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Free to act any way he wanted : male gender identity and professional wrestling

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ABSTRACT

This theoretical study explores professional wrestling as a performance of masculinity. After briefly outlining what American professional wrestling is, and why its study is highly relevant to the field of social work, this study considers how professional wrestling may meet needs of its male fans related to their experiences of gender identity development. This study draws on Sharon Mazer's work of conceptualizing professional wrestling as a performance of masculinity. It draws on a body of feminist, postmodern, psychoanalytic theory which critiques the notion of gender as a binary, essential, and biologically determined category, and asserts that each person's development of a stable, binary gender identity necessarily requires an experience of loss, in which the person must disavow culturally prohibited desires and identifications.

This thesis argues that professional wrestling can be understood as addressing the tension experienced by its male fans between meeting the cultural imperative to maintain a stable gender identity, and needing to cope with and compensate for the losses that this imperative has demanded. This thesis will argue that professional wrestling may afford its male fans opportunities to access disavowed desires and identifications (in such a way that they need not admit to these forbidden desires and identifications) while, at the same time, reassuring them of the stability of their male identity.

Finally, this thesis will consider how this understanding of professional wrestling might inform clinical work with male professional wrestling fans and others, and will suggest avenues for exploration of the issues discussed.

FREE TO ACT ANY WAY HE WANTED:

MALE GENDER IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT AND PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

> In the pre-oedipal phase children are "overinclusive": they believe they can have or be everything. They do not yet recognize the exclusivity of the anatomical difference; they want what the other sex has, not instead of but in addition to what they have (Jessica Benjamin, 2002, p.184).

> Most people thought he [Gorgeous George] was ridiculous in those robes. But all I could see was that he was free to do and act any way he wanted (Clifton Jolley, *I Remember Gorgeous George*).

> Indeed, I argue that consolidating a stable gender identity is a developmental accomplishment that requires the activation of pathological processes, insofar as any gender-incongruent thought, act, impulse, mood, or trait would have to be disowned, displaced, (mis)placed (as in projective identification), split off, or, as Dimen suggests (this volume), renamed via symbolic slippage (Virginia Goldner, 2002, p.72-73).

This theoretical study explores young males' experiences of gender identity. To do this, I examine American professional wrestling as a cultural practice that produces messages about masculinity and prominently displays a range of masculine identities. This examination, in turn, is aimed towards better understanding the question of why professional wrestling is so popular among latency age, adolescent, and young adult males.

How is a better understanding of professional wrestling, which has been widely dismissed in both popular and social science literature either as cheap and frivolous entertainment, or as promoting dangerous values, at all relevant to the field of social work? Hasn't professional wrestling's unwholesome influence already been thoroughly documented in the social science literature? Doesn't it desensitize kids to violence and promote vulgarity, bullying, sexism, and homophobia?

This thesis, which does not aim to refute this critique, instead recognizes that professional wrestling's phenomenal popularity suggests that there is, in spite of its more negative features, some quality about it that is deeply compelling to its fans, many of whom are latency age,

adolescent, and young adult males. This popularity is evidenced by data cited on World Wrestling Entertainment's (WWE) website that WWE programs reach nearly 14 million viewers each week, and that "Friday Night Smackdown continues to be the top rated program on Friday nights among total teens, male teens, and males 18-34" (retrieved from http://corporate.wwe.com/company/events.jsp). Surely, then, it is not a great leap to speculate that many social work clients are also fans of professional wrestling. Certainly, I have come across ample anecdotal evidence in my limited social work practice that this is the case.

Understanding professional wrestling and its powerful appeal can help inform social workers in their work with clients, particularly young males, a group whose emotional life can be closely guarded and therefore difficult to empathize with and affirm. A passing knowledge – and nonjudgmental analysis – of professional wrestling can offer social workers at least one window into the lives of its fans.

Furthermore, I argue that the conventional critique of professional wrestling – as sending dangerous and conservative messages about masculinity; promoting bullying, sexism, and homophobia; and defining masculinity in sharp contrast with, and as superior to, femininity; is not so much wrong as it is incomplete, and that wrestling's presentation of masculinity is considerably more complicated than may first meet the eye.

To show this, I draw on Sharon Mazer's work of theorizing professional wrestling as a performance of masculinity in which (1) because wrestling displays the male body as an object to be admired for its beauty, and because wrestling involves nearly naked men in intimate contact with each other, it violates norms of masculinity (Mazer, 1998); and in which (2) wrestling includes the performance of a range of masculine identities – from the culturally idealized and dominant to the transgressive – and that male fans often appear to identify with wrestlers who

perform culturally transgressive notions of masculinity including flamboyance, attention to physical appearance, and ambiguous sexual identity (Mazer, 1998).

Perhaps, then, wrestling appeals to young males as much because it allows them the vicarious pleasure of transgressing gender norms as because of its presentation of culturally dominant notions of masculinity that young males have been already conditioned to identify with. If this is so, *why* might fans enjoy watching these gender-discordant performances? What is the significance of this? What might this tell us about their interior lives?

To explore these questions, I show how wrestling's complicated presentation of masculinity illustrates four interrelated and complimentary ideas developed by Judith Butler, Virginia Goldner, and Jessica Benjamin: (1) that gender's appearance as a stable, binary, and essential category of identity is not a given, but must be continuously recreated through culture (Butler, 2002; Goldner, 2002; Benjamin, 2002); (2) that a person's development of a stable gender identity necessarily requires an experience of loss in which one must disavow and repress culturally prohibited desires and identifications (Butler, 2002; Goldner, 2002; Benjamin, 2002); (3) that gender is produced through the performance of an idealized notion of itself which can only ever be imitated and thus never realized (Butler, 2002); and (4) that young children admire and want to be like both their mother and their father, identify with both masculine and feminine traits and behaviors, (Benjamin, 2002), and "use cross-sex identifications to formulate important parts of their self-representations" (Benjamin, 2002, p.184).

It is perhaps wrestling's complicated performances of masculinity, which combine the hyper-masculine with the apparently feminine, (Mazer, 1998) that appeal to wrestling's fans, because they speak to the fans' disavowed and repressed desires and identifications. In this way, professional wrestling addresses the tension, experienced by its male fans, between the pressure

to meet the cultural imperative to maintain a stable male identity and the psychodynamic pressure to address and compensate for the experience of loss that this imperative has demanded. Professional wrestling's popularity, then, can be understood in part as reflective of the ways in which it addresses this tension by affording its male fans the opportunity to access disavowed desires and identifications through the display of a wide range of masculine identities, including some that combine elements of culturally dominant and idealized notions of masculinity including aggression and physical strength, with culturally transgressive notions of masculinity involving flamboyance, and the celebration of physical beauty.

It is not just that wrestling allows fans the *vicarious* pleasure of watching wrestlers transgress gender boundaries. Each wrestling performance, according to Mazer, works to affirm the essential masculinity of each wrestler while "revealing" the gender-discordant aspect of the performance to be just that, merely a performance (Mazer, 1998). In this way, wrestling works to assure fans of the security of their male identities even as it allows them the pleasure of accessing disavowed desires and identifications.

