

# Managing Emotional Manhood: Fighting and Fostering Fear in Mixed Martial Arts

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## Abstract

*Based on two years of fieldwork and over 100 interviews, we analyze mixed martial arts fighters' fears, how they managed them, and how they adopted intimidating personas to evoke fear in opponents. We conceptualize this process as "managing emotional manhood," which refers to emotion management that signifies, in the dramaturgical sense, masculine selves. Our study aims to deepen our understanding of how men's emotion work is gendered and, more generally, to bring together two lines of research: studies of gendered emotion management and studies of emotional identity work. We further propose that managing emotional manhood is a dynamic and trans-situational process that can be explored in diverse settings.*

## Keywords

emotion, identity, gender, manhood, masculinity

While fighters in the locker room prepared for combat in the cage, two men from the previous fight staggered in. Juan<sup>1</sup>—the victor—had shiny contusions under both eyes and made it to a folding chair where he sat staring into space. As two paramedics tried to keep him conscious, he cracked a smile with swollen lips and tried unsuccessfully to communicate meaningfully. As the paramedics carried Juan off on a stretcher, Mike—his opponent—leaned against a wall and talked with his trainer. As blood flowed from his nose and mouth, Mike began to sob. His trainer handed him a towel, which he brought to his face with shaking hands. When asked if he was upset about

Juan, he pulled away the bloodied towel and said, "I don't like losing."

Juan and Mike's post-fight experiences highlight what competitors of mixed martial arts (MMA) most often say they fear: injury and losing. Competitions generally occur in a locked cage and fighters wear thin, open-fingered gloves and are allowed to punch, kick, wrestle, and use martial arts techniques. Fights are broken into rounds and end when one fighter submits

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or “taps out” due to pain or exhaustion, is rendered unconscious, is deemed physically unable to continue by a referee, or time runs out. Preparing for these fights entails not only perfecting “guillotine chokes” and “superman punches,” it also involves fighting fear.

Although MMA fighters’ emotion management may appear unique, it reflects a long-lived cultural mandate that “real men” control their fear and other emotions (Kimmel 1996). Peers (Fine 1987), parents (McGuffey 2008), and coaches (Messner 1992) often ostracize boys who express fear, pain, empathy, and sadness. Boys learn that they are supposed to exhibit emotional restraint and “quiet control” (Messner 2009:96). As adults, men often face fear, whether at work (Haas 1977), on the street (Anderson 1999), or in leisure activities (Holyfield and Fine 1997). And not letting fear get the best of you—exhibiting bravery—is a culturally revered quality of manhood (see e.g., Connell 1995). But how do men control their emotions, and what does this have to with gender identity?

Scholars of emotion management—the process through which people suppress or evoke emotions (Hochschild 1979)—are particularly well suited to address this question. Although such research often neglects integrating gender into its analyses (e.g., Orzechowicz 2008; Smith 2008), a sizable literature on gender and emotion work has developed. The dominant approach has been to neglect men and focus exclusively on how women do emotion work as subordinates at work or home (e.g., DeVault 1999; Elliott and Umberson 2008). Although less common, research on gender and emotion work has brought men into analyses in two primary ways: (a) quantitative studies compare men and women’s frequency of various types of emotion management (e.g., Erickson 2005; Lively 2008), and (b) qualitative studies compare men and women’s emotion management strategies in work settings, often showing how

it reproduces hierarchies of status and power (e.g., Lois 2003; Pierce 1995). While contributing greatly to emotions and gender scholarship, these lines of research neglect how such emotion management is implicated in the active construction of identity. Our study contributes to the aforementioned research by showing how men’s emotion management can constitute gendered “identity work” (Snow and Anderson 1987).

To emphasize the gendered and processual aspects of this emotional identity work, we refer to the MMA fighters’ emotion management as *managing emotional manhood*. We define managing emotional manhood as emotion work that signifies a masculine self. Importantly, by the “masculine self” we are not referring to a psychological entity, how men view themselves, or the self-concept. Rather, we take the dramaturgical view that the masculine self is a virtual reality, a self that is imputed to actors based on the information given or given off (Goffman 1959). Schwalbe (2005) defines such identity work as a “manhood act” and emphasizes that signifying control is fundamental. Manhood here is not a static concept, but a malleable image that is constructed for public consumption. While there are many ways that males can put on a convincing manhood act (see Schrock and Schwalbe’s [2009] review), in this study we emphasize that controlling and transforming one’s own or others’ emotions—especially fear—is key.<sup>2</sup> Emotions here are not simply added to or subtracted

<sup>2</sup>In developing an identity work approach to studying men, Schrock and Schwalbe (2009) point out that although Connell (1995) critiqued sex role theory and legitimated the study of men as gendered beings, scholars often reify masculinity as a thing or trait rather than a social practice, problematically equate anything that people with male bodies do as masculinity (essentializing) and ignore power and control in their attempts to uncover new “types” of masculinities. They developed the notion of manhood acts as an antidote to such problems.

from one's presumed manhood (as if manhood exists as a thing rather than a social construction); they are expressions that signify what kind of man one is. As we show, managing emotional manhood can be accomplished individually as well as interpersonally and can prime one to risk one's well-being in a quest to dominate others. We furthermore suggest that managing emotional manhood is a sensitizing concept (Blumer 1969) that microsociologists can examine in diverse social contexts.

### THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Emotion management involves suppressing or evoking particular emotions so as to resonate with culturally defined feeling rules (Hochschild 1979). Emotion work may be accomplished individually, as when a college student personally tries to control his or her anxiety when sitting down to take an exam (Albas and Albas 1988), or when a person vents anger when sitting down to pray (Sharp 2010). Emotion work can be also accomplished interpersonally (Cahill and Eggleston 1994; Francis 1994). Interpersonal emotion management may involve one person trying to control the emotions of others in a unidirectional fashion, such as when a leader of a therapeutic group tries to heal the emotional wounds of the widowed, divorced, or seekers of true selves (Francis 1997; Thoits 1996). It can also be "reciprocal," as when paralegals suppress each other's boss- and client-induced stress in ways that maintain inequality (Lively 2000:33).

Social psychologists' perception that men are less skilled at and less likely to manage their emotions than are women can be traced back to the origins of the sociology of emotions. Hochschild (1983: 165) argued that men are "less likely [than women] to develop their capacity for managing emotion," largely because women are socialized into and more likely

to occupy positions that require the presumably more common kind of "emotion work that affirms, enhances, and celebrates the well-being and status of others." Gendered feeling rules that implore men not to express shame, pain, love, or fear (see e.g., Cancian and Gordon 1988; Stearns and Stearns 1986) further create the impression that men's emotional lives are muted. It would seem, however, that keeping so many emotions under control would require much work.

Scholars of gender and emotion have begun to paint a more complex and nuanced picture of men's emotional lives. Recent survey research suggests that women and men do not significantly differ with regard to their overall experience and expression of emotion, although women generally report more negative emotions (Lively and Powell 2006; Simon and Nath 2004; but see Simon and Barrett 2010). Research also suggests that men less frequently engage in emotion management to suppress anger and irritation at work (Erickson and Ritter 2001) and home (Erickson 2005) and that men are more likely than women to efficiently transform one emotion into another (Lively 2008). While survey methods enable social psychologists to compare men and women's emotional experience and management and generalize to larger populations, this approach sheds less light on how gender and emotion work are dynamic social processes. Taking a closer look at how such processes unfold on the ground floor of social life may help us understand that emotion work does not just vary according to one's gender identification, but that emotion work is implicated in the active construction of gender identity.

