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Call for Papers
Special Issue Of
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Social Psychological Perspectives on Morality

The terms “moral” and “social” were interchangeable for 18th and 19th century social theorists. In the past few decades sociologists have become, as Craig Calhoun describes it, “unmusical” in addressing the moral dimension of human life. Morality involves more than the established social psychological fields of altruism and aggression; it encompasses individual and cultural duties, ideals, and prohibitions that shape interaction. A social science of morality looks at the influences on, embodied enactment, and consequences of implicit and explicit moral orientations toward the good, just, and worthy (and alternatively the profane, disgusting, and shameful).

Psychologists and neurologists are currently directing the scientific study of moral behavior, thought, and feeling. With some notable exceptions, such scholars are looking deeper into the evolutionarily adapted brain. A sociological counterpart is called for to address morality within the self, social situations, and the life course. Such work encompasses the study of affect, exchange, justice, or values, but may lead to new syntheses or research programs.

Our goal is to publish a special issue of Social Psychology Quarterly on the topic of Social Psychological Perspectives on Morality. We welcome submissions from a broad range of empirical and theoretical perspectives, demonstrating the utility (or potential hazards) of a sociological understanding of morality. The deadline for submitting papers is January 1, 2009. The usual ASA requirements for submissions apply (see “Notice for Contributors”). Please send a copy of your paper as a Word attachment to spq@northwestern.edu, the $25 submission fee (payable by credit card or check, and waived for graduate student authors), and an indication that the paper is intended for the special issue. Prospective authors are encouraged to communicate with the editor (g-fine@northwestern.edu) or the special issue deputy editor (steven-hitlin@uiowa.edu) about the appropriateness of their papers.
In professional wrestling, the most socially inspired nuances of passion (conceit, rightful-ness, 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).1 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 (Ashforth and Humphrey 1993), 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.

Since Hochschild’s research on emotional labor among airline employees and bill collectors, a wide variety of scholarship on workers and workplace settings has flourished.2 Overall, this research has focused on the

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1 This is unlike traditional sport, where fans are relatively inconsequential since the overall objective of the competition is winning. For example, as the result of persistent problems with violent fans, certain European professional football (soccer) matches have been played in empty stadiums.

2 For example, there has been research on restaurant workers (Leidner 1991, 1993; Erickson 2004); paralegals (Pierce 1995); luxury retail workers (Martin, Knopoff, Beckman 1998; Godwyn 2006); police (Martin 1999); mortuary science students (Cahill 1999); professors (Bellas 1999; Harlow 2003; Vannini 2006); door-to-door salespeople (Schweingruber and Berna 2005); nursing home workers (Lopez 2006); and hotel workers (Otis 2007; Sherman 2007). For a comprehensive review of the first two decades of literature, see Steinberg and Figart (1999).
effects of emotional labor in occupational settings. More recent studies within the private sphere (DeVault 1991, 1999; Lois 2006), the global context (Otis 2007), and the “marketized private life” (Hochschild 2003) have broadened the scope of emotional labor research; yet, 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).

Moreover, emotion-management research remains focused on individuals within female-dominated occupations who do service work and use “face-to-face or voice-to-voice contact.” In these contexts, behavior is primarily organized by the structure of the market and the effects of individuals (who are disproportionately women) selling their labor for a profit. In general, the focus has been on the negative effects of emotion work that have developed as a result of the transition to a more service and information-based economy.

The present study of professional wrestlers 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 labor, which is intended to produce a “sense of being cared for in a convivial and safe place” (Hochschild 1983: 7)—work that produces “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 study provides a close look at the work that goes into “surface acts” (Hochschild 1983) of hostility and aggression, acts that are less examined in the literature.

