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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Psychological well-being and work in the dramatic arts: qualitative research of actors' experiences

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Objective: Examining the experiences of students of a theater company pertaining to the impact of work in the dramatic arts on their psychological well-being.

Methods: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 students of a theater company of different ages and levels of experience. The collected qualitative data were analyzed in the context of the six-factor *Theory of psychological well-being*, which includes: self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth. In addition to the above topics derived from a deductive approach to data, two additional topics are also discussed: reasons for enrolling in the theater and participants' progress.

Results: The results of this research showed that acting contributes to the personal well-being of individuals. The participants most often mentioned an increase in self-confidence, a decrease in anxiety levels, a connection with other students, courage, and awareness of one's own capabilities. In addition to the positive impact of acting on their lives, the participants also mentioned some negative aspects they had noticed when it comes to the behavior of others, such as a lack of accountability of some students, "pretending" in everyday life, and some prejudices regarding acting.

Conclusion: The results of the research support the idea that working in the arts, in this case the dramatic arts, can contribute to the psychological well-being of individuals. Sharing their experiences of working in the dramatic arts, the students of a theater company touched on all six domains of psychological well-being pertaining to the Theory of psychological well-being (Ryff & Keyes, 1995).

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Introduction

In the 1980s, a growing body of research emerged seeking to examine well-being. Such attempts were mostly focused on exploring only positive human conditions, such as contentment and happiness in life, but they paid little attention to the key question: What is the very core of human well-being (Ryff, 2013)? Fundamental aspects of well-being involve much more than happiness in life, and they concern all human conditions and relations. Well-being is a value that is inseparable from the question of what it really means to be human, i.e., from one's striving to develop personal qualities and healthy interpersonal relationships (Ryff, 2013).

In this context, the Theory of psychological well-being (Ryff & Keyes, 1995) lists six factors through which one's life experiences influence the perception of oneself as a psychologically functional person. Those are:

- *Self-aceptance*. People who have a high level of self-acceptance are aware of their positive and negative sides and accept them, and they also look positively at past events in their lives. People with a low level of self-acceptance are dissatisfied with themselves, look with disappointment at events that have already taken place, are worried about their personal qualities, and want to be different than they are.
- *Positive relations with others*. People with a high level of this quality have warm, cordial and sincere relationships with others and are interested in the well-being of others. They are capable of strong empathy, attachment and intimacy and understand the nature of human relationships as a constant giving and receiving. People with a low level of this quality have few close and sincere relationships and find it difficult to be cordial and open.
- *Autonomy*. People with a high level of autonomy set their own behaviors and goals, are independent, and can resist social pressures to think or act in a certain way. People with a low level of autonomy worry about the expectations and assessments of others, rely on the opinions of others when making important decisions, and accept social pressures.
- *Environmental mastery*. Individuals with a high level of this factor feel they can effectively manage events in their lives and take advantage of the opportunities they are given. Also, they are able to choose or create opportunities for themselves in order to satisfy their own needs and values. On the other hand, people with low levels of this factor have difficulty managing everyday tasks, consider themselves incapable of changing or improving their environment, and are unaware of new opportunities.
- *Purpose in life*. People with a purpose in life have goals and a sense of focus towards them, as well as their own aspirations. Individuals with low levels of this factor lack a sense of meaning in life, have vague goals and aspirations, and lack a sense of direction in life.
- *Personal growth*. People who have a sense of constant progress, see themselves growing and thriving in various aspects of life, are open to new experiences, and

know how to realize their potential. People with a low level of this factor do not know how to improve themselves over time, are often bored and indifferent, and feel powerless when it comes to developing new attitudes and behaviors.

It is important to note that the factors pertaining to the psychological well-being described in the above way include the ability to overcome obstacles and cope with challenges inside and outside a person. Thus, according to this theoretical perspective, psychological well-being is not the same as happiness and contentment. It is closer to *eudaimonia*, a term used by Aristotle in Nicomachean Ethics to describe the highest virtue of life, namely growth toward the realization of a person's true and noblest nature (Ryff, 2018).

From the eudaimonic perspective, one might ask themselves the following question: What parts of life enrich and nurture the realization of people's potential? One of the proposed responses is the inclusion of the arts and humanities in research on psychological well-being (Ryff, 2018). In the medical field, it is becoming more and more clear that philosophy, literature, poetry, visual arts, motion picture arts and music affect the patients' health, and even contribute to the development of empathy in health professionals (Crawford, Brown, Baker, Tischler, & Abrams, 2015; Stuckey & Nobel, 2010). Moreover, there is a growing interest in the arts and humanities as key social ideals in the context of living "good" lives and creating "good" societies (Edmondson, 2004; Nussbaum, 2010). Said efforts are of paramount importance as we are witnessing a decline in the status of the arts and humanities in the academic community (Hanson & Health, 1998). In addition, there is less and less interest in art exhibits and the performing arts in the general population (Ryff, 2018). Finally, within the field of psychology and education, some interest has emerged in the ways in which art contributes to different aspects of one's psychological well-being (Ryff, 2018).