Qualitative researchers are better positioned to advance a processual approach (Snow 1999), but studies of gendered emotion work generally focus on how *women's* emotion work involves "feeding egos and

tending wounds" (Bartky 1995) as they navigate life in subordinate positions.<sup>3</sup> However, a growing body of ethnographic research suggests that men bring to work a biography of emotional socialization that shapes how they manage and express emotions in "masculine" ways (Lewis 2005; Lois 2003; Martin 1999; Pierce 1995). For example, Lois (2003:182–83) characterized male rescue workers as developing a "masculine emotional line" by interpreting their work as exciting and maintaining emotional control when things go bad. Similarly, Pierce (1995:59, 135) labels male lawyers' "intimidation and strategic friendliness" as exemplifying "a masculine style of emotional labor." While such research importantly views men's emotion work as gendered, by labeling such work *masculine* (or not), it undertheorizes how such emotion work is implicated in the construction of gender identity.

An alternative way to view men's emotion management—whether that of lawyers, rescuers, or MMA fighters—is as identity work. Identity work refers to how people dramaturgically signify an identity (Snow and Anderson 1987). While people accomplish identity work individually or collectively and can use language, physical gestures, and fashion to signify selves (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996), it is also an "emotional process" (Fields, Copp, and Kleinman 2006: 164). For example, Francis (1997:162) reveals how bereavement group facilitators mitigate members' grief by "transform[ing] the self from a failure to a victim and the deceased from a victim to a perpetrator." Wilkins (2008) shows how campus

Christians use conversion stories, group singing, and introspection to evoke happiness, which the group defined as a "compulsory" signifier of Christian identity. What we can see in these examples, as Wolkomir (2001:321) puts it in her analysis of support groups, is "how emotion work and identity work converge [so that] emotions [are] signifiers of identity." Although this research integrates emotion and identity work approaches, it neglects to focus on gender. In contrast, we analyze MMA fighters' emotion management as central to their gendered identity work.

It is important to acknowledge that organizational cultures can be structured so as to emphasize or de-emphasize gender (e.g., Acker 1990). While MMA fighting may seem unique, it is like other sports in which men participate in that it orients participants and audiences to view participating as a test of manhood (e.g., Messner 1992).<sup>4</sup> A key way that MMA bolsters its "gendered organizational frame" (Martin 2005) is by marketing a hypermasculine image. For instance, promoters dubbed the MMA Ultimate Fighting Championship as "The Most Controversial Event of the Decade" in which there are "no rules" and "two men enter, one man leaves" (Snowden 2008). The sport not only creates the conditions under which fighters experience and manage fear, it—in combination with the larger culture—also primes people to view fighters' management of fear (as well as their violence) through the lens of gender.

By managing their own fear and evoking it in others, MMA fighters thus present themselves in ways that are commonly interpreted by others as indicative of manhood. We term this process *managing emotional manhood* to emphasize its proc-

<sup>3</sup>In relationships with men, for example, women's emotion work includes evoking sexual desire in themselves to fulfill their male partners' appetites and preempt conflict (Elliott and Umberson 2008) and preparing special meals for men to put them in good moods after frustrating work experiences (DeVault 1999).

<sup>4</sup>As Goffman (1968:128) put it, "[T]he only complete unblushing male in America [has] a recent record in sports."

essual nature and how such emotion management is important for signifying a masculine self or putting on a manhood act. Importantly, our interactionist approach makes us less interested in trying to unearth fighters' motivations for managing fear—such as whether it increases their chances of winning or because it validates their sense of being “real men”—than we are in understanding the processes through which they accomplish such emotion work and its social meanings.<sup>5</sup> Overall, examining how fighters manage emotional manhood builds on the aforementioned research by deepening our understanding of men's emotion work and bringing together two lines of research that have thus far been isolated from each another: studies of gendered emotion management and studies of emotional identity work.

### SETTING AND METHOD

Data for this study derive from 24 months of fieldwork and 121 interviews. The first author gained access to a local MMA gym after calling the owner, Bruce, mentioning a long-time friendship with a professional fighter who had once been Bruce's training partner, and talking about his research interests. The ethnographer observed and openly jotted notes at about 100 evening practices at Steel Hangar Gym, which was located in a small industrial park on the outskirts of a midsized southeastern city. During practices, the fighters helped each other learn new techniques, worked out with punching bags and other equipment, and sparred

with each other. When taking breaks, some of the men sat beside the first author to ask about his research and talk about their training and upcoming fights.<sup>6</sup> He also traveled with the fighters to 10 competitions, where he observed the weigh-in the day before the fight, pre- and post-fight locker room interactions, the fights themselves, and the evening after-parties. While he jotted notes at these events, he also openly made audio and video recordings. He used his notes and recordings when writing full fieldnotes as soon as possible after each observation.

The first author conducted 24 formal 45- to 75-minute interviews with 15 local and 9 regional fighters and 97 brief 5- to 15-minute short interviews at competitions with 64 fighters and 15 trainers, promoters, and officials (some fighters were interviewed multiple times). During the longer interviews, the fighters were asked about their backgrounds, how they got involved in MMA, how they prepared emotionally and physically for fights, how they dealt with injuries, and their competition experiences. The brief interviews focused on fight preparation and experiences. While the formal interviews allotted more time to delve into a wider range of experiences, the brief interviews—conducted either during weigh-ins or soon after a fight—were surprisingly revealing, perhaps due to the intense emotionality surrounding competitions. Of the interviewees, 70 percent were white, 16 percent were black, 11 percent were Hispanic, and 3 percent were Asian. They ranged in age from 19 to 40 (average = 26.5). The majority (18 out of 25) of local interviewees had

<sup>5</sup>Although some who study identity work have asked interviewees about their motivations for doing such work and then made the analysis of these “motivations” central to their results (Khanna and Johnson 2010), we avoid doing so because we view such accounts as a form of identity work (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996).

<sup>6</sup>While most fighters quickly included the ethnographer in their informal conversations and joking, some veteran fighters were initially distant. After he began occasionally working out and sparring with some of them where he showcased a few high school wrestling moves, they began warming up to him as well.



earned degrees from a community college or university.<sup>7</sup> All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

As the first author began fieldwork, he shared copies of fieldnotes, and the coauthors became intrigued by fighters' allusions to fear. This initial interest sensitized us to pay attention to how fear permeated the field and also led us to create interview questions aimed to better understand (a) what fighters worried about and (b) how they managed it. These questions also guided the coding of fieldnotes and interview transcripts, which led to creating typologies of what they most feared (injury and losing) and how they managed their fear (scripting, framing, and othering). As we worked on a draft of the article, we became curious about a few quotes indicating that fighters not only fought their own fear but also sought to evoke it in opponents. We then reanalyzed the data, coded for how they attempted to foster fear, and wrote an additional analysis section.<sup>8</sup> It was only after finishing the analysis and comparing it to existing research and theory that we began developing the concept of managing emotional manhood.

