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An Initial Exploration into the Psychological Implications of Adolescents’ Involvement with Professional Wrestling

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ABSTRACT Professional wrestling has become an internationally popular type of ‘sport entertainment’ among youth. The professional wrestling industry targets children as consumers for live events, televised programming and product merchandising. However, the nature of wrestling has changed in the last two decades and many educators are unaware of the themes and messages that wrestling promotes. This article provides a historical and contemporary overview of professional wrestling and discusses the psychological implications of the violence of wrestling on children. In an initial study, measures of wrestling involvement, aggressive response to shame and Behavior Assessment System for Children (BASC) scores were analysed for 121 male participants (ages 10 to 17). Results indicated that those participants reporting more wrestling involvement tended to respond more aggressively to shame, demonstrated moderately higher levels of school maladjustment, showed higher levels of internalizing problems such as anxiety and social stress and showed lower levels of self-esteem and perceived self-adequacy. Directions for future research and implications for school psychologists are discussed.

Several nights each week a worldwide audience will watch ‘professional wrestling’ and witness scenes like these:

Zach Gowan, a young, one-legged wrestler at 5’11”, 159 lbs. (his leg was amputated as a child) is forced by World Wrestling Entertainment owner and on-screen personality Vince McMahon to wrestle 6’4”, 300 lb Brock Lesnar as ‘payback’ for defeating McMahon on an earlier program. According to the story line, McMahon also does not want a ‘cripple’ in his wrestling
company. Gowan’s mother and young brother happen to be in the front row at this night’s show, and before the match, Lesnar promises to destroy Gowan’s good leg in front of them. After a few minutes of severely beating Gowan in the ring, Lesnar takes him outside the ring, approaches Gowan’s family, grin and then repeatedly head-butts and bloodies Gowan. Lesnar then picks up Gowan and spins his leg into the steel ring-post. Not quite satisfied, he retrieves a steel folding-chair and repeatedly smashes it into Gowan’s leg. Gowan’s mother climbs over the security barrier to assist her fallen and bloodied son. As paramedics wheel Gowan up the exit ramp on a bloody stretcher, Lesnar chases them down, throws Gowan off the stretcher, and carries it back in the ring as a ‘trophy’. He then smears the blood off the stretcher and rubs it across his chest in warrior-like fashion. Two weeks later, in another show, Gowan, now in a wheelchair, is pushed down a flight of stairs by Lesnar.

In another story line McMahon’s daughter Stephanie is feuding with her father for his affair with the beautiful World Wrestling Entertainment ‘diva’ Sable. McMahon orders Stephanie to fight a male wrestler named ‘A-Train’ who weighs more than 300 lbs. A-Train proceeds to beat up Stephanie and throws her across the ring by her hair. After a few moments, with Stephanie prone on the ring floor, A-Train looks toward McMahon and Sable, who are ringside. McMahon holds his fist out and hesitates, then turns it over and gives the thumbs-down sign, imitating the kill signal from the movie ‘Gladiator.’ A-train then climbs the ropes and lands full weight on Stephanie to the approval of father and mistress.

Kane, a recently unmasked wrestler, is interviewed in a backstage dressing room by ringside announcer Jim Ross. Angry with Ross’s questions, Kane beats Ross until he is shown to be unconscious, pours gasoline on his still body, and then sets Ross aflame. Ross twitches and squirms until someone rushes to extinguish the flames.

These graphic scenes are not atypical in today’s world of professional wrestling, dubbed ‘sport-entertainment’ by primary impresario of World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) Vince McMahon. Although wrestling was once a legitimate sport that originated in the carnival circuits more than 80 years ago (Ashley et al., 2000), audiences soon tired of these multi-hour and somewhat tedious contests and sport promoters introduced fixed outcomes, flashy moves and flamboyantly costumed wrestling personalities. These matches were modelled after classic Greek morality plays in which violence was the most effective means of settling disputes between good and evil. Typical Greek mythological themes, such as the son rebelling against the father or the damsel in distress were introduced and prevail to this day (Henricks, 1974). While the outcomes of pro wrestling matches had been predetermined since the mid 20th century, promoters were still constrained by the pretence of presenting their product as legitimate (i.e. uncertain outcome) sport. However, two decades ago, McMahon essentially freed
the industry from this constraint by publicly admitting what many already suspected was true, namely that wrestling matches were actually fixed. While initially this pronouncement made other promoters nervous, it ultimately led to the explosion of wrestling’s popularity. By not having to fake legitimacy, the WWE (then the World Wrestling Federation) was free to put forth a more outlandish, showy, campy product with the knowledge that fans delighted in the pure spectacle of wrestling as sheer entertainment rather than as sport.