Limits of This Thesis' Scope in Examining Identity

This thesis' study is limited in that, in considering the ways in which male fans might experience professional wrestling's presentation of masculinity, I have not considered the important interplay between gender identity and class and racial identity. This important limitation invites further theoretical and research work. Indeed, I do not believe that the broad conclusion that this thesis reaches can fully speak to any individual fan's unique experience with professional wrestling, even if one were to accept the arguments of this study as basically correct. A middle-aged, African-American university professor watching at home would likely experience wrestling's presentation of masculinity in a very different way than an adolescent,

white, developmentally disabled fan attending a live event of a local, independent wrestling promotion. Both of these fans' experiences would also likely be very different from those of a young Japanese-American man's experience, along with his Japanese-American wife, cheering on and holding a handmade sign encouraging a Japanese wrestler at a WWE show at Madison Square Garden.

Overview of Chapter Topics

Professional wrestling is a broad category of performance which has taken a variety of forms over its more than one-hundred-year history. It is now found throughout the world, but is most popular in the United States, Mexico, Canada, and Japan. Because professional wrestling is a unique form of performance and media entertainment, with its own rules, logic, and history, the next chapter briefly outlines what professional wrestling is and defines a number of professional wrestling-specific terms used in this study.

Following this, Chapter Three presents the conventional critique of professional wrestling described above, and compares it with Mazer's analysis of wrestling as a more complicated performance of masculinity. Chapter Four demonstrates how wrestling's presentation of masculinity speaks to the psychodynamic dilemma facing male wrestling fans, described above. Finally, Chapter Five discusses how this particular understanding of professional wrestling's presentation of masculinity might inform clinical social work practice by providing a window into anxieties and hopes of young males.

CHAPTER II

What Is Professional Wrestling?

> To watch wrestling and then to write about performance is to attempt to confront and come to terms with the significance of a highly popular performance practice as it intersects, exploits, and finally parodies the conventions of both sport and theatre (Mazer, 1998, p.3).
>
> Beyond the spectacular elements, many of which are now common in many other sports as well, professional wrestling is an athletic performance practice that is constructed around the display of the male body and a tradition of cooperative rather than competitive exchanges of power between men (Mazer, 1998, p.4).

Professional Wrestling's Forms, Devices, and Terminology

Professional wrestling is a broad and unique form of performance and media entertainment. Having grown out of carnival strong-man competitions at the turn of the century, it can be understood as a simulation of a sporting, combat contest. In its contemporary form, fans are aware that wrestling is "fake." Still, while the results of matches are predetermined, and the overall structure of matches loosely choreographed, the details of most matches are improvised. Two (and sometimes more) wrestlers work collaboratively to create the illusion of a violent, physical competition. This cooperation includes the work of protecting each other from actual injury (Mazer, 1998).

Individual matches are almost always set up so that one wrestler invites identification and support from the live and television audience while his opponent invites condemnation. In other words, most matches feature a "good guy"/hero competing against a "bad guy"/villain. Which performer is which is conveyed through each wrestler's performance of wrestling moves, as well as his character's persona. The "hero" is known in wrestling lingo as the "face." Traditionally, faces have been identified by their adherence to the rules and brave character. The face's adversary is known as the "heel." Traditionally, heels have been identified by their rule-breaking

behavior and cowardice. In contemporary wrestling, a wrestler's status as either face or heel is marked more by signifiers of masculinity, such as bravery and toughness, than by adherence to the rules.

While professional wrestling is constructed to mimic sports, it also closely adheres to the form of melodrama (Jenkins, 2005). Traditionally, wrestling has pitted good against evil; in its contemporary form, in which "goodness" may take the form of a hell-raiser, a protagonist (representing a set of values and characteristics) still vies with an antagonist (representing the degeneration of these values and characteristics) (Jenkins, 2005). Furthermore, professional wrestling's ongoing narrative is conveyed through television programs that are serial in nature, in stories that are continued from week to week. Like a soap opera, each episode involves a number of interconnected storylines and characters playing out a tangled web of loyalties, desires, and personal histories (Jenkins, 2005). Individual matches contain their own narrative within the larger narrative of the serial storyline. Wrestlers engage in feuds with each other, betray each other, and form improbable alliances with former enemies.

A central dramatic device of wrestling narrative is the "turn." Here, a face turns heel, or vice- versa. A wrestler often will switch orientation several – and most switch many – times over the course of his career. A "heel turn" often involves a face betraying a friend and becoming more cowardly and jealous, while a "face turn" can involve a shift to bravery and more conventionally masculine behavior (Jenkins, 2005).

A wrestler's "heat" refers to the level of interest that fans show to the wrestler, whether it be support or condemnation. A face with a lot of heat is admired and cheered by fans, while a heel is passionately booed. At times, an increasingly popular heel's high level of heat can precipitate a face turn. Conversely, when a face has grown stale and fans are not responding,

management will turn him heel. While the wrestling narrative created by the wrestling franchise (such as World Wrestling Entertainment or a small, regional franchise) constructs wrestlers in such a way as to compel fans either to root for or against (it's obvious from the storyline who is meant to be a face and who is meant to be a heel) it is largely the fans, through their reactions, who determine whether a wrestler *remains* a face or a heel.

A wrestler's level of success can be judged by his level of heat. Wrestlers with high heat are generally very skilled technically or are highly charismatic and able to perform a character that fans respond to. A wrestler's in-ring technical ability, which itself includes both athletic skill and the ability to tell a story during an individual match, is one way that a wrestler can perform a captivating character. Other ways involve the wrestler's ability to use charisma and to flesh out a character during interviews and pre-taped and live vignettes.

Temporal, Geographic, and Gender Limitations of Thesis' Scope

This thesis limits itself to American professional wrestling. It also focuses on wrestling with mainstream television exposure, from a look at the 1950's character Gorgeous George to an emphasis on the contemporary period, which I define as the 1980's to the present.

While United States professional wrestling does feature female wrestlers, the vast majority of its focus has been on male wrestlers and they will be the sole focus of this study. Similarly, while there are many female wrestling fans, the majority of fans are boys and men, and they are the sole focus of this study.

CHAPTER III

Professional Wrestling and Masculinity

This chapter explores the question of how wrestling might speak to its fans' wishes, desires, and fears about their identities as males. I will first present a conventional critique of professional wrestling as a form of media that sends dangerous messages about masculinity to its mostly young male viewers, represented by Danielle Soulliere's article, "Wrestling with Masculinity: Messages about Manhood in the WWE" (Soulliere, 2006), and Sut Jhally's documentary video *Wrestling with Manhood: Boys, Bullying, and Battering* (Jhally & Katz, 2002). This critique contends that wrestling models a conservative version of masculinity that glamorizes physical strength, confrontation, heterosexuality, and violence against women.

While accepting much of these authors' critiques, this thesis asserts that professional wrestling's presentation of masculinity is more complicated than this. There are also ways in which wrestling transgresses cultural norms of masculinity. This more complicated view is represented by Sharon Mazer's analysis in *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle*, which posits professional wrestling as a performance of masculinity.

