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Coda: An interview with Terrance Griep (Tommy “Spider-Baby” Saturday)

David Beard, University of Minnesota Duluth

A recent version of the Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire asks employees of an organization whether “your work put[s] you in emotionally disturbing situations” or whether “your work [is] emotionally demanding.” Answering this question helps organizational psychologists determine whether a workplace is a stressor on an employee.

The Moral Injury Event Scale, another quantitative tool used by researchers and therapists alike, asks respondents whether “I have done things that hurt another person” or whether “I have been let down by people I thought I could trust.” In a workplace setting, this inventory is used to determine whether one’s workplace asks an employee to work in a way that is counter to their values, or in a way which makes them feel unsafe.

I reflect on these inventories because these questions are designed to assess conditions that most people would consider extraordinary in a workplace. These same inventories, if used to assess the workplace of a professional wrestler, would be identifying the ordinary working conditions.

- To be a professional wrestler is physically and *emotionally demanding* (a fact persuasively demonstrated by other essays in this special issue).
- When a wrestler injures their partner in a match, they may have (accidentally or intentionally) *done things that hurt another person*.
- When a wrestler is injured by their partner, they may have been *let down by people they thought they could trust*.

In my heart, I believe that the normal conditions under which wrestlers work, if assessed by the Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire or the Moral Injury Event Scale, would be seen as excessive, stressful, even psychologically damaging, if they were normal for other professions.

And yet professional wrestlers return, week after week, often (at the local level) for an amount of money barely sufficient to cover travel expenses. I believe that professional wrestlers have something to teach us about workplace stress, especially in the context of workplace injury.

I wanted, in assembling this issue, to hear directly from a professional wrestler. So, I invited Terrance Griep to share some thoughts. Griep’s biography outlines his prominence as a wrestler:

Recognized by *OUT Magazine* as America’s first openly gay professional wrestler, Terrance Griep takes to the ring as Tommy “The SpiderBaby” Saturday – a heel, through and through. Griep has been featured in *The Advocate*, *Fanboy Planet*, *First Comics News*, *Lavender Magazine*, and *Pride Source*, among dozens of other publications. He has appeared as a guest on many television and radio broadcasts, including *Coast to Coast AM*, which is heard in over 600 markets.

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On the Midwest independent wrestling scene, The SpiderBaby has wrestled for over twenty companies and held nearly twenty championships, both in the tag team and singles divisions. *City Pages* recognized him as its only Wrestler of the Year (in 2009). The International Gay Outdoors Organization has named him one of the Nine Toughest Gays in America.

I was lucky enough to interview Griep in Spring 2022, shortly before his announced retirement in Fall 2023.

If I said to Tommy [Griep’s alter-ego and role when performing as a wrestler], *how have you changed over the last 20 years? Do you think he would say, *I’ve changed*, or do you think he is who he was 20 years ago?*

He would be very proud of the changes he's made, he would refer to himself as wiser and smarter, if we're in *kayfabe* [the fiction co-constructed by wrestler and audience].

If you step outside of *kayfabe*, what I have learned as a performer is that my wrestling matches are all designed as a symposium on cheating. That's how I get the crowd reaction. It's just *how do I stick cheating spots into this match?* You have to be careful with that, because if you do too much, the fans get mad at the referee for not catching you – you just make the ref look bad. I've I figured out the formula for me.

When I started off, I was trying to figure out, *What kind of wrestler am I going to be?* There was sort of a level of fantasy fulfillment: *I saw Randy Savage, do this once. I'm going to do this now.* But that is a dangerous move for both performers. It's putting a lot of pressure on my ankles and knees. [As time progresses] you figure out. *Okay, how can I make that point to an audience without taking that big risk?* You move away from that risk. That's not necessarily age, but experience. I don't think you can experience without age.

Talking about risk and damage to the ankles and knees -- would it be fair to say that a wrestler is injured at every match?

There's being *hurt* and there's being *injured*. Injured means you can't wrestle. Hurt means you can.

I think a lot of athletes would look at a wrestler's hurt and say, that's an injury. You have that luxury if you're the short stop. Just move to third base over here and then take this utility player over there until you've recovered. But we work so hard as wrestlers to make

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ourselves irreplaceable, totally individual. You can't just put in someone else; there is no other Spider Baby. If I'm not there, there's a hole in the card. But that turns into the standard trap: when we are hurt, there's pressure to go out.

I know I've gone out there, particularly as a younger man, when I should not have. I think it's more common in the bigger leagues because there is so much money involved. But those guys are always thinking, too.

As performers, we strive to make ourselves outstanding in a profession made up of liars and shouters. We strive to make ourselves irreplaceable...but this means we can't be replaced when we're hurt, either.

— Terrance Grieb

[Once, Grieb attended a WWE show in Rochester, MN, with fourth row seats.]