Most importantly, this study complements our understanding of emotion work by scrutinizing professional wrestling as an instance of the joint performance of emotional labor. The performance is an enactment of a duel between two or more fighters who are, in actuality, colluding with one another. 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. The performance is designed for the enjoyment of numerous spectators and is therefore a case of “interpersonal emotional management” (Thoits 1995; Francis 1997), yet the passionate frontstage interaction with fans is impossible without an elaborate, skilled, backstage social relationship between two wrestlers. This unique case of interactive, backstage emotion teamwork is the focus of this analysis.

My analysis of emotional labor, based on a long-term ethnography and participant observation of professional wrestling, begins with a description of independent pro wrestling and its participants. I explain my methodology and describe the frontstage, public emotion work between participants and fans. I then analyze what I call their passion

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1 Noteworthy exceptions are studies of bill collectors (Hochschild 1983; Rafaeli and Sutton 1991), police workers (Stenross and Kleinman 1989; Martin 1999), insurance agents (Leidner 1991), criminal interrogators (Rafaeli and Sutton 1991), paralegals (Lively 2000), and booksellers (Schweingriber and Berns 2005).

4 There are a few cases of other emotional work performed jointly, such as two flight attendants serving passengers together (Hochschild 1983) or the staff at a psychodrama support group (Thoits 1996). With the exception of criminal interrogators (Rafaeli and Sutton 1991) and paralegals (Lively 2000), these are generally brief descriptions.
work. Passion work is jointly performed emotional labor intended to elicit a passionate response from subjects through an impression of extreme states such as joy, 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.

This study demonstrates that the joint performance of passion work, like other emotion work with the public, requires and values the management of “surface acting” and “deep acting” (Hochschild 1983). However, by highlighting the jointly performed labor, my analysis of wrestling affords an opportunity for theoretical refinement of extant emotion scholarship (Snow, Morrill, and Anderson 2003). 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.

**Research Site and Participants**

Pro wrestling is best known for the highly stylized, televised programs produced by the well-financed, publicly-traded, and extremely successful World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) Corporation. Beyond the purview of these popular shows, however, is a thriving independent professional wrestling scene known as “the indies.” This loose-knit association of low-budget, community-based entertainment lacks affiliation with the WWE and consists of pro wrestling schools, websites, and regional promotions held in modest venues. Indy promotions have no television contracts (other than occasional local cable access) and each federation is funded by the small revenue from ticket sales and neighborhood advertising at shows that are held about every four to six weeks at available local venues (e.g., bingo halls or, as in this case, a community center). Unlike WWE stars such as “The Rock” and “Hulk Hogan,” a well-respected veteran performer in the indies attracts relatively little recognition outside of this reference group.

Training begins at a school owned and/or managed by a former pro wrestling star. It is an informal organization without active recruiting, and nearly all participants find the school through social networks or the Internet. Dropping out comes with little or no social penalties since the school is a voluntary association. Because the training cannot easily be found elsewhere—there is no “little league pro wrestling” or Police Athletic Wrestling League—wrestling trainers exert a considerable amount of influence on students. After students have paid for their training for (roughly) a year, no regular dues are collected, though certain duties and obligations are expected (moving and setting up the ring, for example, or selling tickets and helping to publicize shows). Most participants begin with the dream of making it into the higher level WWE but eventually recognize, after a few years of participation, how unlikely it is that they will ever be recruited.

In the promotion researched here, the lineup of matches for the show (as determined by the booker) is largely drawn from the same pool of performers who practice together in the training space. When new talent performs, the individual always has prior ring experience and, typically, an established name within the indies. Many matches feature men who are acquainted, though they may or may not have previously performed together. The booker and promoter manage the shows and control the storylines (the dramatic scripts creating
the rivalry between opponents). These stories typically carry over to the next show, and most of them play on American cultural tropes (patriotism, chivalry, heroism, honor) as well as their villainous opposites (rebellion, defiance, rudeness) (Smith 2004).

