

Manhood on the Mat: The Problem is Not that Pro Wrestling Makes Boys Violent. The Real Lesson of the Wildly Popular Pseudo-Sport is More Insidious

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As professional wrestling explodes in popularity, cultural analysts are struggling to catch up to its significance for society. The traditional ways of seeing it - for example, as a morality play of good vs. evil - have been transcended, as wrestling has morphed into perhaps the ultimate expression of the entertainment industry's new, multiplexed model for success.

Vince McMahon, head of the World Wrestling Federation, describes it as "contemporary sports entertainment which treats 'professional wrestling' as an action/adventure soap opera. With the sexuality of '90210,' the subject matter of 'NYPD Blue,' the athleticism of the Olympics, combined with reality-based story lines, the WWF presents a hybrid of almost all forms of entertainment and sports combined in one show." Add to that the fertile brew of traditional advertising, product merchandising, and frequent pay-per-view special events and the result is revenue in the tens of millions of dollars, not to mention a forceful new strain of sports entertainment.

But understanding pro wrestling's immense popularity, especially with (white) men and boys, requires viewing it in the broader context of shifting gender relations.

The accomplishments of social movements such as feminism, as well as the shift to a postindustrial, high-tech era of automated production and e-commerce, have challenged the culture to construct new definitions of masculinity. In the new social, cultural, and employment context, there is less emphasis on characteristics such as strength and physicality that, in an earlier age, not only clearly defined men and women in very different ways, but made masculinity dominant.

In threatened response, many men have retreated into the safe and cartoonish masculinity of a more primal gender order, a world typified by the wildly popular program "WWF Smackdown!" where size, strength, and brutality are rewarded. In wrestling's contemporary incarnation, it's not who wins and loses that matters, but how the game is played. And the way the game is played in the WWF and its companion league, World Championship Wrestling, or WCW, reinforces the prime directive - might makes right, with extreme violence defining how power is exercised.

In the past, discussions about wrestling's effects on "real world" violence have typically centered on the behavioral effects of exposure to it. Does it cause imitative violence?

But that misses the point. For the question is not, "Are children imitating the violence they see?" but "Are children learning that taunting, ridiculing, and bullying define masculinity?" We know from decades of research that depictions of violence in the entertainment media create a cultural climate in which such behavior is accepted as a normal, even appropriate, response to various problems.

We can see this process of normalization clearly in pro wrestling, where intimidation, humiliation, control, and verbal aggression (toward men as well as women) is the way that "real men" prevail. Manhood is equated explicitly with the ability to settle scores, defend one's honor, and win respect and compliance through force of conquest.

Already, this definition of manhood is at the root of much interpersonal violence in our society. For example, abusive men use force (or the threat of it) in an attempt to exercise power and control in their relationships with women. While there is no causal relationship between pro wrestling and male violence, it is clear that the wrestling subculture contributes to a larger cultural environment that teaches boys and men that manhood is about achieving power and control.

Real (or simulated) physical violence actually comprises a small percentage of the length of a pro wrestling telecast. Most of the time is devoted to setting up the narratives, and to verbal confrontation and bullying. In wrestling video games, each combatant not only has signature moves, but also verbal taunts that can be directed against either an opponent or the crowd. The object of the game is to see who can be the most effective bully.

It is a lesson that resonates all too clearly in our schools: A recent survey of 6,000 children in grades 4 to 6 found that about 1 in 10 said they were bullied one or more times a week, and 1 in 5 admitted to being bullies themselves. And we know from the 1990s' series of school shootings that, all too often, guns become the great equalizer for boys who have been bullied, ridiculed, and verbally taunted.

The hyper-masculine wrestling subculture is also deeply infused with homophobic anxiety. Macho posturing and insults ("wimps," and other worse epithets) can barely mask the fear of feminization that is always present in the homoerotic entanglement of male bodies. (The most popular of the trademark taunts by the wrestler X-Pac involves a thrusting of the crotch, accompanied by a sexual vulgarity, and his signature move of humiliation is to back his opponent into a corner and "ride" his face.)

As the enactment of gender has moved to center stage in wrestling narratives, so have women become much more central to the plot lines. In the days of Hulk Hogan and the Macho Man, women were essentially restricted to a couple of sexualized figures. But now, there are many stereotypically hyper-sexualized female characters, especially in the WWF.

More frequently male wrestlers have "girlfriends" who accompany them to the ring. And every week, in one of the most overtly racist and sexist characterizations on contemporary television, the Godfather, an over-the-top stereotype of a hustling pimp (and one of the few important black figures in the WWF) leads out his "ho train" of scantily-clad white women to the leering and jeering crowds.

As female sexuality is increasingly used in the scripts, the line between the bimbo/prostitute sidekick and the female wrestlers is eroding. A recent WWF women's champion is Miss Kitty, a former hyper-sexualized sidekick, who during one pay-per-view event removed her top. And the big contests for female wrestlers often involve mud or chocolate baths, or the "evening dress" contest (where you lose by having your dress ripped from your body).

The few exceptions, such as Chyna, a wrestler in her own right, (who, with The Rock, graced last week's Newsweek magazine cover) emerge from another place in heterosexual male fantasy, the Amazon warrior - tall, muscular, lithe, and buxom.

While ambiguity about proper gender assignments may be the contemporary norm, in the mock-violent world of professional wrestling, masculinity and femininity are clearly defined. And while pro wrestling shares many of the values sometimes associated with elements of the political far right (among them patriarchy, opposition to homosexuality, and respect for hierarchy, , many conservatives have condemned its vulgarity and sexuality.

This criticism (much of it egged on by master promoters like McMahon) fuels the erroneous belief of some youngsters that somehow the WWF and WCW are alternative and rebellious. However, one of the great insights of cultural studies is that adherence to a conservative and repressive gender order can appear powerful and liberating - or rebellious - even as it assigns greater suffering to those deemed less powerful in the social order.

Some people will argue that analyzing the social impact of wrestling is a useless exercise because, after all, it's only play acting, right? But to those who still believe that there is no connection between popular culture and broader social and political issues, that an analysis of wrestling has nothing to teach us about where our culture is heading, we have two words of caution: Jesse Ventura.