### THE FEARS OF FIGHTING

Underneath their bravado, Mixed Martial Arts fighters harbored fear. During

interviews, at the local gym, and in locker rooms before competitions, the fighters often alluded to their fears by talking about "nerves," being "nervous," "worries," "pre-fight jitters," and "butterflies." For example, just before their fights, Ted said, "Oh, I'm nervous as hell!" and Buster said, "I was nervous. I was in the back about to throw up." Shortly after winning a fight, Robin said, "I was extremely nervous going into this." After losing fights, the men often blamed their poor performances on fear. For example, Ted explained, "It must have been nerves or something," and Garrett said, "I sort of felt like I kind of panicked and bitched-out a little bit." As Garrett implied, uncontrollable fear was like being momentarily inhabited by womanhood, which is probably why fighters usually—but not always—avoided saying "I'm afraid/scared/fearful." Saying they were nervous or worried was arguably less damaging to their manhood acts.

MMA fighters most commonly talked about fearing injury and losing. Fighters understood how painful injuries were and that serious ones could end their fighting careers, or worse. There have been two well-publicized deaths of fighters resulting from brain injuries sustained in North American MMA fights since 2007. Although interviewees agreed that, as Rocky put it, "in most cases you're going to come out of it [and] you're going to live," death lurked in the shadows of the cage. When asked what he worried about before his fights, for example, Kenneth said, "You are wondering if they are thinking of this incredible move that is really going to kill you." Dominic said, "This sport is not golf; you can't get hurt or killed playing golf." The possibility of death elevated MMA's manhood quotient.

Fighters more frequently discussed worrying about injuries they could live through. Dean worried about "getting choked out or . . . getting hurt." Lou said

<sup>7</sup>On the *SPQ* website, we have provided an appendix listing all fighters interviewed along with their age, race, education, win/loss record, what type of interview they participated in, and if they were observed at the local gym and/or in regional competitions.

<sup>8</sup>Because our interest in how fighters fostered fear developed after data collection was complete, we had not developed as many questions about this as we did about how the men managed their own fear. As a result of this as well as the fact that we had less data on competitions—where they attempted to foster fear in opponents—than on gym life, we did not devise a formal typology of fostering fear, choosing instead to emphasize the different contexts in which they attempted such intimidation.

"I can get my arm broken [or] my nose broken, I can just get pounded." Jimmy said, "I was apprehensive about getting hurt." Such fears were not unfounded. Local fighters suffered dislocated ribs and concussions, Louis tore his ACL, Rocky broke his foot and seriously injured his back, Lou broke his wrist and finger, and Dominic's retina became detached from his eye twice. Garrett and Dominic had elbow surgeries to remove bone fragments, and Garrett also had surgery to remove a damaged appendix. One local fighter suffered bleeding in his brain and required an induced coma and brain surgery to keep him alive. Because injuries were common, fighters could not easily escape the specter of pain.

In addition to fearing injury, cage fighters also feared losing. Casey feared looking "like a chump in front of all these people . . . if you get knocked out at your first fight in three seconds, then that's all they will remember." Mike said, "You really don't want to let your family or teammates down," and Kenneth said, "The name of the [MMA] school is kind of riding on you. You have to represent for your school." Minutes after Dean lost a fight, he said, "I feel like shit! I came out in front of my hometown and I got tapped out in like under a minute." Buster said "the feeling of losing is the worst feeling in the world, especially when you sell 100 tickets and you have a lot of your friends and family there." Jimmy said that when a fight starts going bad: "You start getting down on yourself. Like, 'Oh no, he's going to get the chicken wing—he got the chicken wing and it hurts. Ow! I look stupid out here. I'm losing.'" Echoing others, these men suggested that they feared losing because it made them feel embarrassed and ashamed—emotions that are antithetical to cultural definitions of manhood.

In a micropolitical fashion (Clark 1990), audience members often undermined

losers' manhood acts by publicly shaming them. When Armand tapped out after being caught in a chokehold, his friends stood up and one yelled "Pussy!" before they all walked out in disgust. Three men who owned an MMA clothing business sat near the cage during another competition and enthusiastically chanted "Bitches get stitches, pussies get fucked!" at the losers of each fight. Drawing on the larger culture of sexism thus helped the audience shame losers in an emasculating fashion.

It was not uncommon for fighters to withdraw from competitions, presumably due to uncontrollable fear. Promoters said that fighters often backed out at the last minute, which required them to scramble to fill holes in the fight card. For each of the regional competitions observed, one or two men listed on the program did not participate.<sup>9</sup> The first author observed one fighter who looked at his competitor during weigh-ins, said he forfeited the fight, and walked out. It was more common for dropouts to blame injury or sickness, even if they had passed pre-fight medical exams. Although none of the local fighters admitted that fear led them to back out of a fight, they believed others—including Armand—"chickened out." Armand claimed the police detained him for violating probation, but others said privately that they did not buy it. Others were publicly ridiculed. Evoking laughter and jeers, an announcer came out before one fight and said the missing fighter "caught a glimpse of his opponent and chickened out. He was afraid that he was going to get his ass handed to him." Uncontrollable fear thus could undermine fighters' manhood acts as well as the sport itself.

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<sup>9</sup>Because programs were generally printed up just before an event, we assume that fear led at least some of these fighters to drop out at the last minute—although we cannot be sure.

Cage fighters had much to fear. Injuries were inevitable and threatened to end their careers. Losing was also difficult to stomach, although it also seems unavoidable.<sup>10</sup> Being controlled by fear, shame, or pain, however, would have undermined their manhood act, as expressing such emotions contradicted feeling rules culturally bound to manhood. But if the men could fight off their fears and foster it in their opponents, they might be victorious men.

### FIGHTING FEAR

Fighters often said that feeling fear itself was not the problem as long as they kept it under control. As Taylor put it, "Fear is an okay thing as long as you can manage it." This belief let them off the hook if they felt some fear but also oriented them toward controlling it. As we will show, their emotion work often involved transforming fear into confidence, which is more consistent with cultural ideals of manhood. One reason that feeling but managing fear is "okay" is that keeping one's poise in a dangerous situation constitutes one of our culture's most honored characteristics of manhood: bravery (see e.g., Connell 1995). As Rudyard Kipling (1976:163–64) put it in a poem often memorized by schoolboys: "If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you . . . you'll be a Man, my son!" To avoid losing their heads, as well as their masculine status, cage fighters managed emotional manhood through scripting, framing, and othering.

### Scripting

To the untrained observer, cage fighting appears to be chaotic violence. Competitors

themselves understood that fights are relatively unpredictable because, as Kenneth put it, "Think of all the things you need to worry about in MMA: take-downs, knees, kicks, and elbows." To evoke a sense of control and minimize fear, fighters developed game plans. We refer to the individual as well as the collective creation, embodiment, and review of the game plan as *scripting* because such work involved planning out and rehearsing combat. Whereas Zurcher (1982, 1985) shows how scripting mass events like football and war games shapes the emotions of participants and spectators *during the events*, we focus on how scripting future events shapes feelings in the present. MMA fighters' scripting constituted managing emotional manhood to the extent it suppressed emotions that did *not* and evoked emotions that *did* resonate with cultural ideals of manhood.

