

# Personal and contextual factors in the construction of acting careers

**Sara Bahia<sup>1</sup>, Isabel Janeiro<sup>1</sup>, Ricardo Duarte<sup>2</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, University of Lisbon  
<sup>2</sup> *Journal of Literature, Arts and Ideas*, Lisbon

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**Portugal**

[sarabahia@netcabo.pt](mailto:sarabahia@netcabo.pt)

## **Abstract**

This research seeks to explore personal and contextual factors that form the basis of formulating and implementing vocational choices in acting careers. The twenty eight student actors that participated in the study were asked to write an auto-biographical description of personal factors and educational opportunities they recognised as decisive for their career choice. Analysis of results enabled the identification of personal features, such as autonomy, determination and perseverance, which the individuals to overcome social and cultural barriers they encountered during construction of their acting careers.

**Key words:** autonomy; career barriers, career development, creativity, perseverance, self-determination

## **Introduction**

The particular context in which individuals construct their careers is multileveled, and factors such as physical environment, culture, family, social groups and school affect the way people view themselves in working roles (Savickas, 2002). Furthermore, the emerging global, networked and culturally diversified world increasingly spreads the perception of a wide range of opportunities for occupational choices.

During the process of developing and implementating vocational choices, people tend to find a balance between personal aspirations and careers that provide minimal barriers (Lent, 2005). Artistic and creative occupations exemplify careers that may be socially admired but at the same time are considered as involving some risk. Youngsters who consider occupations in these domains are frequently discouraged and their plans are often considered unrealistic. This paradox reflects the cultural bias where creativity is simultaneously appreciated and yet socially disvalued.

### *The social notion of creativity*

Literature reviews on creativity have pointed out many social convictions that constitute barriers to the development of creative potential, not only at a social level, but also at economical and cultural levels (e.g. Nieman & Bennet, 2002). There is a general sense in society that the unknown, the unexpected and instability are negative. Thus, features such as courtesy, promptness, obedience and intellectual conformity are valued and, conversely, skepticism, emotional sensitivity and idealism are often punished (Torrance, 1965). This kind of stereotype persistently leads to anti-creative climates in family and educational settings.

### *Construction of careers and social barriers*

Literature on career decisions has consistently pointed out the effect of contextual and internal barriers as impediments to commitment to certain less traditional fields of interest. These barriers include social and economical factors, influence from parents and peers, low self-esteem, fear of success and lack of reinforcement for their achievements (e.g. Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994). However, the effect of such contextual variables may be mediated by a person's cognitive appraisal of their validity and importance (Lent et al., 1994) and by the influence of role models who may minimize or maximize their consequences. Moreover, the perception of these barriers may be a determining factor in any vocational choice. The

manner in which an individual perceives a barrier explains to a large extent how the person will approach the barrier (Swanson, Daniels & Tokar, 1996).

### *Creative persons and artistic occupations*

Career beliefs also determine a person's orientation to the idea of a career (Krumboltz, 1979). Attitudes, opinions, convictions and notions cohere together to create assumptions about a vocational area that may or may not be grounded in reality. The historical bias against Art is reflected in reluctant social acceptance of some artistic careers. In this sense, the presence of some personal qualities is a determining factor in deciding for a career in the artistic, creative domain.

In fact, research on the features of creative persons shows us that there are some common attributes. The most recurrent qualities relate to intellectual curiosity, self-knowledge, independence, communication skills (Vervalin, 1971), attention to detail, flexibility (Cortizas, 2000), rich knowledge base, intrinsic motivation (Amabile, 1983), non conventionality, risk taking, broad interests, openness to new experiences (Simonton, 2000), knowledge of writing, drawing, composing, being quick to question norms and assertions (Sternberg, 1988), and an attitude towards discovery that leads to multiple perspectives and problem finding (Csikszentmihalyi & Getzels, 1988). Many of these personal features are present in artists or people who undertake creative activities. Moreover, a thorough analysis of biographical excerpts of great artists (Bahia & Duarte, 2004) points to three other distinctive personal characteristics, namely, autonomy, determination and perseverance.

