
Book and Resource Reviews

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Wrestling With Manhood: Boys, Bullying, & Battering

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When I was in fourth grade, posters of professional wrestlers adorned my bedroom: Jimmy "Superfly" Snuka, Rowdy Roddy Piper. And every Saturday morning, I watched these men punch, pile drive, and insult each other for the full hour of the show. While far from good clean fun back then, wrestling has since devolved into a spectacle that would be laughable if it were not so disturbing . . . and popular.

Today, owner Vince McMahon's "World Wrestling Entertainment," and its two headline shows, "Raw" and "Smackdown," are among the most watched programs on cable television. In the outstanding video, "Wrestling With Manhood: Boys, Bullying, and Battering," it is argued that "professional" wrestling is not simply entertainment. This form of entertainment also serves as a socializing mechanism that has the potential to shape the beliefs, values, and behaviors of viewers by telling a story of what it means to be a man in contemporary society. More specifically, the video's central premise is that the WWE embodies a particular narrative of hegemonic masculinity in which bullying, intimidation, humiliation, and sexual violence are all intertwined into an acceptable template for male behavior.

The narrators of the video are Jackson Katz, founder of the Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP) Program, and Sut Jhally, professor of communication at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. In their critical read of the WWE, they ask two fundamental questions: Why do people watch these shows? What are the effects? Following a brief description of the structure and influence of the WWE, both narrators offer articulate commentary on several themes, including the glorification of bullying, the relationship between homophobia and violence, sexism, and ultimately violence against women. Within each segment, news stories and statistics are shown that enhance the narrators' main arguments.

The content of the video, while not directly related to sport psychology, is nonetheless highly relevant, and I consider it a must see for all who work under the umbrella of sport studies. A growing number of scholars have called on the field to connect applied sport psychology to larger sociocultural and political contexts and to take issues of power and oppression more seriously in applied research and practice (Brackenridge, 2001; Fisher, Butryn, & Roper, 2003; Krane, 2001). Further, as numerous sport studies scholars have argued for the past 25 years, sport is largely a patriarchal domain that condones, and often rewards, hegemonic forms of masculinity where men act like "real" men. This video is a startling depiction of Messner's (1992) "triad of male violence," as male wrestlers abuse their own bodies,

brutalize other male wrestlers and peripheral characters, and most disturbingly, regularly terrorize women.

The degrading and profoundly disrespectful treatment of women in the WWE also offers parallels to "real" life. As women's increasing power within the fictional world of the WWE soap opera is met with a kind of backlash in the form of workplace harassment and violence, so too is women's progress in sport and society met with backlash. It is ironic, in fact, that one of the leading critiques of Title IX legislation came from the national association of wrestling coaches. Male students and athletes will encounter strong women, and as a profession, we owe it to boys and young men to educate them on how to treat women and each other with some level of integrity and to help them discard the media driven Cro-Magnonification of manhood in favor of more holistic and layered ways of being men. Katz makes this point clear when he challenges viewers to think about why we do not often define a "strong man" as one who defends women and stands up against bullying and homophobia. Applying this message to consulting, does it not take strength to confront male or female clients on racist, sexist, or homophobic remarks? This video is also a timely and useful tool with which to show students that oppression does not have to be a constituent part of sport and that respect for women and other men is not a weakness, but rather a sign of character and a more benevolent form of masculinity.

One narrator also comments that WWE events seem to connect with something "deep" within popular culture, which itself is ripe with many examples of violence. While they do not make the point, it is important to note that unlike the violence, homophobia, and misogyny of video games or Eminem lyrics, the events of wrestling feature encounters between actual human beings. Even though it is all scripted, there are real chairs, real blood, and real scenes of abuse. The connections that scholars must make between other media forms and negative societal trends are thus far easier to make in wrestling, and the video supports this by noting that one of the WWE stars was actually arrested for domestic violence.

On a related point, our clients and students are not all nice men and boys, and it would seem dangerously ignorant to neglect issues of male violence. Although the abusive contingent may be a minority, Curry's (1991) study of masculinity in college locker rooms showed that even more benevolent male athletes often conform to deviant misogynist behavior. AAASP has a sound code of ethics, but what about the ethics and behaviors of those we serve? It is a tough issue to resolve in practice—the policing of athletes' norms and behaviors—but this video would be a good starting point in coming to understand that when you combine the rigid forms of masculinity already found in sport with spectacles like the WWE, a potential result is increased brutality on and off the field.

The video has several other strengths. At 60 minutes, it is well suited for classroom viewing, although instructors should consider beforehand how to best moderate discussions, as the feelings evoked in students may be intense. The video could also be used in any entry-level psychology or sociology course, as it relates to such phenomena as social learning, modeling, and mob mentality. It would seem equally as relevant in women's studies courses, and perhaps most appropriately, abnormal psychology (see sadism, antisocial behavior, etc.). Further, it is appropriate for both undergraduate and graduate courses, and as Katz states, "you don't need a PhD in cultural studies to understand the WWE."

Perhaps the video's greatest strength is its images and the myriad of negative feelings they evoke. When the crowd of thousands, who now include a wide range of race, ethnic, and class groups, cheer as Vince McMahon directs women to strip and to bark like dogs on their hands and knees, the video drives home the point that claims that the WWE product is "just entertainment" are highly suspect. Further, the notion expressed by numerous interviewees in the video, that the WWE is a soap opera for men, is problematic as well. If soap operas are about a fantasy world, then what does it mean that millions of males see the WWE world as a fantasy they relate to?

The video has a few weaknesses, one of which was that the intersections between race, ethnicity, and masculinity are not adequately addressed. That said, I think making a connection between issues such as whiteness, machismo, and masculinity would have been beneficial. Finally, while some might interpret the video as being somehow anti-men, I would counter that it is just the opposite. The video issues an important challenge to viewers to broaden their readings of masculinity and question the problematic, socially oppressive gender practices that come with the dominant form of contemporary manhood.

Finally, lest one think that the images used are in any way extreme exceptions, even a brief, random viewing of current WWE programming reveals that the video represents the norm. Indeed, men continue to feminize other men through the frequent use of the term "bitch," and women continue to be shown as sex objects, and "choke slammed" by both male and other female wrestlers. In 5 or 10 years, the young fans of WWE wrestling will be in our classes, in our workshops, and in our offices, sitting across from us asking about visualization, goal setting, or mental toughness . . . we should ask them, "What does tough mean to you?"

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