Indy wrestlers have day jobs, since performers have no labor contract from the promoters. If there is compensation for performing, it depends on the given promoter and the size of the house attendance. Some promotions provide a small stipend for that night’s performers ($25–$75), but it is very common to receive no pay at all. Younger, less experienced wrestlers are usually satisfied simply to be in the show, and financial compensation is rarely expected. For a successful veteran performer, the money earned from wrestling in the indies might be a meaningful supplement to another job, but it is not nearly enough to be one’s primary source of income. After factoring in costs for meals and travel (and occasional lodging), a mid-level indy performer comes out about even, if not at a loss. Furthermore, promoters have little regard for the wrestlers’ long-term healthcare. There is no provision for health insurance or compensation for sports-medicine support or medical trainers, which, given that injuries are so common, often proves quite costly.5

Since the 1990s, indy promotions have had a reputation for “extreme” performances that are more violent and spectacle-like than the “family friendly” entertainment of earlier eras. “Extreme” wrestling promotions are a variant of risk-taking “edgework” (Lyng 1990), that incorporate more high-risk stunts, “high spots,” and props such as tables, ladders, chairs, trash cans, barbed wire, and cages. The extreme-themed shows target a young male audience and emphasize “exciting, risky, action-packed sports that are culturally coded sites of individual rebellion and creativity” (Messner 2002:82). The most well-known extreme wrestling federation is the Extreme Championship Wrestling (ECW) promotion and a leading ECW star trains students at the school researched here.

In the indy federation researched in this study, there are twenty participants.6 Contrary to the stereotype of pro wrestlers as massive strongmen, most of the participants are of average body size, weighing between 160 and 200 pounds and standing between 5’8” and 6’2” in height. Within the group, there is an established hierarchy based on experience and public performance exposure. Those with higher status are the older, more veteran wrestlers. These “vets” have typically been in the indy scene for at least five years, and several have had some television coverage. In the middle stratum are those wrestlers who have at least a couple of years experience and have performed in at least one public show. At the bottom are “green” wrestlers, who are in training and have not yet participated in a public performance.

Data and Methods

I conducted over three years of ethnographic research at a school that trains men to be professional wrestlers and at the school’s affiliated event promotion. I observed over twenty-five public wrestling events and attended over 60 three-hour-long practices, amounting to over 350 hours of research in the field. My data are derived from participant-observation of the interactions among the wrestlers at their practice site and public-event shows (both frontstage and backstage); fifteen in-depth interviews with wrestling partic-

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5 The only exception is “event insurance,” which covers the overall production and the doctor who checks participants before taking to the stage at public shows. The doctor, as mandated by the state, checks blood pressure, pulse, and briefly inspects the performers for any obvious physical signs that would preclude their wrestling that night.

6 Most participants are white, working-class men who range in age from eighteen to thirty-five, have a high school education, and work part-time in low-level service jobs in a metropolitan area. Five have attained a B.A. at a local college, and four of these five are public school teachers. Five members come from a lower-middle-class to middle-class socioeconomic background. Four men are married and have children. Eleven of them are single and still living with one or more parent(s). Some of their occupations include: security guard, CVS clerk, Blockbuster clerk, UPS warehouse distribution worker, and customer service representative for a local newspaper. One female, and two men of color, are in the group.
I socialized informally with the wrestlers in restaurants, bars and gyms, and in cars while traveling, and I observed other regional wrestling schools and public wrestling performances. While my main focus was on the same group of about twenty wrestlers, I also spoke with pro wrestlers who had moved up to the next level and were performing in the WWE or one of its feeder federations. I not only observed and conversed with “wrestlers in their places,” to echo Zussman’s (2004) phrase, I also collected data on their behavior while they performed at public shows, relaxed, trained, and attended other performances. Additionally, I saw these behaviors evolve over time as I was in the field with this group for over three full years. I gathered data through notes, photographs, emails, and audio and video recordings.