Mazer's analysis of wrestling does share some common ground with those of Soulliere and Jhally. All three investigate the messages that wrestling creates about what a "real" man is. All agree that culture (including professional wrestling) influences people's understanding of gender, and, importantly, each individual's experience of his or her own gender identity. Furthermore, all three authors highlight the theme of emasculation within wrestling storylines. In this chapter, I will explore the differences between the way in which Soulliere and Jhally seemasculinity presented in wrestling and the way in which Mazer does. The apparent conflict between their views provides a clue toward understanding the question posed above: how does

wrestling speak to its fans' wishes, desires, and fears about their identities as males?

A Summary of the Contradiction

On the one hand, wrestling seems to be nothing if not a presentation of an exaggerated, conservative version of masculinity that glorifies violence, heterosexuality, and bullying – and which is defined in bold relief against conservative and conventional femininity. This is illustrated by an example cited by Soulliere, which contrasts stereotypically masculine (strong) and feminine (weak) responses to losing:

> After losing to their father in a Winner-Takes-All match, Shane and Stephanie McMahon respond differently (RAW 11-19-01). Shane readily accepts defeat: "You won and I lost. I lost to a better man." Shane simply leaves the ring, and announcer JR remarks: "Shane's taking it like a man. He lost, he's leaving." In contrast to her brother, Stephanie is emotionally dramatic. She cries, blames her brother for everything, and asks for her father's forgiveness. She is literally carried, kicking and screaming, out of the arena. Here, masculinity is constructed in opposition to femininity (Soulliere, 2006, p.6).

A brief survey of televised matches, in which cartoonishly muscular men bash each other with chairs and issue risque challenges and threats to each other, and in which surgically enhanced women compete in bra-and-panties matches, appears to bear out this reading of wrestling, in which a conservative and rigid version of masculinity is presented in contrast with (and as superior to) femininity. Further confirmation could be provided by watching fans cheer wildly as a black-clad and shaved-headed "Stone Cold" Steve Austin runs into the ring, hits several men with his signature "Stone Cold Stunner" move, and ostentatiously cranes his neck back, pops open a beer and pours it down his throat, as his motionless "victims" lay scattered in the wrestling ring. That wrestling presents masculinity as fundamentally heterosexual could be confirmed by watching fans boo intensely as two apparently gay wrestling characters prepare to exchange vows of commitment during a ceremony taking place at a live World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) event.

Perhaps it is self-evident then, that wrestling is a fantasy world in which "real" men are physically powerful, violent and aggressive, heterosexual, and fundamentally different from women – so different that there could never be any confusion about the differences between men's and women's behavior or about what qualities should be valued in men and set them apart from women. Perhaps, too, instead of speaking to fans' wishes, desires, and fears about their identities as males, one could argue that wrestling instead simply instills conservative and rigid beliefs about masculinity in the minds of its impressionable young male fans.

Yet wrestling's depiction of masculinity sometimes can be much more confusing. Take, for example, the wrestler Rick Rude, whom Sharon Mazer writes about in her book, *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle*:

> Rude always entered to the song, "The Stripper," flaunting glitzy robes and aggressively demanding that his audience submit its admiration to "the sexiest man alive" before stripping and flexing in full bodybuilder drag. He also often wore his opponent's likeness on his crotch or buttocks, and his struts were punctuated by hip thrusts to the audience or a gluteus flex that obscenely manipulated his opponent's cartooned features. His signature finish – the "rude awakening" – explicitly conflated a sexual insult to his vanquished opponent with a display of mastery over a woman (Mazer, 1998, p.113).

Here, while Rude demonstrates that he is a violent, physically dominating, hyper-muscular "real" man, he also simultaneously presents himself as an apparent object of desire and admiration, a perfected body clad in sequins (Mazer, 1998), and thus akin to the female wrestlers in the bra-and-panties match. In this way, Rude seems to embody both a conservative and a transgressive conception of masculinity.

How then can wrestling's presentation of masculinity be understood in such seemingly contradictory ways? Perhaps a more useful question to ask regarding its role in the lives of its male fans is why is it that wrestling presents masculinity in such seemingly contradictory ways? What drives the presentation of masculinity as distinct from and superior to femininity?

Conversely, what drives the ways in which wrestling violates norms of masculinity? What might the contradictions within wrestling's presentation of masculinity tell us about the contradictions and dilemmas that its male fans may struggle with in the process of maintaining their gender identities? I will take up this question at length in the following chapter. In the remainder of this chapter, I will explore in more detail both the critique of professional wrestling as producing dangerous and conservative messages about masculinity, and Sharon Mazer's analysis of wrestling as a performance of masculinity.

Critiques of Professional Wrestling as Media Conveying Dangerous Messages about Masculinity

Both Soulliere and Jhally are interested in investigating the influence that professional wrestling, as media, has on its fans. Specifically, both are interested in the influence that professional wrestling has on its fans' values and beliefs about masculinity. Both Soulliere and Jhally work from the assumption that gender is constructed through culture, including media, and that media, including professional wrestling, contains messages about what it means to be a man and what is to be valued in a man (Jhally, 2002; Soulliere, 2006). Further, Soulliere and Jhally both share the concern that professional wrestling consistently includes messages about masculinity that support and reaffirm dominant, negative, and dangerous ideas about what it means to be a man.

Soulliere analyzed televised (WWE) wrestling programming and identified instances in which content/data related to "being a man." She then coded this data and categorized it into themes within the broader category of "being a man" (Soulliere, 2006). Souilere concluded that these themes "revealed that the messages imparted by the WWE about manhood support the dominant hegemonic form of masculinity, which emphasizes aggression and violence, emotional restraint, and success and achievement" (p.1).

For example, Soulliere, summarizing the findings of her qualitative content analysis of televised World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) programming, "Wrestling with Masculinity: Messages about Manhood in the WWE," notes:

> Six important messages about manhood were revealed by the WWE programs: 1) Real men are aggressive and violent, 2) men settle things physically, 3) a man confronts his adversaries and problems, 4) real men take responsibility for their actions, 5) men are not whiners, and 6) men are winners. These messages support the dominant culturally ideal hegemonic form of masculinity by emphasizing aggression and violence, emotional restraint, and success and achievement as desirable masculine traits (p.8).

Soulliere discusses the potential influence that these messages may have on young male viewers in which "the messages about manhood imparted by WWE performers and announcers may act as scripts that convey appropriate masculine behavior and attitudes and hint at what being a man is all about. Young viewers exposed to these messages may therefore learn that masculinity entails being aggressive and confrontational and that being a man means being a winner, not a whiner" (p.9). Soulliere finds it significant that in the WWE whining is conveyed as a feminine trait. She sees the WWE's portrayal of "whining" as equated with expressing emotions and with being female – not something that a "real" man does (p.8).

In her analysis, Soulliere also included the research question, "[H]ow are proof and assertion of manhood accomplished by the men in these shows?" (p. 3). She found that "men in the WWE also asserted their manhood by emasculating or feminizing other men," and that "this was accomplished first through physical domination" (p.8).

