consent form prior to their interview that clearly explains the purpose of the study, what participation involves, how data will be used, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty or consequence. Participants will have the opportunity to ask questions before agreeing to participate and may decline to answer any question during the interview without explanation.

To protect participant privacy, all identifying information will be removed from transcripts and research materials. Participants will be assigned pseudonyms and no names, institutional affiliations, or other identifying details will appear in any published findings. Audio recordings will be stored securely on password-protected devices and deleted once transcription is complete. Transcripts and research data will be stored in a secure, encrypted digital environment accessible only to the researcher.

Given the sensitive nature of the subject matter, the researcher will take additional care to create conditions of psychological safety during interviews. As a licensed creative arts therapist and registered drama therapist, the researcher is trained to recognize and respond to emotional distress. Should a participant become distressed during an interview, the researcher will pause the session, offer support, and provide referrals to relevant mental health resources as needed. Participants will be reminded at the start of each interview that their emotional wellbeing takes priority over the research.

LIMITATIONS

Like all qualitative research, this study has limitations that are important to acknowledge transparently. These limitations do not undermine the value of the study but reflect the inherent trade-offs of the methodological choices made.

First, the findings of this study will not be generalizable in the statistical sense. Qualitative research prioritizes depth and meaning over breadth and representativeness, and this study is no exception. The goal is transferability rather than generalizability, meaning that readers in similar contexts may find the findings relevant and applicable to their own settings, but no claims will be made about the experiences of all actors in all training environments.

Second, the researcher's positionality as an actor, therapist, and educator who has lived inside these training environments is both a strength and a potential limitation. While this insider perspective provides depth of understanding and

access, it also means the researcher brings assumptions, experiences, and interpretations to the data that could shape what is noticed, emphasized, or overlooked. Reflexive memos and transparent documentation of interpretive decisions will be used throughout the study to address this risk.

Third, participant recall may be a limitation for those who have recently graduated rather than those currently enrolled in training programs. Memory of emotional and embodied experiences can shift over time, and participants may reconstruct their experiences in ways that are shaped by distance and reflection rather than immediacy.

Fourth, because participation is voluntary and recruitment relies partly on the researcher's existing professional network, the sample may skew toward participants who are already reflective about their well-being or who have had particularly meaningful or difficult training experiences. Those who have not found language for their experiences, or who have normalized their training without question, may be less likely to self-select into the study.

Finally, as noted earlier, the arts-based component of this study is still emerging in form. Because the final presentation will be determined by what the research process reveals, it introduces an element of uncertainty into the design that more fixed methodological approaches do not carry.

TIMELINE & BUDGET

Timeline

This study will unfold over a three-month data collection period organized around three phases.

- Phase One, occurring in month one, will focus on study preparation and recruitment. Key activities during this phase include finalizing IRB approval, developing and distributing recruitment materials, identifying and confirming participants, and finalizing interview protocols.
- Phase Two, occurring in month two, will focus on data collection. Semi-structured interviews will be conducted during this phase, alongside ongoing self-study documentation through reflective memos and journals. Arts-based inquiry through the Off-Broadway independent study will also continue during this period.
- Phase Three, occurring in month three, will focus on initial data analysis. Interview recordings will be transcribed, reflexive thematic analysis will begin, and preliminary themes will be identified. Arts-based documentation will continue to be collected and reviewed during this phase.

Budget

The total budget for this study is \$10,000, allocated across the following categories:

1. Participant incentives will account for the largest portion of the budget. Each of the twelve participants will receive a \$50 gift card in recognition of their time and contribution, totaling \$600.

2. Transcription services will be used to ensure accuracy and efficiency in converting audio recordings to text. Professional transcription is estimated at approximately \$1.50 per audio minute. With twelve interviews averaging 75 minutes each, transcription costs are estimated at \$1,350.
3. Qualitative data analysis software, specifically NVivo or a comparable platform, will be purchased to support systematic and rigorous organization and analysis of interview data, at an estimated cost of \$500.
4. Recording equipment including a high-quality digital audio recorder and backup recording device will be purchased to ensure reliable data capture during interviews, at an estimated cost of \$300.
5. Travel costs to conduct in-person interviews across multiple institutional sites are estimated at \$1,500, covering transportation, accommodation where necessary, and related expenses.
6. The researcher's time will be compensated at a rate reflecting the skilled labor involved in designing, conducting, and analyzing qualitative research. Researcher compensation is budgeted at \$5,000 for the three-month period, covering interview preparation, data collection, reflective documentation, and initial analysis.
7. The remaining \$750 will be held in reserve for unforeseen expenses including printing costs, materials for arts-based inquiry, and any additional travel or technology needs that arise during the study.

APPENDIX A: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Study Title:

Actor Well-Being in Higher Education Training Environments: A Qualitative,
Arts-Based Inquiry

Researcher:

Crystal Lucas-Perry, Doctoral Student, Educational Theatre, NYU Steinhardt

Research Question:

How do actors in higher education training programs describe and make meaning
of their well-being throughout the rehearsal and performance process?

Estimated Duration:

60-90 minutes

Recording Notice:

With your permission, this interview will be audio recorded for transcription
purposes only. You may withdraw consent to record at any time.

Consent Script

Before beginning the interview, participants will be informed that the
purpose of the conversation is to explore actor well-being in higher education
training environments. Participation is voluntary and participants may decline to
answer any question or stop the interview at any time. The conversation will be

recorded and transcribed for research purposes only. Participant identity will remain confidential and pseudonyms will be used in all research materials.

Interview Questions

1. Can you tell me about your experience training as an actor in a higher education program?
2. How did you experience your well-being during rehearsals while you were in your training program?
3. How did the performance period influence your sense of well-being as an actor?
4. How did you make sense of or interpret your well-being as part of the acting process?
5. How did your training program address or not address actor well-being?
6. Is there anything about actor well-being in training environments that you think is important but rarely discussed?
7. Is there anything else that you feel inclined to share around this subject?

APPENDIX B: WORKS CITED

- Brott, G., Wilson, C., & Brooker, J. (2025). A qualitative study into the psychological effects of acting work among Australian-based actors. *Australian Journal of Psychology*, 77(1), 2486775.
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