Professional wrestling is physical theater in which participants act out a fight in front of paying spectators. The duel is governed by sporting symbols, but outcomes of matches are fixed. Individual success is not determined strictly by physical merit, and performers must achieve emotional responses from the spectators. Instead of the traditional sports credo—“higher, faster, stronger”—pro wrestling’s credo might be, “Tell a story, sell your move, get a pop from the crowd.” To receive a “pop”—a strong reaction, positive or negative, from the audience—wrestlers must establish who their characters are, what that character represents (“babyface” or “heel”),

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7 For example, there is always a ring, a referee, a declared winner of each match, and the singing of the national anthem. Also, pro wrestling is regulated by the State Athletic Commission, which “enforces the rules and regulations pertaining to the supervision and regulation of boxing and wrestling” activities (NYSAC 2005).

8 Babyface (often shortened to “face”) is the good guy; the heel, of course, is the villain. Establishing what they represent is done with a variety of symbols of the “personal front,” such as flags, dress, speech etc. (Goffman 1959).
and why there is something at stake in the particular fight. As Roland Barthes observed, “everyone must not only see that the man suffers, but also and above all understand why he suffers” (Barthes 1957:20; emphasis added).

Through the interaction with his opponent, the “wounded storyteller” tells a dramatic story of vulnerability, triumph, or defeat (Frank 1995). Bodily movements and face-to-face contact narrate the “mythical violence” (Collins 2008), and most stories strive to evoke passionate feelings among audience members through acts of injustice (or justice). “[M]otion and emotion are intimately linked,” and emotional display is immediate and unfiltered (Elias and Dunning 1986:50).

Yelling, cheering, and verbal taunts exchanged between the wrestlers and spectators all work to set the emotional mood, not unlike the manipulative atmosphere in Peggy Thoits’ study of encounter groups—where music, lights, and smoke “intensify[ed] the mood of the moment” (1996:91). 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). The show, as Jeffrey Goldstein contends, makes violent entertainment appealing: It contains “clues to its unreality” (the staging and setting); it portrays an “engaging fantasy”; it is “exaggerated and distorted”; it has a “predictable outcome”; and it usually “contains a just resolution” (1998:223). Despite the staging, this spectacle, as Guy Debord suggests, is “the very heart of society’s real unreality … the spectacle epitomizes the prevailing model of social life” (Debord 1967:13). Henry Jenkins argues that pro wrestling’s enactment is widely adored because it allows male spectators to express emotion overtly (1997).

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-fi-bay”). 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”—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 frontstage. Most important is that in order to create passionate indignation, adoration, and “expressive emotion work” (Hochschild 1979: 562) in the public frontstage relationship 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

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8 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).
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. Like the rookies in a police academy, new wrestlers learn that behavior and demeanor consist of the repression of emotional displays (Martin 1999:121).

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.”

This conditioning resembles that needed by a boxer, who must “harden oneself to pain, to get one’s organism used to taking blows: to get hit regularly and progressively adjust to it” (Wacquant 1992: 246). But it also represents a central tenet of the crucial emotion work on the self: the need to take an “active stance vis-à-vis feeling” (Hochschild 1979: 561).

As in the culture at large, being able to handle a great amount of pain is a source of pride (Nixon 1996; White, Young, McTeer 1995; Young 1994). 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 ordinarily, 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.

The need for a more flexible, malleable, and loose body is difficult to adjust to because it is not easy to remain calm during an “alarm” (Goffman 1971: 238), such as when someone runs at you with an outstretched arm, or jumps on you from a height of five feet. Those who develop skills more quickly learn to release their inhibitions and “submit.” Damon, a quick learner, referred to himself as a “meat puppet”:

You get to be what I nicknamed a ‘meat puppet’. . . I was easy to put into submission moves. I went up light, I came down fine, no matter what people did. So if somebody wanted to try and create a move or invent a move, or see if they could do something on someone my size, [they’d] drag me into the ring and see what happened.

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 desired motion or direction. Bobby, a regular performer, explained a light touch when describing Hammer, another wrestler with excellent skills.

