Passion Work: The Joint Production of Emotional Labor

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[In profession wrestling] the most socially inspired nuances of passion (conceit, rightfulness, refined cruelty, a sense of ‘paying one’s debts’) always felicitously find the clearest sign which can receive them, express them, and triumphantly carry them to the confines of the hall. It is obvious that at such a pitch, it no longer matters whether the passion is genuine or not. What the public wants is the image of passion, not passion itself. -Roland Barthes, 1957

Professional wrestling is a passionate reenactment of a violent fight between good and evil. The performer’s objective is not to win the match, but rather, to attain a strong emotional reaction from the audience. This interaction between fans and performers is the defining aspect of the performance, for without the spectators there would be no such thing as professional wrestling (Turowetz and Rosenberg 1977). However, to create this overtly emotional, passionate frontstage interaction between performers and audience, crucial (albeit unseen) backstage “emotion work” between two or more performers must take place. This analysis is an examination of this backstage, joint emotion work with a fellow “opponent.”

In her groundbreaking book The Managed Heart, Arlie Hochschild introduced the concept of “emotion management,” defining it as work that “requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others” (1983:7). While this concept has been criticized because the presumed emotions underlying the behavior can sometimes be unclear, Hochschild’s research nevertheless argues that the management of emotions is a common aspect of many occupations and a social process contingent on ideology and social context.

The bulk of research remains oriented towards behavior governed by a profit motive. The
emphasis in this literature has been on what Hochschild describes as the three characteristics of jobs that involve emotional labor: “face-to-face or voice-to-voice contact with the public”; the requirement that workers “produce an emotional state in another person—gratitude or fear, for example”; and lastly, providing the employer “a degree of control over the emotional activities of employees” (Hochschild 1983: 147).

This paper extends and refines current research on emotional labor in three main respects. First, professional wrestlers (at the “indy” level studied here) are not performing for their immediate livelihood, hence their work is not driven by financial incentives. This voluntary emotional labor—work that is an aspect of business entertainment though not directly imposed by profit-driven schema—allows us to examine the association between emotional labor and identity as shaped within the context of a recreational physical activity.

Second, instead of traditional emotion work that is intended to produce a “sense of being cared for in a convivial and safe place” (Hochschild 1983: 7)—work that produce “soft emotions” (Price 1994) traditionally coded as feminine—pro wrestling is physical work intended to create passionate feelings of contempt, indignation, and suspense among the audience. Positive feelings like adoration and appreciation are also summoned, but only in conjunction with a more “evil” emotion worker. Therefore, the paper provides a close look at the work that goes into surface acts of hostility and aggression, acts that are less examined in the literature.

Most importantly, I complement our understanding of emotion work by scrutinizing professional wrestling as an instance of the joint performance of emotional labor. Unlike other emotional work (where, for example, an individual worker serves customers, or an individual professor teaches students), pro wrestlers do joint emotional labor with one or more fellow opponents. It is an enactment of a duel between two or more fighters who are, in actuality, colluding with one
another. Moreover, the frontstage show is impossible without an elaborate, skilled, backstage social relationship between two wrestlers and this unique case of interactive, backstage emotion teamwork is the focus of this analysis.

My analysis of emotional labor begins with a description of the frontstage, public emotion work between participants and fans. I then analyze what I call their passion work. Passion work is jointly performed emotion work intended to elicit a passionate response from subjects through an impression of extreme states such as pain, agony, or suffering. Ideal performances of passion work such as pro wrestling are situations in which two (or more) performers jointly perform emotional labor in a high-stakes context where there is great risk for pain, injury or death. In this paper, my analysis is divided into emotion work on the self, techniques of joint emotion work, the ideals of skilled joint labor, the latent empathy, and, lastly, the management failures in which this passion work breaks down.

