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Danielle Johannesen
University of Minnesota Crookston

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Mick Foley's "Mankind" and the Performance of Mental Illness in Professional Wrestling

Introduction

Professional wrestling thrives on paradoxical representations of reality. The basic narrative of professional wrestling, the scripted brawl, is itself a paradox. Professional wrestling is real in that wrestling requires intense physical demands, often resulting in long-term injuries and health problems for wrestlers. Real people choose professional wrestling as a career path; wrestling is a type of physical labor. However, this intense, often debilitating physical labor occurs in a theatrical space. Wrestling consumers demand drama, storytelling, and memorable wrestling characters who cycle between roles as heroes, called *babyfaces*, and villains, called *heels*. Indeed, describing professional wrestling requires specialized terminology. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "kayfabe": "In professional wrestling: the fact or convention of presenting staged events, performances, and competitors' rivalries as if they were authentic or spontaneous." Wrestler Terrance Greip describes kayfabe as "a simple synonym for the willing suspension of disbelief. . . Ultimately, what kayfabe is from a wrestler's perspective is selling your finish; it is making the end of your match seem believable, and everything you do contributes to that effort. So, as a wrestler, you present your gimmick when people are around" (Reinhard et al. 146). Audiences—largely aware of the staged aspect of professional wrestling—delight at the unusual mix of physical spectacle enacted by participants in a dramatic production. The question of "what is real?" is constantly present. Even in tragic moments such as Owen Hart's in-ring death in 1999, wrestling audiences find themselves constantly questioning what is real and what is part of the show.

Perceptions of reality also shape human mental health. Outside the ring, many professional wrestlers have struggled and died due to serious mental health and substance abuse issues. Perhaps the most tragic example is the murder-suicide event perpetuated by Chris Benoit in 2007, in which Benoit murdered his wife and son before taking his own life. Iconic wrestlers including The Rock, Hulk Hogan, and others have revealed struggles with depression (Mitchell; Phelan). In individuals afflicted with mental illness, perceptions of reality are often distorted in ways that manifest unusual behaviors and/or difficulties for the individual. Joseph Fargiorgio interviewed former professional wrestlers for a major research study on wrestling and wellness. Fargiorgio explains,

According to a few of the participants, overwhelming amounts of stress in their lives may be the real cause of early death for some wrestlers. Sam, who both wrestles and promotes his own wrestling company, explains that wrestlers balance a variety of types of stress in their lives, including the stress they place on their bodies, the stress of constant travel, and the stress of trying to balance their personal and family lives. (124)

The stresses associated with the work environment, intense physical demands, financial pressures, fame, and general lifestyle associated with professional wrestling can contribute to mental illness among wrestlers.

Many wrestling gimmicks are patterned on the "madman" or "monster" figure—a violent, sometimes barbarous killer who exists outside the bounds of civilized society. Like other wrestling gimmicks, these "crazed" characters draw on stereotypes and exaggerations linked to mental illness. The American Psychiatric Association (APA) explains that stereotypes are part of broader mental illness stigmas, which also include discrimination and prejudice ("Stigma, Prejudice, and Discrimination"). These stigmas are "universal," affecting every part of the world;

stigmas have negative effects on the mentally ill (“Stigma, Prejudice, and Discrimination”). For example, seeing “crazed” professional wrestlers engaging in and celebrating violence suggests a link between mental illness and violent behavior, which can subsequently influence how the mentally ill are perceived in everyday life. Visions of mentally ill individuals as violent and dangerous is a common misperception consistently perpetuated by media, including professional wrestling.

A comprehensive survey of performances of mental health in professional wrestling is beyond the scope of this article. However, one wrestling gimmick emerges as an especially fascinating case study. On April 1 1996, Mick Foley’s wrestling gimmick Mankind made its television debut in World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE)¹. Early in the five-minute match, ringside commentator and WWE czar Vince McMahon describes the Mankind character as “the most deranged individual” in the history of the WWE. Throughout the match, McMahon and partner Jerry “The King” Lawler use the term “deranged” to describe the Mankind character, with the commentary functioning as characterization and storytelling aimed at portraying the character as an insane, deformed, unpredictable wrestler bent on destruction and chaos.

The Mankind costume evokes other “deranged” figures from popular culture. His tattered, brown tunic features a mysterious symbol. Like Hannibal Lecter, Leatherface, and other murderous villains from film, the Mankind character wears a mask. During the match, viewers observe the Mankind character pull out his own hair, talk to himself, and mumble incoherently. While the gimmick would evolve over time, oscillating between hero (babyface) and villain (heel), Foley and the Mankind character ascended to legendary status in the world of professional wrestling. In the discussion that follows, I summarize the origins of the Mankind gimmick and its status as an extension of the real Mick Foley. I analyze how the Mankind gimmick engages aspects of mental illness. Further, I trace how wrestling fans and audiences responded to the gimmick. Finally, I reflect on the implications of Mankind and professional wrestling for broader discussions of mental illness.