[Hammer’s] a great worker. When I wrestled him at a practice, I wasn’t sure when to sell because he was so light. But if you look at him, he looks like he’s wrenching and wrenching and wrenching, but he had me in an arm-lock and I didn’t feel anything. That’s the kind of worker for the WWE. They want you to be as light as you possibly can be.

This illustrates prototypical emotion work, as well as distinguishes it from other traditional gendered types (in which warm cheerfulness is displayed). Hammer displays gritty toughness and bruising strength to the audience when, in actuality, he is employing delicate, nuanced, and respectful “body labor” (Kang 2003).

Hammer himself 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 [yanks 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:

12 Of the five strategies identified by Rafaeli and Sutton, the wrestling performance most resembles the “simultaneous good cop, bad cop” strategy.
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.” Performers also need to be cognizant of what has already occurred in the match. For example, if someone has wrenched on his opponent’s arm and (supposedly) inflicted harm, it would not make sense for the opponent to then immediately use this “damaged” arm with great ease or force.

c) **Time your moves.** Wrestlers often need to relax and slow down to achieve proper timing. The following example from my fieldnotes demonstrates the use of “trained imagination” (Hochschild 1983: 83)—where comprehension of the emotion necessary for the act is drawn from experience—to help learn the sense of proper timing.

_Dan and Pete were working each other. Cuss gives some basic pointers about being a heel. He said, ‘Remember, when you are the heel, think of it like you are being paid by the hour.’ I am not sure what he means, so I ask Fishman for clarification. He says, ‘Take your time,’ as he raises both his arms up and slowly walks around while grinning, gesturing toward an imaginary crowd. He says, ‘You go slow and milk everything.’ [Fieldnotes 10/10/04]_

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13 The “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 whom you ask.
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 blows and makes the noise from contact more audible.

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.

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.

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. When executed correctly, the fans will not notice that one wrestler is assisting the other with the heavy lifting. If poorly timed, a wrestler is obviously leaping upwards onto the back of his opponent, and fans see that the two fighters are colluding, thereby breaking the kayfabe.

Shared Understandings

Performers develop shared understandings of what to expect from each other in the ring. These are conveyed in three main ways. First, opponents 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 times, but like a jazz performance, there is ample room for improvisation. As Mickey put it, “The heel normally calls the match, the pacing of the match. But it’s up to the baby face to
The second way of conveying expectations is brief directives during the match itself. Wrestlers use subtle whispers while performing. When closely embraced in a corner of the ring (or positioned in a “submission move” on the mat), wrestlers exchange instructions that are inaudible to the audience. The following excerpt from my fieldnotes illustrates this:

While we are all in the backroom watching the video of a previous night’s match, Danny relayed the conversation he had had with his opponent in the midst of setting up his “finishing move.” On the screen are two men embraced while standing several steps up a ten-foot metal ladder stationed in the corner of the ring. Danny recounted the conversation on the ladder: “He said, ‘Do you have me?’ and I told him I had him. I said, ‘No, it’s alright…put your arm here’. . . He needed to move his leg and I told him to move his leg.” (Fieldnotes 12/12/04)

The two performers then flew into the air and did a flip while embracing (see Image 4).

The two performers then flew into the air and did a flip while embracing (see Image 4).

They landed safely on the mat nearly ten feet below and the crowd roared in appreciation. This move, one of the most spectacular and (apparently) painful of the match, demonstrates in crystallized form the importance of joint work in managing the emotions of the audience. It provides insight into the backstage emotion management (of anxiety, in this case), since these whispered interchanges are essential to avoiding the sort of slight mismatch of actions that could produce a serious injury in one or both wrestlers.