Although pro wrestling continues to have elements of Greek mythology themes of good versus evil (cf. Zengota, 1994), its current incarnation, even as entertainment, has erased the lines between the classic battles between good and evil. For example, today’s embodiment of wrestling involves scripts in which ‘babyfaces’ (the industry term for good guys) engage in behaviours previously reserved for ‘heels’ (bad guys) such as cheating, using weapons to win and assaulting referees. Stone Cold Steve Austin, arguably the most popular babyface in industry history, delights crowds in his pursuit of his enemies with his beer-chugging, cussing and bird-flipping routine, often behaving in ways that previously only evil characters used to achieve victory.

While pro wrestling had a small to moderate following throughout its existence, its evolution into sport-entertainment has led to its explosion into one of the most popular contemporary spectator pursuits. Professional wrestling is very popular and widely watched internationally, particularly in North America, Australia, Japan and other countries. However, the pro wrestling to which we refer in this article differs significantly from other forms of legitimate (i.e. the outcome is uncertain) combative contests commonly referred to as amateur wrestling. These amateur events can take various forms, most popularly referred to simply as either freestyle (where both arms and legs can be used to execute holds or defend against attack) or Greco-Roman wrestling (in which a wrestler may not attack an opponent’s legs nor use his or her own to execute moves), though there are slight variations on each. Many organizations conduct these legitimate sport events, with organized amateur wrestling taking place on every continent and in virtually every country across the globe. Indeed, the 2003 World Championships of Freestyle Wrestling had participants from countries as diverse as Japan, Israel, Turkey, Iran, Uzbekistan, Estonia, Cuba, Switzerland, Australia, in addition to literally dozens of other countries (Abbott, 2003). In most cases, these countries have federations (such as the Turkish Wrestling Federation) which train promising young wrestlers for these events, and in many countries these athletes are viewed with iconic status by both young and old. Further, this type of wrestling is sanctioned in schools in the United States and across the globe, and by many community organizations, with children as young
as five participating in some community organizations. These schools and local organizations (which often hold matches at public school facilities) contend that wrestling in this more ‘pure’ form offers an avenue by which youth can learn positive traits such as self-discipline, self-esteem and perseverance.

In sharp contrast to this participant-driven amateur style wrestling is the spectator-driven ‘sport entertainment’ venue known as professional wrestling. Rather than being sanctioned by educational, community and national sponsors, professional wrestling is a corporate entertainment enterprise whose dominant purveyor is the WWE, a publicly traded company that generates net revenues of approximately $375 million a year. WWE broadcasts to over 100 countries and in 12 languages. The WWE enjoyed the height of its popularity in the late 1990s, with its flagship program, Monday Night Raw, broadcast on TNN (now Spike TV) being the most watched cable television show in 1999 (Rosellini, 1999). While live event attendance and television ratings have dropped somewhat in the last three years, WWE wrestling remains extremely popular. WWE’s other primary cable television program, Smackdown, is consistently one of the top watched sports programs. Both Raw and Smackdown generally combine to draw Nielsen ratings (percentages of television households watching) of between six and twelve (Anonymous, 2003). WWE thrives on its weekly cable programming and its pay-per-view revenue. Among all pay-per-views, boxing and wrestling combined for 95 percent of revenues in 2001 (Anonymous, 2002). Further, the WWE gathered 5.4 million pay-per-view buys in fiscal year 2003, this alone earning $91.1 million in revenues (WWE Inc., 2003a). The television networks paid the WWE $58.5 million in broadcast rights in fiscal 2003, while nearly $73 million was earned from advertisers (WWE Inc., 2003a). The popularity of the WWE also is apparent in live ticket and merchandising revenue. Fans regularly pay about $40 a ticket for one of over 300 live wrestling events staged per year and crowds average 5,000 per event. Devotees buy over $44 million of licensed wrestling-themed merchandise, ranging from clothing to toys to videos. These products are specifically marketed for their ‘sexiness’, and their promotion of pain and ‘rule breaking.’ To illustrate, a best selling t-shirt is wrestler Steve Austin’s ‘f*ck fear, drink beer’ shirt.