Significantly, Soulliere appears to assume that viewers identify with the men who are asserting their manhood by emasculating their rivals, rather than with the men whose masculinity is questioned, as in this example:

> Shane McMahon shows a clip from RAW on Smackdown (08-16-01) in which Booker T physically dominates The Rock through post-match aggression. Shane comments to the live audience: "There's your beloved Rock. Look at him," and then proclaims Booker T

> "the man." In effect, Shane is suggesting that Booker T has emasculated The Rock by rendering him vulnerable and weak. Through physical domination, Booker T has asserted his own manhood, which makes him "the man" (p.8).

Yet, at the time that this episode aired, The Rock was one of the most popular performers in the WWE. So it is likely that many, if not most, fans identified with The Rock, the man who is being threatened with emasculation. It is also notable that in the examples Soulliere cites, the men who are asserting their masculinity in one example are themselves having their masculinity challenged by other men in other examples.

Soulliere notes that the likely consequence of professional wrestling's messages is to reinforce the "hegemonic masculine ideal" (p.10) and potentially "stifle alternative masculinities, especially homosexual versions" (p.10). She adds that this "may have unintended consequences for men who internalize this dominant version. As Clatterbaugh (1995) has argued, many of the dominant masculine traits place restrictive limits on men, and may contribute to psychological health problems" (Soulliere, 2006, p.9).

Importantly, Soulliere considers that WWE content might contain messages reinforcing the dominant ideal of masculinity because this is what its fans are looking for. She notes:

> It should also be kept in mind that socialization via media representations is not simply a one-way process. It can be argued that people select the kinds of television programs they watch, and selection may be based on expectations and preference for a certain kind of content. Those who choose to watch professional wrestling programs may do so because the content, including its representations of masculinity and femininity, appeals to them and perhaps even fits in with individual notions of what being a man is all about. In this sense, a sort of self-socialization process may be taking place, with television portrayals simply reinforcing established gender role expectations (p. 9).

If this is the case, then it is useful to ask why so many young males are choosing to watch wrestling, and why wrestling's representations of masculinity and femininity appeal to them. I assert that this question is particularly important to ask in beginning to use professional wrestling as a way of understanding the interior, emotional lives of young male wrestling fans.

Similarly to Soulliere, Sut Jhally, in his documentary video, *Wrestling With Manhood: Boys, Bullying & Battering*, argues that wrestling provides a model for a conservative ideal of masculinity that values physical strength, confrontation, bullying, violence against women, and heterosexuality (Jhally, 2002). *Wrestling With Manhood* also observes the way in which men in the WWE assert their masculinity by emasculating other men, including by directing feminizing language at other men (Jhally, 2002).

Jhally's video observes that the WWE uses gay characters as a way to reinforce the heterosexuality (and thus the real masculinity) of the other men (Jhally, 2002). Further, Jhally notes that wrestling uses homophobic storylines, characterizations, and language, in part, because it is *itself* at risk for being read as homoerotic:

> Now if this is true, women who are wrestling each other might potentially kiss, then it must also be potentially true for the male wrestlers as well. Especially as they are in such close physical and intimate contact with each other so much of the time. So the potential for homoeroticism, sexual desire between men is always there, just under the surface. In fact if you look at professional wrestling in this way a whole new way of watching the WWE emerges (Jhally, 2002).

Moreover, Jhally asserts that this potential homoerotic reading of wrestling compromises the masculine ideal that wrestling models. In this way, he suggests a relationship in which idealized, compulsory heterosexuality reinforces a rigid, conservative ideal of masculinity.

> When violent, threatening, and, above all, straight masculinity is set as the ideal in professional wrestling, this homoerotic undercurrent is very threatening, so the writers have to compensate for it by clearly proving that the masculinity on display is not homosexual, not gay. One of the standard ways they achieve this is by using insults to distance the wrestlers from gayness, as it were. When men and boys are insulting each other, the derogatory terms are meant to demonstrate what real masculinity is not. Insults are used to police the boundaries of what is considered to be normal (Jhally, 2002).

Jhally's analysis coheres with Soulliere's in that the *Wrestling with Manhood* video asserts that wrestling idealizes straight, violent, and bullying masculinity, and thus defines a real man as possessing these qualities. Yet, by pointing out that, because wrestlers are in "close and

intimate physical contact with each other, they are at risk for being (or at least being read as) gay," Jhally suggests that there is an element of wrestling that appears to undermine its message that a real man is straight.

That these men in "close and intimate physical contact with each other" are often nearly naked, and that their bodies have been developed through weight training and steroids, waxed of any body hair, and presented and displayed through protracted entrances and muscle-posing as objects to be admired, constitutes a way in which wrestling threatens to undermine norms of masculinity. Sharon Mazer's *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle* illustrates this further and demonstrates a more complicated understanding of professional wrestling's presentation of masculinity.

A Different View: Professional Wrestling Transgressing Norms of Masculinity

Mazer, in *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle*, makes an observation, similar to Jhally's, of a potential homeoeroticism underlying wrestling's overt heterosexism:

> Professional wrestling appears to violate basic principles of masculine performance in a number of ways. First, it relies on the display of male bodies that are presented alternately in extravagant costumes and almost naked. Second, these male bodies in performance are seen to touch and embrace, to make a show but not a reality of hurting another man, to dominate and submit to one another in ways that resemble nothing so much as cliches of sexual engagement. Fiercely heterosexual and heterosexist in its discourse, professional wrestling thus converges on the homoerotic in its semiotics (Mazer, p. 6).

While Jhally asserts that the intimate physical contact involved in wrestling creates an undercurrent of homoeroticism, his analysis focuses on the way that wrestling compensates for this by distancing itself from gay masculinity through overt homophobic behavior (Jhally, 2002). In this way, Jhally's analysis maintains its focus on wrestling's modeling and idealization of a dominant and conservative, straight, violent masculinity.

Mazer, on the other hand, points out that no matter how furiously wrestling runs in the

direction of homophobic and conservative masculinity, it nonetheless fails to shake off a simultaneous presentation that undermines and transgresses conservative norms about masculinity, because wrestling inherently includes elements that are conventionally associated with femininity, such as male bodies in close contact with other male bodies, and the display of the male body as an object of aesthetic beauty (Mazer, 1998). While Soulliere and Jhally see wrestling as glamorizing violent and physically dominating behavior, Mazer allows that wrestling's male fans may identify (in the sense that they admire and sense a personal similarity to) as much with the man being dominated as with the man doing the dominating.

Mazer's analysis of professional wrestling is fundamentally different from those of Soulliere and Jhally in that she sees wrestling's presentation of masculinity as much more ambiguous and complicated. Whereas, Soulliere interprets Booker T's physical domination of The Rock as sending a message that "real" men are physically dominant and emasculate other men through physical domination as a way to assert their manhood, Mazer notes the way in which nearly every match contains a portion in which each man is dominated by the other. Whereas, Jhally argues that the WWE uses homophobia to assert the heterosexuality and thus the "real" manhood of its wrestlers, Mazer suggests that male wrestling fans may vicariously enjoy the performances of wrestlers with gender discordant behaviors and traits in a way that suggests a nearly hidden admiration. (Mazer, 1998)

Definition of Performance Studies

Before delving further into Mazer's study of professional wrestling, it is helpful to first briefly describe performance studies, the theoretical discipline in which Mazer bases her work. Richard Schechner (2006), writing in *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, indicates that "behavior is the 'object of study' of performance studies" and that performance studies scholars

pay attention to "'the repertory,' namely, what people do in the activity of their doing it"(p.1).

