The Spiral of Violence: Equity of Violent Reprisal in Professional Wrestling and its Dispositional and Motivational Features

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Though lacking empirical evidence, professional wrestling has been criticized for portraying excessive violence in harmful contexts. This study focused on the equity of violent reprisal perpetrated by liked versus disliked protagonists with socially sanctioned or unsanctioned motives. Results of a quantitative content analysis show that most violent interaction sequences were over-retributive. Violence that was not part of match competition was routinely initiated for normatively unsanctioned motives and showed predominant patterns of escalating violent retribution. These patterns held across perpetrator disposition. Thus, liked characters regularly aggressed for normatively unacceptable reasons. The consequences of these portrayals are discussed.

The popularity attained by professional wrestling makes its presence impossible to ignore and concerns about its potential influence difficult to avoid. Nielsen research for Fall 2002 through Summer 2003 shows that, on average, 627,000 children between the ages of 9 and 14 watch *Raw* every week, and 847,000 watch its companion show, *Smackdown*. More recent Nielsen data indicates that as of February 2008, *Raw* and *Smackdown* were each attracting total audiences of nearly

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five million per week (Nielsen Media Research, 2008). WWE's net revenues for the 2006 fiscal year amounted to almost exactly $400 million, with over $81 million drawn from television rights fees alone (United States Securities and Exchange Commission, 2006).

Yet despite its apparent widespread appeal, few familiar with *Raw* and *Smackdown* are surprised at the type of attention it has received in public discussion. The troubled voices of parents, social critics, and scholars alike decry that harm to vulnerable viewers will come from the sexuality, profanity, and extreme violence that occurs inside and outside the ring. This concern has been further magnified by the fact that WWE programming is wildly popular with males ages 12 through 17 (Bickford, 2006), a target market that may be especially impressionable. The Parents' Television Council (2001) has consistently labeled WWE content too violent for family hour programming, while academics have criticized a lack of dignity in its content (Raney, 2003) and for fostering physical aggression among young viewers (''The Evidence Against Media Violence,'' April 28, 2001). More alarming is research positing that children are more likely than adults to perceive wrestling as realistic (British Broadcasting Standards Commission, 2001). Since perceived realism increases the likelihood that viewers will imitate observed aggression, (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1963), the fact that wrestling appeals to younger viewers has resulted in considerable worry.

Early studies on exposure to live wrestling matches have suggested that wrestling is more likely than other sporting events to invoke negative mood states (Arms, Russell & Sandilands, 1979). Lemish (1998) found that among adolescents, wrestling appeals almost exclusively to males; a second study revealed that elementary school boys may be prone to engaging in violent behavior and schoolyard fights that are imitative of the behaviors seen in professional wrestling (Lemish, 1997). Perhaps the most damning evidence of a relationship between watching wrestling and aggressive behavior comes from the research of DuRant, Champion, and Wolfson (2006). In their sample of over 2000 North Carolina high school students, the researchers provide evidence of a significant association between the time males spent watching wrestling and their self-reports of carrying weapons to school, fighting in and out of school, and physically fighting with a date or girlfriend.

The current study addresses questions related to this topic by examining the justification for violence found in televised professional wrestling. It starts by explicating content features of justified violence expected to moderate the influence of exposure to media violence on aggressive behavior, and presents the results of a study assessing the presence of features thought to facilitate aggression. Specifically, the frequency of contextual features representing sanctioned motives for violence and dispositions toward perpetrators and victims were identified and coded. Further, the level of equity found in violent reprisal was examined in order to investigate sequential patterns in the prevalence of violence that would be considered excessive given its provocation. The current study attempts to identify how often different combinations of these theoretically relevant features are coupled with violence in professional wrestling.

Justified Violence in Media

Previous research on television content has identified a number of contextual features associated with the representation of violence that contribute to its influence on viewer aggression (Wilson et al., 1997). Research in this area has suggested that when acts of violence are presented as justified, they may reduce inhibitions that prevent aggressive behavior, whereas unjustified acts of violence do not appear to have the same effect on viewer aggression, and might even inhibit aggressive responses (Berkowitz, 1962; Geen, 1981). Provoked research participants who had seen justified violence were more likely to demonstrate heightened aggression both in their attitudes toward others (Berkowitz & Rawlings, 1963) and in actual behaviors such as the administration of shocks to a confederate (Berkowitz & Geen, 1967; Hoyt, 1970). Although this research has gone generally unchallenged, Lachlan (2003) notes that it is based on a narrow conceptualization that defines violent reprisals as justified only when committed by liked protagonists with normatively sanctioned motives.