Research shows that wrestling draws on many middle-class fans. Wrestling fans generally have yearly household incomes exceeding $40,000, and 11 percent earn in excess of $75,000. Over 60 percent of fans have attended college or have college degrees (Ashley et al., 2000). Critical to this article is the fact that the WWE is extremely popular among youth. Teenagers flock to view wrestling events in person and on the television. Professional wrestling is viewed on television by over
one million children under the age of 12 (Anonymous, 1999). Rosellini (1999) cited Nielsen figures that show Raw drawing more teenage male viewers than Monday Night Football, with a full 15 percent of professional wrestling viewers being under 11 years old. Millions regularly connect to wrestling web sites or chat about wrestling on the internet. To potential advertisers, the WWE promotes its teen appeal, touting that WWE.com is the number one entertainment site for males in the 12- to 17-year-old age range, and their advertising demographic is males in the 12- to 34-year-old age range (WWE Inc., 2003b). It is to the potential effect that pro wrestling involvement has on these youth that the current initial exploratory study is addressed.

Given the popularity of professional wrestling, surprisingly little academic research has been devoted to the subject. Most work in the area has essentially been devoted to descriptive analysis that examines wrestling from a sociological and anthropological perspective (e.g. Henricks, 1974; Zengota, 1991) rather than from a psychological perspective. Sociological studies have argued that regular viewing of professional wrestling is associated with negative outcomes such as perpetuating racial stereotypes (Maguire and Wozniak, 1987) and desensitizing viewers to violence (Maguire, 1999). Messner et al. (2000) performed a content analysis of television sport programming, including wrestling, and found that young male viewers are presented with a narrow portrait of masculinity with themes such as ‘white males are the voices of authority’, ‘women are sexy props or prizes for men’s successful sport performances or consumption choices’, ‘aggressive players get the prize; nice guys finish last’ and ‘boys will be violent boys.’ They cite numerous examples as to how pro wrestling promotes these last three themes. Another study found that in each episode of televised wrestling there were approximately 12 uses of weapons, five groin kicks, 33 incidents of crotch-grabbing and 21 incidents of simulated sexual activity (Brown, 1999).

Few studies have gone beyond content analysis of wrestling programming in examining its potential negative impact on viewers despite the fact that there is considerable evidence demonstrating the impact of televised aggression on children (e.g. Anderson and Bushman, 2001; Steur et al., 1971). Although the effect sizes of these studies range from small to moderate in field studies and quite large in lab studies (e.g. Paik and Comstock, 1994), it has generally been concluded that exposure to televised violence contributes as much to aggressive behaviour as any other identified variable, that this relationship persists over time (e.g. Huesmann et al., 1984; Huesmann et al., 2003; Singer and Singer, 1981; Singer et al., 1984) and that the relationship is especially strong in situations where the aggressive model is either rewarded for aggression or not punished for it. In the context of viewing...
wrestling, viewers imitate not only the physical violence of wrestlers, but their language and gestures both inside and outside the ring as well. Televised violence has also been linked to violence desensitization. Indeed, many wrestling fans often defend criticisms of wrestling’s aggressive content by claiming that, particularly relative to other programming, wrestling is not particularly violent.

While a link has been established between television violence and aggression, contextual factors have been identified which strengthen this relationship, and many of these contextual factors are present, if not enhanced, in contemporary wrestling presentations. First, children and adults are more likely to imitate attractive aggressors (‘good guys’) and young children can make good-bad discriminations at an early age (Huesmann et al., 2003). Second, the presence of aggressive stimuli such as weapons has been shown to increase the learning of aggression and, in wrestling, there are multiple uses of weapons in the ring such as hitting with steel chairs, championship belts, brass knuckles, sledgehammers and other assorted objects. Third, humour in the context of violence has been shown to increase the learning of aggression. Humorous insults and threats hurled back and forth between wrestlers are a staple of wrestling programming and regularly appear on licensed apparel (e.g. the Rock’s t-shirt which states ‘We Bring the Whuppin’, You Bring the Ass’). Humour, particularly hostile humor (Baron, 1978) fosters an emotional desensitization to violence, leading viewers to perceive the violence as less serious than it would be perceived in the absence of such humour (Gunter and Furnharm, 1984; Jablonski and Zillmann, 1995; Potter and Warren, 1998). Fourth, as indicated earlier, rewards and reinforcement enhance imitation of aggression. Unlike many other sports where the degree of violence is controlled and regulated through both societal and sport rules, in wrestling almost anything violent is acceptable and the combatants are thoroughly rewarded by wins, belts, audience approval and large salaries. Finally, learning of aggression is increased when the aggression is perceived as justified (Rule and Ferguson, 1986). Given the effect of these five contextual factors and their clear presence in the pro wrestling setting, the prediction that pro wrestling exposes children to an environment in which aggression is likely to be learned is strengthened.