When asked how they dealt with emotions before competitions, fighters frequently brought up their game plans. Isaac responded, "I need to have a game plan and stick to that. I don't want to fight too much out of emotion." Troy said, "I would do a lot of visualization of the event [so] I was emotionally prepared." John replied, "I just think about what I want to do. What is this guy going to try to do? If I know he's a southpaw, what do I have to do to avoid that hook?" After Blake mentioned that "fear and nerves work together to make you more tired and gets your heart rate going" and was asked how he "avoided feeling that way," he responded:

Just think about my training. Our game plan is always to hit it on the mat whenever possible . . . and work towards first position. Within that there are always plans that are somewhat different. Like . . . I want to go out there and shoot or crunch up and throw and try to stay on top. Just because I feel like that sets the pace

<sup>10</sup>Maintaining an undefeated record for more than 10 to 15 professional MMA fights is extremely rare, perhaps due to the diversity of techniques fighters are allowed to use. Randy Couture, who is thought by many to be the best MMA fighter of all time, has a record of 18–10.



... and that fighter is going to feel like you have them totally dominated.

While the inherent unpredictability of fights could evoke various fears, going over one's game plan enabled the men to suppress their fear and put on a more convincing manhood act.

More experienced fighters seemed better able to put together game plans for themselves as well as others, perhaps because they were more attuned to one's strengths and weaknesses. One veteran trainer/fighter said, "If you're a great grappler then don't stay on your feet . . . when you're training a guy, you got to start gauging where that person performs the best." Another veteran, Kenneth, said of a local fighter: "I know that his strength is his athleticism, his height, his range, and his explosiveness. Those things I kept telling him [to use to his advantage]."

Developing game plans also involved researching their opponents. Rocky said,

Me and Dominic get together and we do extensive research . . . we go to BattleBase.net—the most complete database of fighters thus far—and look at what his record is. I look at what his [fight] style is. I look at how he's won his fights. I look at how he's lost his fights. And I implement that into a strict training regimen. If I'm fighting the kick boxer who wins all his fights by knock outs, you're going to be damn sure I'm practicing my striking. . . . But if I know I'm fighting a wrestler, I'm going to be working on my kick-down defenses and my knock-out punches.

Fighters regularly searched for videos and information about opponents on YouTube, MySpace, Facebook, and other Internet sites for MMA fighters and fans, such as MMAUniverse.com and Sherdog.com. In addition, if gym members had previously seen a fight involving a future opponent of a local member, they shared what

they remembered. Overall, such intelligence gathering and sharing helped fighters to script game plans that bolstered confidence and manhood.

Although such scripting minimized fear as fighters prepared for competitions, fighters believed that to be successful they needed to instill the script into "bodily memory" (McCaughy 1998:290). As fight night neared, said Kenneth, "You should already have your game-plan . . . *in you* right now. You don't have time to be thinking about that kind of stuff during a fight." To get the plan "in you," Allan echoed others when he said: "I practice to the point to where it becomes natural, where you can just do it naturally in the fight situation." When asked how he dealt with his emotions as he prepared for a fight, Ed referenced embodying the script, "It is all about putting yourself in the situation over and over again, so that nothing is new to you. [T]hat's what separates the good fighters from the mediocre fighters: [Good ones] don't panic, they are comfortable." Embodying the script thus helped manage emotional manhood by evoking confidence.

Embodying the script also helped fighters inject some bravado into their manhood acts. For example, one evening Scotty strutted around the gym and loudly proclaimed that he was going to win his upcoming fight. The first author approached him and asked, "So, you feel pretty confident about your fight?" Scotty replied, "Yeah, I am going to choke him out. I can feel it . . . I've been taking necks everywhere I go. So I will probably get him up against the cage and give him a little." Demonstrating the script, he then threw a flurry of punches followed by a high knee before declaring, "Take him to the ground and finish it!" Scotty later explained that because his opponent was a "striker" (boxer), he planned to knee him in the face, wrestle him to the ground, and strangle him until he loses consciousness.

Fighters also said that scripting helped them keep their fear under control during the emotionally intense minutes before their fights commenced. In the locker room, fighters often warmed up by hitting pads as their trainers went over their game plans. For example, after saying, "I was real nervous, I was sweating" before a recent fight and being asked if anything helped, Dustin said: "I had my coach and he was holding pads as well as telling me the game plan." Some fighters suggested that bringing their scripts into the cage helped them keep their worries under control before the first bell rang. After being asked if he was "experiencing fear or any type of emotions" when he recently entered the cage, Garrett said, "I sort of remember just being chill when I was in there. I had my game plan and I was going to try to implement it."

Scripting also played a role in how the fighters made sense of both their victories and defeats in ways that preserved their commitment to enacting manhood through cage fighting. Fighters, for example, maintained the notion that scripting helped them win and control their fear by giving their game plans credit for defeating opponents. As Jimmy explained minutes after a successful bout, "I'm going to pat myself on the back and say I stuck to my game plan . . . I never really did get too frustrated or nervous." Even when their manhood acts in some ways failed (i.e., they lost), trainers and fighters used scripting to minimize the fear that they were not cut out for the cage and evoke confidence that they could come out on top in the future.<sup>11</sup> One night at the local gym, for

example, one trainer proclaimed to a fighter, "You lost when you didn't listen to my game plan." Keeping alive the idea that scripting propelled fighters to victory thus preserved it as a resource for managing emotional manhood.

Developing, embodying, and reviewing their scripts enabled fighters to keep their emotions in check and put on convincing manhood acts. Choreographing their violence was highly rational, taking into account their opponents' and their own perceived strengths and weaknesses to devise strategies. Such scripting thus not only signified manhood by minimizing fear but also by denoting rationality, a key cultural marker of manhood.

### **Framing**

MMA fighters also used framing to do emotion work that signified masculine selves. Following Goffman (1974), we define a frame as a definition that answers the question, "What is going on here?" Framing shapes how one not only thinks about a situation but also how one feels. Albas and Albas (1988), for example, show how students minimized fear of exams in part by framing them as "quizzes." Fighters' emotional framing most often involved defining cage fights as (a) just another day in the gym, (b) business, and (c) a valuable experience. They used these strategies individually and interpersonally, although they generally hid them from members of the local gym who did not compete in competitions.

Framing a fight as just another day in the gym boosted confidence and mitigated fear by defining competitions as banal. Although the audience, announcers, ring girls, medical professionals, and steel cage made competitions objectively different than training, fighters often equated fights with everyday training. Lou said that he kept "calm and composed" by thinking "in my mind that [the fight] is

<sup>11</sup>While some might argue that losing undermined their manhood acts, because the sport is marketed as a contest of violent masculinity, we think that *most* people view participants—regardless of their win/loss record—as credibly masculine (the same could be said of professional football players on losing teams). Of course, winning likely boosts one's masculine status more than losing.

a sparring match. [I] think of it as another day in the gym." When asked how they dealt with their emotions prior to a competition, Scotty said, "Just be natural and do the same things that I do in the gym"; Felix answered, "I basically want the mindset that I have in practice"; and Nick said he "stay[s] cool because it's just like every other day in training." Such framing thus managed emotional manhood by mitigating fear.

Unlike scripting, framing fights as "just another day in the gym" was not part of the culture of the local gym. Because many men trained but did not participate in competitions, MMA fighters preserved their status as more dominant men by maintaining a public distinction between training and competition. Backstage, however, MMA competitors learned about this emotion management strategy from veteran fighters and trainers. When asked about how he helps fighters control their pre-fight emotions, for example, Dominic said:

A lot of those conversations happen behind closed doors. [Or] at three in the morning. You get a phone call from a fighter and he is like, "I don't know that I can do this." And you have to be like, "Yes, you can. You do this every day in the gym."