Performance studies can be understood as an approach that "draws on and synthesizes approaches from a wide variety of disciplines including performing arts, social sciences, feminist studies, gender studies, history, psychoanalysis, queer theory, semiotics, theology, cybernetics, area studies, media and popular culture theory and cultural studies" (Schechner, 2006, p.2), in order to think about performance in as broad a way as possible (Schechner, 2006).

Schechner describes an understanding of performance in which:

> (P)erformance must be construed as a 'broad spectrum' or 'continuum' of human actions ranging from ritual, play, sport, popular entertainments, the performing arts (theatre, dance, music), and everyday life performances to the enactment of social, professional, gender, race, and class roles, and on to healing (from shamanism to surgery), the media, and the internet (Schechner, 2002, p.2).

He goes on to note that "the underlying notion is that any action that is framed, presented, highlighted, or displayed is a performance" (Schechner, 2002, p.2). In this view, a professional wrestling match is a performance because it includes a set of behaviors, the action of the match, but also the ways in which this action is framed, displayed, and highlighted, including the match's location within the wrestling ring, its promotion, and its broadcast on television. Furthermore, the professional wrestling performance includes the ways in which each wrestler projects his character, including through in-ring action, dress, and live and pre-recorded interviews and vignettes.

But, in this view as well, each fan's (and each wrestler's) behaviors of daily living, including the ways that they maintain their gender identities, through dress, choice of language, and choice of profession, would also be considered as performance (Schechner, 2002). Moreover, Schechner's (2002) view of performance as necessarily happening within relationships between people is a useful frame within which to think about the potential

meanings of wrestling performances in the lives of its fans. So, with this as the theoretical lens through which to think about performance, what does Mazer make of the performance of professional wrestling?

Professional Wrestling as a Performance of Masculinity: Mazer's Study

Based both on her time spent with wrestlers in training, and on analysis of televised professional wrestling, Mazer's *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle* shares some common ground with the critiques of Soulliere and Jhally. She shares their observation that wrestling addresses the question of what makes a "real" man. Like these authors, Mazer also notes that the men in wrestling often are threatened with emasculation: "[P]erhaps the 'real' man in the end is the one who proves his masculinity by winning, and the not-so-real, not-so-manly man is the loser in an arena where masculinity is as contested as are belts and titles. What a wrestler risks in the wrestling performance is perhaps not so much injury, but emasculation" (Mazer, 1998, p.99).

Mazer includes three ideas that complicate the conclusions of Soulliere and Jhally and also suggest that wrestling speaks to fans' complicated experiences as males. First, Mazer observes that professional wrestling includes the performance of a range of masculinities, from the culturally dominant and idealized to the transgressive (Mazer, 1998).

A brief survey of wrestlers from the 1950's through the new millennium clearly supports this observation. Wrestlers who have performed versions of hypermasculinity include "Stone Cold" Steve Austin, The Undertaker, Arn Anderson, Brock Lesner, HHH, and John Cena. These wrestlers generally wear minimal (often black) ring attire, are physically dominating, and have an emotional range mostly limited to anger.

On the other end of the spectrum, wrestlers who have performed transgressive versions of

masculinity include Gorgeous George, “Adorable” Adrian Adonis, “The Model” Rick Martel, Goldust, Ricky Starr, and Billy and Chuck. These wrestlers wear distinctly feminine ring attire including women’s hats, perfume, hair in curlers, and in Goldust’s case, a gold lame bodysuit. These wrestlers, while depicted as less physically strong than hyper-masculine wrestlers, generally have been athletic and skillful.

Furthermore, many wrestlers, including some of the most popular, can be placed in the middle of the spectrum of masculinity. Their performances, such as that “Ravishing” Rick Rude, described earlier in this chapter, combine elements of hypermasculinity while also transgressing norms of masculinity in other ways. These wrestlers have included Hulk Hogan, Jesse “The Body” Ventura, “Heartbreak Kid” Shawn Michaels, and Brutus Beefcake. These wrestlers wear flamboyant ring attire including feather boas, shiny robes, and in Brutus Beefcake’s case, leopard-print wrestling trunks with see-through mesh patches. They are generally portrayed as physically dominant or as possessing extraordinary skill, but have a broader emotional range than the hyper-masculine wrestlers, and often have charismatic personalities.

Second, Mazer argues that at least some male fans identify with as much as against wrestlers who perform culturally transgressive notions of masculinity including flamboyance, attention to physical appearance, and ambiguous sexual identity (Mazer, 1998). This is demonstrated by the phenomenal success and influence of Gorgeous George, an early television star who pioneered the flamboyant wrestling persona.

Third, Mazer asserts that each wrestler’s performance works to affirm his inherent masculinity, even as it may include gender-discordant behaviors and traits (Mazer, 1998). This more complicated understanding of wrestling suggests that fans likely are able to vicariously enjoy performances of gender identity transgression in a way that is safe and does not threaten

their own male gender identities.

In the chapter, “Real Men Don't Wear Shirts,” Mazer discusses professional wrestling as a performance of masculinity. She illustrates this by considering examples of matches and individual wrestlers from both the 1950’s and 1990’s. Mazer presents 1950’s and 1990’s wrestlers whose performances include conventionally feminine elements such as flamboyant attention to personal appearance and ambiguous sexual identity. These include the aforementioned Rick Rude; Gorgeous George, one of the most successful wrestlers of the 1940’s and 1950’s, whom Mazer describes as entering the wrestling ring wearing “a sequined robe and artificially shaped blond curls” (p.93); Ricky Starr, who, Mazer notes, “literally prances and dances into the ring to the cheers of the crowd (p.94); and Goldust, who wears a a gold lame bodysuit and gold face-paint, and, as Mazer describes, “openly displays the homophobe’s canon of homosexual cliches as part of his efforts to generate heal heat” (p.114).

Mazer develops an analysis of professional wrestling as a performance of masculinity in which each wrestler’s essential masculinity is affirmed even as elements of his performance violate conventions about what is acceptable for a man to feel and do:

> What is at stake in the squared circle in each individual performance and what is sold to, as well as celebrated with the audience is nothing less than an underlying idea(l) of a homogeneous community of men, whose differences are always understood to be superficial, a kind of drag overlay on an essential masculinity (p.102).

