# **Cultural Plunge Project**

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COUN 6230: Psychological Preparation and Mental Skills Training

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I had the opportunity to attend a small professional wrestling event in St. Louis, MO while I was staying in Mount Vernon, IL for the month. I am a black belt in Brazilian jiu jitsu (BJJ), trained in Dutch kickboxing, and have won an amateur MMA fight. However, I was not versed in pro-wrestling. Despite having an extensive background in combat sports, I have always categorized pro-wrestling as entertainment instead of sport. This is a common criticism of pro-wrestling considering the name itself implies that it is the professional version of collegiate or Olympic wrestling. Wrestling is considered the first sport ever and is also classified as a combat sport. So why did I choose a combat sport for this cultural plunge project? Since I considered pro-wrestling to be more performative than competitive, it was both an unfamiliar domain yet still qualified as a sport and therefore this assignment. The experience gave me insight into a world that I had previously misjudged. What I witnessed was a form of theater that focuses on engaging its audience in an athletic portrayal of real world situations and showcasing good versus evil. Three sociological themes I observed at Dynamo Pro Wrestling Thanksgiving Slam 2022 were deviance, violence, and gender roles.

 As far back as the late 1800’s wrestling has been seen as a performative art. The development of a new style of amateur wrestling that branched off of Greco-Roman allowed athletes to use moves that were previously not allowed. This made it more of a spectacle to watch. Similar to what watching UFC is for fans of MMA, the catch-as-catch-can style gave way to a circus-like attraction (Griffiths, 2015). At a time when many traditional wrestling fans were disillusioned because they thought the matches were being fixed for betting, pro-wrestling took advantage by creating a spectator-friendly offshoot of wrestling with a predetermined outcome (Ashley et al., 2000). By the 1920’s and on, pro-wrestling was considered engineered entertainment complete with personalities, storylines, and drama.

Commercialization of the sport brought the characters onto movie screens and toy store shelves making it a billion dollar industry today. Some would argue the theater aspect of pro-wrestling is what makes it a fake sport because the outcome is predetermined and the matches are loosely scripted. If it is fake, are the wrestlers still considered athletes? Jones (2019) argues that athletic identity should not be denied to pro-wrestlers because they act out a “fictional representation of sporting conflict”. Training still requires extensive skill-building, athletic physicality, and dedication to their role. It may be an athletic mode of storytelling, but those playing the characters are still athletes.

The narratives of pro-wrestling center around the battle between good and evil. Each opponent or team that enters the cage is either a “babyface” fighting for moral righteousness or a “heel” acting as a villain to create dramatic tension (Jones, 2019). The spectators are in on it, cheering at and chanting on the back and forth action in what is always an over-the-top fiasco. When I entered the small gymnasium venue for Thanksgiving Slam 2022, I saw an elevated boxing ring with metal folding chairs aligned in rows on three sides. There was a stage and curtains for the “promos” or elaborate entrances that characters use to hype up the crowd. My friends and I sat down in a row behind two white men and their young daughters. They were there to introduce their kin to the wonderful world of professional wrestling. Other spectators were young and old, family-oriented, white and black. Some had beers in their hand but were far from rowdy low-lifes. In fact, the dads in front of us looked like middle-class, educated family men. At one point dad #1 said, “Here's to raising our daughters right. “They gave each other a nod, and cheers-ed to it. A study done in 2000 found that the general fanbase of pro-wrestling is like your next door neighbor: between the ages of 25 and 49, making at least $40,000 income, and college-educated. In other words, they are educated consumers who enjoy a soap opera portrayal of violence.