Motivational and Dispositional Factors. Defining justification based on motive is apparent in research by Felson and Ribner (1981), who commented that justified violence is an intentional act that requires some sort of normative reason. Motive has played a clear defining role in studies that establish justified violence operationally as acts committed in response to a previous attack from an aggressor (Geen & Stonner, 1973; Hoyt, 1970), or a credible threat by the perpetrator (Hoyt). Motive has also played a defining role in studies that have identified unjust acts as those lacking clear reason for violence (e.g., Hoyt, 1970; Geen & Stonner, 1973), offering normatively inadequate reasons such as greed (Berkowitz & Rawlings, 1963; Geen & Stonner, 1974), or the pure enjoyment of watching someone suffer (Berkowitz & Powers, 1979). Similarly, definitions of justice based on disposition are apparent in research by Berkowitz and Rawlings, who maintained that acts of violence are inherently just if the victim is a disliked antagonist. Procedurally, several studies have classified violence as just when it is perpetrated against immoral targets that are disliked and therefore deserving of physical punishment (Berkowitz & Geen, 1967; Geen, 1981).

A cursory look at this body of research might leave the impression that justified violence has been carefully explicated; however, by and large, this work has failed to detail the role of moral appraisal identified in other literature. Although only limited empirical research has addressed the factors that govern moral appraisal of violent media, research on disposition theory has suggested that audiences mostly enjoy seeing punishment as long as it is fair and recipients deserve it (Zillmann & Bryant, 1975; Zillmann & Cantor, 1977). Yet, detail on what acts are insufficient or excessive remains vague. In this regard, notions of equitable reciprocity seem crucial in the appraisal of violence as just or unjust. Without perceived accordance between transgression and reprisal, appraisals of justification for violence cannot

occur. Yet research on justified media violence has largely overlooked this critical consideration.

Equitable Retribution. At the most fundamental level of moral appraisal, Kohlberg (1958) asserted that notions of justice are determined by considering whether or not the inherent qualities of a reprisal constitute literal reciprocity, or are strictly equal to the provoking act. An act of violent reprisal is just if its inherent qualities are equivalent to the violence that preceded it, and unjust if violence in the reprisal falls below or exceeds the initiating violent act. Notably, Kohlberg observed that this appraisal is moderated by our disposition toward the actors involved and perception of their motives.

Prior content analytic research on media violence has defined justification purely in terms of motive (Tamborini et al., 2005; Wilson et al., 1997), coinciding with behavioral research by labeling aggressive acts prompted by socially sanctioned motives as justified and those based on selfish or unsanctioned motives as unjustified. However, Kohlberg's (1958), and Colby and Kohlberg's (1987) assertions suggest that definitions based only on perpetrator motive might be inadequate. Instead, definitions that consider both the motive and the relative level of reciprocity in a given violent act might better represent the complex nature of the concept. This approach for the definition of justification is adopted in the present study. For a violent act to be considered just, it must not only be motivated by a socially sanctioned cause, it must also meet a standard indicating that the level of violence contained is roughly equal to the events that instigated the interaction, or falling within what one would consider to be a narrow range of responses considered appropriate under the circumstances (see Raney & Bryant, 2002; Zillmann & Cantor, 1977).

Implicit in this definition is the notion that an observer's judgment about what constitutes a justified form of equitable reciprocity often becomes moderated by the observer's disposition toward the actors involved and perception of their motives. The result is a set of acts or range of behaviors that viewers might deem inherently equal to a provocation given the existing dispositional and motivational context.

Problems with Conceptual Ambiguity

The limitations imposed by the narrow definition used in research on justification become evident when it is recognized that it appears inconsistent with the presentation of violence in parts of mainstream television. The National Television Violence Study (NTVS) (Wilson et al., 1997) contended that much of the violence on mainstream television is justified because it is motivated by self-defense, retaliation for previous acts, or other related reasons. At the same time, NTVS also revealed that most violent acts on American television are committed by disliked characters. If likable television characters frequently perpetrate violence for unsanctioned reasons, the experimental evidence used to differentiate the influence of justified

and unjustified violence potentially lacks ecological validity to the characteristics of justified violence found in many media representations. By confounding justification with portrayals of the perpetrator as a liked protagonist, research in this area may both have failed to accurately represent justified violence as it appears in media, and done so in a way that alters our expectations about the way justified violence influences viewer behavior.

Justified Violence in Professional Wrestling

Critics have argued that professional wrestling sanctions violence normally deemed unjust in other social settings. Maguire (2000), for example, suggested that the concept of deviancy barely exists in professional wrestling, and acts that would routinely constitute deviant behavior in most other settings are considered normative. Likewise, Campbell (1996) asserted that characters fluctuate between hero and villain, depending on the context of the interaction; in many cases, this may lead to the aforementioned incongruity between disposition and motive for aggression. In a recent content analysis of televised professional wrestling, Tamborini et al. (2005) reported that most violence is committed by perpetrators that cannot be characterized as particularly popular or unpopular. At the same time, 69% of the violent acts in wrestling were linked to motives that might be considered sanctioned or justified. Once again, however, this research did not articulate how often liked and disliked characters perpetrate violence for different reasons. Moreover, it can be argued that reason alone is not enough to justify all levels of violence. Since neither this nor any prior content analysis has documented how the level of equitable reprisal is associated with the dispositional and motivational attributes of the violent perpetrators, it is impossible to determine whether or not liked characters commonly engage in excessive violent reprisal without sanctioned motives. NTVS used a static plan to examine both levels of retribution and motives linked to dispositional roles. The present study attempted to go beyond this to examine sequential patterns of reprisal equity, and to see if these patterns are associated with character disposition and motive.