In the earliest quantitative study on professional wrestling, Arms et al. (1979) found that adults scored significantly higher on the aggression dimension of the Mood Adjective Check List after attending a wrestling event in comparison to pre-attendance scores. Durant (as cited in McClellan, 2002) surveyed 2,228 high school students and discovered that for those students who had watched wrestling the previous two weeks, girls were 18 percent more likely and boys were 11
percent more likely to engage in dating violence and to use drugs. If they watched wrestling shows more than twice in the same time period, the incidence of dating violence more than doubled. In another study by Bernthal (2003) school teachers noticed their students imitating the aggressive language and behaviours that the students watched on professional wrestling shows.

The current study sought to expand on this existing work. Specifically, given the increasingly violent and sexual content in professional wrestling, existing research which theorizes a relationship between its viewership and negative outcomes and the popularity of wrestling among children, examination of wrestling's potential negative psychological impact on children who are involved in wrestling is both timely and much needed. Further, whereas prior research on pro wrestling has addressed only potential effects of wrestling viewership, this study examined not just watching wrestling per se, but overall involvement in the wrestling culture through watching it on television or at live events, purchasing products and interacting with peers who also are heavily involved in the culture of wrestling.

Besides examining the potential link between wrestling involvement and aggressive tendencies, it also was intuitively appealing to examine relationships between wrestling involvement and three other areas: school maladjustment, clinical maladjustment (internalizing disorders) and the personal adjustment variables of sense of inadequacy and self-esteem. A link between wrestling viewing and acting-out school problems was suggested by Bernthal (2003). Bernthal surveyed 370 teachers in grades 2–8 and found that more than half described students who watched wrestling as physically aggressive and more likely than children uninvolved in wrestling to get into trouble in the classroom and at recess. The teachers reported that students mimicked both the physical aggression and vulgar language of wrestlers. They also reported that these students were relatively loud, tired on mornings after wrestling programming from staying up late and not as academically strong as other students. Wrestling was viewed by these teachers as harmful to children's development and seen as a significant contributor to acting out problems at school. Both Samuels (2000) and Wasmonsky and Beresin (2001) discussed professional wrestling's diminishment of authority figures within its programming. Samuels (2000) stated that the referee embodies the failure of authority and law to regulate violent intentions and actions. The referee often has little overall power in the outcome of a match and wrestlers often ignore his warnings and rulings. Similarly, Wasmonsky and Beresin (2001), in their labelling of pro wrestling as the ‘Anti-Sport’, noted that in wrestling, authority is something to be challenged because referees are constantly ignored, mocked, abused and are physically small and weak.
compared to the wrestlers. Authority figures other than the referees, such as on-screen ‘commissioners’ Vince McMahon and Eric Bischoff, often act in ‘corrupt’ ways such as stacking the decks against wrestlers they dislike (e.g. two or three on one ‘handicap matches’) and physically interfering in matches themselves. In sum, it is hypothesized here that involvement in professional wrestling has the potential to teach youth that authority figures lack both efficacy and scruples. Further, it is our contention that for children, it is possible that this learning can carry over to authority figures whose job it is to keep order, for example, school teachers and administrators. In sum, higher levels of learned aggression (dependent on our earlier prediction), higher levels of acting-out behaviours in school and lessons learned regarding the inefficacy and often unscrupulous behaviour of authority figures leads to the prediction that higher levels of wrestling involvement will be associated with higher levels of school maladjustment.

In addition to the prediction that wrestling involvement is positively related to externalizing problems such as aggression and school maladjustment, it also is reasonable to predict relationships between such involvement and internalizing problems such as anxiety and general adjustment issues such as a sense of inadequacy and self-esteem. First, internalizing and externalizing behaviours often are present together, especially among children with difficulties in social skills and in making friendships (Gresham et al., 1998). Social isolates and loners typically are those who commit both workplace violence and domestic violence, and a link between professional wrestling engagement and dating violence has been established (McClellan, 2002). Thus, it is predicted that there would be a positive association between wrestling involvement and internalizing problems. Second, given the predicted association between wrestling involvement and internalizing problems, it is also reasonable to expect that students who show more wrestling involvement will show a relatively higher sense of inadequacy and relatively poor self-esteem. For example, the child who spends a great deal of time engaged in the world of wrestling and identifying with these often inappropriate role models may be prone to personal gratification through fantasy in order to deal with their own perceived personal inadequacies. By watching wrestling and identifying with the characters, it may be argued that these children are seeking to gain a sense of control over a world and environments that fail to gratify them and give them a sense of positive accomplishment much in the same manner as bullying. Indeed, research shows that bullied students tend to have more anxiety and other internalizing problems compared to non-bullied students (Salmon et al., 1998). Children with personal inadequacies may also turn to wrestling to learn moves and language to defend themselves against bullies or simply other more self-assured students. Therefore,
negative relationships are predicted between wrestling involvement and both a sense of inadequacy and self-esteem.