Whereas fighters often presented themselves as invincible in the gym, they expressed more vulnerability backstage. In these hidden moments, more experienced fighters often engaged in interpersonal emotion work to ease their fears. Although such emotional support is culturally coded as "feminine," new fighters used what they learned to enact emotional manhood.

In addition to defining the fight as another day in the gym, fighters also managed fear by framing the fight as business. For example, Victor said, "Before a fight you are always a little nervous . . . but

when you step into the cage . . . you just go and do your job. It is like an everyday office guy." Steven said that when he goes into the cage, he "must remain a sportsman about it and understand that it's a profession." Larry said, "A true professional in this sport approaches this as a business . . . I got to put this dude down and get my money so I can put food on the table." When asked how he dealt with his pre-fight emotions minutes after he won his first fight, Forest said, "I had to turn into a professional . . . I wanted to be calm." Although newcomers sometimes used this strategy, the more experienced fighters most often invoked the rhetoric of professionalism and business, probably because they could more credibly claim it.

Cage fighters' framing of fighting as a business endeavor was commonplace at the gym, perhaps because it reinforced the status differences between competitive fighters and those they occasionally derided (in interviews) as "hobbyists." In addition to overtly referencing professionalism in the gym, fighters alluded to it by talking about prize money. One of the more successful fighters, Rocky, for example, bragged one evening that he never accepted a fight for less than \$1,000 and talked about being on the verge of gaining sponsors who would help him double his pot. Although competitive fighters often evoked the business metaphor, none turned a profit. They usually fought in no more than three matches a year, most of which paid \$200 if they showed up and an additional \$200 if they won, while the fighters spent \$100 a month on gym memberships. Even Rocky admitted, privately, that he was considering quitting because he could no longer afford it.

In contradiction to framing the fight as "just another day in the gym," the fighters also mitigated fear by framing the fight as a valuable experience. Newcomers more often used this strategy than veterans.

When asked what helped him deal with emotions before a recent fight, Steven said, "I just kind of looked at it as there's no pressure on me . . . it's an opportunity, obviously, to get some experience and [I should] just go out and enjoy it." Isaac managed emotional manhood by framing a fight in the wider context of his biography:

When I showed up . . . all those doubts crept into my mind. Doubts like, "Why in the hell am I doing this?" There is obviously a risk of having your face punched in. . . . "Why am I doing this to myself? Why do I put myself in this position?" So for me what works is just to sit back . . . and say, "I'm doing something that is so important to me. And it is something that I want to do so badly. And that this is something that I am going to remember for a long time. That is why this is making me this nervous."

In this example, Isaac explains how he manages his fear by framing a fight as one of his life's most cherished moments. Doing so swept his doubts under the rug, enabling him to more convincingly display emotional manhood.

While losing matches could make fighters fear that they were no longer cut out for the cage, framing their losses as valuable learning experiences often eased their fears and gave them enough confidence to continue. Nick said, for example, that a recent "loss taught me a lot of things about being inside the cage, a lot about being calm and my nerves and just how to compose myself in the cage. So this time coming in I am ready for it." Dean emphasized that even if one loses, one gains: "And all my lessons learned from losing are the kind of lessons that stick." Fighters seemed to have learned this strategy of viewing losses as learning experiences from other fighters. For example, Steven explained how a famous fighter made sense of losing before

proceeding to similarly frame his own recent loss:

He said that [his loss] was the best thing that ever happened to him. . . . When you are able to gain more from a loss, in some cases it can become a win. And mentally, I think it does more for your psyche. [H]aving suffered [a] loss . . . the next fight that you have, your mental preparation will probably be a little bit more crisp and sharp. . . . The reinforcement is, "This is one to learn from. Don't let this same thing happen again."

Framing losing as lessons thus helped fighters with various levels of experience keep their fear in check and maintain commitment to cage fighting, both of which signified manhood.

Framing fights as another day in the gym, a business opportunity, and a valuable experience helped MMA fighters manage emotional manhood by keeping their fear under control. In addition, by framing fighting as business, they also drew on cultural ideals of manhood (Connell 1995). While framing—like scripting—was sometimes collaborative, all of the frames were not shared publicly. Framing competitions as similar to training was a form of private emotional support among competitors and trainers, while framing fights as business or valuable experiences was part of the local gym's front-stage culture. This helped position competitive fighters as superior to hobbyists, furthering the manly image of those brave enough to enter the cage.

### **Othering**

Fighters also mitigated fear and bolstered confidence and pride by defining themselves as superior to their opponents. Such "othering" (see e.g., Schwalbe et al. 2000)—whether it involved creating powerful virtual selves ("implicit othering") or defining their opponents as inferior

("oppressive othering")—made them feel like victory was within reach. As we will show, both the meanings of such othering and its emotional impact helped fighters signify credible masculine selves.

Managing emotional manhood via othering was often an interpersonal process and generally involved more experienced gym members easing the less experienced members' fears. "If I say, 'Oh, I feel uncomfortable with this,'" Donovan said that his trainer tells him, "You got great hands [and] can take this guy down [and] submit him." Henry said of his trainers, "They're building me up, telling me I got all the ability in the world [and] I'll win." Tanner said his fears were eased when "my teammate told me that there is no way in the world that this guy is going to be as tough as the guys you're training with." Felix explained that his trainer gave him the "usual pep talk" before a recent fight: "You've trained better than this guy. You're a better fighter." Trainers and gym mates thus painted fighters as superior to their opponents, which mitigated fear and bolstered their confidence and pride as dominant men.

Interviews with trainers revealed that such othering was intended to manage men's pre-fight jitters. When asked how he kept his fighters from "getting nervous," one trainer said: "I was telling Colby before this fight, 'This guy is not even in your league. He shouldn't even be fighting you.'" Another trainer, Kenneth, said that he takes into account what he knows about the fighters' habits and training when crafting an emotionally uplifting message:

I was really pumping Rocky up because I know that's what he needs. He is just a testosterone-laden guy. I am like, "You are going to out athleticism this guy, you are so much stronger," and I got him to be really aggressive . . . and feel really confident.

With Scotty, however, Kenneth took a different strategy:

We didn't bring in enough yuppies for him to beat up on. His training partners were all people who he could probably never beat in a fight. . . . And so with that he has developed this mindset where he is very comfortable being on his back, being in a bad position, being beat up. With him you just want to tell him that, "You know what, Scotty, you know what you are doing, you can finish people. You do it all the time."

These excerpts demonstrate how trainers incorporate their perceptions of each fighter's "mindset" and training into their interpersonal emotion management strategies. Such implicit othering was intended, as Kenneth put it, to make fighters "confident." Transforming fear into confidence was crucial in enabling fighters to put on a credible manhood act.