According to the self-determination theory, autonomy is a universal need that leads to initiative and defence of one's own actions (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Meaning self government, it is usually interrelated with personal freedom of will and action in accordance with integrated values, requests and interests, i.e. internal control (Deci, 1995). The idea of autonomy is connected with intentionality (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and is also present in the preference to think innovatively based on an individual choice, as specified by the investment theory of creativity (Sternberg & Lubart, 1991). In this sense, autonomy refers to volition, the organismic desire to self-organise experiences (Deci, 1980).

Autonomy leads to determination, which means the act of making or arriving at a decision through strong firmness of purpose. Thus, determination refers to the establishment of

goals and their fulfilment (Csikzentmihalyi, 1990) and has also been used in relation to will power or volition (Corno, 1992). Volition is defined as the use of will to make choices about what to do, and is seen as an essential element of voluntary human behaviour (e.g. Bandura, 1997). Conation is also used to illustrate this intentional, personal motivation. Therefore, the perception, thought, feeling, commitment, and action will be influenced by one's belief about the purpose of one's life, which, in turn, determines the strength of one's pursuit of self-established goals.

Perseverance, persistence, tenacity, steadfastness and patience convey a sense of endurance in the pursuit of a desired end which is explained by Csikszentmihalyi's theory of creative flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). With clear goals every step of the way and immediate feedback to one's action, enabling a balance between challenges and skills, action and awareness are merged and distractions excluded from consciousness, allowing a total concentration on the essential. With no worry about failure, self-consciousness disappears, because the self transcends into a larger dimension, distorting the sense of time and transforming the activity into an autotelic engagement. The concept of perseverance is also described by Renzulli's (1986) active task commitment, which presupposes the responsible establishment of one's own goals and standards that leads an intense, energetic, eager and enthusiastic involvement in the activities and challenges with little need for external motivation.

The autonomy, determination and perseverance that are observed in many artists are features that explain and, at the same time, determine their perceived self-efficacy. Beliefs in personal efficacy affect life choices, level of motivation, quality of functioning and resilience to adversity (Bandura, 1986). In effect, protective factors that lead to resilience (e.g. Masten, Best & Garnezy, 1990) and their entwinement in a dynamic process (Rutter, 1987) include connections to feelings of self-worth and self-efficacy, autonomy (Benard, 1993), talents valued by self and others, positive role models and educational and cultural opportunities. Therefore, social experiences and "actors" have a decisive role in the choice of an artistic career. The convergence of these factors emerges in the presence of artistic competencies, namely, aesthetical sensibility and a strong internal need to express a creative potential (Bahia & Duarte, 2004).

### *Acting careers*

In more specific terms, theatre careers exemplify an artistic and creative domain largely appreciated by society but also usually devalued in occupational terms. To overcome the many stigmas surrounding acting occupations, some specific personal qualities and strengths are certainly required.

"Theatron", θέατρον, from the Greek meaning "place of seeing", and "drama", δράμα, meaning "action", represent the art of tragedy and comedy that had its origin as a celebration of Dionysus. Nietzsche associated Dionysius with the enthusiastic, emotional and instinctive approach to knowledge, opposed to the analytic and rational Apollonian approach, more valued by our educational systems. To "act" in the "place of seeing" needs conviction and courage to make a choice that encounters difficulties not only in the initial decision but also in attaining personal strategies needed to deal with frequent setbacks, such as not being accepted in castings or having to abdicate personal freedom whilst under contract of exclusivity with a certain company.

### *Goals of the study*

In order to acknowledge the "backstage (f)actors" determining the construction of acting careers, the present research established two main goals. The first seeks to explore conditions that form the basis for formulating plans for an acting career. The second goal aims at identifying personal and contextual factors that facilitate implementation of that vocational choice.

## **Methodology**

### *Subjects*

Twenty eight students participated in the study, all of them in their fourth year of a five-year degree program in Theatre, at the Escola Superior de Teatro e Cinema at the Instituto Politécnico de Lisboa. Ages ranged from 21 to 28 for the 15 female and 13 male students.

### *Method*

The method used was collection of narrative excerpts. The narrative approach in career studies is a promising methodology that allows for exploration of the whole complexity of career-related issues. As Savickas (2005) suggests, career stories reveal the themes that

individuals use to make meaningful choices and adjust to work roles. By listening to the personal narratives, career research captures the essential meaning of careers and the dynamics of their construction.