The Origins of Mankind

Professional wrestler Mick Foley gained fame in Extreme Championship Wrestling (ECW) as Cactus Jack, a maniacal brawler billed from Truth or Consequences, New Mexico who toted a baseball bat wrapped in barbed wire. “The Debut of Mankind” podcast episode summarizes how the character originated. In 1996, World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) expressed interest in Foley as a foe for the Undertaker² (Mark Calaway). However, McMahon felt that Foley needed a new gimmick. In his memoirs and podcast, “Foley is POD,” Foley has documented these early conversations with McMahon about the character. McMahon envisioned Foley as a masked, mentally unstable character who came from an asylum. Because Foley lost part of an ear in a wrestling accident, McMahon felt that the mentally unstable gimmick would allow Foley to highlight the mangled ear. Foley notes that the name “Headcase” was initially floated by McMahon as a name for the character. The *Oxford English Dictionary* identifies “headcase” as a slang term meaning “a person whose behavior is violent and unpredictable, or markedly eccentric . . . such a person characterized as mentally ill or unstable.” Wanting to remain Cactus Jack, Foley was initially opposed to McMahon’s ideas. Following negotiations with McMahon and encouragement from his wife, Collette, Foley came to embrace the Mankind persona (“The Debut of Mankind”).

The Mankind gimmick fit the *OED* definition of “headcase.” Foley crafted much of the gimmick himself, suggesting the name “Mankind” to McMahon as an alternative to “Mason the

Mutilator” (“The Debut of Mankind”). Foley invents an origin story for Mankind, envisioning the character as a disturbed pianist who damaged his fingers after striking himself with a hammer (*Have a Nice Day* 527). This origin story helped provide context for the Mankind character’s signature wrestling move, the Mandible Claw. Foley suggested different entrance and exit music for Mankind, requesting “gentle” piano music for the exit, as he wanted to evoke the “peace of mind” he imagined Hannibal Lecter felt in the *Silence of the Lambs* after killing several humans (“The Debut of Mankind”; Nicks 47).

The Mankind gimmick was shaped by elements of the Cactus Jack character, inspiration from popular culture, and Foley’s imagination. In Mankind, Foley retained the long, greasy hair from the Cactus Jack gimmick. Foley’s Cactus Jack gimmick also exhibited some mental instability; for example, an ECE Cactus Jack promo features Foley’s Cactus Jack describing himself as “demented” (“Cactus Jack Promo”). Foley explains in both his memoir, *Have a Nice Day: A Tale of Blood and Sweatsocks* (1999) and in his “Foley is POD” podcast that Mary Shelley’s novel *Frankenstein* (1818) and the music of Tori Amos influenced his vision for the Mankind character. The WWE creative team insisted that Mankind wear an entirely brown costume (*Have a Nice Day* 508-9). McMahon’s initial vision for the character included a metal mask, which Foley rejected (“The Debut of Mankind”). The creative team then crafted a custom mask that encircled Foley’s face in studded brown leather straps. Foley appreciated that the custom mask catered to showing his facial expressions (“The Debut of Mankind”). However, Foley has consistently stated that he “hated” that the leather mask was uncomfortable and inhibited his breathing. Foley suggested a symbol for the back of Mankind’s brown tunic. Foley combined a Celtic cross with an “X,” explaining that he thought it looked “mysterious” and “a little bit foreboding” (“The Debut of Mankind”). The Mankind character combined McMahon’s generic vision of a “headcase” with Foley’s more thoughtful vision of a tormented, complex character.

Foley’s promos reveal the complexities of Mankind’s psychological states. In wrestling parlance, a “promo” is a “promotional interview,” or “dialogue or monologue meant to advance a storyline” (“Promo”). In backstage interviews and promos, the Mankind character is shown dwelling in boiler rooms, shrouded in shadows. These promos included confessional types of content where Foley would reveal details about the character’s backstory and sources of trauma. Foley delivered these promos in a tormented voice, seemingly fighting back tears. Many of the promos include Foley reflecting on Mankind’s physical disfigurements, including the disfigured ear and fingers. Even today, these promos remain dramatic and compelling. The character resembles the mad, tortured artist, with the Mankind character acting out the torturous reality of no longer being able to play music with his mangled fingers. Foley ends most promos with Mankind’s signature “have a nice day” message. Foley endears Mankind to audiences while adding interest to the character: Foley’s Mankind is both kind and deranged.