Fighters individually used creative variations of these othering strategies to quell their fears and emotionally prepare themselves for battle. A few drew on cultural products such as films and racial stereotypes. When asked how he kept his fear in check, Cecil, an African American fighter, said:

Right before my fight, I go ahead and do my pre-fight ritual. [Guys from] my gym call me "King Kong" because of my grappling style and [so] I awaken that inner gorilla . . . I rock back and forth and I have visions of a gorilla coming out of a cage, [like] when King Kong comes out of the cage and he pounds his chest powerfully just as lightning strikes. I hear the thunder and [see] lightning hitting the ground when I roar. You hear my roar and you look at my eyes. And I am ready to go into the cage.



Like medical students envisioning themselves as healers in order to mitigate their fear of disgust (Smith and Kleinman 1989), Cecil quelled fear and bolstered confidence by viewing himself as an animalistic monster. He thus drew on a film to symbolically align himself with dehumanizing stereotypes of violent African American men (see Collins 2004), which ironically helped him emotionally signify that he was a "real man."

Fighters' othering used not only Hollywood scripts, but also video games as resources. After Rocky asserted that he does not fear the cage, he was asked how he managed that. He said:

I pretty much think of it as a video game. He has a little energy bar and a stamina bar above his head and every time I hit him that bar goes down. I try to think about the fact that every second that I don't hit him that energy bar may be going back up. I think of myself the same way, except I pretend that my energy bar never goes down. It's just like I am in invincible mode.

Similar to medical students who manage emotions by, for example, "dehumanizing" a patient as a "broken toaster" (Smith and Kleinman 1989:61), Rocky muted fear by constructing his opponent as well as himself as pixelated pugilists. His othering also conveyed masculine dominance by representing his virtual self as so "invincible" that "nothing can hurt me."

In addition to defining themselves as physically superior to their opponents, fighters also regulated emotions by constructing themselves as mentally superior. Rocky explained his thoughts before the fight, "I'm not intimidated . . . I'm just as strong mentally as I am physically," and Allan said, "I think, 'My will is a little bit stronger than yours.'" When asked how he dealt with his emotions before a fight, a veteran fighter said:

The specific thing that I always tell myself is that I am way smarter than the other guy. And that may or may not be true obviously, but that's the thought I have because everybody trains their asses off for a fight. . . . For me, I am going to say—while I am looking across [the cage]—that, "I know you trained hard, but I trained better. I trained smarter. I know more of what I am doing than you do. I am going to be able to think faster than you and be able to deal with any situation you put me in better than you."

Similar to other fighters, he boosted his confidence by constructing a powerful virtual self as intellectually superior to his opponent. As he implied, however, the emotion work strategy's success at mitigating fear was contingent on denying the fact that "it may not be true." Suspending disbelief likely helped him as well as others manage emotional manhood.

Instead of focusing on their own mental or physical acuity, some fighters painted opponents as, emotionally speaking, insufficiently masculine. When Dominic was asked how he dealt with his nerves before entering the cage, he said,

I like thinking about the fact that whatever the other guy is doing, you're going to beat him anyway. If the guy needs to cry like a girl in order to fight, you are still going to beat him. If he needs his parents in the stands to support him, you are still going to beat him.

Drawing on the larger culture, Dominic thus constructed competitors as fearful girls who depended on others ("parents") for emotional support. Other fighters similarly managed their own fear by imagining their opponent as fearful, which is culturally associated with women. As a veteran local fighter put it:

What I think about . . . is not that I'm nervous, but I'm thinking about the fact that he's fucking nervous, you know what I'm saying? I know that somewhere deep down in his heart there's at least one ounce of fear or apprehensiveness or tentativeness and I just like to play on that. I imagine that he's scared shitless.

Similar to how nascent male-to-female transsexuals engage in "personal pep talks" to control fear when preparing to go out in public as women (Schrock, Boyd, and Leaf 2009), fighters' masculinist self-talk bolstered their confidence as they set forth to bash symbolic women.

Before fighters left the locker room and entered the arena, trainers often engaged in othering to emotionally prepare them. Before one fight Emil ran in place backstage, fixing his eyes on the ground, and his trainer leaned in and in a dramatic tone said, "You got more heart." Emil nodded once and continued to run in place, before the trainer leaned in again and said a little more loudly, "You're the best." The trainer then peeked out at the audience momentarily before moving just inches from Emil's face, saying in a serious tone and with widened eyes, "All these people came to see you." The trainer then glanced toward Emil's opponent warming up a few feet away and said, "He is not going to steal it from you." Emil began rhythmically nodding his head and banging his fists together. As music began and the announcer dramatically introduced Emil, he left the locker room and made his way to the cage.

Nationalism and implicit racism were also occasionally used in such othering, which bolstered confidence as fighters headed to the cage. In the locker room before one contest, Larry and his trainer—both of whom were white and U.S. citizens—were waiting as Larry's opponent—a Peruvian national—entered

the cage. Larry's trainer then told him that he had requested a "special song" be played for his own entrance. As Bruce Springsteen's "Born in the USA" began to play loudly over the sound system, the crowd erupted.<sup>12</sup> Larry glanced at his trainer and cracked a smile, pounded his fists together, and confidently growled, "I'm taking this fucker to school" as they entered the arena.

Fighters' othering—which defined fighters as superior to their opponents—constituted managing emotional manhood. Such othering drew on cultural ideals and stereotypes, was accomplished individually and interpersonally, and not only kept fighters' fear under control but bolstered confidence as they entered an objectively fear-inducing situation. Thus, othering cultivated emotional expressions that resonated with gendered feeling rules and signified, in the dramaturgical sense, a masculine self.

### FOSTERING FEAR

Another way fighters managed emotional manhood was by fostering fear in their opponents. Inducing fear in other men essentially signified that they themselves were so powerful that they could turn other men, emotionally speaking, into women. Such emotional micropolitics not only raised one's own status (Clark 1990) but also signified masculine selves—that is, it conveyed that they were in control of not only their own but also their opponents' feelings.

Competitions provided many opportunities for the men to try to evoke fear in their opponents. The day before a match, fighters saw each other during weigh-ins and meetings with promoters and officials. Fighters sometimes strategically

<sup>12</sup>Although the lyrics of this song are critical of the United States, it was used here (as well as in most public events where it is played) in a nationalist fashion.

presented themselves backstage in hope of intimidating opponents; they walked around “trying to be a badass,” as one fighter put it. Local fighters sometimes donned new hairstyles at competitions that bolstered their tough image, such as getting a Mohawk, dying their hair outlandish colors, or shaving it off. Interviewees sometimes strategically displayed their physique and, if given a chance, added some verbal innuendo intended to evoke fear. After discussing how he managed his own fear, for example, Taylor said, “Not everybody is built like me. I’ve had guys that have just seen me and backed out of a fight before.” Asked to expound, he described what happened at a tough man contest:

I’m walking around with my shirt off. . . . And another guy walks up to me and he says, “Hey what weight class are you fighting in?” And I said, “I’m fighting a light weight.” And he looks at me and he’s like, “Man, there is no way you’re a light weight.” And since then I ain’t never seen that guy again. He was obviously in my weight class [and] was like, “Shit.” And the next thing you know, all the promoters were talking, “We just lost a fighter.” (mutual laughter) Intimidation is a huge, huge, huge portion of it.

Here Taylor suggests that he evoked fear in his opponent by going shirtless and displaying his considerable muscularity. Telling his opponent that he was fighting “a light weight” instead of “in the light weight division” may have also been effective.