Methods

Wrestling involvement measure
As previously stated, we desired to look at the relationship between our dependent variables and pro wrestling involvement as opposed to simply pro wrestling viewing. As there are no existing measures of wrestling involvement, we compiled 22 items measuring various aspects of a child's involvement in wrestling. The items consisted of statements to which the child answered true, not true or sometimes/somewhat true. Some items were positively phrased (e.g. I watch wrestling on television every week; I have a lot of wrestling toys), while some were negatively phrased (e.g. I don't visit internet sites about wrestling very often; I would not like to write about wrestling for a school assignment). On negative items, the negative portion of the statement was underlined on the survey. For positively phrased items, two points were given for every statement answered true, one point for sometimes/somewhat true and no points for not true. Negatively phrased items were reverse-coded (no points for true, one point for sometimes/somewhat true and two points for not true). A total wrestling involvement score, ranging from zero to 44, was computed by summing the scores on the 22 items. The items demonstrated strong internal consistency, with coefficient alpha = 0.89. The complete wrestling involvement scale can be found in Appendix 1.

Dependent measures
To measure aggression, the aggressive response to shame factor of the Attitudes Toward Guns and Violence Questionnaire (AGVQ) was used. The AGVQ is a 23-item instrument, designed for children, with four main factors: aggressive response to shame, comfort with aggression, excitement and power/safety (Shapiro et al., 1997; Shapiro et al., 1998). The instrument has been shown to be a reliable and valid measure of violence-related attitudes in young people. The instrument was developed with a sample of 1,164 children ranging in grade from third to twelfth, with the children coming from public schools, college preparatory schools and Catholic parochial schools. The aggressive response to shame dimension was chosen as it captures the type of aggression most often depicted in professional wrestling, and thus the type of aggression children are likely to learn through their involvement with wrestling. As discussed earlier, many professional wrestlers are motivated to harm their opponents because they have
been shamed or disrespected in some fashion. The aggressive response to shame factor is comprised of eight items measuring beliefs that the shame resulting from being insulted can be undone only by aggressive means. Illustrative items include ‘If somebody insults you, and you don’t want to be a chump, you have to fight’, and ‘If someone disrespects me, I have to fight them to get my pride back.’ Children could respond with ‘agree’, ‘not sure’ or ‘disagree’. The aggressive response to shame factor showed strong internal consistency in development of the AGVQ, (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.83) and also accounted for the highest level of variance on the instrument, with 23 percent of the variance accounted for (Shapiro et al., 1997). For each item, two points are assigned for agreement, one point for not sure and no points for disagreement. The eight-item summed score, ranging from zero to 16, was this study’s dependent measure. The entire scale can be found in Appendix B. In our sample, the items demonstrated strong internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.78). The other three factors of the AGVQ were not included as dependent measures as the items contained within each primarily address a child’s attitude toward guns and how gun possession would make them feel (Shapiro et al., 1997). We did not expect wrestling involvement to influence attitudes specifically toward gun violence.

In order to assess school maladjustment, internalizing problems and the personal adjustment constructs of sense of inadequacy and self-esteem, the Behavior Assessment System for Children (BASC) was used (Reynolds and Kamphaus, 1992). The BASC is a multi-measure behaviour rating system. Included in the system is a self-report personality inventory for children with a version designed for younger children (ages 8–11) and another version designed for adolescents (ages 12–18). Each version has items (152 for younger children, 186 for adolescents) that can be answered by the child as ‘true’ or ‘false’. The test yields individual subscales for numerous constructs (e.g. anxiety, self-esteem, atypicality) and broad or composite scales (e.g. school maladjustment, clinical maladjustment), thus allowing interpretation of both types of measures. There are two or three validity scales depending on the scale version. The BASC yields non-normalized T-scores with a mean of 50 and standard deviation of 10. Scale norms are representative of 1986 and 1988 Census data and the scale has good reliability and validity (Bracken et al., 1994). For example, the adolescent norming sample was approximately 4,500 students of diverse backgrounds and cultures; internal consistency estimates ranged from 0.80 to 0.90. Scale validation has included factor analyses, correlations with other measures and contrasting children with various psychological diagnoses.