The promos combine eerie imagery and content with ruminations on serious themes. As Mankind, Foley makes philosophical statements, such as “destruction can be beautiful.” Also, the promos consistently use “Mankind” in reference not only to the gimmick, but also to humanity in general. As such, many of Foley’s statements as Mankind suggest that the character is a metaphor for the human condition. Foley explains that his idea to name the character “Mankind” was influenced by the idea that the name could also stand for humanity in general (*Have a Nice Day* 504). In a promo recorded prior to the Mankind character’s television debut in WWE, Foley appears as the character in a dark, underground lair holding a rat and blaming God for Mankind’s abnormalities (“Mankind with a Rat”). This promo literally traces the origins of

Mankind to a fictional “eighth day” of creation. According to Foley’s narrative in the promo, “on the Eighth Day, God created Mankind.” In both McMahon’s original vision and in Foley’s transformation into the gimmick, the underlying traits of madness and mental instability define the character. Implicitly, the character name suggests that madness and psychological challenges are part of the human condition.

Foley rose to fame in the WWE during the “Attitude Era” of the late 1990s. During this era in wrestling, the central question of “what is reality?” loomed large. As Nicks explains, “As the Attitude Era continued, this would continue to become one of the biggest shifts in storytelling within the industry where the lines between scripted and unscripted would constantly be pushed to their breaking point” (48). Nicks writes that Foley’s promos of the era, during which Foley provided context for Mankind’s mental and emotional struggles, served as “a historic moment for the WWF to acknowledge wrestlers were more than just the characters they played on TV” (48). Some of the most powerful Mankind promos are inspired by events from Foley’s own life and experiences as a professional wrestler. Foley explains that on the eve of his television debut for WWE, he decided that Mankind would pull out his hair, explaining that the idea stemmed from Foley’s own observations of people with “emotional difficulties” (“The Debut of Mankind”). According to Foley, Mankind’s behavior exhibited an individual who was “suffering big time on an emotional level” (“The Debut of Mankind”).

An in-ring promo from 1997 features Foley’s Mankind alongside William Alvin Moody’s character, Paul Bearer. The Paul Bearer character performed as the Undertaker’s longtime manager. During the promo, Foley reveals that Mankind has a wife and children (“Greatest WWE Promo”). The Mankind character explains that he cannot keep his daughter safe due to his wrestling travel schedule (“Greatest WWE Promo”). This promo fuses elements of Foley’s own life, including his family and wrestling schedule, with the traumatized Mankind character. As Mankind, Foley asks, “do you know what it feels like to walk inside your home, and your wife says ‘what is burning?’ and it’s me!” (“Greatest WWE Promo”). This graphic vignette is based on Foley’s experience returning home from a match in Germany with burns on his legs. In *Have a Nice Day*, Foley describes arriving home; his wife, Collette, asks about an odor, which was emanating from Foley’s burn injuries (459). These promos are considered some of the most memorable in the history of WWE. The content humanizes the Mankind character; not only does the character dwell in boiler rooms, but he also has a home and family. Foley’s performances and storytelling abilities also provide context for Mankind’s psychological symptoms. Audiences gain understanding of the events that may have contributed to the character’s psychosis.

Foley’s in-ring wrestling style increased Mankind’s popularity as a character. As Mankind, Foley practiced “hardcore” wrestling. Popularized in the United States by ECW, hardcore wrestling is a style of wrestling characterized by spectacle, shock value, integration of weapons or tools, and loose or nonexistent rule structures. Throughout his tenure as a WWE gimmick, Foley performed as Mankind in some of the most shocking matches of all time, including the infamous 1998 “Hell in a Cell” match against Calaway’s the Undertaker. During the match, Calaway throws Foley off the top of a steel cage. Later, Calaway choke slams Foley through the top of the cage. Many accounts of this match exist, as Foley sustained significant injuries. However, these types of risks and shocking stunts defined Foley’s style as a wrestler and contributed to the characterization of Mankind as a masochistic, disturbed madman who enjoyed pain and suffering.

The Mankind gimmick evolved over time. In 1998, Foley's Mankind emerged as a more affable, goofy character. Instead of the brown tunic, the transformed character wore a disheveled, collared shirt and necktie suggestive of a dysfunctional corporate employee. At times, Foley's Mankind wore sweatpants, while in other matches he retained the original brown wrestling tights. While the leather mask remained, the transformed Mankind character was more eccentric than deranged, with his sidekick companion "Mr. Socko" helping propel the character to heroism among wrestling fans. Foley remarks that this transformation of Mankind into a more relatable character enabled more powerful connections with fans ("The Debut of Mankind"). Foley further explains that he feels proud of the popularity of Mankind among fans and observes that the character "clicked" with many people ("The Debut of Mankind"). After debuting in the WWE as Mankind, Foley began appearing as two additional gimmicks: Cactus Jack and Dude Love. The "Three Faces of Foley," as these three gimmicks are known, were intertwined yet distinct from each other and from Foley himself. Foley's three gimmicks, talent for dramatic storytelling, and willingness to suffer pain and intense physical risks in the name of wrestling entertainment propelled him to stardom in the WWE.