I really loved studying the WWE guys up close. The venue is a small venue, and it was two-thirds full. The wrestlers used no top rope moves whatsoever. The wrestlers were very, very careful, as if they were saving their riskier moves for larger crowds.

You were a fan before you were a wrestler. Does your perception of injury (or aging, or illness, the other themes of this issue) change as you move from being the person in the stands to the person in the ring? Is there a different set of glasses you put on at some point when you become a professional, and you see the illness or injury differently?

This calls back to the “hurt” vs. “injury.” When you're a pro, you just think of what can we work through.

An example: I had performed a move that I called “the flyswatter,” which is a leg drop. I start on the outside of the ring, on the apron, and I lean back on the ropes. I fling myself over the top rope and then do a leg drop across the opponent's chest.

One night, I tore a ligament in my lower back. It had been warning me for months before the night in question, and I would back away from it, but then come back to it. It was just incredibly stupid on my part. It was the worst pain I experienced as a wrestler. It just took my breath away. I couldn't move my legs. It wasn't a paralysis, but it hurt so much to move them.

I used my hands to manipulate my legs into a triangle choke, a sleeper hold performed with the legs. Then I grabbed the ropes to get illegal leverage. I was still cheating, but after I won the match, I couldn't walk. I couldn't walk. My tag team partner had to come to the ring and almost carry me. At the curtain. I pushed him away, and I just collapsed right in the doorway

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because moving hurt so bad. My colleagues had to step over me to get to the ring for the rest of the night.

The following week I scheduled a Friday night match, a Saturday night match, and two matches Sunday afternoon. I couldn't stand; I was using the ropes to prop me up in a way that nobody (I don't think) could see. I knew, once I got down on my stomach or back, once I left my feet, I wasn't going to be able to get back up. I had to hold my upper body up and then drag my feet under me, and then I could stand.

Telling all those promoters, *really sorry, but I can't make it. I'm hurt* never even occurred to me. I just thought, *how can I pull this off?* Today, I would call them and say, *I'm sorry – I can't do it.*

Back then, I was proud of that achievement, but I look back at it and think, *God, that was so stupid!*

What Griep is talking about here is called, in the sociology of sport and in studies of dance, the “normalization of pain and injury.” In other studies of dance, scholars discuss the value system that encourages dancers to believe that injury while dancing and the brutal effects of eating disorders are necessary for professional success. Instead of experiencing these as signals of harm that should cause a pause and a reconsideration of practice on the part of the dancer, these pains are normal and must be endured.

It seems natural to see wrestling, sports, and dance on a continuum in which pain and injury might be normalized. Griep's claim, that a professional wrestler is irreplaceable on the card in ways that an athlete on a team sport is not, is provocative for the health humanities scholar.

During the pandemic, some of the assumptions about healthcare workers were made visible; frontline workers (from EMTs to nurses to general practitioners) were revealed to be irreplaceable. Whether or not a hospital had ten ventilators available for use didn't matter if there was only one nurse available who knew how to operate the ventilator. An ambulance wasn't the most essential element of an emergency medical call – the EMTs and the emergency room staff were. Absent a team of EMTs, the ambulance doesn't leave the station. Absent a full complement of emergency room staff at the closest hospital, that ambulance might be redirected to another hospital twenty minutes or two hours away. We pressured nurses, doctors, and EMTs to normalize the pain that comes from stress and burnout in their jobs because we need them to come to work.

Using Griep's language: we ask healthcare professionals to come in to work, hoping they will believe that they are *only* hurt. In nearly any other profession, we would be asking them to work in conditions that would count as an injury.

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Reflecting on Griep’s evocation of the normalization of pain and injury in wrestling, I think, invites readers of *Survive and Thrive* to consider the place of the normalization of pain and injury in healthcare professions.

I want to end on a more positive note. Perhaps we can talk about the healing power in representation. How has your work as the first openly gay wrestler, inside and outside the ring, had a healing effect on you or on others?

In the last two months, I've had multiple people expressing appreciation of that, and I'm grateful to hear it.

I came out before my first match, November ninth, 2003. *Out* magazine recognizes that I'm the first openly gay pro wrestler in North America. I had young wrestling fans in mind because representation has been so small in wrestling, for gay people before that. It was always *You're a bad guy. Why are you a bad guy? Because you're gay.* To be gay was just intrinsically evil. I wanted to present something with more nuance.

Recently, I met a guy at First Avenue. This guy was very old. And he had this tragic flannel shirt and docker-style pants that went right up to his nipples and this ugly mess baseball cap and the lightest blue eyes I've ever seen. A local promoter introduced us, and he went on about talking about the gay wrestlers that he is related to and he's kind of negative about them. I'm like, *Where is this going?* He looked at me, teared up, and said, I've been waiting for you my entire life.

Read in dialogue with other pieces in this issue, Griep reminds us that wrestling, as a performance, can be healing for the audience.

For more information about Terrance Griep, visit <https://www.linkedin.com/in/terrance-griep-887b085/>