Mazer grounds this assertion in her discussion of the performances of Gorgeous George, arguably the top wrestling star of the 1950’s, in which:

> To watch Gorgeous George first flaunting his sequins and curls and then erupting with a flash sequence of expertly executed moves against his opponent is to witness a performance that threatens to destabilize an audience’s assumptions about what real men are and what they do. But as it invites the audience’s expressions of antagonism, it also acknowledges and affirms his performance as transgressive, implicitly recasting the masculine norm back to his opponent. Further, as he reveals his own not inconsiderable skill, he drops his drag, at least for the moment, and aligns himself with the masculine

norm. He can play the man too, he implies, if and when he chooses (p.107).

Gorgeous George's tremendous success in generating heat from fans, and in attracting crowds to his matches indicates that his performance was highly meaningful for his largely male audience. What then, might this performance tell us about fans' wishes and anxieties about their male identities? In the next chapter, I draw on ideas from recent postmodern, feminist, psychoanalytic theory to explore the possibility that wrestling performances such as this speak to a deep yet inexpressible common experience of male gender identity development.

CHAPTER IV

Psychoanalytic Gender Theory

The previous chapter compared a conventional critique of professional wrestling with Mazer's understanding of wrestling as a more complicated performance of masculinity. This chapter shows how wrestling appears to speak to fans' experiences of male gender identity development. In particular, I argue that wrestling performances combine masculine and feminine qualities in such a way that fans have the opportunity to enjoy the fantasy of simultaneously being masculine and feminine, while also being reassured of the fundamental and inherent nature of their masculinity.

In order to do this, I draw on four complimentary and interconnected ideas about gender identity development presented by Judith Butler, Jessica Benjamin, and Virginia Goldner. These ideas are: (1) that gender's appearance as a stable, binary, and essential category of identity is not a given, but must be continuously recreated and reinforced through culture (Butler, 2002; Goldner, 2002; Benjamin, 2002); (2) that young children admire and want to be like both their mother and their father, and thus identify with both masculine and feminine traits and behaviors (Benjamin, 2002); (3) that each person's development of a stable gender identity necessarily requires an experience of loss in which one must disavow and repress culturally prohibited desires and identifications (Butler, 2002; Goldner, 2002; Benjamin, 2002); and (4) that gender is produced through the performance of an idealized notion of itself which can only ever be imitated and thus never realized (Butler, 2002).

Critique of Theories of Stable and Binary Gender

Virginia Goldner, in *Toward a Critical Relational Theory of Gender*, critiques the role that Freud and subsequent psychoanalytic thought has played in upholding the characterization

of gender as being an essential, binary category consisting of stable and mutually exclusive male and female identities (Goldner, 2002). She asserts that Freud locates gender differences in the biological need for procreation, and thus conceptualizes male and female gender identity as both a natural outcome and a healthy achievement. Furthermore, Goldner notes that Freud's conceptualization of gender reinforces the broader cultural imperative of essential and binary gender, and that subsequent psychoanalytic theory, as a body of work building from and often revising Freud, has failed to critically question this formulation. Thus, Goldner writes:

> Since Freud collapsed the distinctions between biological sex, sexuality, and gender, deriving in sequence, heterosexuality and gender polarity from the anatomical difference, certain kinds of questions could not be asked of the theory because they could not be seen. As long as gender was derived from sexuality, which while bisexual in essence, was 'ordained by Nature' to express itself heterosexually, the terms of the debate were restricted to a revolt against the intolerable and implausible inferences about femininity that he derived from this schema (Goldner, 2002, p. 66).

Thus, Goldner argues that while critics have challenged Freud's ideas as privileging masculinity as superior to femininity, they have not called into question masculinity and femininity themselves, as stable and mutually exclusive binary categories. Goldner continues:

> The cultural matrix that sustains the illusion of two coherent gender identities prohibits and pathologizes any gender-incongruent act, state, impulse, mood, as well as any identity structure in which gender or sexuality is not congruent with biological sex. Thus, those gender and sexual identities that fail to conform to norms of cultural intelligibility appear only as developmental failures or logical impossibilities (p. 69).

Certainly, professional wrestling seems to be a part of this cultural matrix that models and reinforces the notion of a binary gender-system. Recall Soulliere's example, in the previous chapter, of the McMahon family match in which Shane McMahon's masculinity was equated with maturity and emotional constraint and presented as superior to his sister Stephanie's femininity, which was equated with immaturity and over-emotionality. Yet, as the previous chapter's discussion indicates, there seems to be a way in which wrestling's presentation of

masculinity slips and becomes more complicated and unstable. In this way, wrestling is like a smudged print of a picture of an exaggerated and rigid binary gender polarity.

Young Children's Identification with Both Mother and Father

Jessica Benjamin, in *Sameness and Difference: An "Overinclusive" View of Gender Constitution*, also questions the conception of gender identity as binary and stable. She argues instead for "deconstructing the reified gender dichotomies and thinking of gender in transitional terms, leaving a world of fixed boundaries with uncrossable borders for a transitional territory in which the conventional opposites create movable walls and pleasurable tension" (Benjamin, 2002, p.197-198). Benjamin cites Irene Fast's theory of gender differentiation, which

> …argues that children are initially bisexual, reinterpreting the idea of bisexuality to mean not a constitutional, biological analogue but a position of identifying with both parents (1990). In the pre-oedipal phase children are "overinclusive": they believe they can have or be everything. They do not yet recognize the exclusivity of the anatomical difference; they want what the other sex has, not instead of but in addition to what they have (Benjamin, 2002, p. 184)

Benjamin then argues that an adult's ability to access this early childhood experience of identifying with both their mother and father will allow them to have greater empathy in relationships across gender difference. Moreover, Benjamin posits that this ability, instead of a move towards a more rigid understanding of oneself as either masculine or feminine, should be understood as a true developmental achievement (Benjamin, 2002).

Benjamin describes that, in the "overinclusive" phase, "…the sexes are parallel in their insistence on being everything, their elaboration of complementarity as opposites held within the self, and their protest against limits (p.192). This brings to mind Mazer's discussion of the appeal of Gorgeous George, in which she cites Clifton Jolley's comments that as an adolescent he loved Gorgeous George's flamboyant performance because he was "free to do and act any way he wanted" (Mazer, 1998, p.107).

Mazer touches on the role that wrestling seems to have played in helping young fans negotiate their masculinity as they moved from adolescence to adulthood:

> Rather than prescribing limitations to masculine behavior, professional wrestling recognizes the official version at the same time that it acknowledges and, it might be argued, even encourages the unleashing of masculine expressivity in all forms. It is no wonder , then, that professional wrestling is remembered so fondly by so many men as a key part of their adolescent transition into adult masculinity and sexuality, a step toward understanding the self as a man among other men (Mazer, 2002, p.107).

Contrasting this understanding of wrestling with the critiques of Soulliere and Jhally, then, suggests that the presentation of masculinity in wrestling seems to paradoxically belong to both "a world of fixed boundaries with incrossable borders" and "a transitional territory in which the conventional opposites create movable walls and pleasurable tension (Benjamin, 2002, p.197). In this way, wrestling affords its fans the opportunity to watch and enjoy men behaving in both stereotypically masculine and feminine ways. But it also speaks to a sense of terror that this unraveling of a stable masculine identity may provoke.