Mankind and Mental Illness

The Mankind gimmick synthesizes generalizations and stigmas of mental health with performances of genuine mental illness symptoms. The promos contribute powerful backstory shaped by truth, fiction, and dramatization of trauma. The Mankind gimmick does engage important psychological themes. The backstory narrative contextualizes Mankind's symptoms and behaviors, inviting audiences to ponder how the character's behaviors and participation in the surreal world of professional wrestling might be understood. This raises important questions: How does Foley's performance of the character engage genuine mental health issues? Furthermore, if the performance does engage genuine mental health issues, what are the implications of those performances? Foley's shaping of the gimmick helped it transcend a cartoonish stereotype; as a performance of mental illness, the Mankind gimmick enacted by Foley does engage mental health issues in some thoughtful ways. However, the broader WWE narrative about the Mankind character, especially during its time as a heel, relies on stigmatization and stereotypical descriptions of mental illness.

The basic origins of the Mankind character draw on popular media representations of deranged villains. The character reflects stigmas associated with mental illness. For example, the Mankind character is both violent and mentally unstable. The character is also a social outcast, connecting with rats and inanimate objects while maintaining few functional relationships with humans. These traits cast the Mankind character as "Other" and suggest that he exists apart from civilized society. Beekman explains that early gimmick development in professional wrestling often relied on this Othering, with gimmicks borrowing on elements of the "freak show attraction" (75). The transformed, more eccentric character's disheveled corporate outfit combined with the leather mask mix images of the unstable employee³ and the masked madman. Individuals suffering from mental illness are often stigmatized as unemployable or difficult to work with. The relatable, more affable Mankind gimmick is almost childlike, yet continues to stun as a "hardcore" wrestler. Although the humorous aspects of this Mankind endear him to viewers, characters with comedic features can also perpetuate mental illness stereotypes. In his book *Media Madness: Public Images of Mental Illness*, Otto Wahl writes that media portrayals of mental illness often stigmatize mental illness symptoms as "comical oddities" (29). Scenes and matches featuring Mr. Socko amuse and entertain audiences, subsequently generating

affection for the gimmick. Simultaneously, the gimmick hinges on stereotyping the mentally ill as “foolish” and comical. However, just as Foley’s vision for the character was more complex than McMahon’s, the character’s engagement with mental illness transcends simplistic generalizations.

In her study of mentally ill characters in film, Jacqueline Noll Zimmerman differentiates between films that exploit mental illness and films that offer complex treatments of the subject. Indeed, film provides many helpful examples of mentally ill characters. Although professional wrestling is not film, the two genres share the elements of character and performance. Noll Zimmerman identifies three types of movies that feature mentally ill characters. Two of these types are “movies that exploit certain myths and stereotypes of the mentally ill” and “movies that exploit the subject for horror or violence” (12). Some “mentally ill” wrestling gimmicks clearly fit the two types of narratives mentioned above; wrestling gimmicks purposefully draw on myths and stereotypes, and wrestling entertainment hinges on scripted violence. These narratives, in film and in wrestling, can advance misconceptions about mental illness. Noll Zimmerman identifies a third, more complex type of mental illness narrative. These narratives “treat the subject honestly, increase the audience’s understanding of the subject, and challenge viewers’ assumptions and attitudes” (12). Foley’s performance of the Mankind gimmick aspires to these qualities.

Foley’s Mankind promos exhibit an elite male athlete sharing vulnerabilities and traumatic experiences on a grand stage. Noll Zimmerman explains that many film characters who are violent and mentally ill “are presented almost entirely in terms of their psychopathic, violent behavior; nor is there any meaningful effort to explain the nature, cause, or development of their illness” (100). The Mankind origin story combined with Foley’s Mankind promos provide context for the character’s tormented psyche. Foley’s willingness to share traumatic wrestling memories, including the anecdote about the burns he suffered in Germany, remind viewers of the physical and emotional toll professional wrestling exacts on a performer. Foley’s 1997 interview as Mankind with Jim Ross included stories about Foley’s youth, during which he ate worms and struggled to gain acceptance socially. In weaving his own memories into his performances as Mankind, Foley reveals the therapeutic dimensions of drama. Reflecting on Aristotle’s ideas about the therapeutic aspects of theater, Sally Bailey writes,

Aristotle identifies theatre as an agent of catharsis—the purging of negative emotions.