The weigh-in ritual was a key moment in which fighters attempted to intimidate each other. It generally began with fighters being called up for quick medical checkups. During this time, the room was filled with chatter and laughter as fighters, trainers, and promoters from different cities mingled. When it was time for

fighters to weigh in, however, fighters and trainers coalesced into gym-based groups and—except for the announcer calling up opponents—the room was silent. When called, fighters walked up to the center of the stage, wearing nothing but boxers, and stepped on a scale. After their weight was announced, they flexed their muscles and briefly posed for pictures. Once each opponent did this, the two men posed together for “stare down” photos, in which they stood eye-to-eye in fighting stances. When asked how he tried to intimidate his opponent during the pre-fight ritual, Forrest said:

You never let them know that you’re scared of them. So you always look them dead in the eye. Never back down, never do anything to make it look like you’re nervous. You know, just pretend like you’re—act like you’re confident the whole time.

Keeping one’s own fear under control was thus key to instilling fear in opponents. Fighters typically put on one of three intimidating personas during the stare down: (a) the arrogantly confident “High School Quarterback,” (b) the barely controllable angry “Wide-Eyed Madman,” or (c) the unflappable “Bored Russian.”<sup>13</sup> The most overt attempts to induce fear were the “madmen,” who often invaded opponents’ personal space and made bodily contact.

On the day of the fight, fighters usually had opportunities to intimidate each other backstage, as they often shared a locker room or had backstage areas that were connected. For example, Dustin said,

<sup>13</sup>The prototypes listed here are part of a story that appears on multiple MMA Web sites (see e.g., <http://www.mmauniverse.com/articles/SS118>). Although all fighters’ presentations did not perfectly resemble one of these ideal types, their self-presentations generally reflected one of them more closely than another.

"The way the locker rooms were set up, I could see [my opponent] watching me when I was warming up." Dustin said he looked at his trainer and said loudly, "Are you ready for me to knock this mother fucker out? I'm going to fuck him up!" He added, "I could just tell he didn't want to fight me . . . he was worried about it." When Garrett similarly saw his opponent checking him out in the locker room, he whacked the punching mitts his trainer was holding with particular vigor, hoping to intimidate his opponent. Managing emotional manhood thus involved using the body and language in attempt to control others' emotions.

Some interviewees, especially newcomers, revealed that their opponents' backstage presentations sometimes evoked fear in them. Once when Garrett arrived at the arena for pre-fight activities, he found out that the promoters changed his opponent and saw his new one "looking all rugged, I was intimidated." Lou said his confidence was "utterly shattered" when he saw his opponent moments before his fight, suggesting he "would not be surprised if this guy left weigh-in and shot steroids . . . he was impressively bigger [by] 20 pounds." Doug said of his opponent, "When I got a look at him it was intimidating [because] he looks like someone in a bar that would beat the shit out of you . . . I was nervous." Dean explained how when he first saw his opponent, "a big stocky old man," he thought, "Oh man! I'm going to have to out-wrestle him." [Then] I see a Wacala wrestling bag. Wacala is a really good wrestling program. So I was like, 'Damn, there goes wrestling [from my game plan]!'" Opponents' presentations could thus unravel their game plans and confidence, although they tried to not to show it.

Many fighters said they tried to intimidate opponents when entering the cage. Most often fighters said that they

attempted to do this in a subtle fashion. When asked if they tried to intimidate opponents once in the ring, Tommy said, "I try to look at his face when the referee is talking to us"; another said, "I give my opponent a little stare-down and intimidate him"; and Ayden said, "I just come out and let him know that I'm not afraid. I size him up and give a little stare." Fighters' demeanor was thus part of their dramaturgical arsenal.

African American fighters sometimes presented themselves in ways that resonated with racial stereotypes, hoping to evoke fear in opponents. Dion would enter the ring doing "the gorilla stomp, just to intimidate my opponent . . . and get the crowd going." At one event he was observed running into the cage and jumping vertically about four feet into the air before stomping down on the middle of the mat with both feet, shaking the whole cage and creating a loud noise that reverberated through the arena. He then charged at his opponent, who was required to remain in his corner, and repeated the gorilla stomp, coming down a mere foot from his competitor as he yelled in unison with the roaring crowd. Immediately after this fight, the loser was asked how he felt before the opening bell: "I was terrified." Taylor, another African American, fashioned himself in stereotypical gang attire, wearing dark glasses and a doo-rag, and sometimes a black t-shirt with "Danger" printed on the front, and generally entered the arena to a song that started with gun shots. When asked about his presentation, Taylor, a college-educated information technology professional, responded:

That's all Hollywood. I'm not a gangster. Do I sound like a gangster? . . . I kind of put all that into a persona. . . . If me coming out to some music or wearing something on my face, or glasses will put a little ounce of doubt in this guy's

head, make him think, "Hey, man, this is a bad mother fucker right here," it's only to my benefit.

While Dion's and Taylor's performance constituted "passion work" (Smith 2008) because it could generate crowd excitement, it also managed emotional manhood by evoking fear in their opponents. This worked in part because the cultural stereotypes of African American men orient others to view them as dangerously animalistic and criminal (Collins 2004).

If fighters sensed or caught glimpses of fear in opponents' faces, it affirmed their own manhood and motivated them to fight with confidence. In a post-victory interview, for example, Benny said he knew "the fight was mine" before it started because "I could sense that he just wasn't ready to fight me at all . . . he was nervous." Casey offered a bit more detail in his post-fight interview: "I looked across the cage at him—his face—he seemed kind-of scared. And I thought . . . that I'm probably going to win this. So I went out and shot right away and knocked him down." If their own violence evoked fear in opponents during a fight, the men felt particularly powerful and motivated to finish them off. As Rocky said:

Once they're all bruised up and I see the fear in their eyes and, man, I see that they realize that the fight isn't going to be as easy as they thought it was going to be—or that their game plan isn't working like they thought it was going to—that's really what gets me going.

Evoking fear in their opponents could thus work back on fighters' own emotions, motivating them to confidently attack.

Managing emotional manhood involves not only fighting one's own fear but also trying to evoke it in others. By strategically manipulating their appearance, engaging in nonverbal posturing, and

engaging in discursive acts, the fighters sometimes broke through their opponents' emotional defenses. Regulating their own emotions played a role in this micropolitical emotion work—whether presenting themselves as calm and collected or on the verge of rage. In addition, some men of color strategically embodied racial stereotypes that have long been used to control minority men as a resource to exert power over others. Regardless of the strategy used, the implication of this emotion work was that they, as men, should be respected and feared.

## CONCLUSION

Mixed martial arts competitors feared injury and losing and needed to manage these emotions to put on a convincing manhood act. Through scripting game plans; framing the fight as another day in the gym, business, or a valuable experience; and othering opponents as inferior, fighters usually kept their fear under enough control to enter the cage. They accomplished such emotion management personally and interpersonally and not only suppressed fear but evoked confidence. Fighters also engaged in a kind of micropolitical emotion management, seeking to instill fear in opponents by strategically using language and their bodies to enact intimidating personas.