From its beginnings, art has been a means of expressing one's feelings, insecurities and interests. In this sense, special emphasis should be put on dramatic arts because of the actors' ability to experience and become aware of a number of emotional states.

In 2018, Vandenbroucke and Meeks conducted a study to examine the extent to which one's involvement in the theater scene affects the level of their psychological well-being. The research included individuals who occasionally attend theater performances, as well as regular theater subscribers (Vandenbroucke & Meeks, 2018). The results showed advantages both on the personal level and wider level. They found that regular attendance at theater performances contributed to the development of important social relationships, as well as that it leads to a sense of community, personal psychological stimulation, and positive feelings in participants (Vandenbroucke & Meeks, 2018). It is interesting to note that art, in this case theater, affects the perception of one's psychological well-being even if one participates in the performance as a spectator, and not as an actor.

In 2015, researchers Wimpenny and Savin-Baden conducted a study to examine the impacts of "active" involvement in acting on participants. The authors wanted to examine the benefits of one's involvement in dramatic activities for the purpose of improving and maintaining the health and personal well-being of socially isolated and marginalized people over the age of 50 (Wimpenny & Savin-Baden, 2014). The research involved several steps, with some of them being interviews with participants and drama workshops led by

a qualified performing artist (Wimpenny & Savin-Baden, 2014). The participants actively participated in the work of the local theater, and thus also in the carrying out of the research, namely over one year. The results showed that active involvement in the dramatic arts provides participants with the opportunity for creative encounters and processes such as developing new interpersonal relationships, from peer and family relationships to those with the audience (Wimpenny & Savin-Baden, 2014). Furthermore, sharing personal stories and public appearances helped the participants when it comes to their perception of boosting their self-esteem and developing stage skills (Wimpenny & Savin-Baden, 2014).

The aim of this research was to examine the experiences of students of a theater company (PlayDrama Performing Arts Theater) pertaining to the impact of work in the dramatic arts on their psychological well-being. Considering the complexity of psychological wellbeing, and its link to dramatic arts, we wanted to explore dramatic arts within the Theory of psychological well-being (Ryff & Keyes, 1995), using a qualitative approach. This enabled us to gain an in depth insight of the experiences of students of PlayDrama Performing Arts Theater.

Methods

Qualitative research deals with studying the ways in which people understand the world and the experiences they have. In doing so, it is important to understand the meaning that a person attaches to the events they experienced, as well as the ways in which they deal with certain situations. Consequently, the core of qualitative research is the quality of one's experiences, and not the identification of cause-and-effect relationships (Willig, 2008). In an epistemological sense, we have chosen a generic qualitative approach, without opting for any specific philosophical foundations on which our analysis is to be based (Bradburry-Jones et al., 2017).

Sample size

The criterion on the basis of which the required or sufficient sample size is established in qualitative research is saturation, namely the moment where the inclusion of new participants does not lead to any new data. Although in qualitative research there is no rule regarding the optimal number of participants whose statements will lead to data saturation (which depends on a number of factors, such as the aims of the research or the characteristics of participants), Hennink, Kaiser, & Marconi (2016) claim that nine interviews are enough to achieve code saturation, i.e. the moment when new codes do not appear in the participants' responses. Guest, Namey, & Mitchell (2013) recommend the inclusion of fifteen participants as a general guide. Consequently, we also decided to include 15 participants in our research.

Participants

We recruited participants who regularly attend classes at the PlayDrama Performing Arts Theater. PlayDrama is a theater company that includes both professional and amateur actors. It regularly stages plays, and often supports young, unaffirmed actors.

To ensure sufficient sample heterogeneity, we chose participants from different groups of the PlayDrama Performing Arts Theater and with different levels of experience (between two and nine years). The heterogeneity of the sample provides insight into different perspectives related to the aim of the research, as well as into experiences, which is a common aim of qualitative research. For the purpose of this study the first author, herself also a member of the PlayDrama Theater, approached each selected participant and explained the purpose of the interviews. All approached participants agreed to be interviewed.

All fifteen interviews were conducted successfully. Fifteen participants were involved in the research, namely ten women and five men. The youngest person was 21 years old, and the oldest was 61 years old. Fourteen respondents were current students of the PlayDrama Performing Arts Theater, and one was a former member (**Table 1**).