Aristotle was not referring to purging emotions of the actors, but of the audience members watching the play. However, actors, as the vehicle through which the emotions of the character are expressed, necessarily experience catharsis, too.

Foley’s powerful relationship with the audience therefore rests on his willingness to channel his own vulnerabilities through the Mankind character. The professional wrestling environment arguably offers an appropriate stage for the public sharing of traumatic experiences. Susana Pendzik describes the stage as a “sacred” space, explaining that “sacred spaces” are “special places” (25). Bailey argues that stage spaces can function as therapeutic spaces, in part because anything can happen on stage. Foley uses the professional wrestling stage—including the ring itself—to engage in activities that have therapeutic properties. The professional wrestling “stage” encourages storytelling, suspension of disbelief, and the acting out of dramatic and complex emotions. These activities have therapeutic properties (Bailey). Foley’s mastery of the professional wrestling stage and its therapeutic opportunities help propel Foley to hero status among wrestling fans.

Despite the therapeutic opportunities offered by the performative aspects of wrestling, Mankind's promos occur in a performative space where masculine heroes rarely break from what Danielle Soulliere calls the "hegemonic masculine ideal" (10). Soulliere has documented professional wrestling's engagement with hyper-masculinity and the general theme of "manhood." Indeed, elite male athletes continue to struggle against mental health stigmas linking mental illness with weakness ("Athletes and Mental Health"). Foley uses the Mankind gimmick to channel powerful revelations about his own vulnerabilities as a man who works as a professional wrestler. Foley writes, "I would tell the real-life Mick Foley stories, and I would give Mick Foley's opinions, but I would do it as Mankind. In actuality, the two weren't that different . . . I guess in that case, Mankind was the insecure side of my personality; the side that had never quite felt accepted" (*Have a Nice Day* 577). Again, Foley uses the Mankind character to channel and share intimate aspects of his own life and psyche. While Foley does not describe performing the Mankind character as therapeutic, the comments suggest that the Mankind character enabled Foley to perform and reflect on "the insecure side of his personality." Foley's wrestling talents and "hardcore" style aligned him with traditional "masculinity" in many ways, but the Mankind character's openness about psychological vulnerabilities challenged the masculine superhero image common among elite professional wrestlers.

Notably, many of the Mankind character's behaviors and statements suggest that the character is a victim of mental health stigma. The APA explains that self, public, and institutional stigmas can negatively affect individuals recovering from mental illness. According to the APA, these stigmas can lead to "reduced hope, lower self-esteem, increased psychiatric symptoms, and difficulties with social relationships." Individuals experiencing the impacts of stigmas might also isolate from society and feel misunderstood ("Stigma, Prejudice, and Discrimination"). Foley's Mankind promos exhibit these symptoms. While the promos offer complex, interesting character details, ringside commentary describing the character constantly reiterates three basic themes: ugly, deranged, unpredictable. During Foley's televised match as Mankind with Bob "Sparkplug" Holly, ringside commentator Jerry "The King" Lawler characterizes the Mankind character as ugly. As Foley's Mankind makes his way to the ring, Lawler remarks, "I heard he tried to enter an ugly contest and they said, 'sorry, no professionals'" ("Mankind's WWE Debut"). McMahon and Lawler constantly call the character deranged, deformed, and ugly, drawing attention to his face, scars, and disfigured fingers. McMahon remarks, "we've never seen anything quite like this deranged individual" ("Mankind's WWE Debut"). A narrative tension exists between the corporate rhetoric of the WWE, symbolized by the ringside commentary, and the victim of that rhetoric: Foley's Mankind. Ringside commentary consistently stigmatizes and others the Mankind character.

The Mankind character practices self-harm behaviors during wrestling matches and promos. Enjoying pain is a key element of the Mankind gimmick as a "hardcore" wrestler. For example, Foley often carries thumbtacks when performing Mankind. Foley uses the thumbtacks as a tool against opponents, but the thumbtacks regularly injure Foley as well. Foley writes, "Physical pain always somehow seemed to relieve mental pain for me" (*Have a Nice Day* 52). The A & E *Biography: WWE Legends* episode on Mick Foley emphasizes Foley's reputation as someone who thrived on pain growing up. In the episode, Foley admits that he often ate dog food as an adolescent to stand out or get attention ("Mick Foley: Legendary WWE Wrestler"). However, self-harm differs significantly from the enjoyment of pain. The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) explains that "self-harm is not a mental illness, but a behavior that indicates a need for better coping skills" ("Self-Harm"). In the ring, Foley as Mankind often

pulls out his hair, which NAMI identifies as a common self-harm practice. As mentioned previously, Foley integrated this behavior into the gimmick to illustrate Mankind's emotional struggles. In a promo with Dustin Rhodes's Goldust character, during which the Mankind character calls Rhodes's Goldust "Mommy," the Mankind character slams his own head against a metal cabinet ("Mankind with Goldust"). These self-harm behaviors situate the Mankind character among individuals who struggle to cope and resort to self-inflicted physical pain to feel something.