The third way is the ideal—performers use their intuitive “sense” of each other. Opponent’s positions are anticipated without any audible information being shared. A forthcoming swing or kick is sensed by reading each other’s “cognitive,” “bodily,” and “expressive” cues (Hochschild 1979). Like professional dancers, this type of synchronicity can develop only with two wrestlers who are well acquainted and have previously worked together in tandem. Hammer, a veteran, explained this phenomenon:

You’re sitting up, for instance. I might say, ‘Just stay.’ And you don’t know what I’m doing, but I might just—boom [stamps his foot]. I’ll do this, you come up again. And if you’re smart, you’ll just stay there [seated] because the people will be popping. But you have to really have this
Because Hammer has confidence that his partner will not lift his knee at the crucial moment, he can execute a spectacular maneuver that makes the crowd “pop.” Such confidence allows the performers to seamlessly move and coordinate with one another. In this case, the movements flow from their synergy and trust of each other.

**Ideal Performances of Joint Labor**

As with all forms of work, workers improve with experience; this is no different with pro wrestling emotion workers. Confirming the research of Erickson and Ritter, veterans with higher status tend to have more control over their emotional labor skills, which are smoother and (apparently) more effortless than the skills of novice wrestlers (2001:148).

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, 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.”

Veterans learn to limit the number of bumps in their performance. Cuss, a veteran, explained this acquired knowledge during an interview.

*Now, I realize that I don’t have to do as much. You know, you can kind of tell what the crowd wants. I don’t have to kill myself anymore to get a reaction. Back in ’99, I wrestled this guy almost every week in some kind of three-way match or four guys, whatever. And, you know, I go to the locker room after the match, and I was always the smallest guy there. I’d hear him say, ‘I only bumped once. And this other guy, he says, ‘I didn’t bump at all.’ The other guy, ‘I only bumped once.’ Meanwhile, I bumped twenty or thirty times. Oh my God, Jesus! Maybe I shouldn’t be doing this. These guys are walking around like nothing, and I’m half dead.

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.14

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

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14 Being too light can also be a problem. But if the format of the WWE production is an indication of proper performance techniques, we can infer that well-performed emotion work utilizes less physicality. The WWE format benefits from extensively crafted scripts taking place outside the ring in hallways, interviews, and the locker room. Additionally, there are commentators who narrate the drama and help tell the story. In fact, in two hours of programming, viewers likely see no more than thirty-six minutes of in-ring physical wrestling; the rest is an “elaborate, soap-opera-style story line detailing a host of feuds, rivalries, grudges, and Byzantine subplots” (Rosellini 1999:1).
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.

This ability to work the crowd with titillating psychology becomes a source of pride among the more experienced. The following passage describes exactly how a skilled wrestler might work jointly with an opponent to get a reaction from the crowd without relying on more risky physical stunts.

Some guys feel...they have to do eighty flips to get a reaction from the people. But they don't interact with the people! It's move, move, move, move, move. I'll do moves, stop, and look at somebody. The best people are kids and old ladies...you try to look for them. So you do a move and you do something right, and I'll see Hammer creep out of the thing on the side—I'll stop and stare at him. And I'll go and play to him. Maybe I'll come back this way, and I'll tell the little kid, 'Let me know if he comes back and tries to get me!' I'll work, so I'll say [to the opponent], 'Hey, give me a minute, then come get me.' I'll go up to Hammer, stop right in front of that kid. Then I'll walk past him just a bit and as he's coming from behind; the kid will say, 'Mickey, he's coming! he's coming!' Then the rest of the kids say, 'Mickey, he's coming! He's coming! And I'll go 'Ooh!'—turn around—and he'll back off.

This passage illustrates the pride taken in doing savvy emotional labor. Mickey manages several simultaneous relationships and implements (jointly with his partner), "deliberate provocations" (Thoits 1996) for the sake of the fans. The outcome is a unique product of joint labor in which the wrestlers' backstage interaction with each other generates a heightened suspense, largely unattainable from emotional labor done as an individual.

Not unlike veteran police detectives who come to understand their interactions as "higher mental work" (Stenross and Kleinman 1989), wrestlers take increasing pride in these emotional skills as they progress. The management of emotions becomes an important resource that suggests that veteran members with higher status "influence and evaluate others in terms of their own standards of delicacy and poise...Theirs is the dominant cultural arbitrary of emotionality, defining the emotional currency of social prestige" (Cahill 1999:114).