Participants conduct emotional labor that is the reverse of typical emotional labor in that, instead of females serving customers with a smile, this is men working together to serve an audience with a performance of pain, suffering, and antagonism. For these performers, hostility is almost always displayed, although empathic feelings of cooperation, protection, and trust are often actually being felt. Furthermore, within such a high-risk setting—a recreational setting in which participation is voluntarily, and motivations are not driven by financial incentives—wrestlers perform intimate emotional labor with one another. The attraction to such a dangerous pursuit is due in part to the product generated from this elaborate labor.
I go for cover on Joey. Then people are like, ‘Oh that’s it. One, two, kick-out. They go, ‘Oooh!’ False finish. Then you bump the referee. And then when you bump the referee, people are like, okay, bad guy’s going to win. They think that. Then we stall a little more. Playing with people’s emotions is really what we do. –Mickey, a nine year veteran and booker for promotions

Professional wrestling is physical theater in which participants act out a fight in front of paying spectators. Yelling, cheering, and verbal taunts exchanged between the wrestlers and
spectators all work to set the emotional mood. There is typically very little subtlety; indeed, pro wrestling has been described as carnivalesque “spectacle” (Barthes 1957 Mazer 1998), “masculine melodrama” (Jenkins 1997), a “land of mask and monstrosity” (Henricks 1974:178), and “non-ambiguous” (Mazer 1998).

Performers follow interactional rules similar to those governing magicians: make your “move” appear as real as possible—without it actually being real. Participants refer to this illusion of realness as “kayfabe” (pronounced “ka-fab”). Wrestling with kayfabe requires three essential qualities: charisma, psychology, and physicality. Charisma refers to the spirit and dramaturgical skills of the wrestling character, psychology describes the interaction with the spectators, and physicality refers to the kinesthetic moves and motions conducted while interacting with your “opponent.” All three skills require extensive facility with emotional management because the wrestler is simultaneously managing two separate interactions that have separate “feeling rules”\(^1\)—the frontstage relationship with the audience, which attempts to evoke passionate emotions (such as awe, fear, and anger), and the backstage relationship with the fellow partner, which demands skilled coordination, control, trust, and empathy. Kayfabe is a derivative of the management of these two simultaneous interactions. Wrestlers refer to such managing as “working.”

Kayfabe: Emotion work in the Backstage

Performing with kayfabe means negotiating a demanding—and often contradictory—emotional landscape in which the feeling rules that govern the backstage conflict with those governing the process. Most important is that in order to create passionate indignation, adoration, and “expressive emotion work” (Hochschild 1979: 562) in the public frontstage relationship

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\(^1\) Hochschild defines feeling rules as a set of “socially shared, albeit often latent (not thought about unless probed at), rules” (1979: 563) that create “guidelines for the assessment of fits and misfits between feeling and situation” (566).
between wrestlers and fans, trust, protection, and empathy are required within the backstage relationships between the two performers working jointly. The frontstage fight is designed to appear as out of control—rage, mayhem, and destruction running amok. Yet performers are (at least ideally) in complete control. Additionally, agony and the infliction of pain are enthusiastically celebrated in the frontstage at the same time that they are skillfully avoided in the backstage. The following section describes the set of techniques which help wrestlers perform emotional labor jointly.

Initially, before one learns to “work” jointly as partners, each participant must adjust his orientation to his own emotions. In general, this initial, individual emotion work is governed by feeling rules associated with ideals of “hegemonic masculinity” (Connell 1987), such as stoicism, toughness, and independence and new wrestlers learn that behavior and demeanor consist of the repression of emotional displays.

Even though violent performers might be considered to be naturally predisposed to handling a higher threshold of pain, a “natural” acceptance of pain did not in fact exist for most participants. Emotion work is utilized to assuage the initial transition, which is evident when students first learn the most fundamental pro wrestling move, a “bump.” A basic bump entails falling backwards onto the upper half of your back from a standing position in the ring; no partner is needed to learn it. A wrestler who cannot adjust the deeply ingrained relationship to pain has no future in pro wrestling. Cuss, the lead trainer, explained how some students never get past the initial fear of hurting themselves: “A lot of time it’s just fear. It’s not natural to fall backwards and expect to be okay. Some people can get over that, some can’t. If you can’t, you’re in the wrong business. We’ve had students that I’ve actually told, ‘You’re not cut out for this.’” Therefore, the initial test is whether one can manage his own emotions, in this case fear. Surely
some new students start off with less fear than others, but even for them, there is an “instinct you
fight.” Damon, a wrestler with five years of experience, gives an account of the “instinct” and
the need to “psych” oneself up.