Violence is seen as justified within sport when it is acted out in controlled contexts with implicit consent (Coakley, 2021). We accept that combat sports will be physical and violent when we tune in for a UFC event but if we were to witness the same within a classroom or at a workplace, it would not be okay. For pro-wrestling, the violence is encouraged and essential to the experience. I witnessed very exaggerated displays of violence with perpetrators full of rage while their victims squirmed and writhed in supposed pain. Suffering was conveyed through grand gestures that begged for crowd interaction. I found myself getting up out of my seat to boo one of the heels who called himself snitch and wore a gimp mask straight out of a stag shop. The more the crowd and I booed, the more fuel we gave him. The tension of which back-breaking technique was coming would build, only to be squashed with a pile driver to the canvas, to which we would then groan a collective, “ooooo”. When heels win, they often do so by cheating, which keeps the play of morality alive. The narratives of violence conform to the audience’s expectations of good and evil (Campbell, 1996). One of the many ways I witnessed this was whenever the heel characters begged for the audience to call them names. They wanted us to see them as bad guys. If we as the spectators are offended by or dislike the heel, it makes any violence toward him justified. If the victim is unliked, then revenge for a previous attack or in defense of a credible threat is socially acceptable (Lachlan et al., 2009). The narrative provides the motive, which always matters if we are accepting that violence is morally okay. In pro-wrestling, this behavior is expected and allows for spectators to engage in kayfabe, or admitted fakeness (Jones, 2019). The overexaggeration of violence is encouraged in the fictional worlds created by community gymnasiums like the one I found myself in.

These fictional worlds are representative of sport and society. In sport, if an athlete’s behavior is seen as either an underconformity or overconformity to sport ethics they are considered deviant (Coakley, 2021). The great sport myth says that sport is inherently good and we must purge anything morally flawed out of it. Pro-wrestling seems to mimic this ideology by being over-the-top defiant to the point that spectators must suspend disbelief. Without realizing it until my research, I was asked to accept a new reality when I entered the gymnasium and that no, this is not fake, yes it is okay for men to cry, and women fight men. Once this fictional world is created, behavior deemed deviant or criminal in society is now the norm (Lachlan et al., 2009). What makes it okay, like the acts of violence, is that all involved are “in on it” and have (hopefully) given their consent. Many of Coakley’s sports ethics exist within pro-wrestling such as the all-or-nothing attitude, biting down and dealing with adversity, and that athletes must be exceptional.

The drive to be distinguished from peers is evidenced by the need to develop a character and backstory in order to be part of the narratives. Are you a heel or are you a face? Do you want to be on the good side or the bad side? The dichotomy of good versus evil demands for characters who fully embody this in their storylines. One way to distinguish oneself is through body image. Culturally, men are expected to be big and strong while women are weak and thin. At the highest level, pro-wrestlers are exposed to higher pressure to conform to these ideals. How they portray themselves in the ring is largely based on their skill and character building, however physique becomes the differentiating factor of how serious wrestlers are to their craft. Unfortunately, this leads to steroid use, muscle dysmorphia, harmful weight loss strategies, eating disorders, etc. as a result of internalized media representation of body ideals (Soulliere & Blair, 2006). At the local level, I was happy to see that many athletes were unashamedly out of shape. Both men and women were present in the ring that night and many were not toned or tanned. The ones who had their bodies on full display often only wore a speedo and while some were physically blessed, the majority were not. The pressure to fit gendered roles of body ideals can negatively affect athletes but I assume that because it was a small local event, they were likely not getting paid and therefore were not willing to make those kinds of sacrifices. Another display of gender I saw was that the women on the card were part of a coed team. Traditional gender ideologies posit that men are biologically superior to women, making the idea of women fighting against men as wrong and unfair (Coakley, 2021). To my surprise, the women were repeatedly tagged in to deal with their male foes. This involved dangerous jumps from the top of the ropes, being thrown in the air, lots of pummeling, and violent albeit fake punches to the face and body. These distortions of gender ideologies again ask the spectator to suspend their disbelief that women are in fact getting smashed by men because it is very obviously fake.

The fakeness of professional wrestling is what pulls in the spectators. The fictional world is a place for diehard fans to participate in make-believe where adults and children alike can imagine an alternate reality where good and evil battle it out without experiencing real violence or injury. It is a playground for human themes to be enacted and a form of entertainment that transcends traditional stages and scripts.

As a future mental consultant I value experiences that allow me to change my perspective. It is important to examine our existing biases, ideologies, and beliefs and not become defensive when presented with conflicting information. I never would have gone to a professional wrestling event because I always believed it was cringeworthy. I was not wrong, but it is cringeworthy in an elevated sense. Pro-wrestlers act out social ills and attempt to right them. It lets us see what a life would be like under different circumstances where we can control the outcomes of our lives. The experience taught me that encounters with a new person means encountering another world, one that is constructed by their own biases, ideologies, and beliefs. My future clients have their own story and when I meet them for the first time, I can see myself entering their world as I seek to understand why they think the way they do. I appreciate this experiment as it taught me to be less of a judge and more of a listener.

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