Table 1. Review of the participants' personal information (sex, age, years active in PlayDrama studio)

Participant	Sex	Age	Years active in PlayDrama studio
V.B.	F	61	9
D. Z.	M	23	3
I. B.	F	27	4
M. O.	F	49	5
L. M.	M	35	4
L. Š.	M	25	4
L. P.	F	29	2
M. P.	F	47	7
V. Z.	F	33	4
I. Z.	F	42	5
K. R.	F	53	4
N. K.	F	25	2
B. K.	M	21	2
G. K.	F	55	5
P. M.	M	34	4

Semi-structured interview

In order to collect qualitative data on the experiences of drama workshop participants, the semi-structured interview method was used (Brinkman & Kvale, 2014), and reported according to Standards for reporting qualitative research (O'Brien, Harris, Beckman, Reed, & Cook , 2014). Semi-structured interviews allow the collection of data related to topics of interest to the researcher, while leaving the participants the freedom to talk about topics that are not planned in advance. An interview guide was developed by both coauthors, with the main part referring to how acting has affected the participants' daily lives so far (**Table 2**). The sub-questions within the guide served as reminders for the researcher (BR) and as an incentive to the participants if they had not already touched on a certain topic. If a participant talked about something that was not planned by the guide, and the researcher assessed that it was related to the topic and aim of the research, she would let the participant continue and would try to gain better insight into the participant's experience, namely using spontaneous sub-questions.

Table 2. Guide to Semi-Structured Interviews (Brinkman & Kvale, 2014)

Part of the interview	Objective	Questions
Introduction to the interview	Get to know the participant, discuss the reasons they enrolled in the performing arts theater. Allow the participant and interviewer to relax and engage in conversation.	- Tell me about how you started acting. - Why did you decide to enroll in the PlayDrama Performing Arts Theater? - How long have you been a member of the theater?
Central part of the interview	Find out how the experience of work in the dramatic arts has affected and continues to affect the student's daily life.	- Tell me something about how your acting affects your daily life. Sub-questions: - How does acting affect your perception of yourself? - Can you tell me more about how acting affects your relationships within and outside the performing arts theater? - In what ways does acting help you influence events in your life? - Have you personally improved in any way because of acting? If yes, please tell me in which aspects and how. - Have you found any new opportunities through acting? If you have, please tell me more about them. - Can you tell me how important the director's comments are for you, and how much you are guided by your own feelings when evaluating your success in a role? - Have you noticed any changes in other students that have come about due to acting
End of interview	Determine if the participant has anything else to say that has not yet been discussed in the interview. End of interview.	- Is there anything we may not have talked about that you would like to add or highlight?

Conducting the research

The first author conducted all the interviews and transcribed them. Most of the interviews (12 of them) were conducted in administrative offices of the PlayDrama Theater, with the exception of two pilot interviews, as well as one interview that took place in a hospitality facility. Two pilot interviews took place at the workplace and at the home of a close friend, respectively. The first interview was recorded on October 23, 2018, and the last (the 15th) one was held on March 6, 2019. The interviews lasted between 15 minutes and 1 hour. The course of all 15 interviews was audio recorded with a cell phone device, i.e. its voice recorder option. An interview was scheduled with each participant separately, and it was explained to them that their participation was entirely voluntary, that they would not receive any compensation for their participation, as well as that they could cancel or quit the interview at any time without explanation. At the beginning of the meeting, the aim of the research was again briefly explained to each participant. They were also informed that the interview would be recorded, and that based on said recordings, anonymized transcripts would be created, where particular attention would be paid to removing any information that could identify the participants. In the process of transcript creation, the names and surnames of the participants were replaced by a letter and a number. The interviews were conducted once the participants had given their informed consent to participate.

Data analysis

Since we have identified the Theory of psychological well-being (Ryff, 1989) as the starting point for the understanding of psychological well-being, we approached data analysis by combining a deductive and inductive approach. The deductive part pertained to the fact that in developing the codebook we used six categories that were not based on the answers obtained, but represented six factors that were predetermined by the Theory of psychological well-being (Ryff, 1989): self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth. Thus, we looked at the participants' responses in the context of that theory, i.e., we sought to examine whether said factors could be identified when participants spoke about the impact of acting on their personal lives. On the other hand, data analysis pertaining to this research included an inductive approach, which consisted of individual answers completing and "building" an already specified category. This is an example of an inductive approach because we started from the individual, to then cover the general as well: with their individual observations and responses, the participants developed and enriched the set categories. With the inductive approach, we created additional codes that were not provided by the starting theoretical framework.

The data analysis was informed by the steps given by (Braun & Clarke, 2006) when describing the thematic analysis steps (although we deviated from their model by pre-setting six topics based on said six factors of psychological well-being):

1. getting acquainted with data
2. creation of initial codes and sub-codes
3. identification of topics (code organization patterns)
4. revision of topics
5. final definition and naming of topics
6. drawing up a report.

We started developing the codebook immediately after conducting and transcribing the first interview. The researcher BR carried out the initial coding in continuous consultation with a more experienced researcher, scientist DH. The codebook stabilized after 13 interviews. After that, no new codes were identified. The data analysis was performed using MS Word for Windows.