For collection of the narrative excerpts, participants were asked to write an autobiographical description of the personal conditions and educational opportunities they recognised as being decisive in their undertaking a career related to theatre.

## Results

From content analysis of the narrative excerpts, five main categories of factors emerged which underlie the process of choice and implementation of an acting career: the moment when the career plan was formulated; contextual factors forming the basis of the decision; personal factors which were considered decisive for that choice, the perception of cultural and social barriers to theatre professions, and protective personal factors or personal competencies identified as required for facing different types of barriers. Table 1 presents a summary of the results.

**Table 1: Categories**

Main categories	Sub categories	Total Sub-categories	Total main categories
Moment of choice	Child	3	28
	Adolescence	19	
	Young adult	6	
Contextual factors	Cultural experiences	16	42
	Role models	20	
	Critical incidents	6	
Personal factors	Artistic interests	13	16
	Social intervention	3	
Perception of barriers	Personal barriers	2	9
	Social barriers	7	
Personal protective factors	Autonomy	10	38
	Determination	8	
	Perseverance	20	

## 1. Moment of choice

Analysis of the results identified adolescence as the critical period for decision making. In effect, nineteen participants referred to having decided on an artistic career during their adolescence, more specifically when they were 15, 16 or 17 years old. Three participants referred to having made the choice during childhood, and six other students acknowledged making their decision at an adult age, after unrewarding experiences in some other study or professional area. The following examples of auto-biographical passages illustrate these findings:

### Childhood

*“I participated spontaneously in the plays my father organised in the parish hall. The actors and the public praised my performances and that was how I knew what my life would be”.*

*“In Africa, one Christmas, my parents took us to see a play inside the local church. It seemed magic to me, and at that moment I wanted to become part of this magical world!”*

### Adolescence

*“When I was 16 I went to the theatre for the first time. Watching that play made me feel a very special emotion that motivated me to go to the theatre again and again. But watching wasn’t enough... and that was when I understood what I wanted to be”.*

*“My choice was not immediate. It was the result of a long organization of my internal abilities.”*

*“Acting was a late choice. My first option was the social field with acting as a hobby. Then, when I was 17, I understood that it made more sense to deepen my knowledge of theatre and take a degree in acting. That was when I chose this option.”*

### Young adulthood

*“I took Biology for three whole years. The moment I found the courage to say I wanted to be an actress, I quit Biology!”*

*“Literature did not motivate me enough. I attended the course for 7 years... 6 of which I also worked in several jobs without knowing what I wanted to be. The stage and night life fasci-*

*nated me, but I couldn't find the courage to commit myself to this world. At 29 I finally made my decision".*

*"The day I defended my Masters in Sciences I decided to quit my job and finally take a degree in Theatre. The amateur experiences in acting during school and university spoke louder.*

## **2. Contextual factors**

Analysis of the answers revealed three groups of subcategories as significant contextual factors enabling this career option. These subcategories included early cultural experiences which opened perspectives to occupations in the artistic domains (a total of 16 references); the influence of significant people or role models in the decision making process, mostly within family and school settings (a total of 20 references), and chance factors or critical incidents that unexpectedly precipitated the choice of an acting career (5 references). Examples of references related to contextual factors are:

### **Cultural experiences**

*"My family was open to cultural activities"*

*"I learnt to play the piano for 6 years. That experience led me to choose the stage as a career."*

*"I practiced gymnastics from 9 to 17. Acting is all about body expression."*

*"I lived my childhood and adolescence in a "revolutionary" town in the suburbs of Lisbon which offered a wide variety of recreational activities that I attended during this period."*

*"The school shows I participated in and acting in an amateur company were very successful experiences."*

### **Role models**

*"My father has always worked in radio and my mother is a teacher. What better role models?"*

*"My stepfather is the best story teller in the world."*

*“My first memories include actors and musicians that were my parents’ friends.”*

*“It was with my Language Arts teacher in the 9th grade (or was it the 10th?) that the turning point began.”*