If any wrestler tells you they feel fine, they’re lying… There’s a certain instinct you fight
when you learn to wrestle, because you’re throwing yourself at the ground on purpose. No one
falls down on purpose except pro wrestlers. And so, it’s something you need to train your body
not to react to. And it’s something you need to psych yourself up to do. It’s probably something
you shouldn’t be doing.

As in the culture at large, being able to handle a great amount of pain is a source of pride.
When a wrestler with little status expresses any vulnerability or pain, it is usually met with a
veteran’s harsh dismissal, such as, “You still bitchin’ about your neck?” (Fieldnote 1/12/04). For
wrestlers of lower status, admissions of distress are rhetorically sanctioned, which serves to
silence any future confessions of such feeling.

When a wrestler experiences pain in the backstage, he is expected to work hard to deny,
overcome, and control any response (Smith 2008). Cuss, who also heads the school and is a
veteran wrestler, recalled his failed attempt to control pain after his very first injury several years
back.

I fractured two ribs. So I was out for like four or five weeks. I had two fractured ribs,
[but] you know, you don’t know what happened, what it is at the time, and you don’t
want to look like a sissy. So, you know, you do more. Then it happened, and I’m like,
“Yeah, I’m okay, I’m okay.” Then you get thrown around again, and I’m like “Ah…
maybe I’m not okay.”

Moments like this, where participants suppress feelings of vulnerability, often occur, but they are
seldom articulated so starkly. In this particular instance, Cuss could no longer deny the pain and he had to speak up, but, of course, “failed acts of management still indicate what ideal formations guide the effort” (Hochschild 1979: 561).

The primary bodily technique for wrestling with kayfabe is the development of a loose and light body. When both performers are malleable, pliable, and relaxed, moving as a synchronized couple is easier. The adjustment to the pro wrestling praxis demands emotion work because it is antithetical to the ordinary, hard body of an athlete. As Michael Messner contends, if an athlete is to be successful, he must “develop a highly goal oriented personality that encourages him to view his body as a tool, a machine, or even a weapon utilized to defeat an objectified opponent” (1987:323). This traditional understanding must be deconstructed by new wrestling participants. It proves to be counterintuitive for new members since being hard and firm is valued by men, especially athletes, in almost every other context.

Wrestlers are also encouraged to use “light touches,” soft grasps of the opponent that help performers lead and/or manipulate each other. This looseness enables your opponent to move your body in the necessary motion or direction. Hammer supported this essential, although rarely stated, guideline when asked about his experience in the WWE. About the “touch,” he said:

With each other…because they’re on the road four or five days a week, they’re not going to kill each other. There’s a difference if I grab your arm and flex my muscles and it looks like I’m squeezing you. It’s a trick. As opposed to doing this [yanking my arm forcefully behind my back]. So yes, I would think ‘the touch,’ as you put it, is certainly more advanced…Without a doubt.

Hammer’s account reveals the importance of the light touch for playing a “trick” on the audience as well as its function for maintaining good relations with other wrestlers.
Techniques of Joint Emotion Work

If you don’t take the time to establish that bond, like I’m the good guy, you’re the bad guy, I need you to clap for me, I need you to make fun of him here, we hate each other because why—[Then] why does the match matter? These are all things you need to establish. – Fishman, a wrestler of four years

In nearly every match, the script calls for wrestlers to implement an “emotional contrast strategy” (Rafaeli and Sutton 1991), where one wrestler represents good, the other bad. The following set of skills are the primary techniques that wrestlers use to jointly “work” the collaborative illusion:

a) Sell your moves. When your opponent handles your body, make a convincing facial expression of sheer agony, pain, and distress. At the same time, make loud grunts and groans to further convey the physical duress.