Reflexivity

The researcher BR also used to be a student of the PlayDrama Performing Arts Theater, and she is currently actively involved in their work as one of the directors. Due to said impossibility of a completely objective approach to this research, each phase had to be approached reflexively. When selecting participants for the interview, individuals whom she did not know personally or with whom she did not have the opportunity to establish significantly close relations were chosen. That way, an attempt was made to approach the interviews with as little previously shared experience with the participants as possible, which was very difficult. Even if she did not know the participants before the interview,

the interviewer found it difficult to maintain complete impartiality and "separation" from them. On the other hand, during the first two interviews, personal connection with the participants did not present a challenge. Two pilot interviews were conducted with close friends with whom she spent a lot of time in the performing arts theater. The purpose of these two initial interviews was to test out the questions on close friends who could help her deal with any anxiety or difficulties during the interviewing process.

The researcher DH led the research and has many years of experience in working with expressive techniques (music, dance, visual arts...) in the context of psychotherapy, personal growth and development. Moreover, art and artistic expression are an important part of his life.

Results

The analysis of the collected data covered the following eight topics (samples of significance) and their subtopics. Those are: "Self-acceptance", "Relations with others", "Autonomy", "Environmental mastery", "Purpose in life", "Personal growth", "Reasons for enrollment in the theater" and "Participants' progress". The first six topics were selected based on the Theory of psychological well-being (Ryff, 1989) and its six factors, and two were inductively identified during the processing itself (**Table 3**).

Table 3. Review of the eight topics and their subtopics

Topics	Subtopics
Self-acceptance	• Problems with personal qualities • Perception of oneself • Emotions
Relations with others	• Positive relations • Recognition of negative aspects • Family and friends
Autonomy	• Impact on one's own life • Time for oneself • Wrong assumptions of taking care of oneself • Work on the role
Environmental mastery	• New opportunities • Negative aspects • Work • Facing problems
Purpose in life	• Approach towards acting • Continued engagement • Work process • About life
Personal growth	• Competences • Body • Room for progress – more
Reasons for enrollment in the theater	• Love of acting • Other reasons
Participants' progress	• Acting • Personality

The first topic ("Self-acceptance") is divided into three subtopics: "Problems with personal qualities", "Perception of oneself" and "Emotions". "Problems with personal qualities" contain codes talking about the participants' personal problems before enrolling in the theater. Most participants state that, before enrolling in the performing arts theater, they had low self-esteem, suffered from anxiety, were insecure, did not know how to recognize their own talent and would change their minds about enrolling in the theater. In two cases, the participants also mention fighting with depression.

> *I didn't dare audition at all because I always thought acting was for people that are better than me, and I didn't really feel good in my own skin. (V. B., 61)*

> *Well, at first, I couldn't even think about it because I would get terribly anxious. Then I couldn't even think about how it affects me, because anxiety was my main preoccupation... (L. M., 35)*

> *[...] I really fell into a lethargy, that was my outlook on life, and it was really killing me, it started killing everything that was alive in me. (V. Z., 33)*

The subtopic "Perception of oneself" follows some clear changes that occurred after the participants enrolled in the theater. As the greatest benefits of their work in the theater, the participants mentioned the feeling of liberation and self-confidence, the disappearance of anxiety, and their perception of their age. It is clear that the students with a low level of self-acceptance have reached a higher level, which also includes a positive attitude towards themselves.

The last subtopic ("Emotions") includes the participants' views on raising awareness of their emotions and on ways of dealing with them. The participants mention that with acting they can regulate their feelings more easily, as well as deal with any difficulties in an appropriate manner.

> *I think it helps me when things are urgent and pressing – the pressure doesn't affect me that much, so I am able to do what I need to do. That is great because before, when things would upset me like that, it would be much harder for me to react and do what I needed to do. I think I'm calmer now in every sense of that word. (L. P., 29)*

The second topic ("Relations with others") also consists of three subtopics: "Positive relations", "Recognition of negative aspects" and "Family and friends". Interestingly, two extremes have emerged in this category when it comes to the responses about positive and negative relations with other people, and especially with the other participants. As for the positive aspects, the participants very often mentioned the connection between different people. They focused on a sense of pride, togetherness, friendship, sincerity and trust.

> *[...] the connection between people is palpable. I don't want go get all poetic, but the feeling is extraordinary, you can just feel that those people are close to you...(D. Z., 23)*

> *[...] after all, they're really people you care about. In the beginning, they were just strangers to me, just people I would see twice a week, but in the end, I realized that I actually loved them and cared about them, that I would be sorry if I left and if I wouldn't be able to see them anymore, because they became important to me. (B. K., 21)*

> *After the rehearsal, when you see these people, you always have the feeling that you are working on something that is bigger than you with them. (D. Z., 23)*

These results are in line with the definition by Ryff and Keyes (1995), who state that people with a high level of positive relations with others have warm, satisfying, and sincere relationships with the people around them. On the other hand, the participants also mentioned some negative aspects. They mostly talked about a lack of accountability of some students, as well as the tendency of some of them to act as leaders and impose their opinions on others.