It is highly plausible that confounding unsanctioned motives with negative perpetrator disposition in prior research procedures may have created a bias in previous experimental research. Informal consideration of several popular shows on both network and cable television (e.g., *24*, *The Sopranos*, *The Shield*, *NYPD Blue*, etc.) suggests that violent portrayals by liked characters with socially unacceptable motives may not be so uncommon. Moreover, liked characters in such programming may frequently engage in violent reprisal that extends beyond a level that would be considered normative under the circumstances. The potential effect of portrayals in which over-retributive violence is paired with characters displaying aberrant combinations of disposition and motive (e.g., good characters engaging in violence for bad reasons) should not be overlooked. To the extent that these portrayals occur in television content, past understandings of ''justified'' violence may be incomplete.

Yet the presence of these violent portrayals—both in terms of mixed disposition and motive, and in terms of patterns of over retribution—remains largely unexamined.

Toward this end, an investigation was conducted into the content of professional wrestling, a program type thought to be rife with these portrayals. Although this does not represent all media violence, empirical evidence that these portrayals exist in wrestling would be important for two reasons: First, it would give preliminary evidence that these portrayals exist in at least one genre. Second, if these portrayals exist in wrestling and perhaps in other genres, it suggests that past research explicating the effects of ''justified'' violence should be reexamined.

Based on belief that media representations of perpetrator motives and dispositional attributes hold the potential to moderate viewer perceptions of excessive violent reprisal, the following research questions are posed:

RQ$_1$: How often do violent interactions take place in professional wrestling telecasts?

RQ$_2$: How often do these violent interactions show sequential patterns of retributive violence that are strictly equivalent, over retributive, or under retributive relative to the events that precipitate them?

RQ$_3$: To what extent are normatively sanctioned and unsanctioned motives for violence associated with acts of equivalent retribution, over retribution, or under retribution?

RQ$_4$: To what extent are positive and negative dispositions toward perpetrators associated with normatively sanctioned and unsanctioned motives for violence within acts of equivalent retribution, over retribution, or under retribution?

Methods

Violent interactions were coded using an adaptation of a scheme first developed by the NTVS (Wilson et al., 1997) and later modified by Tamborini et al. (2005). The scheme was applied to a sample of professional wrestling televised in prime-time. Following the NTVS protocol, the frequency of violent interactions was coded. For each of these violent interactions, the modified protocol from Tamborini et al. (2005) was used to classify perpetrator dispositions as ''faces'' (good guys) and ''heels'' (bad guys). Following this, the modified scheme was adapted to code sanctioned reasons for violent reprisal. Finally, a new category called level of reciprocity was added to assess the extent to which reprisal was equivalent to precipitating events.

Sample

This study reports additional analyses on a sample used previously in a study by Tamborini et al. (2005). Wrestling content was drawn from 10 weeks of prime-time programs taking place during the fall of 2002. Each week, a total of 4 hours of

new wrestling programs appeared on television. This included *WWE Raw* (Monday nights from 9 to 11) and *WWE SmackDown* (Thursday nights from 8 to 10). From this group of taped programming, 40 hours were available for analysis. Two episodes were omitted due to technical problems with the recording, bringing the final sample to 36 hours of programming. A sample totaling 36 hours provided enough content to produce a stable distribution of violent interactions and relevant contextual features, and the use of such an intact time period is a fairly common technique in content analytic research (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 1998). Following the collection of wrestling programs on VHS tape, they were transferred into a DVD-R electronic file format and restored on writable compact disk. This procedure was intended to reduce the incidence of coder error and to avoid problems with intercoder reliability by establishing precise time codes.

Units of Analysis

The NTVS focused on physical violence, defining violence as program material that shows the actual use of physical force intended to harm an animate being or group of beings, a credible threat of such force, or the harmful consequences of its use (Smith et al., 1998). The current study began with this definition and extended it to include verbal aggression that was unrelated to physical harm, but had the capacity to inflict emotional, psychological, or professional harm on another character. Consistent with the coding scheme developed by Chory and Tamborini (2004), these verbal aggression forms included: swearing, rejection, dislike, sarcasm, competence attacks, character attacks, physical appearance attacks, threats, maledictions, demands, and mocking. Although not part of the NTVS, verbal aggression is an important part of content analysis on television violence (Greenberg, 1980). Furthermore, past research has indicated an important link between verbal aggression and subsequent aggressive responses by reviewers (Anderson, Carnagey, & Eubanks, 2003; Chory & Tamborini, 2004).