b) Sequence and build. To follow the logic of the story, wrestlers must understand the sequence of moves that sensibly follow one another. To create drama and maintain suspense, like any good story, the fight must “make sense.” For example, if one performer is (supposedly) stronger than the other, this superiority must emerge after an initial period of give and take. As Mickey, the veteran, says, “Like you can’t start the match, with a double arm flippin’ crazy DDT and then do an arm bar. Who wants to see that? You have to build.”

c) Timing. Wrestlers often need to relax and slow down to achieve proper timing.

d) Avoid the harder, bony parts of the body. Closed fists are usually avoided because wrestlers want to make contact with the more fleshy parts of the body. This softens the

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2 A “DDT” is a move in which a wrestler falls down or backwards to drive a held opponent’s head into the mat. It stands for “Death Drop Technique” or “Demonic Death Trap,” depending on who you ask.
blows and makes the noise from contact more audible.

e) Work the left side. Grab your opponent’s left arm or leg so that he knows which limb you expect to grab and which of the two to give you.

f) Use proper footwork. Before executing a move, a participant should move towards the center of the ring so his opponent will know where to find him (often not having the opportunity to see clearly) and avoid getting tangled in the ropes.

g) Jump upwards. At the exact moment your opponent needs to lift you in the air, jump up. Instead of straining to hoist a two hundred pound man in the air unaided, he lifts a much lighter person because the opponent is simultaneously rising.

Shared Understandings

Performers develop shared understandings of what to expect from each other in the ring. Shared understandings are conveyed in three main ways. First, they talk in the locker room before the match. The booker has already decided who will be “going over” (winning), but performers still need to know the general plan for the match. The heel typically dictates the proceedings with a discussion that varies in precision depending on a variety of factors, such as their familiarity with one another, the larger storyline, and the desired excitement level. On the whole, performers establish a general framework with a beginning, a “finishing move,” and a few moves in the middle. The framework helps wrestlers know that they need to be in certain positions at given moments but like a jazz performance, there is ample room for improvisation. The second way of conveying expectations are brief directives during the match itself. Wrestlers use subtle whispers to each other while performing. The third way is most ideal—performers use their intuitive “sense” of one another. Opponent’s positions are anticipated without any audible information being shared. A forthcoming swing or kick is sensed by reading one another’s cues.
Like professional dancers, this type of synchronicity can develop only with two wrestlers who are well acquainted and have previously worked together in tandem.

Ideal Performances of Joint Labor

As with all forms of work, pro wrestling emotion workers improve with experience. In general, less experienced, “green” wrestlers progress from a performance heavily reliant on physicality to a performance more reliant on “charisma” and “psychology”—the dramaturgical skills and the interaction with the audience. New wrestlers are always encouraged to master bumps and this fundamental move is consistently emphasized during training because loud thuds add an important audible dimension to the theatricality. But physicality and bumps are not essential for “drawing heat” and getting the crowd “fired up.” As Fishman states, “You need to stop, take your time and make things matter. A lot of times at that first match, you’re just trying [so hard] to show people how good you are physically that you miss that whole other huge thing that makes the match.”

Instead of repeatedly battering the body for “pops,” performers learn to assist one another by selling their painful agony (to the audience) with convincing expressions of pure suffering. The shared, implicit truth is that convincing portrayals of hatred, agony, and domination matter as much, if not more, than hard contact.

Mickey, a veteran of eight years, explains his “knack” for using joint emotion work to reduce drastically the hard physicality while still creating passionate emotions for the audience.

I seem to have a knack, thankfully, of controlling people’s emotions, which a lot of guys don’t have… when you turn around, I poke you in the back of the head and poke you in the eye. Which is designed to make you [the fan] pissed off. “Now why’d you do that? You didn’t need to do that!” And I beat up on your favorite [guy] for a little while. I do
the simplest things – the other night with Wayne I stood on his hand while talking trash to the crowd. And people were into it. So I say, “Okay, why get away from that and take several falls on my back and run around when, if I stand on your hand, I’m going to get the kind of reaction I want. Smart way of working.”