> *[...] but it would sometimes bother me when there would be three or four of us instead of ten, always the same three or four, and we couldn't even do the show or the scenes properly because we always had to wait for someone or something. That is what I remember the most, that is really what most annoyed me. Sometimes, only four of us would show up, and there was supposed to be nine or ten of us, and then we would have to put off a scene for another time... (B. K., 21)*

> *[...] maybe they aren't even aware of that, you know, when they start suggesting what they think should be done a little too often, and in the end, it seems like they are the ones holding the class... (M. P., 47)*

The third subtopic ("Family and friends") refers to one's positive relationships outside the performing arts theater, mostly with the people one is close to. The participants mention that their loved ones have noticed some positive changes resulting from their work in the theater, as well as that they encourage them, but they also point out that it is not possible to treat colleagues and family members the same way.

> *It's great that my children and my husband support me – they all support me in what I do because they see that it's good for me. (I. Z., 42)*

> *They also somehow look at me differently. They used to see only a housewife, a mom, a person who has a job to do and stuff like that. They didn't see this other side of me... (K. R., 53)*

> *[...] when you get home, you have to change a little bit because you can't interact with your family that way. (D. Z., 23)*

The third topic ("Autonomy") consisted of four subtopics: "Impact on one's own life", "Time for oneself", "Wrong assumptions of taking care of oneself" and "Work on the role". Although the participants were often surprised by the question of how acting helps them to influence events in their lives and would mostly say that they did not have an answer to that, said positive impact is evident from the other answers they gave, when providing explicit examples of how acting has helped them in life was not necessary.

> *And it even affected my private life a lot in terms of fighting all those hot shots and stuck-up people... now I imagine they are a character and think about what character I should be to be able to work with them. That actually worked very well a couple of times. (I. B., 27)*

Other codes include the ways participants act when they have problems with others. They point out that acting helps them develop directness and courage, as well as makes them

think of themselves, feel their own values, etc. Ryff and Keyes (1995) state that people with a high level of autonomy are independent, as well as that they set their behaviors and goals by themselves, and that is also evident from the data obtained during this research. The participants talk about how acting helps them be direct with others and stand up for themselves, and they also mention the importance of taking time for oneself and one's interests. Moreover, they point out that taking care of oneself is often equated with selfishness, as well as that people should not make them feel guilty about doing something they enjoy.

> *[...] it seems to me that now I don't immediately pass judgment or give my opinion, I don't think it's a waste of time to hear someone out... (G. K., 55)*

> *[...] now, I am able to read people much faster and solve problems more directly in some relationships... (I. B., 27)*

> *[...] it's not true that when a class ends, I stop thinking about PlayDrama. Me thinking about it lasts for quite a while. If we have a class on Monday, and then not until Thursday, I also live PlayDrama on Tuesday and Wednesday, I don't know, I don't just turn it off, I really care about it. (G. K., 55)*

The question regarding one's work on the role had the aim of examining whether the participants were more guided by the director's instructions or their own feelings. According to Ryff and Keyes (1995), people with a low level of autonomy are concerned about other people's expectations and assessments and rely on their opinions when making important decisions. All fifteen participants expressed respect for all the directors. In ten cases, we noticed that the participants were more guided by the director's suggestions, nine quotes mention the participants' own feelings, and five mention a combination of the directors' instructions and the participants' personal feelings.

> *I definitely let them lead in a way (::), I like when I'm given a frame, I like being in that frame, but it's mostly because I'm that type of person – when I'm given everything, I don't know what to do... (I. B., 27)*

> *[...] a lot of us would fall into a trap when one director would say one thing, and the other ones would say something different. That would confuse us and make us blame everyone, while in fact the point was to listen, to listen to yourself and to deliver that well on scene, and then everyone would tell you you did a good job. (B. K., 21)*

> *I combine those things because they want us to add a personal touch to our performance, they want us to improvise, and they only give us a little guidance and want us to create a combination of their suggestions and our personal touch. What I do is I repeat what they say, and add a little of my personal touch to it, because that seems more interesting to me. (L. M., 35)*

The fourth topic ("Environmental Mastery") consists of four subtopics: "New Opportunities", "Negative Aspects", "Work" and "Facing Problems". The topic "New Opportunities" includes the participants' answers regarding new acting opportunities outside the performing arts theater. They mention that acting helps them in everyday situations where com-

munication is necessary, as well as that it helps them overcome certain challenges and provides them with the opportunity to work on different films, series and in theaters.

> *[...] doors are always opening, because acting does not only open new doors, but it also occasionally requires them. From project to project or in general, it actually fits into this item regarding personal growth because acting asks you to behave based on what it requires you to do. (D. Z., 23)*

> *[...] I appeared in a couple of music videos and auditioned for a couple of films – it opens doors for you, for sure, because everything is connected now... (L. M., 35)*

In the topic "Negative aspects", the participants also mention their negative views pertaining to environmental mastery, such as a lack of time management. They also encountered prejudices about acting – they claim that others sometimes believe they are involved in acting in order to be able to "pretend" and lie in their daily lives as well.