The present research examined those composite and individual
scales most likely to be linked to televised aggression generally and wrestling involvement specifically. First, BASC scores on the broad ‘School Maladjustment Scale’ were examined. This composite reflects attitudes toward school and teachers, and also includes a sensation-seeking dimension that measures the tendency to take risks and seek excitement. Second, BASC scores on the broad ‘Clinical Maladjustment Scale’ were examined. This composite is a broad index of distress and internalizing problems and reflects anxiety, atypicality (tendency to have unusual perceptions, behaviours and thoughts), external locus of control (the perception that success or failure is determined by forces beyond one’s control), and social stress (felt tension and pressure in relating to others). Third, two individual scales, self-esteem and sense of inadequacy, were examined. The self-esteem scale addresses warmth, openness and ego strength, and is a general measure of a child’s self-satisfaction with reference to both physical and non-physical characteristics. The sense of inadequacy scale assesses a child’s lack of belief in his or her ability to achieve at expected levels, a tendency not to persever and a perception of being unsuccessful.

Survey administration and sample characteristics
In order to test the predictions, 121 male children were surveyed in a classroom setting. Children were surveyed in groups ranging from 13 to 25, and researchers were present during each administration to ensure that directions were followed and the children did not talk to each other. Children completed the entire BASC inventory first (including items comprising scales not used as dependent measures), followed by the aggressive response to shame items and finally the wrestling involvement items. Children were given the BASC inventory appropriate for their age. The entire survey generally took children between 50 minutes and one hour to complete. Children ranging in age from 10 to 17 were surveyed (6.6 percent = 10 years old, 28.1 percent = 11, 24 percent = 12, 19 percent = 13, 14.9 percent = 14, 1.7 percent = 15, 0.8 percent = 16 and 4.9 percent = 17). Only males were surveyed because they are professional wrestling’s primary target audience, the primary fan base and because males would most likely identify with the wrestling characters. Thus, our predictions, both practically and theoretically, are best suited for testing with male children and adolescents. Respondents were in grades 4–12 although 93 percent were in grades 4–8. The ethnic composition of the participants was 50.4 percent Caucasian, 39.3 percent African-American, 7.7 percent Hispanic and 2.6 percent Native American. In terms of their home environment, 68.4 percent lived with both mother and father, 26.5 percent came from single-parent homes and 5.1 percent lived with relatives other than mother or father.
Results
A median split was performed on the wrestling involvement scale, splitting the sample into two groups based on the median score of 20 on the summed score of the items comprising the scale. The first group was children with lower involvement in wrestling (score range = 0–19), while the second group was children with higher involvement in wrestling (score range = 21–44). Children who scored the median 20 on the involvement scale were dropped from the sample, as there was no rationale for including them in the higher involvement group versus the lower or vice versa. This resulted in six surveys being discarded, and an overall sample size of 115. T-tests were performed to test for differences between these two groups on all dependent variables. All p-values reported are one-tailed due to our directional hypotheses.

Using the summed aggressive response to shame scale as the dependent variable, as predicted, children who had higher involvement in wrestling exhibited a significantly higher degree of aggression, \( (M = 6.07; SD = 4.13) \) than did children who had lower involvement in wrestling \( (M = 9.02; SD = 4.34) \) \( (t = 3.72; p < 0.001) \). Using the T-score on the BASC school maladjustment composite as the dependent variable, children who had higher involvement in pro wrestling exhibited moderately higher levels of school maladjustment \( (M = 58.04; SD = 10.04) \) than did children who had lower involvement in wrestling \( (M = 55.10; SD = 10.38) \). Although in the predicted direction, these mean differences are marginally significant \( (t = 1.53; p < 0.06) \). To test for differences on internalizing problems, the T-score on the BASC clinical maladjustment scale was used as the dependent variable. Results showed that, as predicted, children who had higher involvement in pro wrestling exhibited more internalizing problems/clinical maladjustment \( (M = 54.47; SD = 9.92) \) than did children less involved in wrestling \( (M = 50.90; SD = 11.40) \) \( (t = 1.77; p < 0.04) \). With regard to the personal adjustment constructs of self-esteem and sense of inadequacy, results supported our hypotheses that children who are more involved in pro wrestling will have lower self-esteem and a heightened sense of inadequacy when compared to children who are less involved in wrestling. T-scores for self-esteem were significantly lower for children more involved in wrestling \( (M = 47.84; SD = 9.19) \) versus children less involved \( (M = 50.86; SD = 9.23) \) \( (t = 1.75; p < 0.04) \). T-scores for sense of inadequacy were significantly higher for children with higher involvement in pro wrestling \( (M = 56.78; SD = 11.60) \) versus children less involved \( (M = 52.76; SD = 12.06) \) \( (t = 1.81; p = 0.035) \). It should, however, be noted that BASC scores for wrestling involved youth still fall well within average limits and do not in any way reach clinical maladjustment levels.
Discussion
Professional wrestling is widely viewed both on television and in live venues; its products are merchandised to youth worldwide. In and of itself this is not problematic. However, in contrast to amateur wrestling contests, the content and focus of professional wrestling has substantially changed over the last two decades so that today there are numerous themes that can be viewed as potentially detrimental to children’s well-being. These themes, well-documented through content analysis of wrestling shows, include extreme violence using weapons, violence directed at women, minorities and other historically disenfranchised groups, and the message that winning and destroying enemies is justified by whatever means are necessary. Given that children are especially vulnerable to violent images and have difficulty differentiating fantasy from fact, researchers have begun to investigate the potential impact of wrestling on children.