Violence was measured at the level of individual interaction using protocols from the NTVS. A violent interaction was defined as an exchange between two characters (verbal or non-verbal) that occurs when a unique perpetrator (P) engages in a particular type of act (A) against a unique target (T). Any time the perpetrator, act type, or target changed, a new interaction was created. Contextual variables were coded separately for each new interaction (PAT). Prior to coding the contextual variables, all 36 hours of programming were first coded to establish the beginning and end point of each PAT using the time codes stored on DVD-ROM. Contextual variables were then assessed at this level.

Sanctioned Reasons for Violent Reprisal

Coding sanction occurred in two steps. First, each PAT was classified according to a modified scheme which included nine potential motives. These included eight reasons for violence based on the NTVS coding scheme and one added by Tamborini

et al. (2005) labeled ''mandated.'' Then, after this initial coding was completed, the nine reasons were collapsed into three categories labeled sanctioned, unsanctioned, and neutral.

The nine motives contained six of seven original NTVS categories including: protection of life, anger, retaliation, personal gain, accident, and other/unknown. NTVS protocol was used to define these categories. The seventh category, mental instability, was defined by NTVS as a combination of mental incompetence and amusement. Since these two dimensions appeared distinct in terms of sanction, mental instability was divided to create our seventh and eighth categories. Violence committed by individuals with a clearly portrayed mental illness was coded as mental incompetence. Violence committed for the sole purpose of enjoying the suffering of the victim was coded as amusement.

The ninth category, mandated, was defined as an act of violence committed within normative parameters authorized and directed by a set of rules or governing body (e.g., authorized violence in a wrestling match performed with the intention of contributing to victory). Tamborini et al. (2005) contended that the addition of mandated to the NTVS coding scheme is called for by the unique motives that bring about violence in sports. Many violent interactions in wrestling and other sport are required or expected as part of competition. Tamborini et al. argued that violence motivated or expected by rule is theoretically distinct from personal gain in the NTVS scheme. Although the violence here is designed to gain advantage over an opponent, equating sanctioned violence in sport with forms of behavior typically classified as personal gain by the NTVS (e.g., thieves stealing from banks or addicts stealing from drug dealers) lacks face validity. With this in mind, violent acts compelled by rule as part of ''sport'' (in this case wrestling) were included as the category labeled mandated.

The nine motives were grouped according to three categories of sanction for violence labeled sanctioned, unsanctioned, and neutral. Sanctioned motives included protection of life, retaliation, and mandated (following the protocol of Tamborini et al., 2005). Unsanctioned motives included anger, personal gain, and amusement. Neutral motives included mental instability, accident, and other/unknown.

Perpetrator Disposition

For each violent exchange, the perpetrator of the act of violence was coded in terms of whether they were liked, disliked, or neutral. Although the NTVS scheme was used as the foundation for coding other categories, the approach to coding this character feature was different. The NTVS definition of good and bad characters relies on situational motives in order to identify the dispositional roles of the characters within the narrative. Separation of the confounding between motive and disposition created by the NTVS approach is one of the goals of this study. Towards this end, perpetrators were coded as a ''face,'' a ''heel,'' or ''uncertain'' based on evidence in the ongoing storyline. The evidence used was initial crowd reactions. Following the protocol of Tamborini et al. (2005), characters met with cheers were coded as

faces, those met with boos were coded as heels, and those met with neither were coded as uncertain.

Level of Reciprocity

Violent reprisal was coded as equal-retribution, over-retribution or under-retribution. Equal retribution was represented by the case in which the inherent qualities of violent reprisal constituted a literal reciprocity or were strictly equal to the provoking act. Over-retribution was characterized by situations in which the inherent qualities of the reprisal exceeded this level, whereas under-retribution was characterized by situations which failed to reach this level. This was operationally defined as cases in which an act of reprisal is the same apparent act as the one precipitating it, a greater apparent act, or a lesser apparent act. For example, a case where the initiator punches a target twice and the target punches the initiator back twice would be considered equivalent retribution. If the original target punched back three times, this would be considered over-retribution. If the original target returned one punch, this would be considered under-retribution.

Training and Reliability

Four graduate research assistants comprised the two sets of coders in the study. Prior to coding, the assistants underwent intensive training to coding procedures using wrestling programs not contained in the final sample. Coders were trained until reaching at least a .70 level of agreement on all variables. The first coder pair viewed all program materials to establish the beginning and end point of each PAT line (an interaction containing a unique perpetrator, act, and target). To unitize PAT lines, scenes were identified, and the number of matching time codes per scene across 4 hours of content was used to determine reliability. The alpha for reliability on PAT lines was .82. The second coder pair then coded each established PAT line for all contextual variables of interest. Scott's Pi (Krippendorf, 1980) was then used to estimate the reliability of the categorical context variables. Scott's Pi for level of reciprocity (under-retribution, equal retribution, and over-retribution) was found to be .84. For the nine motives for violent reprisal, Scott's Pi was found to be .87, while reliability for disposition towards perpetrator (face, heel, or uncertain) was .79.