> *[...] when people hear that someone is involved in acting, they immediately think... if someone who is not involved in acting was sitting here, they would laugh and think that I use acting to be able to pretend in my daily life. (V. B., 61)*

> *[...] people looking at it from the sidelines think that it is much easier than it actually is. I also used to believe that until I came here, until I actually realized what an actor has to go through in order to deliver an emotion and all that... (L. Š., 25)*

In the subtopic "Work", the participants talk about how acting helps them in the workplace, especially when it comes to the development of speaking skills. They also mention the fact that they are able to make a positive first impression, as well as some other benefits, such as different job opportunities and the opportunity to participate in different projects.

> *Let's say it helps me in my work. Our vocation also involves public performances in front of children, and you always need to present things a little differently to children, you shouldn't approach them rigidly, but adjust your acting, your tone, and so on. (K. R., 53)*

The fourth subtopic ("Facing problems") includes statements about how the participants deal with different unpleasant situations and people. They state that acting helps them recognize which people suit them and which do not more easily, that they are more open and calmer when resolving conflicts, and that they can deal with inconvenient situations more calmly.

> *The people who suited me still do, but now it's easier for me to deal with the ones who don't too. (I. B., 27)*

> *[...] the fact is that it calms me down, I try to understand the other person and I do not react impulsively, like: "Get away from me, I'm not interested in what you say". I try and find a nicer way to avoid all that and still be content. (N. K., 25)*

Ryff and Keyes (1995) define the environmental mastery factor as an individual's ability to manage events in their life on their own. Such people know how to take advantage of the opportunities they are offered or create their own opportunities. A high level of this factor can be seen in the participants' responses where they mention how they took advantage

of the opportunities and jobs they got though acting, as well as how they created career opportunities for themselves, for instance by developing their speaking skills.

The fifth topic ("Purpose in life") consisted of four subtopics: "Approach to acting", "Continued engagement", "Work process" and "About life". The topic "Approach to acting" deals with the participants' thoughts on how for them, acting is a job just like any other, or that it is more than just a hobby. The topic "Continued engagement" shows the participants' desire to continue being members of the performing arts theater, as well as a fear of sorts, namely caused by a lack of other activities that they would like to do if they were not members of the performing arts theater.

> *[...] on the other hand, just like any other profession that a person would like to be involved in and does it right, it certainly can and will have a therapeutic effect on that person, because we all know what it's like when you do something you love properly. It is great. (D. Z., 23)*

> *People usually say: "Oh, that's a great way to blow off steam." I don't like it when they say that. For me, a way to blow off steam would be running or doing exercises. Here, you create something. (V. B., 61)*

In the subtopic "Work process", we noticed that, according to the participants, the work process is more important than the final product, i.e., the final performance. They state that working with the directors and other students requires patience, time and repetition, but that they enjoy the process even more than performing in the final show.

> *I really adore shows, I love a full theater, but that really the last thing on my list. This whole process is in fact what I find especially interesting. My relationships with people, those relationships as they develop both on and off stage, well, that's what's I find truly amazing. (V. B., 61)*

> *It taught me patience and that some things take time to build, you need to wait, and repeat stuff a lot – you really do need a lot of patience... (L. P., 29)*

In the topic "About life", the participants talk about their values in life, how PlayDrama enriches their lives, and about expanding their horizons with other activities. All participants take their involvement in acting seriously and state that acting truly fulfills, opens and enriches their lives.

> *[...] this year, when we all got together at the beginning, I've even said: "PlayDrama's really changed my life in a way." (V. Z., 33)*

> *[...] and it seems to me that everyone is trying to be a better person than they are now. I don't think anyone is pretending to be better than they are – they are really trying to be better than they are. Take me, for example – I believe that I'm trying to be a better man than I am now. (P. M., 34)*

> *[...] it's mostly that I met some people and experienced some things I never thought I would, I never thought I would get to take part in some of those things, so it definitely did enrich my life. (P. M., 34)*

According to Ryff and Keyes (1995), people with a high level of purpose in life have goals and a sense of focus towards them, as well as beliefs that give their lives meaning. Such

persons have their own aspirations. From the data we obtained, it is evident that acting helps the participants develop a purpose in life. They see acting as a real treasure and even mention how it changed their lives in a number of ways.

The sixth topic ("Personal Growth") consists of four subtopics: "Text", "Competences", "Body" and "Room for progress – more". In the subtopics of the topic "Text", the participants talk about the benefits of the drama script they are working on in the theater. They mention how the text teaches them valuable lessons for life, as well as how it helps them strengthen their memory.