Even though he describes it as doing “the simplest things,” it in fact involves significant skills in joint emotional labor: the opponent is in position, the gimmick makes sense in terms of the sequence and timing of the story, the partner is selling the agony, Mickey steps on his opponent with only a light touch, and he is trash-talking to the crowd all at the same time. This illustrates the joint creation of indignation.

Latent Empathy

The high-risk performance is done with care for the partner. Each performer, despite the outward display of hatred and domination, is responsible for his opponent’s welfare. The two main manifestations of empathy are protection and trust. Rarely are these expectations stated explicitly, but as with many of the most revealing moments of participant observation research, a disruption in the performance provides a glimpse of the governing ideology.

One example was the following admonishment by Tyler (posted on the group’s Web message board) on the day after I witnessed him sustain an injury during training.

I want to say thanks to those who called and emailed me about my injuries sustained Thursday night at the school. Doctors told me I have severe spinal and neck wear-’n’-tear for my age, and that it’s time to hang up the boots. It’s not something any wrestler wants to hear, but it’s something that time will decide. I will be out for the next 2-3 weeks and hope that I will be in good condition by the next show. I am grateful because things could be much worse. With that said I leave all of you with one thought: This is a serious
business and we all MUST look out for each other, and PROTECT each other. Accidents happen yes, but if you are not comfortable taking a move, giving a move, and/or don't know what a move is, you don't have to take it, and you shouldn't give it. I will be bored as hell these next few weeks SO SOMEBODY PLEASE BRING ME SOME [wrestling video] TAPES!!!!!!

Instead of singling out Fishman, his partner in the ring at the time he was injured, Tyler, channels his frustration into a strong edict that stresses the collective need for protection. Tyler, who is age 28, took a couple of weeks off, but he does not “hang up the boots” as his doctor recommended.

A corollary of the importance of protection is the need for trust. Wrestlers must suspend any fear and entrust their body to their in-ring opponent. Even among a self-selected group of people who choose to become professional wrestlers, it is not “natural” to be relaxed when an opponent runs at you with his arm outstretched, or when lying exposed as a man jumps down directly on (or next) to you. Suspending this instinct is a significant challenge for participants considering pro wrestling’s danger. Hammer explains his reliance on trust in the following statement.

You’re allowing me to put my hand behind your head. You’re allowing me to hold your arm—which can easily be turned into a very compromising position. There’s a difference between holding your arm like this, and holding your arm like that. It’s very simple. And a lot of these guys know I can take the boney part of my arm [and drill it] into your shoulders, into your rotator cuff, into your elbows, underneath your neck.

This account demonstrates how pro wrestling’s elaborate coordination is embedded within a relationship of mutual trust (Smith 2006). To remain a participating performer, one must learn to rely on the precision of the opponent’s movements. In essence, wrestlers develop and
depend on feelings of trust in order to maintain a surface act of passionate anger, agony and subordination. As Cuss states:

When it comes to the big move and he picks you up over his head, if he’s blown up and can’t breathe, he drops you. You’re at risk for being injured. He’s out of shape. And people won’t trust you…. [Essentially], well, you aren’t going to lie to me. I’m saying, “I trust you, I’m going to give you my body. You’re going to take care of me.”

These words illustrate the implicit faith that performers must have in one another. The imminent danger and risk of pro wrestling is managed with a backstage understanding that each wrestler will safeguard his opponent throughout the routine.

Occasionally, this reciprocal empathy breaks down. Mickey, the main booker and veteran wrestler, explained why he stopped putting himself in a position where he had to trust his opponent.

I stopped doing crazy things. If I’m doing really crazy things, everything I do I make sure I can control myself, or if something does go down it’s my fault. I’m not trusting somebody else, you know. Like Warrior, it’s not that I didn’t trust Warrior, but I don’t want to take a chance of an ‘oops’ happening. If an ‘oops’ happened, I did it to myself. So I don’t put myself in positions where I depend on someone else.