Results

Amount of Violence

Research Question 1 asked simply how often violent interactions take place in professional wrestling. In order to assess this figure, the total number of violent

interactions found across the 36 hours of wrestling content (1136) was divided by 36. This produced an average of about 31.50 violent interactions per hour. When adjusting for time devoted to advertising (approximately 22 minutes per hour), this figure becomes even more striking, with violent interactions occurring at a rate of 49.82 per hour.[1]

Since it is reasonable to expect that much of the violence in professional wrestling is mandated by the rules that govern its competition, the frequency of violent interactions was looked at separately in terms of acts that were mandated by the event and those occurring outside of the mandate. Of the 1136 violent interactions, 303 were coded as mandated, leaving 833 violent interactions that were unassociated with wrestling competition. Divided by 36 hours, this leaves about 21.14 per hour. Once again, adjusting for advertising time, this averages out to 36.53 non-mandated violent interactions per hour.

Level of Retribution

Research Question 2 asked how often the violent interactions that took place were strictly equivalent, over-retributive, or under-retributive in comparison to the events that precipitated them. Just by looking at the frequencies of ''over-equivalence'' within the scenes (95.0%; $n = 1136$) compared with ''strict equivalence'' (1.7%; $n = 1136$) or ''under equivalence'' (3.3%; $n = 1136$), the conclusion seems to be clear: most violent interactions observed in the current sample were over retributive relative to precipitating events.

This notion was tested with a one-sided sign of difference test (trend test) (Moore & Wallis, 1943). An exact p value was first calculated for each scene. Parametric approximated p values were also calculated, assuming that the test value (i.e., the frequency of ''over-equivalence'' within a scene) follows asymptotically a normal distribution if scenes are long enough ($n > 12$ sequences; see Moore & Wallis, 1943). To aggregate the test results at the program level, which covers all scenes and sequences, a procedure known under the label ''agglutination tests'' (e.g., Edgington, 1972) was used. The rationale behind this procedure is that under H_0 condition the sum of k normal distributed test values with a standard deviation of SQRT(k) is again normally distributed. Both the nonparametric procedure ($U = 23.4$; $p < 0.01$) and the parametric procedure ($U = 42.3$; $p < 0.01$) indicated a significant result with test values far beyond a critical test value of 2.32 (one sided test, $\alpha = 0.01$). Given the initially shown distribution of ''equivalence'' this result is not surprising. It is worth noting that the invariance found in the distribution of equivalence here precludes the use of more sophisticated statistical procedures which are designed to analyze data on multiple levels (e.g., hierarchical linear models).

When looking only at non-mandated violence, the percentage of over-retributive acts increases further. About 97% of all non-mandated acts were over-retributive. These initial findings seem to suggest that the form and style of professional wrestling lends itself toward a series of interactions in which violence is immediately followed

by an over-retributive act in an upward escalation of violent behavior. Overwhelmingly, most violent interactions were over-retributive relative to precipitating events.

Motivation for Violence

Research Question 3 asked how often sanctioned and unsanctioned motives for violence are associated with acts of equivalent retribution, over retribution, or under retribution. Since findings for individual motives are predominantly redundant with the three higher-order categories, only the results for the violence-sanction categories are reported here. A significant χ^2 (4, $N = 1136$) $= 52.09$, $p < .001$, $\phi = .21$, revealed a pattern in which the majority of violent acts committed with unsanctioned motives were excessive in their level of reprisal, as did the majority of sanctioned acts (see Table 1). More than 98% of all unsanctioned violence was over-retributive in nature. Although perhaps not unexpected, it is worthy of further note that 88% of all sanctioned violence was also over-retributive. The same patterns appear in separate analyses looking only at non-mandated violent interactions. Even when violence is presented as occurring for a socially normative reason, it is excessive in its level of reprisal more often than not, offering examples of aggressive retaliation that go beyond strict equivalence in nature.

Perpetrator Disposition

The fourth research question was designed to address the relationship between dispositions toward perpetrators, motivations for reprisal, and the equivalence of the aggressive acts committed. Faces and heels were compared across motivations and levels of retribution. In all but one case, the findings for individual motives do not vary from those for the higher order categories within which they fall. Thus, only the results collapsed across the three categories of violence sanction are reported.

Table 1
Sanctioned Motives and Equivalence of Violence

	Sanction of Violence				
	Sanctioned	Unsanctioned	Neutral	Total	Equivalence
Strictly equivalent	13 (4%)	6 (1%)	0 (0%)	19	(1.7%)
Under retribution	30 (8%)	6 (1%)	2 (1%)	38	(3.3%)
Over retribution	325 (88%)	626 (98%)	128 (99%)	1079	(95%)
Total	368 (100%)	638 (100%)	130 (100%)	1136	(100%)

Note: Scores represent frequency of violent-reprisal acts with column percentages in parentheses.