> *[...] we always draw lessons from the texts we are given, especially when we dig a little deeper...you can definitely learn some valuable lessons for life from them. (D. Z., 23)*

> *[...] so, I am this many years old, hmm, I like this PlayDrama quite a bit, and I could... well, here I'm actually working on making my brain work as long as possible and trying to age well, so to speak. (G. K., 55)*

The subtopic "Competences" has the most codes in the entire research – as many as nine. The greatest competencies they have acquired while working in the theater are the fact that they are working on themselves and becoming aware of their own potential. The students also mentioned the following competencies: enjoyment, creative process, new views of art, focus, maturity, active listening, and work on their ego. In addition to mental and emotional competencies, the participants also mention their bodies as training grounds for personal growth. As many as eleven quotes mention the participants' physical development within the performing arts theater. Learning new skills was mentioned twice, and the development of speaking skills such as diction and precision in expression was mentioned four times.

> *[...] first, I somehow became more aware of my potential. I can do it, I can get out in front of the audience, not get confused, not forget the text. I am a little anxious at the beginning, but then it passes. I consider that to be quite a victory. (K. R., 53)*

> *[...] and even in situations where you have to get physical with someone, I used to be like: "Come on, don't hug or kiss me, please", which goes away with age, and now that's not a problem for me at all. (M. P., 47)*

> *It helped me accept myself and my body exactly as it is. (I. Z., 42)*

> *[...] I know how to wait, where to put a comma, where to pause, I known how to break a sentence into five, six words, I known to be concrete and clear. (G. K., 55)*

It is interesting that the participants also mention opportunities for further progress – they state that there are qualities that they have not fully developed yet. Those include continuous work on self-confidence, relaxation and liberation.

> *[...] I maybe lack, well, not maybe, but definitely – I would say I lack self-confidence. I guess you lack it your whole life, I don't know. (V. B., 61)*

> *Even though I've been a part of this for years, I still feel like, well, like I need time to loosen up – that is something I became aware of... (M. P., 47)*

Ryff and Keyes (1995) point out that people with a high level of personal growth feel like they are continuously improving. They see themselves growing and progressing, they are open to new experiences, and they know how to realize their potential. The students of the performing arts theater recognize personal progress over time, and realize that there are also qualities they can further improve.

The seventh topic, titled "Reasons for enrollment in the theater", pertains to the reasons why the participants got into acting. The category is divided into two topics: "Love of acting" and "other Reasons". In ten quotes, the participants stated that they have always had a certain interest in acting and the arts in general, while in more detailed answers it was noted that the participants have been unconsciously engaging in acting throughout their lives, as well as that they have been showing interest in performing arts since their childhood or youth. On the other hand, some participants enrolled in the theater for different reasons. These include the need to cope with anxiety in the work environment and the need to cope with difficult situations in life. Four quotes mention that the participants enrolled in the performing arts theater at the urging or suggestion of friends and acquaintances. It is interesting to note that in four quotes, the students expressed regret that they had not enrolled in the performing arts theater earlier.

> *But when I think about it, my closest girlfriends and I, even when we were little, in the first, second grade, we always played pretending we were in a theater. (V. B., 61)*

> *[...] I think I'm theatrical in a way and prone to, how to say it – I wouldn't say prone to drama, but I can draw some comedic elements out of situations, entertain people a little and so on. (M. O., 49)*

> *It was four years ago, when a bad thing happened to me – I was looking for a way to avoid falling into this deep sadness, into depression. (K. R., 53)*

The eighth and last topic ("Participants' progress") consisted of two subtopics, namely "Acting" and "Personality". The participants state that the biggest advantage they noticed in other participants, as well as in themselves, is getting rid of theatricality. They comment on the progressive shift from caricatured, exaggerated and overemphasized acting to the more natural stage expression that comes from experiencing the character's inner self. They also noticed the development of talent in some students, as well as easier compliance with the director's instructions.

> *[...] and in some of those pro-amateur situations where there is a lot of caricature, a lot of everything, a lot of exaggeration, a lot of gags and so on, so when I came here, I had to get rid of all of that in the first, second, third year...as they say: "Stop, you don't have to do anything, just follow the things on the inside, inner speech, inner monologue, inner this, that", and basically, when I started applying these techniques and methods, improvisations, etudes and all that... (G. K., 55)*

When it comes to the topic of "Personality", the participants point out that the most obvious change they noticed in other students is how they loosened up. By that, they mean that the students became less introverted, shy, and fearful of other people's opinions.