Internal conflict and self-stigma inform the Three Faces of Foley. In a profile of Foley for a list of the WWE's "insane" characters, Ryan Dilbert writes of the three gimmicks: "A medical professional would be overwhelmed by Foley's plethora of mental issues. Foley's characters may have dissociative identity disorder, sadomasochism, and impulse control disorder, among other maladies." Conflict with the self is, on some level, inherent to professional wrestling. This theme was explored powerfully in the 2008 film *The Wrestler*, in which Mickey Rourke plays Randy "The Ram" Robinson. An aging wrestler in poor health, Robinson has a sense of purpose only in the world of wrestling. Attempts to transition away from wrestling into "normal" life end in loss and humiliation. Robinson is unable to separate his sense of self from wrestling and "The Ram" gimmick. In other cases, a single professional wrestler must often perform multiple gimmicks to remain relevant and keep working. Foley's aversion to the leather Mankind mask symbolizes this internal conflict inherent in wrestling. As a professional wrestler, Foley is simultaneously himself, an employee, a "hardcore" athlete, and multiple gimmicks. Noll Zimmerman writes, "In portraying madness and mental illness, the movies frequently dramatize the conflict of a divided self" (14). In *The Wrestler*, Randy Robinson struggles with addiction, depression, and failed relationships as he staves off the death of his wrestling career. Sadly, Robinson comes to believe that he has no identity or purpose for living outside of wrestling. The end of the film suggests that The Ram chooses to execute his signature move, The Ram Jam, one final time—knowing it will lead to his death.

The ability to cope, change, and adapt while continuing to excel as a professional wrestler separates Foley from Randy "The Ram" Robinson. In performing The Three Faces of Foley, Foley publicly acts out aspects of his own internal conflicts. Not only do the Mankind promos reference Foley's family life and traumas sustained in wrestling, but Dude Love projects Foley's "fantasy creation of what a man was supposed to be" (*Have a Nice Day* 57). In crafting this character and explaining its origins, Foley reveals vulnerabilities about his own sense of masculinity. Dude Love also worked as a fun alternative to the darker Mankind gimmick, which Foley needed to keep fans interested but also to relieve the psychological burdens of performing Mankind ("Mick Foley: Legendary WWE Wrestler"). Nicks writes of Foley, "the storied career and evolution of his three characters eventually condensing into a singular identity is a harrowing journey of violent reconciliation with inner struggles and self-acceptance" (53). For Foley, professional wrestling functioned as a creative outlet for working out human psychological struggles, including those associated with figuring out individual identity. Foley's brilliant use of the professional wrestling stage shows how performing internal conflicts can resonate with audiences. Professional wrestling offers a pathway for dealing with immaterial thoughts and emotions in a material space.

Foley's performance of Mankind is as paradoxical as wrestling itself. Although Foley brought thoughtful narrative and complex performances to the generic "headcase" envisioned by Vince McMahon, the character nevertheless operated within a business known for thriving on exaggerated and stereotypical characters. Like other media and entertainment, professional

wrestling has contributed to stigmatization and stereotypes of mental illness. Tragically, much of this stigmatization and stereotyping was performed by wrestlers who suffered from mental illness, addiction, or other serious health problems. Mickey Rourke's Randy "The Ram" Robinson character resonated with audiences because it presented a raw portrait of the psychological costs exacted by a career in professional wrestling. Professional wrestling remains both a livelihood and an irresistible craft for Foley and many others. Significant progress has been made in breaking down stigmas, and Mick Foley has been an important voice in those efforts. However, professional wrestling remains an industry where mental and physical wellness seem impossible goals for those involved. As successful as Foley has been, he suffers significant physical effects, pain, and cognitive symptoms due to wrestling injuries. Professional wrestling and overall wellness do not coincide.

A long-term, thoughtful review of the Mankind character shows that the character is complex and reflects some accurate dramatizations of some aspects of mental illness that individuals who are struggling might identify with. However, these same aspects could trigger some viewers or reinforce stigmas among general audiences. Also, despite the thoughtful, empathetic elements of the Mankind gimmick, the existence of the gimmick in the broader context of professional wrestling necessarily ties the character to "hardcore" wrestling violence. Fans were also drawn to Mankind because of Foley's willingness to perform dangerous stunts that shocked audiences. Without the element of "hardcore" violence and physically shocking stunts, Foley would not have succeeded as a professional wrestler.