Perpetrator Disposition and Motive Sanction. In total, 137 of the violent inter-actions observed were committed by faces, 168 by heels, and 831 by characters toward whom a long standing disposition could not be determined. For heels, more violence was unsanctioned (46%) than sanctioned (33%), whereas faces were about as likely to commit sanctioned (48%) or unsanctioned (42%), and uncertains were more likely to commit unsanctioned (60%) than sanctioned (30%) violence, χ^2 (4, $N = 1136$) = 39.05, $p < .001$, $\phi = .19$ (see Table 2). All this suggests that violent reprisal by faces and heels is predominantly over-retributive, and of these over-retributive acts, many are sanctioned. However, for uncertains, although most violent reprisal is also over-retributive, most of these acts are unsanctioned.

Interesting patterns also emerged in separate analyses looking at disposition and sanction within the over-retribution sample. A significant χ^2 (4, $N = 1079$) = 43.48, $p < .001$, $\phi = .20$, revealed a pattern in which a disproportionate number of unsanctioned acts were committed by perpetrators with uncertain dispositional attributes. Of the acts perpetrated by uncertain characters, 27% were sanctioned, 62% were unsanctioned, and 10% were neutral. The finding appears even stronger when examining only non-mandated acts, where only 4% were sanctioned, whereas 83% were unsanctioned, and 13% were neutral, χ^2 (4, $N = 803$) = 65.56, $p < .001$, $\phi = .29$.

Perpetrator Disposition and Retribution Level. Evaluating the level of violence associated with dispositions held toward perpetrators is also helpful in addressing Research Question 4. In total, 91% of acts committed by faces, 96% of those committed by heels, and 96% of those committed by uncertain characters are over-retributive. Notably, this indicates that a substantial number of liked characters engage in violent behavior that is excessive in comparison to the events precipitating them. Separate analyses looking only at non-mandated aggression show that 91% of the acts committed by faces, 98% of those committed by heels, and 99% of those committed by uncertain characters are over-retributive, χ^2 (4, $N = 638$) = 17.73,

Table 2
Sanctioned Motives and Perpetrator Disposition

| | Disposition | | | |
Sanction of Violence	Face	Heel	Uncertain	Total
Sanctioned	67 (49%)	55 (33%)	246 (30%)	368 (32%)
Unsanctioned	58 (42%)	78 (46%)	502 (60%)	638 (56%)
Neutral	12 (9%)	35 (21%)	83 (10%)	130 (12%)
Total	137 (100%)	168 (100%)	831 (100%)	1136 (100%)

Note: Scores represent frequency of violent-reprisal acts with column percentages in paren-theses.

Table 3
Perpetrator Dispositions and Equivalence of Non-mandated Violence

	Disposition			
Equivalence	Face	Heel	Uncertain	Total
Strictly equivalent	2 (4%)	0 (0%)	4 (1%)	6 (1%)
Under retribution	3 (5%)	1 (1%)	2 (1%)	6 (1%)
Over retribution	53 (91%)	77 (99%)	496 (98%)	626 (98%)
Total	58 (100%)	78 (100%)	502 (100%)	638 (100%)

Note: Scores represent frequency of violent-reprisal acts with column percentages in parentheses.

$p < .001$, $\phi = .17$ (see Table 3). As a result, it can be stated that regardless of the context of aggression, faces and heels are equally likely to commit over-retributive violence, and both are highly likely to do so.

Discussion

This study began with two principal goals: first, to examine the frequency of violent reprisal in televised professional wrestling, and second, to examine how wrestling combines context features associated with disposition, motivation, and level of violent reprisal. The findings raise concerns about whether or not the frequency and nature of the violence portrayed in wrestling might facilitate perceptions of reprisal as justified. They also bring to mind questions about how frequently other program genres portray violent behavior with unsanctioned motives, positive perpetrator dispositions, and over-retributive reprisal. Finally, they point to the importance of testing the mechanisms through which the features of wrestling violence might facilitate aggressive tendencies.

Not surprisingly, the findings show that televised professional wrestling is overflowing with violence. Across a typical 2-hour wrestling broadcast, viewers will see an average of 32 separate aggressive interactions, many containing multiple violent acts. More central to the scope of the current study, the bulk of violent interactions observed in professional wrestling are over-retributive in nature. On first glance, over-retributive acts should be seen as unjust and, according to some claims (Berkowitz, 1962; Geen, 1981), limited in their ability to facilitate aggressive responses in viewers. However, when considering the contextual features of disposition and motive, the violence in professional wrestling presents potentially problematic behavioral models.

A close examination of the attributes commonly associated with violent protagonists in wrestling reveals two critical features that might moderate the influence of

exposure on aggressive audience responses. The first is the frequency of over retribution found among liked characters. The fact that 91% of all violent interactions by faces are over-retributive indicates that liked characters commonly engage in aggressive behavior considered normatively disproportionate to its prior instigation. In this sense, these acts should be seen as unjustified. Perhaps more importantly, after controlling for mandated aggression, liked protagonists use over-retributive violent reprisal just as frequently when it is not part of the competition (91%) as they do when it is a sanctioned part of the match.