> *[...] she, in my opinion, opened up so much, made so much progress, that's how I saw it. For example, she is like a flower that blossomed, I don't know, I actually*

started crying after the show when I realized how much she opened up, how relaxed she was, how present, how, I guess, good she felt during all of that... (V. Z., 33)

Discussion

This study aimed to explore the associations between psychological wellbeing and dramatic arts. The obtained results show how acting is related to various benefits. The participants stated that the most obvious benefits of acting are an increase in self-confidence, a decrease in anxiety levels, a connection with other people, courage, awareness of one's own capabilities, loosening up and physical development. Interestingly, the obtained data show that the participants believe that acting helped them recognize certain negative aspects such as a lack of accountability of other students, people "pretending" in everyday life, and facing prejudices about acting. Furthermore, in line with existing knowledge (e.g. Liebmann, 1996) the participants reported that through acting they learned how to deal with conflicts with other people in an appropriate manner. The obtained results speak in favor of the fact that the inclusion of art in everyday life can enrich the realization of human potential and thus help improve one's well-being (Ryff, 2018; Funch, 2021). Acting as an art form seems to be an appropriate choice because at its core, it requires that the actors learn more about themselves (Ward, Connolly, & Meyer, 2013). An actor must be aware of and accept their good and bad character traits, create and nurture positive relationships with colleagues, be independent and regulate their own behavior from within, and not be guided by other people's expectations. An actor also has to master their environment in such a way that they can perceive and take advantage of the given opportunities or develop their own. One's goals in professional and private life should be accompanied by a sense of focus towards them. An actor, as a person who is constantly working on themselves, should be aware of their continuous development and know how to use their own abilities. Although the students of the PlayDrama Performing Arts Theater are not training to be professional actors, the goals they have and the paths they are taking are not at all amateurish. The approach to working on each role is gradual and serious, which was also noticed by the participants, who often point out that to them, acting is more than just a hobby.

Participants in this study were not professionals and belonged to different age groups, from early school age to older age. We believe that our obtained results have implications in observing their acting through the prism of lifelong learning.

According to Vekić (2015), lifelong learning is a process of intentional and unintentional acquisition of knowledge and skills, as well as of development of attitudes, which takes place throughout one's life, namely with the purpose of personal, social or professional progress. The notion of lifelong learning refers to several different points of view. One of them is cited by Cropley et al. (1979) who talks about the instrumental and non-instrumental vision. The instrumental vision defines lifelong learning as a way to achieve certain concrete and practical goals, such as improving one's vocational skills, greater work efficiency, higher living standards, increased enjoyment of leisure time, etc. (Cropley et al., 1979). On the other hand, the non-instrumental vision emphasizes the importance of life-

long learning for the development of education itself, not as a means to an end, but as an end in itself, namely with an emphasis on spiritual rather than material benefits (Cropley et al., 1979). In this sense, our study demonstrated both aspects of lifelong learning demonstrating the beneficial potential of adults' engagement with dramatic expression.

In 2006, the European Parliament and the Council adopted a recommendation on key competences for lifelong learning. One of its eight competences is cultural awareness and expression. According to the recommendation, this competence is defined as acknowledging the importance of creative expression of ideas, experiences and feelings in various forms such as music, reproductive arts, literature and visual arts. This competence refers to the appreciation and enjoyment of works of art, as well as to self-expression in different media using one's innate abilities (Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council, 2010).

In addition to developing stage and artistic qualities, work in the dramatic arts in the performing arts theater contributes to the psychological well-being of the students, and at the same time affects their lifelong learning. The students of the performing arts theater learn through various activities: from struggling to accept their own weaknesses and shortcomings, to working on getting rid of anxiety, accepting their character traits, strengthening their virtues, developing positive relationships with colleague actors and directors, physical work, dealing with negativity, and developing speaking and acting skills. In many aspects of work in the dramatic arts, the participants learn in a disorganized and unintentional way. Therefore, this can also be considered unintentional learning and self-education. The connection between lifelong learning and work in the performing arts theater is supported by the fact that most of the interviewed students gave priority to the process working on a play rather than the final result, i.e., the play itself. It can also be noted that this is a process of lifelong learning where the focus is on learning and developing one's own abilities and skills, and not on institutions and structures.

Our study showed that participation in drama activities can be closely related to participants' well being. This calls for re-consideration and inclusion of dramatic activities in both official and un-official educational curricula. Current state of official education leaves drama on the margin (Hanson & Health, 1998) reserved only for especially motivated individuals and/or professionals while the true participatory potential of dramatic activity is unfortunately lost. We believe that our study adds to the body of knowledge pointing into a different direction where playfulness and self exploration that drama can offer may be enacted by many for the benefit od all.

Conclusion

In 1989, Carol Ryff offered a vision of psychological well-being as a field of interaction between six different factors of human life that affect a person's understanding of themselves. These factors include self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth. Art is associated with psychological well-being because artistic expression has a strong positive impact on human health and well-being. The reason for this is the fact that throughout history, people have

had the need to express themselves creatively and create, either out of a desire to express their problems, fears and doubts, or out of joy and in order to evoke joy. Previous research showing the connection between well-being and art has shown that "active" participation in drama workshops, as well as attending theater performances, has a beneficial effect on one's own perception of psychological well-being. The goal of this paper was to examine the experiences of students of the PlayDrama Performing Arts Theater pertaining to the impact of work in the dramatic arts on their psychological well-being. The results have shown that acting contributes to the participants' psychological well-being. The obtained data indicate many advantages of including art in one's everyday life.

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