Whereas most scholarship on gendered emotion work focuses on how women manage emotions at work and home in ways that reinforce their subordination (e.g., DeVault 1999; Elliott and Umberson 2008), we show how men do emotion work aimed at facilitating domination. We also show, however, that fighters' experience shaped how they managed emotions and that despite their best efforts, their fears often came true. The most experienced fighters more credibly used some strategies (e.g., the rhetoric of professionalism) than did newcomers,



and as more “privileged emotion managers” (Orzechowicz 2008), they were better able to quell or transform their fear. Similar to leaders of support groups (Francis 1997; Thoits 1996), experienced fighters more often acted as emotional guides who not only managed newcomers’ fear but taught them strategies that they could use individually or on other fighters—that is, they passed down some “emotional capital” (Cahill 1999) to the next generation of cage fighters. More generally, although all fighters’ emotion work aimed to manage their fears of losing and pain, because fighters inevitably lose and are injured, the sport created the conditions under which their emotion work was in some ways “doomed to fail” (Copp 1998). While such failure could lead some fighters to quit, our analysis shows how many used some of the same emotion work strategies (scripting and framing) to quell fears that they were not cut out for the sport, bolstering commitment to the cage despite repeated beatings.

Our study also contributes to sociological social psychology by developing the notion of “managing emotional manhood” in order to bring together insights from research on emotions and gender and research on emotions and identity work. In doing so, we promote an interactionist approach that views emotion, identity, and gender as intertwined social processes. Because people are held accountable to present appropriately gendered self-presentations (West and Zimmerman 1987), their emotion management is often geared toward signifying gender identity. One implication of this is that emotion scholars should move beyond considering gendered feeling rules as “masculine” or “feminine,” as if these concepts have some objective status (see Bem’s [1993] critique). Instead, we advocate viewing such rules as part of an “identity code” (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996) that defines what acts—emotional or

otherwise—are commonly interpreted as signifying one is a real “man” or “woman.” As our study suggests, controlling one’s own fear while fostering it in others is key to the identity code of manhood.

Understanding that emotion management may constitute gendered identity work may enrich our understanding of qualitative and quantitative research that has found sex differences in emotion work. In her structural equation analysis, for example, Lively (2008:927) finds that men efficiently transition from one emotion to another whereas women making similar transitions generally “move through more intervening emotions.” She suggests that these differences may be due to how men and women’s brains differently process emotions, social structure, or “subculture variation” in how women and men feel and manage emotions (Lively 2008:929). Consistent with our approach, another possibility may be that men do emotion work more efficiently because expressing many emotions, especially those indicating vulnerability, is inconsistent with signifying masculine selves (and vice versa for women). Erickson and Ritter (2001:160) find that men are more likely than women to experience agitation at work but less likely to manage it, suggesting it might be due to “power and status” or the different types of jobs men and women typically hold. We might add that because anger is one of the few emotional expressions that is consistent with the identity code for “being a man,” men may feel freer to express irritation at work (and vice versa for women). Ethnographic research comparing how men and women differently manage emotions at work suggest that gender socialization leads women to engage in feminine and men to engage in masculine styles of emotion management, which preserves status distinctions (Lewis 2005; Lois 2003; Martin 1999; Pierce 1995). Our analysis would suggest that such differences

may exist because men and women's emotion work are part of their differently gendered identity work projects. Thus, while socialization, status hierarchies, and working conditions may indeed shape emotion work, our approach would emphasize that people still put their agency to use to regulate emotions so as to signify their gendered identities.

More broadly, our analysis shows how culture is implicated in gendered emotion work. In addition to providing the identity categories and codes that enable us to interpret an emotional display as signifying the gender identity, we can also see how culture is a "tool kit" (Swidler 1986) of resources that can be used to accomplish gendered emotion work. More specifically, our analysis shows how fighters mitigated fear and cultivated confidence by using cultural ideals of men as rational, business-minded, and physically intimidating (Connell 1995). In addition, the men sometimes drew on stereotypes of women as dependent and overemotional and of men of color as animal-like and criminal (Collins 2004) to manage emotions. Furthermore, fighters' emotion work helps reproduce the cultural ideals that men should feel confident and fearless in the quest to dominate others. Of course, MMA fighters have a larger audience than do most others who do so. Because MMA is the fastest growing professional sport in contemporary society (Snowden 2008), such gendered emotion work (as well as their violence) also constitutes a cultural product consumed by the masses.

Our study also demonstrates the value of adopting a social psychological approach to emotions for gender scholars of men and masculinity. Although research and theory on men and masculinity often suggests men are supposed to be emotionally inexpressive (Connell 1995; Sattel 1976), social psychology can deepen our understanding of why that is the case (feeling rules/

identity codes), the processes through which men regulate emotions (emotion management), and how such regulation signifies a virtual masculine self (identity work). Furthermore, whereas it has been said that men and other dominant groups attempt to evoke fear in subordinates to better control them (e.g., Schwalbe et al. 2000), our study suggests that controlling one's own fear may also be important for maintaining one's power or at least deriving compensatory benefits from those who control distribution systems.

While case studies are limited in that they cannot be generalized to a larger population, they can help us develop robust "sensitizing concepts" (Blumer 1969), which are useful for analyzing trans-situational processes. Much previous research provides glimpses of managing emotional manhood, including studies of male stalkers (Dunn 2002), rapists (Scully 1990), and batterers (Hearn 1998) that show how such men blunt empathy and/or evoke fear and shame in women. And, as suggested earlier, much research on men's emotional work lives—including studies of health care workers (Lewis 2005), rescue workers (Lois 2003), and lawyers (Pierce 1995)—can similarly be viewed as showing how men's emotion management constitutes manhood acts. While future research may uncover important variations, we suspect managing emotional manhood is a social process that can be examined in diverse settings.

One direction for future research that would deepen our understanding of managing emotional manhood would be to investigate how men in different contexts manage emotions in addition to fear—such as guilt, anger, and empathy—as part of their identity work. We also think microsociologists should examine how women's emotion management is implicated in not only their subordination but also their gendered identity work; that is, how they "manage emotional

womanhood.”<sup>14</sup> It may also be fruitful to systematically examine people breaking the feeling rules proscribed for their sex category, as is the case with women who participate in MMA or men who participate in groups that encourage the open expression of shame and fear. Such “cross-gendered” emotion work may involve some strategies used in gendered emotion work, yet the meanings of and thus the responses to such work may be very different. And finally, since gender identity is intertwined with race, class, and sexual identity, microsociologists should explore more thoroughly how these statuses are implicated in gendered feeling rules and emotion work (see e.g., Wilkins 2010; Wingfield 2010).

Putting on a convincing manhood act requires more than using language and the body; it also requires emotion work. By suppressing fear, empathy, pain, and shame and evoking confidence and pride, males signify their alleged possession of masculine selves. Such emotion work may thus create an emotional orientation that primes men to subordinate and harm others. And by signifying masculine selves through evoking fear and shame in others, such men are likely to more easily secure others’ deference and accrue rewards and status. Managing emotional manhood, whether it occurs in a locker room or boardroom, at home or the Oval Office, likely plays a key role in maintaining unequal social arrangements.

<sup>14</sup>Hochschild’s research on dual-career relationships comes close to this. It is here that she suggests that one’s emotion work is “guided by an ideologically informed aim . . . to sustain a certain gendered ego-ideal, to be for example a ‘cookies-and-milk mom’ or a ‘career woman’” (Hochschild 1990:129). Yet the notion of an “ego ideal” is more consistent with viewing identity as part of the self-concept than with identity as a dramaturgical construction.

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