At the time of our interview, Mickey no longer performed with “extreme” moves that involved flips, ladders, and pile drivers. Few wrestlers, however, are in a position with enough status or seniority to choose to minimize such risk. Wrestlers must follow the booker and/or promoter’s plans if they want to be booked in future shows. Nevertheless, this exception further demonstrates the (often implicit) negotiation that members must always operate within: follow the rules of mutual trust and protection or you will not remain a pro wrestler.
Disruptions: When the Passion Work Breaks Down

From time to time, the coordinated labor between performers breaks down. Breakdowns are rare, but they are exceptions that prove the rule and allow us to refine the limits of passion work. A disruption typically occurs for one of three reasons: a) a performer’s labor is not well executed and/or signals are misread; b) a wrestler feels disrespected to such an extent that the collaboration is called into question (often because he feels his opponent did not help to “sell” his moves); or c) there is a perceived threat to the group’s hierarchy and coordination is replaced with true antagonism.

The most common reason for a disruption is when someone’s work is not well enough executed, causing signals to be misread. Props such as bats, chairs, ladders, barbed wire, and broomsticks are often involved in these incidents. Such gimmicks raise the stakes by providing a more spectacular violence as well as a greater risk of injury and mistakes.

There are many instances where we see the inverse of prototypical emotion work. Instead of an error causing feelings of “agitation” (Erickson and Ritter 2001) and frustration (veiled by a display of ease and nonchalance), we see an error causing concern (veiled with anger and intent). Pro wrestling work presents many analogous moments where emotions of rage and anger are displayed, when sympathy and concern are, in fact, felt.

The second form of a disruption is when the opponent is “big timed,” which means a wrestler was too pompous to sell his own moves for his opponent. Big timing disrespects an opponent because his moves do not appear to have caused any pain or harm; it is deemed a breach in respect for your opponent. Tony describes the arrogant attitude this way:
"Yeah, like I'm too big to bump for you, too good to sell for you. I'm somebody, you're nobody. Why am I going to put you over at all?"³

The third type of disruption is a “shoot.” In any match, either in the preparatory training or performance space, there is the possibility of a shoot: a true fight where the implicit coordination is suspended and painful “stiffs” are exchanged. One type of shoot is premeditated (from before the match begins); the other begins when someone accidentally stiffs an opponent too many times during the match, triggering an exchange of stiffs.

Premeditated, intentional shoots are typically conducted to maintain respect for the group’s hierarchy. A participant who is “not liked,” or someone who is getting “too big-headed” often has no warning—and it is not until he is in the ring that he finds out what he is in for. They are frightening because the taken-for-granted “feeling rules” (i.e.: “loose,” “relaxed” protocol) have been abandoned by one member, thereby making the wrestler virtually defenseless.

Anticipating a softer, looser grip or contact—when instead, a firm arm is thrust—creates extreme vulnerability because one cannot tense up and/or flinch in preparation for the strike.

An accidental stiff that triggers an escalated exchange “happens all the time” because it is so easy to unintentionally stiff an opponent. Since the two partners are simulating a real fight with each other, performers come extremely close to drilling an opponent’s cheek, or choking their neck. As Slaughter states, “Sometimes you accidentally stiff someone. Sometimes you just can’t help it.”

For a seasoned wrestler, the standard response in such accidental instances is to send a firm shot back, known as a “receipt.” Below is an excerpt from my interview with Mickey.

M: It happens all the time. [If] the mistake happens repeatedly, you receipt the guy, give it back to him.

³ “Put you over” means to help your partner win the match by losing.
T: Doesn’t that escalate?

M.: A lot of guys get it. ‘Oooh, sorry.’ [But] I mean, you only say you’re sorry so many times before a guy’s like, ‘Look, dude, you’re killing me here.’ Then you give it back to him. [Some guys] will work as stiff as they can until you give it back to them. See how far they can push you. See if you’re a pansy or not.

T: So you get respect from pushing back?