*“My English teacher used drama to teach us the language. That fascinated me and motivated me to attend a workshop in acting which then triggered my decision.”*

### **Critical incidents**

*“I went on a school visit to watch a play. In the end we spoke to the actors. That was when I made my decision.”*

*“It was while I was selling encyclopaedias door to door as a teenager to save money for a long journey that I understood the relevance of impersonating different roles according to the context.”*

*“My best friend persuaded me to go with her to the selection phase for this course. The first session she never showed up. I did, although I thought I had no chance of getting in. But I did, and never hesitated after that.”*

### **3. Personal factors**

Analysis of the autobiographical excerpts revealed three distinct categories of personal factors underlying the process of choice: personal interests in arts and creative activities, or the “inner need” to express creative potential (13 references); and, the desire to intervene at a social level (3 references). The following are examples of such references:

#### **Artistic interests or needs for creative expression**

*“I always knew I had to embrace a career in arts. Painting and music were my first choices. Then one day I understood it was the theatre!”*

*“I discovered the pleasure of self-expression and of the poetry that exists in this world of acting”*

*“I saw Theatre as a way to promote the expression of an inner personal reality”*

*“Theatre is a way to harmonize my shyness with my sense of humour”*

### **Social intervention**

*“Acting offers a power of communication not attained in any other way.”*

*“Acting is doing something different towards society... It enchants the world.”*

*“As a teenager I was a very active political spokesman. Defying the crowds was fascinating. Fortunately when I grew up I thought acting would be better than politics”*

*“I understood that theatre was the only way I could touch other people and produce a change, even if a mild one, in society”*

### **4. Perception of barriers**

The main barriers which participants perceived as opposing their plans for an acting occupation concerned personal barriers such as the lack of competence (only two references), and predominantly social barriers, mostly family discouragement (a total of five references) and peer criticism (two references). Some of these occurrences are shown below:

#### **Personal barriers**

*“As a child I thought I wasn’t very good at acting, but I insisted and finally understood that with experience I could overcome my limitations”*

#### **Family barriers**

*“At 15 I decided to become an actress. My mother tried to dissuade me. That only gave me more conviction to fight”*

*“When I decided I was going to take acting as a career, my grandmother congratulated me and then asked me what other degree I was going to take!”*

### **Peer barriers**

*“It still takes me some effort to try to explain to friends’ friends that there is enough theory and practice to study during a five year university course in theatre. It seems people think acting is easy and that it is something that shouldn’t be taken seriously.”*

*“Anyone can be an actor! I think everyone who isn’t an actor has this belief! If only we could fight against that belief, people would appreciate our lives more!”*

### **5. Personal protective factors**

Narrative excerpts showed three main personal features that function as protection against social and cultural barriers and allow the participants to overcome the obstacles they encountered. The three most relevant factors were autonomy (ten references), determination (eight references) and perseverance (twenty references). The following excerpts are example of sentence-units included in these categories:

#### **Autonomy**

*“At 15 I founded a drama group at school with some classmates. I thought it would be an opportunity to explore the possibilities of drama.”*

*“My family insisted I take a degree in Law. I didn’t want to. So I missed my final high school exams and wasn’t able to apply to Law School. But I knew could apply to Theatre Studies: That was the only way I found to make my dream come true.”*

#### **Determination**

*“When I decided to study theatre I understood it was the first time I wanted to fight for something.”*

*“When I was finishing high school I saw an ad in the paper for a course of socio-cultural animation. I quit the regular secondary educational system, leaving two years behind and took that professional course. It was my way of understanding what I really wanted. Then University followed.”*

#### **Perseverance**

*“I felt the need to make sacrifices in order to obtain results.”*

*“When I saw a play I understood I could do the same if I tried hard!”*

*“I finally felt I could act. That was when I started practicing seriously”*

### *Final act*

Once upon a time there was a girl. She was the second daughter of a couple of high school teachers who devoted their free time to the organisation of cultural events in the small town they lived in. Very young she dreamt of becoming a ballerina, but in that small town where she lived there were no advanced ballet classes. From an early age she organised plays with the neighbours and performed them for family and friends. With her older sister she produced “Radio Child”, a home made radio program with advertising just like “real world Radio”. She spent hours looking at the mirror and acting out different characters. As a teenager she studied music and felt the fascination of the audience in public events. She discovered the pleasure of reading aloud in front of the class, the mirror, or other people. The next step was acting in an amateur theatre group. Yet, when she was 18, influenced by an art teacher, she decided to study Architecture. Two years later a colleague challenged her to participate in a play. The next year she decided to interrupt (or maybe never return?) Architecture and take a degree in Theatre.

