

The Black Artists Way

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INTRODUCTION

- De-roling describes the systems actors use to mentally and emotionally disengage from their character after a performance.
- Black actors often must step into the headspace of someone enduring race and gender-specific trauma to perform. Having to be in that headspace for hours at a time can result in black actors feeling disconnected from their own identity and trapped in the feelings and emotions of their characters.
- From the moment one is cast, their identity becomes inextricably bound to the character in which they must portray. Methods like the Stanislavski method emphasize recalling past experiences to step into character, yet do not account for the needs of the actors as they step out of character.
- The research presented here is focused on evaluating the effects embodying traumatic roles has on black actors, such as boundary-blurring, second-hand trauma, or various other mental and emotional tolls.

METHODS

This project takes a mixed method approach in that it combines qualitative and quantitative techniques to gather results. Essentially, the research consists of interviews, focus groups, journals, surveys, psychological assessments, and literature review with actors from Theatre Tallahassee production of August Wilson's Fences and eventually the ETA production of D. L. Colburn's The Gin Game.

- Before the Fences production rehearsals commenced, the actors/participants were surveyed about their prior knowledge revolving around the subject matter of this research study.
- Seven actors were given curated de-roling techniques that were implemented throughout the play's production.
- Two participants were then interviewed on their experiences as black actors in a theatrical space.

Following the collection of data, the results from the survey were quantified while the interviews were transcribed and coded. As this is an ongoing project, data gathered from participants performing in The Gin Game have yet to be collected and analyzed.

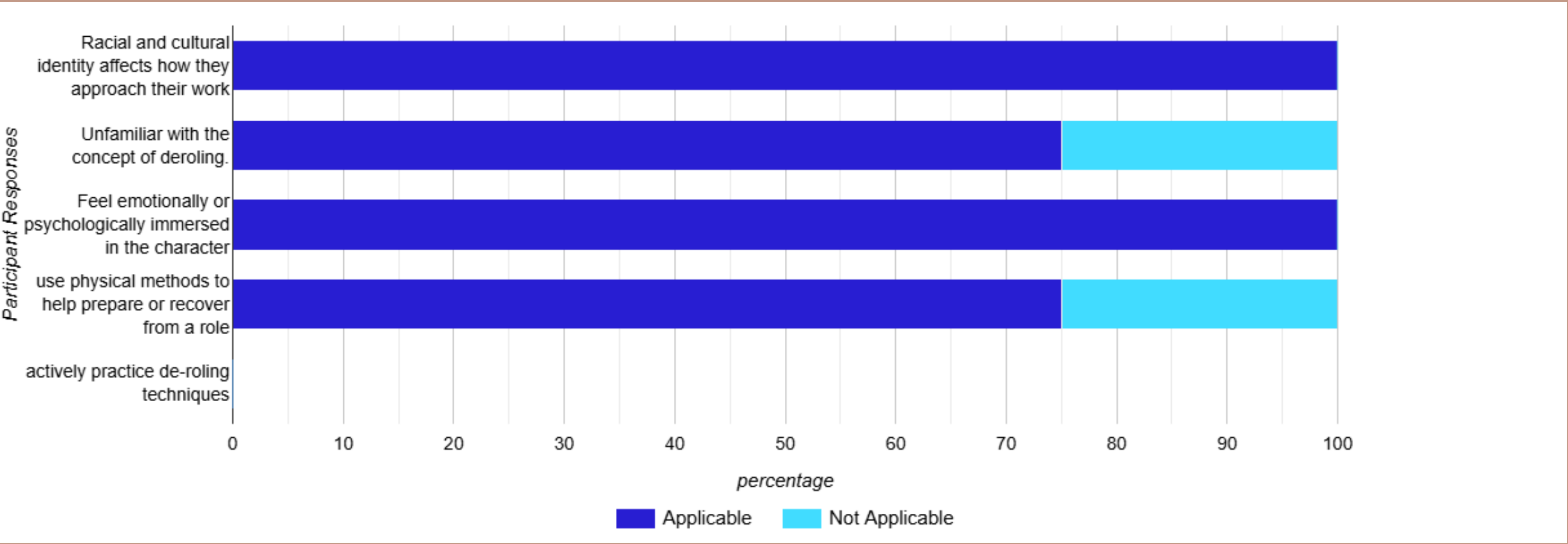
RESULTS

The following is a brief summary regarding the participants' experience, and how these findings may aid in better curating a system black actors can use to mentally and emotionally disengage from their character after a performance. Thus, allowing the development of a deroling process for the needs of black actors playing uniquely traumatic roles. The data presented below was collected at the start of the study process before de-roling practices were employed in the rehearsal room.

- 100% of survey participants responded that racial and cultural identity affects how they approach their work as actors.
- 100% of survey participants responded that they feel emotionally or psychologically immersed in the character they are portraying.
- 75% of survey participants were unfamiliar with the concept of deroling.
- 75% of survey participants use physical methods such as exercise or body movement to help prepare or recover from a role.
- 0% of participants actively practice de-roling techniques

Despite none of the participants actively practicing de-roling techniques, ⅓ found themselves engaging in physical activities to step in and out of character, perhaps suggesting a subconsciousness need to detach. Within the 2 interviews, a motif of race, ethnicity, and identity was found to be a main factor that affected both the interviewees personal experience in theatre. The results are not entirely conclusive as the project is ongoing.

Surveyed Actors Responses



DISCUSSION

The data collected from the survey suggested that one's identity becomes a part of one's character and a part of the process of developing a character. While the survey provided us with usable quantifiable data, there were limitations in the breadth of perspectives gathered, with a small sample size and 75% of participants being within the 20-21-year-old age range. This project, however, is ongoing, and future research intends to focus on an older age group in the hopes of offering more breadth in perspective. The interviews that were conducted provided a deeper look into the personal perspectives of two of the actors. The relationship between actor, identity, and character was perceived as positive amongst both interviewed participants. One participant specified that playing these roles helps them feel connected to their past and those who came before them. At the same time, trepidations in the rehearsal space were experienced as a result of interactions between fellow theatre practitioners who lacked an understanding of the black experience. This first round of research has informed the ways in which further research will be conducted. The actors were more connected with the subject matter and studies when outside of the rehearsal space. There is still much to be determined based on what little we have analyzed.

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