Admittedly, the research in this area is sparse and not well-controlled. However, several previous studies (Arms et al., 1979; Bernthal, 2003) are beginning to yield empirical evidence that is consistent with theoretical predictions that a preoccupation with professional wrestling is, at best, not in the best interests of children, and, at worst, quite harmful. This study is consistent with those that have demonstrated that wrestling involvement is associated with negative effects on children and adds to the existing literature by looking not only at wrestling viewing but at a total wrestling involvement in terms of purchasing wrestling related merchandise (much of which is targeted for use in school), socializing with wrestling engaged peers, having family who are engaged in wrestling and performing other wrestling involved behaviours (e.g. visiting wrestling internet sites). To this end, a new measurement scale was devised that showed very good internal consistency. Nevertheless, the scale must be subjected to further testing and refinement such as using it to compare groups that might logically differ in wrestling interest, such as behaviour problem students, high and low achievers, and students varying in confidence and locus of control. Using this scale, our research showed not only predicted effects on a measure of aggression but also showed associations between heightened wrestling involvement and increased clinical maladjustment, internalizing problems and school problems as well. This last finding supports an earlier study (Bernthal, 2003) demonstrating that children engaged by wrestling may well take problematic behaviours into their school setting.

We cannot and do not conclude that wrestling involvement causes negative outcomes for children, only that there appears to be an association. In the current study it cannot be determined if wrestling involvement contributes to negative outcomes for children, whether children...
who have negative self-images and other adjustment concerns are somewhat attracted by wrestling stimuli (perhaps hoping that they too may become omnipotent like their favorite heroes) or whether some other factor or factors impact on both. In this regard, one may question how parenting styles may enter the equation inasmuch as parents who either encourage immersion in the wrestling culture or are laissez-faire in terms of their children's involvement may be acting to increase both that involvement and adjustment problems. Along these same lines, little is known about the influence of peers and close-in-age siblings, and how their attitudes toward wrestling impacts friends and siblings.

Subsequent studies may follow a number of different directions. First, there are virtually no qualitative studies of what initially attracts youth to wrestling, nor do we know the relative impact of various involvement factors in influencing behaviour (e.g. knowledge about and interest in wrestling, watching events live and on TV, purchasing products and active mimicking of protagonists and situations). For example, perhaps immersion in the total culture of professional wrestling in terms of viewing, purchasing and imitating is particularly harmful to children whereas merely viewing a weekly show is less so. Second, there is limited research examining children prior to and after wrestling exposure and no data that tracks children developmentally over time. Thus, although there is suggestive evidence that wrestling involvement is associated with relatively higher levels of aggression, the possible association with adolescent gang violence or adult violence and law breaking is an area that could be explored. This would seem to be of particular concern given the messages that wrestling promotes regarding authority figures. Third, the impact of wrestling involvement in influencing social attitudes appears to be a promising area of research, in that it could theorized that such involvement has the potential to affect attitudes toward women and minorities, drug usage (e.g. steroid use), the disabled and the death penalty to name but a few.