The Development of Gender Identity Involves Loss

Both Goldner and Benjamin also assert that each person's accomplishment of a stable gender identity necessarily requires an experience of loss. Here, Goldner notes:

> Indeed, I argue that consolidating a stable gender identity is a developmental accomplishment that requires the activation of pathological processes, insofar as any gender-incongruent thought, act, impulse, mood, or trait would have to be disowned, displaced, (mis)placed (as in projective identification), split off, or, as Dimen suggests (this volume), renamed via symbolic slippage. In this regard, a critical appropriation of Fast's (1984) work would emphasize her reference to the intense feelings of narcissistic injury and loss that accompany the child's realization that she or he must abandon gender-discrepant self-representations and would argue, as May (1986) does, that such losses are never abandoned but are merely sent underground via a panoply of defensive operations (Goldner, 2002, p.72-73).

Benjamin echoes these ideas, writing:

> In my view, the unaccepted mourning for what one will never be – especially the boy's inability to face the loss entailed in not being the mother, even to acknowledge envy of

> the feminine – has particularly negative repercussions, often more profound and culturally pervasive, if less obvious, then the classically recognized oedipal frustration of not having mother (Benjamin, 2002, p.194).

How does an understanding of this experience of loss inform thinking about male fans' experiences of professional wrestling performances? Consider Mazer's description of a 1950's Gorgeous George performance in which "a sequined robe and artificially shaped blond curls top his wrestler's trunks and shoes" (Mazer¸ 1998, p.93), and allow, as Mazer writes, that "his evident success in generating heat, his 'pop' from the fans, appears to have been complex rather than simple, as much about identification as condemnation" (p.93). Consider Soulliere's example from 2001, in which Booker T physically dominates The Rock, and allow that most fans identified with The Rock, perhaps the most popular wrestler of his era. And consider that even a seemingly hyper-masculine performer, such as "Stone Cold" Steve Austin, described in the previous chapter, also violates norms of masculinity, in that he typically appeared nearly naked in black briefs revealing a waxed body completely absent of hair. Further, consider that the nearly naked Austin would invariably become physically intertwined with another nearly naked man during the course of each match.

It appears then that these performances include feminine qualities such as the presentation of the body as an object of admiration, beauty, and (perhaps) desire, and the experience of being physically dominated, and thus, acted on. That these performance also include masculine qualities such as physical strength and mastery, suggest that they mirror the experience of young children who "believe they can have or be everything" and who "want what the other sex has, not instead of but in addition to what they have" (Benjamin, 2002, p.184).

In this way, wrestling seems to offer its male fans access to these unconscious and repressed fantasies and desires. However, if wrestling's performances truly transgress norms of

masculinity and the cultural imperative of two mutually exclusive genders, how is it that fans avoid the anxiety and shame that they would likely experience in reaction to their pleasure in these performances.? And if wrestling truly is so transgressive, then how is it that it is so often read, as by Soulliere, as reinforcing "the hegemonic masculine ideal" (2006, p.10)? To answer these questions, I turn to the thinking of Judith Butler about gender, performance, and the performance of drag.

Gender Is Created through Its Performance

In her article, "Melancholy Gender-Refused Identification," Butler, referring to her previous book, *Gender Trouble*, notes, "I argued that gender was performative, and by that I meant that there is no gender that is 'expressed' by actions, gestures, or speech, but that the performance of gender was precisely that which produced retroactively the illusion that there was an inner gender core" (Butler, 2002, p.13).

Referring to her thinking about drag, Butler notes, "And yet, if one considers that gender is acquired, that it is assumed in relation to ideals that are never quite inhabited by anyone, then femininity is an ideal that anyone always and only 'imitates.' Thus, drag imitates the imitative structure of gender, revealing gender itself as an imitation" (Butler, 2002, p.13).

Butler's understanding of the drag performance, in which a man's performance of an exaggerated femininity works to undermine the assumption of the essential quality of femininity, is an interesting counterpoint to Mazer's understanding of the (drag) wrestling performance. Here, drag works toward an opposite aim.

Indeed, Mazer describes professional wrestling in general as a kind of drag performance that assures its fans that the wrestlers they watch, and thus they themselves, are men:

> But for all that wrestling displays the antagonism of difference, it also and more importantly affirms what it is these men have in common – that is, they are men. What is

> at stake in the squared circle in each individual performance and what is sold to, as well as celebrated with the audience is nothing less than an underlying idea(l) of a homogenous community of men, whose differences are always understood to be superficial, a kind of drag overlay on an essential masculinity (Mazer, 1998, p.102).

An example of this can be found in the wrestlers Billy and Chuck, who began performing as a sexually ambiguous tag team in 2002, and whose storyline culminated in a much-hyped televised commitment ceremony during which the men revealed, within the storyline, that they had been merely pretending to be gay all along, in order to gain publicity and career advancement.

While never explicitly identified as gay, Billy and Chuck were clearly marked as such by their behavior and characteristics, as well as by other wrestlers' treatment of them. Thus, over the course of several months, Billy and Chuck, who had bleached blond hair and wore matching red, rubbery outfits, became increasingly affectionate towards each other, and were shown helping each other stretch in preparation for matches, often in homoerotic positions.

Billy and Chuck's performance during their commitment ceremony parallels that of Gorgeous George in two ways. First, fans' reactions to Billy and Chuck were likely more complicated than they might first appear. Like Gorgeous George, Billy and Chuck's gay gimmick was successful in creating heat. Their story gained increased prominence within the wrestling telecast and began to attract outside media attention. While fans were vocal in their passionate antipathy towards the duo, this antipathy likely contained a seed of identification.

This is evidenced by the behavior of fans in the live audience during the commitment ceremony. Here, as Billy and Chuck prepared to exchange their vows, fans began chanting "Just say no!" Although, this chant was clearly homophobic, it also illustrated that fans were experiencing the ceremony from the perspective of Billy and Chuck.

Furthermore, this chant indicated that fans understood that Billy and Chuck's gayness

was merely a performance, and that they identified with the straight wrestlers underneath. If they were gay, why exhort them to "say no"? Billy and Chuck's performance was such that after they, within the storyline and thus still in character, revealed that they were only pretending to be gay, their new straightness, and thus new masculinity was to be understood as an inherent, inner identity. Thus, we can guess that Billy and Chuck's performance may have worked to reassure fans that, if even two such effeminate men are "real" men, they have nothing to worry about regarding their own masculinity.

Mazer describes a performance by Gorgeous George in which "as he reveals his own not inconsiderable skill, he drops his drag, at least for the moment, and aligns himself with the masculine norm" (Mazer, 1998, p.107). Mazer's language implies that everything about Gorgeous George's performance that violates norms of masculinity – his blond curls, his preoccupation with his appearance, the way he moves and holds his body – is framed so as to be understood by his audience as merely performance. In contrast, Mazer suggests that George's "flash sequence of expertly executed moves" (Mazer, 1998, p. 107), his athletic prowess, strength, competitiveness, and ability to physically dominate another man, is understood by his audience as something that can not be faked and thus reflects an inner masculine identity (Mazer, 1998).