Studying the Mankind gimmick reveals that the gimmick offers metacommentary on what it means to have an identity as a professional wrestler. Importantly, audiences continue to crave Foley's revelations, as Mankind, about the challenges of being a professional wrestler. The gimmick exposes the psychological implications of portraying a persona patched together from imagination, stereotypes, and popular culture references. Subsequently, these are fascinating performances by Foley, who works within the confines of his industry to add depth and interest to genuine psychological subjects. Noll Zimmerman writes that "an alternative reality has always appealed to humans" (27). Professional wrestling offers this alternative reality. Navigating this reality poses psychological challenges for both wrestlers and their fans, as the content enacted and cheered is necessarily exaggerated, unrealistic, and often cartoonish. However, navigating the reality of professional wrestling may also provide therapeutic benefits for those who perform and view professional wrestling. Many aspects of professional wrestling directly affect mental health in diverse and important ways. Professional wrestling offers a dramatic, one-of-a-kind venue for using characters to explore personal struggles or emotions. The stories that result, especially when combined with unforgettable wrestling, form compelling content for audiences.

Audience Responses to Mankind

The Mankind gimmick launched a legendary career for Mick Foley. Nicks summarizes Foley's impact on professional wrestling:

Mick Foley's interactive storytelling spanning the Attitude Era forever changed the professional wrestling industry by piercing the illusion of established reality. . . . Mick Foley pioneered a new style of sports entertainment, set a new precedent for character development, and redefined physical expectations for a professional wrestler. (44)

During Foley's prime in the WWE, fan signs reading FOLEY IS GOD appeared in arenas during televised wrestling events. Foley's podcast and his second book, *Foley is Good*, reference these ubiquitous signs. These signs, visible during any event featuring Foley, illustrate how Foley

transcended the gimmicks he performed. Foley forged remarkably close relationships with fans, confirming stories that he stayed overnight with fans to save money while working as a professional wrestler (“Ask Mick Anything”). In *Foley is Good*, Foley explains that moments with fans comprise many of his most prominent wrestling memories (557). While Cactus Jack and Dude Love contributed to Foley’s longevity as a popular wrestler, the Mankind gimmick enacted Foley’s most iconic moments, including the Boiler Room Brawl, Buried Alive, and Hell in a Cell matches.

Wrestling fans continue to worship Foley, whose cultural reach has translated into success in writing, stand-up comedy, acting, and charitable work (“Mick Foley”). As of December 2022, Foley was the highest earning sports celebrity on Cameo, a website where consumers purchase personalized videos recorded by celebrities (Mooneyham). Foley has engaged in significant philanthropic work and supports many charities. Among the organizations Foley supports is “Tag Me In,” a movement aimed at supporting mental health among members of the wrestling community (DeAngelo). Foley has maintained stability in his personal life, raising four children with his wife of thirty years. Unlike Rourke’s character in *The Wrestler*, Foley has thrived outside the ring, translating his wrestling celebrity into other passions. For nearly four decades, Foley has attracted and maintained an enthusiastic fanbase.

The popularity of Foley and the Mankind character are undeniable. What remains unclear is to degree to which the character’s mental illness symptoms resonated with audiences who shared or identified with those symptoms, whether in therapeutic or traumatic ways. As Soulliere and Blair explain, “Analyzing content alone cannot reveal anything about the actual effects that such content may have on those exposed to it” (280). Each viewer brings different perceptions, life experiences, familial experiences, and other knowledge that shapes their response to the gimmick. Foley has expressed significant skepticism of notions that professional wrestling exposes young viewers to harmful content any more than other forms of mainstream media (*Foley is Good* 520). In an article for *Psychology Today*, Travis Langley studies why viewers are drawn to professional wrestling. Langley discovers that wrestling fans report enjoying the storytelling and entertainment elements of professional wrestling. Drawing on Freud, Langley also notes that watching wrestling can serve a “psychological purpose”: “What about the fans, though? Most of them are not acting out aggressively, certainly not to the same degree. For them, another Freudian concept comes into play, that of catharsis . . . relieving strong or pent-up emotions by means such as vicariously viewing activities that engage one’s emotional resources.” Interest in a gimmick like Mankind can therefore expose audiences to stigmas and stereotypes, but enjoying wrestling can also have psychological benefits for individuals who need an emotional outlet.