### **Conclusion**

From the analysis of the autobiographical excerpts two main conclusions can be drawn. The first conclusion relates to almost all participants’ recognition of the complexity of personal and contextual factors underlying the process of career choice. The second main conclusion of the study comes from the finding that, for the vast majority of participants, construction of a theatre career is more a question of effort and work than a question of natural ability. All the acting students pointed to several factors affecting the process of choice. Nonetheless, the large majority of respondents referred exposure to cultural activities or events during childhood and adolescence as a determining factor for arousal of interest in acting activities. Also of crucial importance seems to be the opportunity to establish contact with a significant person related to the artistic milieu.

Although few students explicitly refer to the personal and social barriers encountered during the career choice process, most of them emphasized some personal qualities required to pursue their goals. Perseverance is the factor most recognised. The presence of personal qualities and of artistic competencies not only seems to affect the initial decision for an acting career but also the belief in the possibility of handling future difficulties. Autonomy, determination, perseverance, feelings of self-worth and self-efficacy, as well as talents valued by self and others, all function as protective factors. Because development is a dynamic process, these personal qualities are not the sole responsible factor for this kind of option. They interweave with various social and cultural experiences and are influenced by role models who become highly significant. This interactive dynamic process seems to have a decisive role in the choice and the implementation of an artistic career.

Gagné's theory of the transformation of gifts into talents (Gagné, 1999) stresses this intertwining of personal and contextual factors. The expression of specific talents in a certain domain depends on the personal gift and on two sets of catalysts, one at a personal level and the other at an environmental level. Personal catalysts include physical dimensions and psychological dimensions (motivation, interests, volition, perseverance, traits). Environmental catalysts (mentors, learning experiences) provide the opportunities for specific training and practice in a field and affect the development of high levels of talent. Therefore, the activities and programmes the creative person is enrolled in are a key factor in the development of gifts into talents. In the case of the Theatre, cultural experiences contribute in a decisive way to the choice of this area. Interestingly, few participants refer to specific theatrical experiences. The exposure to cultural events, as a spectator and not necessarily as a participant, seemed to have had an unexpected effect in some of these students during their developmental course.

One implication of the present research study is the need to consider contextual factors both in the conceptualization of creativity and in the analysis of career construction, in particular for artistic careers. Fortunately, recent decades have brought a shift from an ethnocentric individualistic approach to personal development to a more contextual approach (e.g. Phinney, 2000). The importance of contextual dimensions is present in the recent confluence approaches to creativity. The systems model (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988) considers creativity as the result of an intertwinement of the person, the domain and the field. Therefore, formal and informal educational settings should consider the importance of these contextual variables and

provide more opportunities of cultural participation and less social barriers to the pursuit of creative dreams, whichever they may be.

Another implication pertains to the methodology used. On one hand, this methodology is shown to have great potential given that autobiographical narratives capture an all-encompassing view of the variety and the dynamics of factors involved in the construction of creative careers. On the other hand, future research is needed to uncover all the potentialities of this research tool as well as precautions for its use.

Summarizing from the life descriptions that motivated the present study, we sustain the idea that most of these future actors recognised an early involvement in artistic activities and expressions and, once they decided to undertake a career in acting, all of them pursued their goal in an autonomous, determined and persevering way. However, some adolescents may never fulfil their dream because they do not encounter the backstage (f)actors that seem to have a crucial role in the pursuit of a career in acting. It is, in fact, difficult to follow the advice Konstantin Stanislavski<sup>1</sup> gave to all who engaged in the acting profession: “Love the art in yourself and not yourself in the art”.

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<sup>1</sup> Stanislavski was a Russian theatre and acting innovator, who developed a systematic approach to training actors to work from the inside outward.