The second feature is the substantial number of liked characters that engage in aggressive behavior for reasons that are not generally considered socially appropriate. Within faces, 58% of all aggressive acts are committed for non-sanctioned motives. This number rises to 63% of all acts when looking only at violent interactions that take place outside the mandate. As such, liked characters are frequently seen aggressing for non-sanctioned reasons. In fact, the majority of all non-mandated violent acts are associated with non-sanctioned motives. Although these numbers are consistent across heels and uncertain characters, the real concern here is that liked characters are repeatedly seen engaging in aggressive behavior that would normally be considered unjust.[2]

Although the frequency of liked characters performing unjustified violent acts is cause for concern in itself, the sequential nature of over-retributive violence in wrestling seems cause for even greater alarm. Since most reprisal acts across the sample as a whole (roughly 95%) were over-retributive in nature, characters appear to engage in sequences of aggressive acts that become more and more excessive. One act of over-retribution follows another in a ''spiral of violence'' that leads to increasingly fierce reprisals that are both excessive in nature and often motivated by unsanctioned cause.

By confounding dispositional and motivational concerns, previous experimental research on justified violence leaves open the possibility that, under certain conditions, exposure to unjustified violence might facilitate subsequent aggression. The prospect that viewing unjustified violence perpetrated by liked characters can increase aggressive response seems in direct contrast to prior claims found in research on justified media violence. Yet if this is true, it is conceivable that the abundance of unjustified acts committed by a liked protagonist in wrestling might facilitate aggressive behavior. For example, although it is logical to hold that aggression increases because showing violence as justified disinhibits aggressive constraint, it is also plausible that constraint is disinhibited because liked protagonists are shown acting aggressively. This is an important empirical question that should be addressed by experimental research examining the independent and combined influences of disposition, retribution level, and motive for violence.

In addition to considering the aberrant combinations of disposition and motive found in wrestling, the current study builds on and extends research examining the context of media violence by examining sequential features of reprisal found in violent exchanges. The NTVS (Wilson et al., 1997) broke new ground in its analysis of violent media by focusing on a number of theoretically important con-

textual variables. The approach was designed to build on the static plan used by NTVS in order to examine sequential patterns of reprisal equity and their groupings with dispositional attributes of perpetrators. Though such patterns may be more easily seen in wrestling than other violent media, identifying patterns of escalating violence adds an important context feature to the study of violent narratives that has until now been generally overlooked. It is believed that this feature may be present in other forms of violent narrative, and that future research should examine other narrative forms to see if and where patterns of escalating over-retribution can be found. Recurring models of escalating violence found in programs heavily viewed by adolescent audiences are likely to be of concern to many scholars and parents alike.

Limitations

The current study is not without limitations. First, the sample was drawn from 10 weeks of prime-time cable programs during the fall of 2002. Although this type of sample is widespread in content analytic research (Riffe et al., 1998), it represents a small sample from a past season of prime-time wrestling content. Though there is little intuitive reason to believe that the pattern of over-retribution in professional wrestling has changed since these programs were originally broadcast, this is nonetheless an empirical question and one that mandates the replication of the study. Notably, these programs are still seen in syndication. In fact, WWE recently launched a premium digital cable network devoted almost entirely to syndicated wrestling content (WWE 24/7), some of it dating back years (World Wrestling Entertainment, 2008a). As WWE broadcasts over 7,500 hours of syndicated programming to 130 countries in 23 languages each year (World Wrestling Entertainment, Inc., 2008b), the program life of a series such as *RAW* or *Smackdown* continues to extend itself.

A second limitation might be seen in the study's operational definition of violence, which may have served to underestimate the frequency of violence in professional wrestling. Although this study's definition of violent interactions includes verbal aggression (and is perhaps less conservative than the NTVS definition), identifying the fundamental unit of analysis as the violent interaction (rather than individual acts themselves) promotes lower estimates of wrestling violence than would coding individual violent acts. Associated with this, the use of blind coders to identify faces, heels, or uncertain characters might have minimized the number of acts associated with identifiable dispositional features. The large number of characters coded as uncertain suggests that this approach to coding disposition might have limited the ability of coders to identify faces and heels. Over 70% of the interactions in this study were attributed to uncertain perpetrators. Though this number might seem surprisingly large, the less-notable or new characters regularly introduced in wrestling likely create conditions where many characters lack identifiable dispositions. Perhaps the persistent use of verbal attacks such as swearing and mocking

others is routine for new characters developing identities as a face or heel. If so, this might account for the large percent of violence perpetrated by characters with uncertain dispositions. Of course, regular viewing of this content and familiarity with the narrative may make one more likely to recognize characters and assign dispositions.

Another limitation of this research concerns the extent to which wrestling violence generalizes to other forms of violent media. Is wrestling violence formed and perceived more as fantasy than other violent media such as courtroom or crime dramas? Issues concerning the manner in which viewers respond to and process "fantasy" violence found in media have been a scholarly concern for over 50 years. Generalizing from genre to genre or from "fictional" media to real life is difficult at best. Concerns over the extent to which wrestling violence differs from violence in other genres are similar to concerns over whether violent crime drama differs from violence seen in docudrama, or reality programming, or news reports, or that witnessed in real life.