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 (Goffman 1959).

One example is 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.

Another example of the protective dimension of empathy work is the intense teamwork needed when jumping, falling, and landing. These moves require a partner to catch or slow down a flying body. Tony explained:
I did a diamond closeline to the outside, and Vinny didn’t catch me. So I landed on my knee. If you watch the tape you’ll see me limp. I get up and I limp because I’m like, ‘I have to catch Terror.’ And once Terror did that, I just laid down. Oh, that was the worst pain! My girlfriend and I went home that night. She said in my sleep I was moaning and groaning. She said it was so bad for awhile she had to sleep on the floor.

Here the feeling of pain is actively suppressed on behalf of his opponent’s (and the entire performance’s) welfare. Despite the splitting pain, Tony must get in the proper position for the next move. If he does not move into the proper position, his opponent would likely have suffered an injury far more severe than a wrecked knee.

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 posi-
tions 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, how-
ever, are in a position with enough
status or seniority to choose to mini-
mize such risk. Wrestlers must fol-
low the booker and/or promoter’s
plans if they want to be booked in
future shows. So, rarely does anyone
other than a senior performer (who
also dictates storylines) have the
opportunity to reduce risk in this
manner (Howe 2004: 184).

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 disrup-
tion 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 collab-
oration 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 inci-
dents. Such gimmicks raise the stakes by pro-
viding a more spectacular violence as well as
a greater risk of injury and mistakes. Take, for
example, Bobby’s explanation of a broomstick
gimmick gone awry:
I told him I had a broom under the ring. I had sawed it down about half way, thinking, ‘Oh this thing is going to break real easy.’ . . . but I pulled him over the apron and instead of just hitting him in that one area [of the broom], I hit him with the whole broom and all you heard was Smack! And I looked down and the broom didn’t break! I was like ‘Oh, shit.’ So I took the broom and broke it over my knee. It was broken, it just didn’t break. It was at the maximum breaking point. So I must have looked like a He-man. I whacked him with this broomstick as hard as I could and it didn’t break, then I broke it over my own knee. But from the top of his shoulder here, diagonally down across his back, it looked like he was caned. I felt bad about that.

Bobby is lucky in this instance because while the passionate hatred and agony are conveyed to the audience (and certainly felt by the performer), no one suffered a serious injury.

As Bobby’s account shows, he appears to the spectators as a powerful “he-man” impervious to emotion, even though he actually “feels bad” at this moment. He thus exhibits a form of “emotional dissonance” (Hochschild 1983: 90) where he feels guilt and sympathy but displays anger and stoicism—one of 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 in fact sympathy and concern are felt.

The second form of disruption occurs when the opponent is “big timed,” which means a wrestler is 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?”

The third type of disruption is a “shoot.” In any match, either in the preparatory training or performance space, there is the possibility

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15 “Put you over” means to help your partner win the match by losing.
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 stiff an opponent too many times during the match, triggering an exchange of stiffs.16

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.

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 cheering, adrenaline is flowing, and wrestlers draw on “emotional memory,” where character and self are often blurred (Stanislavsky 1967).

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 ethnographic study of pro wrestling analyzes the use of emotional labor to reenact a wild brawl between two performers. Instead of strictly focusing on the overtly emotional exchange with the audience, an exchange that defines the overall performance, this examination analyzes the wrestlers’ more obscure backstage emotion teamwork that takes place within the self and with other performers. The study 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.

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16 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.
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. While this corroborates research that finds that men excel at emotional labor calling for the suppression of positive emotional displays and the presentation of negative emotions (Erickson and Ritter 2001:148), it also demonstrates how such 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, particularly as a threat to one’s sense of authentic selfhood (Erickson and Ritter 2001:148). 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.

While the case of passion work among professional wrestling performers is unique, the principles of these social dynamics are not. Passion work operates in most 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, dancers (e.g., breakdancers), 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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