M: [Yeah] otherwise they’ll just walk all over you. Like the first time I worked with Gary. He was killing me with his kicks. He hit me right in the back of the hamstrings, and I punched him right in the face. And everything was fine after that.

Thus, receipts are not verbalized but rather, negotiated with one’s body; the “duration,” “degree,” placement (or “direction”), and timing of bodily contact conveys intent (Hochschild 1979:564). The exchange is precarious because a receipt is acceptable as an assertion of self-respect, but if it is understood as unwarranted retaliation, it is disrespectful to the higher status wrestler. Risk is heightened by the fact that at public shows the crowd is screaming and adrenaline is flowing.

Disruptions can cause the match to lack a certain degree of kayfabe, potentially destroy the show’s storyline, and cause an injury. Any wrestler who repeatedly disrespects the rules and causes disruptions is pressured to leave the organization. However, these breakdowns in the joint labor are all typically backstage, for disruptions are usually invisible to the spectators. In the frontstage—not withstanding the big time type of disruption—the spectators are still likely to witness the infliction of suffering, hatred, and physical confrontation—just as they would if the performers were enacting it instead of (in these disrupted moments) truly experiencing it.
Conclusion

This paper analyzes the use of emotional labor in professional wrestling. Instead of strictly focusing on the overtly emotional exchange with the audience, an exchange that defines professional wrestling, this examination analyzes the wrestlers’ more obscure backstage emotion teamwork that takes place within the self and with other performers. The paper traces how performers do emotion teamwork with other performers, and the social consequences of such work. This analysis makes visible the joint emotion work that undergirds passion work performances.

Prototypical emotional labor strives to induce a state of comfort among clients, such as workers serving customers with a smile. Professional wrestling, on the other hand, presents a case of performers serving customers with sneers, snarls, and scowls. Instead of inducing a comfortable, relaxed emotional state, performers work to achieve a state of agitation, indignation, and contempt in others. Performers do this jointly by using what Rafaeli and Sutton call an “emotional contrast strategy” (1991), where participants evoke strong positive feelings from the audience largely by engineering powerful negative feelings toward their seemingly dastardly partner. Among other things, this demonstrates how the joint performance allows for the sort of emotional breadth that is difficult to achieve in solo emotional work.

The case of independent professional wrestling also reveals the rewards of emotional labor. Emotion work is often analyzed as having negative mental health outcomes, but the findings of this study suggest a contrary effect. Participants’ intimate, physical emotion work with each other within a high risk, dangerous, recreational setting generates a meaningful product—a product that is neither tangible nor financial, but social. Rather than experiencing this passion work as harmful or alienating—as with most emotional labor—this joint emotional
labor, because of its inherent empathy built upon mutual trust and protection, is routinely connective, intimate, and a means for solidarity. At the same time, it demonstrates a dynamic in which the frontstage performance of violence provides a veil for the expression of empathy between two men who would, in all likelihood, not otherwise share it.

We learn from this case that passion work is a ubiquitous form of joint work that operates in other instances of stage or ritualized violence that are organized around audience appreciation. Two stage actors on Broadway acting out a passionate display of vengeance do similar surface acts of hostility, while simultaneously coordinating technically precise movements which place a particular premium on cooperation and trust. Therefore, a range of physical performances, not necessarily those set on stage, deploy a certain degree of collaborative passion work in which workers deploy surface feelings that evoke uncertainty, suspicion, anger, and fear, while simultaneously drawing on “deep feelings” of protection, care, respect, and trust for each other. These include stunt men, magicians, (e.g., knife throwers), figure skaters, circus performers, physical dancers (e.g., break-dancers), pornography workers, and street performers.

Indeed, a version of joint passion work operates in several, less physical contexts as well. Two police detectives interrogating a suspect, two lovers being publicly affectionate, and two con artists snowing a subject with a confidence trick, all enact a form of joint passion work. These actors collaboratively work to induce a particular feeling from their subject, and for the overall interaction to succeed, they must rely on skilled coordination, respect, and a measure of empathy for their partner.
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