Additional research is needed to determine if exposure to wrestling violence is perceived differently than other forms of mediated violence, if these differences fluctuate with repeat exposure, and if this affects corresponding attitudinal and behavioral outcomes. This research would contribute to larger issues concerning the extent to which television and real world violence are perceived differently. Of course, separate from this comparison, researchers should not overlook the importance of exposure to fantasy violence, which continues to draw the attention of scholars concerned with violence in new forms of media such as video games (Anderson & Bushman, 2001; Anderson & Dill, 2000; Farrar, Krcmar & Nowak, 2006; Sherry, 2007), where (like wrestling) characters are fictional, cartoonish, and found in fantastic settings far removed real life.

Conclusion

Despite its limitations, this inquiry into disposition, motive, and retribution level is consistent with the researchers' initial suspicions. The content of televised professional wrestling is replete with previously unexplored dispositional confounds. Notably, though not the main focus of this study, the confounds observed here are thought capable of moderating the effect of exposure to justified violence, and their observation raises questions about the potential influence of their exposure. How are viewers affected by the frequent portrayal of over-retribution or by exposure to liked characters aggressing for bad reasons? Does it influence perceptions about the normality of over-retribution, about how often "good guys" and "good people" aggress for bad reasons in media and real life, about the justification of these acts, or the general acceptance of violent retribution? This study begins to explore content issues related to the level of retribution and motives for violent media, and suggests the need for further behavioral research addressing these questions.

Before exploring these questions, it would be valuable to examine how frequently the dispositional confounds observed in wrestling appear in other media. Preliminary evidence suggests that they may not be so rare, as the NTVS (Wilson et al. 1997) indicated that a substantial share (24%) of violent interactions in mainstream television was carried out by good characters. Though they did not report the percent of these acts performed for bad reasons, the fact that well over 50% of all violent acts were motivated by personal gain or anger suggests that unjustified violence by liked characters might not be unusual. Informal examination of popular shows such as *The Shield*, *24*, and *Walker Texas Ranger* suggests they repeatedly portray law enforcement agents held in high regard performing acts violating the ideals of justice and equity.

A final unexplored area made salient by this study deals with the appeal of over- retribution in violent media. Is wrestling's ritual of ever increasing violence an indication of over-retribution's appeal? Zillmann and Bryant (1975) show that equitable retribution is enjoyed more than both over- and under-retribution (except in very young children unable to understand moral issues related to equity). Nevertheless, the belief that some viewers might prefer severe punishment is intuitively appealing. Zillmann (2000) proffers that different "morality subcultures" vary in their principled appraisal of both criminal behavior and the punitive practices found in penal systems. Zillmann's position is consistent with the notions of Raney (2002, 2005), and Raney and Bryant (2002), who argue that traits of "vigilantism" (i.e., favorable attitudes toward retribution) and "punitive punishment" (i.e., like for harsh punishment) predict appraisals of how much punishment fictional transgressors deserve and audience enjoyment of crime drama.

Applied to this research, it might be posited that the escalating retribution found in professional wrestling appeals to viewer subgroups whose attitudes on retribution differ from the public at large. Exploring the link between morality subcultures and exposure to professional wrestling can help one understand the genre's appeal and inform one's attempts to predict exposure outcomes. Moreover, to the extent that over-retribution and the dispositional confounds found in wrestling are similar to those in other violent genres, one can learn how these context factors shape exposure to violent genres with broader appeal.

Notes

[1] The results reported in this study are based on analyses from a data set used by Tamborini et al. (2005). The current study followed earlier protocol to measure at the level of individual interactions, identified as a PAT line. However, the current study differs in two major ways. First, because the purpose of the 2005 study was to compare TV wrestling with data on other TV genres from previous NTVS research, the 2005 study included only physical aggression in analyses. The current study did not attempt to replicate earlier research, and endeavored to consider aggression more broadly. Toward this end, both physical aggression and verbal aggression were coded and included in the current analyses. The inclusion of verbal aggression in the present study (56% of the interactions reported) accounts for the fact that there is a higher number of violent interactions reported than in Tamborini et al. Second, because the current

study focused on the equity of violent reprisal, it used a different coding scheme than the 2005 study. Distinct from the larger and unsystematic categories used in previous research, the present study coded data into three new categories labeled sanctioned, unsanctioned, and neutral.

[2]It should be noted here that the authors define justified violence differently than Tamborini et al. (2005) in their initial examination of these data. Tamborini et al. used only motivational criteria to define justification. Due to the large quantity of mandated violence associated with the ''sport'' of wrestling, they identified 69% of the observed violent interactions as justified. Given the added stringency of considering equivalence, the figures reported here identify most violence in professional wrestling as unjustified.

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