To claim, as we have hypothesized, that wrestling involvement will impact children is not particularly controversial. Indeed, there is enough concern with this subject that the WWE's own website attempts to help parents watch wrestling with their children in a 'responsible' manner. Unfortunately, however, this advice, although well-intentioned, focuses primarily on the physical injuries that may result when children imitate wrestling moves that are scripted for the ring. No doubt much of the impetus for this concern involve cases such as that of Lionel Tate, the 12-year-old Florida youth who killed his six-year-old neighbour using professional wrestling manoeuvres, and then claimed in trial that wrestling exposure was to blame (Clary, 2001). Although wrestling involvement and physical injuries are of great concern, this study has addressed the potential psychological
injuries associated with wrestling, many of which might be more widespread than negative physical outcomes. Further, any recommendations to parents to minimize any potential psychological harm will need to take into consideration children's ages and developmental status. The dilemma that parents face regarding wrestling viewing is far more complex than they face trying to talk with young children about violent cartoons because the wrestling viewing audience, entering into and transitioning through adolescence, is undergoing physical and cognitive changes and forming attitudes regarding sexuality, character, morality, career goals and the like. One need only sample pro wrestling merchandise to gain insight into the attitudinal messages being offered to children in these formative stages. For example, the Undertaker's t-shirt which carries the message 'Big Evil Pain Sin-Dicate: Let the Beatings Begin', the Rock's t-shirt with the sexually undertoned message of 'Hit it Strong: Hit it Hard', Kurt Angle's t-shirt with the message 'The Truth Won't Set You Free', or Spike Dudley's t-shirt with the message 'Pound 4 Pound, One Tough Little Bastard' are commonplace at live events, being worn by adults and youth alike.

Finally, our research concurs with growing concern that wrestling involvement is associated with school problems, including attitudes toward school and teachers and tendencies to take risks. This is particularly interesting in light of the fact that the WWE has initiated a program 'Superstars in Reading' that seeks to encourage children to read by rewarding them with posters and CDs of wrestling stars. Although the authors commend the WWE for this educational outreach, our data and the work of others suggest that schools should avoid any direct association with the values implicit in WWE programming. If anything, teachers, counsellors and school psychologists need to further understand not only children's widespread interest in professional wrestling, but fully understand the messages that professional wrestling promotes and the effects of these messages on youth. While many teachers are fully able to recognize that their students are 'pre-occupied' with professional wrestling, it is likely that few educators fully appreciate the messages and themes being shown and, whereas school psychologists increasingly recognize the impact of violent images and trauma on children, there is far less attention given to the impact of continuous exposure to more subtle aggressive images such as those that make up the current culture of professional wrestling. In order to heighten educators' sensitivity to wrestling's effect on youth, video producer Ronit Ridberg (2002) released Wrestling With Manhood: Boys, Bullying, and Battering, an educational program designed for high school students that addresses the enormous popularity of professional wrestling among male youth and its relationship to community violence. This is an excellent beginning educational tool and is useful
viewing by school psychologists internationally as schools attempt to address violence in society.

References


Appendix 1 – Wrestling Involvement Scale Items

I watch wrestling on television every week.
I watch wrestling on television more than once every week.
I go to wrestling events in person very often.
I don’t visit internet sites about wrestling very often.
I do not have any close friends who are fans of wrestling.
I do not have any family members who are fans of wrestling.
I have a lot of t-shirts with wrestlers or wrestling sayings on them.
I have a lot of wrestling toys.
I have a lot of wrestling posters.
I have a lot of wrestling hats.
I don’t read wrestling magazines very often.
I would be more likely to buy something if a wrestler on TV recommended it.
I would not like to write about wrestling for a school assignment.
I don’t imitate any wrestlers’ sayings (words) very often.
I don’t imitate wrestling moves very often.
There are not any wrestlers who I would really want to be like.
I wish more of my friends were fans of wrestling.
I don’t buy special wrestling events on TV very often.
Being a wrestling fan is not cool.
I like to play wrestling video games on the TV or computer.
If I had to take a test on wrestling, I would get an ‘A’.
My parents and friends think I am a big fan of wrestling.

Appendix 2 – Aggressive Response to Shame Scale Items

If somebody insults you, and you don’t want to be a chump, you have to fight.
If someone insults me or my family, it really bothers me, but if I beat them up, that makes me feel better.
You’ve got to fight to show people you’re not a wimp.
If someone disrespects me, I have to fight them to get my pride back.
A kid who doesn’t get even with someone who makes fun of him is a sucker.
If people are nice to me I'll be nice to them, but if someone stops me from getting what I want, they'll pay for it bad. I'd feel awful inside if someone laughed at me and I didn't fight them. If I acted the way teachers think I should out on the street, people would think I was weak and I'd get pushed around.