Nevertheless, stigmas and stereotypes reinforced by media and entertainment have serious, measurable impacts. Stigmatization affects the ability of those suffering from mental illnesses to recover and enjoy life. The Mankind character debuted in 1996—on the cusp of the “turn of the century” period Pescosolido, Halpern-Manners, Luo, and Perry identify as a time that “saw a substantial increase in the public acceptance of biomedical causes of mental illness” (6). Pescosolido et al. further explain that the turn-of-the-century period saw “increasing mental health literacy” and a “decrease in stigmatizing attributions” (6). The study reveals that mental health awareness and acceptance are increasing, but also points out that many improvements can be attributed to growing knowledge of depression. Still, the study found that while stigmas might be fading, there has been “no reduction in social rejection” (6).

Foley has shared that the transformed, comedic Mankind seemed to appeal to fans who appreciated a social outcast. Foley writes of his transformation into the more relatable Mankind: The best gimmicks in wrestling are actually extensions of a real-life personality. I was feeling a lot like a battered and beaten man that time had left behind and was confused because of it. I decided to portray myself as a battered and beaten man that time had left behind and was confused because of it. I knew for a fact that many of our fans were not actually “cool.” I gambled they would get into a character that likewise was not. (*Have a Nice Day* 669-70)

These comments do not speak to mental illness. However, Foley reveals his belief that his own insecurities might resonate with audiences. The Mankind character could reach those audiences.

As Nicks explains, wrestling fans saw Foley as an “underdog” (49). Opportunities exist for ethnographic research on fans of Foley’s Mankind. Conversations with fans of the character could reveal whether the character appealed to fans who identified with the character’s psychological complexities and identity crises. cursory surveys of fan comments, fan sites, and online Foley communities reveal enthusiasm for the character’s psychological depths and entertaining wrestling performances. Additional qualitative research on Foley’s fanbase, specifically fans of the Mankind gimmick, could produce valuable information about the extent to which interest in the Mankind character’s psyche fueled Foley fandom.

Conclusions and Implications

Scholarship has yet to thoroughly address performances of mental illness in professional wrestling. Fargiorgio’s work draws on conversations with former wrestlers to analyze professional wrestling labor and overall wellness. In their 2021 book chapter on how women’s professional wrestling depicts body issues, Reinhard and Olson directly address the implications of mental health stigmas and stereotypes in women’s wrestling. In both examples, firsthand stories and testimonials from wrestlers play a significant role. Voices of former and current wrestlers offer indispensable perspectives that can enhance ongoing scholarship on wrestling and mental illness. Worthwhile questions exist about the therapeutic aspects of wrestling, including both physical and performative aspects of the sport. Opportunities exist for scholars, storytellers, and the wrestlers themselves to collaborate and converse about intersections between narrative, theater, performance, and professional wrestling. These conversations can potentially yield creative and impactful insights about how professional wrestling engages mental health for both wrestlers and audiences.

When considering the question of what constitutes reality, mental illness shapes reality for many humans worldwide. In this way, mental health stigmas and stereotypes are illogical. While stigmas portray the mentally ill as dangerous outcasts who exist outside of society, mental illness is incredibly common. As Noll Zimmerman emphasizes, mental illness is “part of the human condition” (13). Indeed, mental illness and “Mankind” are inseparable. As workplaces, schools, sports, and society in general prioritize mental health, sensitivity to stigmas and respectful language continues to spread. Referencing suicide or mental illnesses like schizophrenia in jokes or flippant conversation is increasingly unacceptable. Professional athletes like Simone Biles, Michael Phelps, Kevin Love, and others have shared their mental health journeys. Indeed, mental health as a subject must enter mainstream culture in ways that counter and add dimension to prevalent media stereotypes. Efforts to prioritize mental health must continue. Representations of mental illness in media require further scholarly attention. Approaching popular culture subjects like Mick Foley’s Mankind can engage various audiences

in important conversations about the realities of mental illness and depictions of those realities in popular media. For sometimes mysterious reasons, what happens in professional wrestling matters to many people, and professional wrestling holds both lessons and cautionary tales for mental health. Wrestlers themselves, like Foley, can harness the power of storytelling to share the realities of succeeding in a sports entertainment business with truly distinctive demands. Audiences, including scholars, should seek out these stories and continue to analyze how professional wrestling grapples with mental health.

Notes

1. World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) was popularly branded as “World Wrestling Federation,” or “WWF,” during Mankind’s career in the organization. “WWE” is used throughout this article to maintain consistency with current branding.
2. Foley has credited the Undertaker (Mark Calaway) with much of his success, explaining that Calaway’s enthusiasm for the gimmick and for working with Foley had a tremendously positive impact on Foley’s career. See *Foley’s Have a Nice Day: A Tale of Blood and Sweatsocks* for more discussion.
3. Foley’s disheveled costume also reflected his engagement with the “Corporation” storylines involving the McMahon family throughout the Attitude Era. See the “Debut of Mankind” episode of “Foley is POD” for more information.

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