Here, Gorgeous George has given fans an opportunity to take pleasure in a performance in which he is free to "have or be everything" (Benjamin, 2002, p.184), to be masculine and feminine at the same time. However, to take pleasure in such a performance would amount to a recognition of what one necessarily gave up by developing a stable male identity. And because this recognition is itself something that was repressed in the process of developing a stable male identity, this pleasure needs to be disavowed. Gorgeous George gives fans a way to do this by

"dropping his drag" during the course of his match and thus "revealing" himself to be inherently masculine. If this was not reassurance enough for fans, then they could always remind themselves that, yes, they paid money to see Gorgeous George perform, but they paid to boo him.

The claim I have developed in this thesis is that the performances of professional wrestling combine masculine and feminine qualities in such a way that fans have the opportunity to vicariously enjoy and identify with an experience that mirrors that of early childhood, in which children "believe they can have or be everything" (Benjamin, 2002, p.198), and identify with both their mother and their father (Benjamin, 2002). Furthermore, the development of a stable male gender identity requires that boys give up and repress any identification with femininity. I argue that wrestling performances work to assure male fans of the security of their male identities through the use of drag.

I do not argue that this is the only way that gender is performed, addressed, or dealt with in professional wrestling. But I do hold that it is a part of many fans' experience of professional wrestling.

CHAPTER V

Applications for Social Work

This thesis demonstrates a way in which a highly popular cultural practice, professional wrestling, illustrates recent postmodern feminist, psychoanalytic ideas about gender identity development, described in the previous chapter. In this way it explores the relationship between culture and individuals' personal, psychological experiences. Through an exploration of professional wrestling as reflecting and speaking to its male fans' experiences of their masculine identities, this thesis presents a new way of understanding young males who are wrestling fans and, through the topic of professional wrestling, a non-threatening way to talk with them about issues related to masculinity. Personally, this exploration of gender identity development has helped me to deepen my awareness of the interplay between my own gender identity and my work with clients.

This thesis challenges the view of professional wrestling as simply promoting bullying, conventional notions of masculinity, sexism, and homophobia. Instead, watching professional wrestling is likely a much more nuanced experience in the lives of its male fans. Wrestling's continuing theme of the threat of emasculation likely reflects its fans' own feelings about the vulnerability of their masculinity. Furthermore, wrestling's complicated, flamboyant, and hyperbolic performance of masculinity appears to allow fans the opportunity to vicariously access repressed and culturally prohibited feelings of identification with and admiration for femininity, while at the same time reassuring fans that their own masculinity is an outward expression of an inner core identity, and is thus secure.

Clinical social workers, by gaining an understanding of professional wrestling, will likely increase their ability to emphasize with male wrestling fans and better understand their anxieties,

hopes, and needs related to their male identities. Moreover, the ability to talk about wrestling with clients gives clinical social workers a way of talking metaphorically with male clients about these anxieties, hopes, and needs. This will likely give these clients a safe way of exploring thoughts and feelings that might otherwise feel too threatening to talk about, including feelings of vulnerability, and identification with femininity. Clinicians could respond to clients' statements about professional wrestling and thereby meet clients where they are.

What might this look like? The following is an example of a hypothetical conversation that a clinician might have with a young male wrestling fan. I have chosen to revisit an example given by Soulliere of the way in which men in the WWE asserted their manhood by emasculating and feminizing other men through physical domination (Soulliere, 2006):

> Shane McMahon shows a clip from RAW on Smackdown (08-16-01) in which Booker T physically dominates the Rock through post-match aggression. Shane comments to the live audience: "There's your beloved Rock. Look at him," and then proclaims Booker T "the man." In effect, Shane is suggesting that Booker T has emasculated the Rock by rendering him vulnerable and weak Through physical domination, Booker T has asserted his own manhood, which makes him "the man" (Soulliere, p.8, 2006).

Client Profile

Sam is a white, thirteen-year-old seventh-grader. He lives with his mother, sixteen year-old sister, and ten year-old brother. Sam's parents divorced when he was nine years old, and although his father lives in the same city as he, they have infrequent contact. Sam was referred for individual outpatient therapy by his school, as teachers have reported that he is struggling academically and often disrupts class by making jokes and trying to distract other students. Additionally, Sam's adjustment counselor reports that he is frequently bullied by other boys and appears to be singled out for his small size. Sam has gotten in trouble several times this year for fighting.

Sample Dialogue

Clinician: So, how was your week?

Sam: Okay, I guess. I dunno.

Clinician: What would be helpful to talk about today?

Sam: Ummm, I dunno. School was okay. Handed in that paper they were bugging me about. I'm psyched for this weekend…watching Summerslam on Sunday.

Clinician: You sound pretty excited.

Sam: Hell yeah! Main event – Booker T versus The Rock! The Rock's my favorite wrestler.

Clinician: What do you like about The Rock?

Sam: (pause) Ummm, everything! Too much to say.

Clinician: Well, what's one thing you like about him?

Sam: He's funny. He, like, makes fun of other wrestlers, he imitates them. He doesn't let stuff bring him down. Like last week on Smackdown, Booker T gave him a beat down and stuff. Shane McMahon was ragging on him and stuff.

Clinician: Yikes!

Sam: I know, huh. You know The Rock wasn't having any of it. Last night he pretty much ripped into Booker T – he was making fun of him so bad.

Clinician: Ripped into him?

Sam: Yeah, The Rock came out and was making fun of Booker T. He is so funny.

Clinician: Man, so last week The Rock was really on the short end of it huh, I mean, getting beat up by Booker T. But it didn't seem to bother him. I mean he was standing tall the next week. How does he do it?

Sam: Mostly he's funny. He doesn't let things get to him. That's how I wanna be.

Conclusion: "Performing" the Masculine and Feminine in Therapy with Young Males

Exploring gender through this thesis has helped me to better understand the relationship between my own experience of gender identity and my clinical work, particularly with latency age and adolescent males. For example, over the course of my work in human services, I have been very conscious of the power that I hold within my relationships with clients. Consequently, my approach has been to assume a gentle and unassuming posture with the clients I work with. I have noticed though, that adolescent boys often bristle against this. In one instance, I was working with a ten-year-old boy whose father had left the family. I noticed that when I gently offered help when he was having difficulty building something with Legos, he would rudely reject me in a way that was reminiscent of his treatment of his mother. However, when the two of us would play basketball, I began to experiment with adding a bit of masculine swagger to my demeanor. The boy seemed to delight in this. Moreover, after the session, it was apparent that the boy was much better able to accept my caring. I believe that my successful approach here was partly influenced by my ability to get in touch with my own early experience of wanting to be everything, and of identifying with both masculinity and femininity. I believe that by modeling first masculinity then "feminine" sensitivity," my approach helped this boy use his relationship with me to both feel cared for and nurtured and to glimpse his own potential for adventure, mastery, and power. Might talking about professional wrestling with latency-age and adolescent boys serve as a way of exploring these needs, which are profoundly influenced by the experience of being male? I believe that clinical social workers will find no shortage of clients who are wrestling fans with which to try it.

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