PSYC4559: Psychology of Violence
Time: MW 2:00pm-3:15pm
Location: Gilmer 240

Instructor: Meret Hofer
Office Hours: Mondays 12:30-1:30 | Office: Gilmer 302
Email: meret.hofer@virginia.edu | Phone: 434-243-3180

Course Description

Violence is a complex social problem that is best understood using a multidisciplinary approach. Drawing on research and theoretical frameworks from the fields of psychology, biology, sociology, criminology, anthropology, and law, this course will cover the roots of violence, specific subtypes of aggression and violence, as well as the physical and psychological consequences of violence. This course examines aggressive and violent behavior across the life-span and will consider what we know and do not know about the epidemiology, etiology, risk and protective factors, and treatment approaches for various forms of aggressive and violent behavior, including its impact on victims, perpetrators, and society. A primary focus of the course will be to examine the interactive effects of biological, psychological, and social factors in explaining and responding to violent psychopathology. When relevant, we will discuss how public policy and law are affected by the current understanding of aggression and violence.

We will also examine the ways in which violence is portrayed in a range of representational media, challenging students to consider how portrayals of violence can mobilize sensitivity and accountability while honoring the memory of those who have been affected by the act of violence. Through these perspectives, the course will deepen our understanding of violence in a range of contexts as well as uncover intervention efforts that have effectively prevented or controlled violence in our communities.

Classes will involve lectures on selected topics, documentary screenings, and class discussions and exercises. Students are required to attend and actively participate in class, submit written assignments, lead a presentation and complete a final paper.

Course Objective and Learning Outcomes

At the conclusion of this course, you will be able to:
1. Integrate a range of theoretical perspectives to generate comprehensive explanations for why individuals act aggressively and violently.
2. Recognize the range of biological-, individual-, social-, and structural-level factors that put someone at risk for or protect an at-risk individual from becoming violent.
3. Describe and distinguish between various subtypes of aggression and violence and report their impact on its victims.
4. Identify empirically-supported means for assessing and measuring aggression.
5. Thoughtfully reflect upon the range of representational options available to portray acts of violence with consideration to the unique goals of the portrayal.
6. Describe empirically-supported prevention and treatment programs for combating violence.
General Policies

Readings: Required readings will be available on Collab.

Academic Honesty: As you are aware, the University of Virginia maintains a strict honor code that helps to create a community of trust in our classes. It is one of the most valuable aspects of attending or teaching at UVa, and we should all take pride in maintaining this tradition. If a violation of the honor code comes to my attention, the person(s) involved will get a 0 for the assignment or exam, independent of any action taken by the honor committee. For more information about the honor code, see http://www.virginia.edu/honor/index.html.

Learning Environment: Every student is responsible for helping to establish a safe, positive learning environment for themselves and their fellow students. This includes helping other students focus on the course material by turning off your cell phones and refraining from engaging in distracting activities on the computer (such as answering emails, chatting, checking Facebook, etc.). Additionally, due to the sensitive and, perhaps at times distressing, nature of the materials covered in this course a safe and empathetic learning environment is all the more important. When engaging in class discussion and debates on sensitive topics please be respectful of your fellow students.

Accommodations: If you receive accommodations through SDAC, please notify me as soon as possible.

Dates for dropping course with and without penalty:

- September 5 – Last Day for Adding
- September 6 – Last Day to Drop (deletion from transcript)
- October 15 – Last Day to Withdraw

Course Requirements and Grading

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Percentage of Final Grade</th>
<th>Due Date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attendance &amp; Participation</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Assignments:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Statement of Reflexivity</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>Monday 8/28 posted by 9 AM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Issues of Measurement</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>Monday 9/11 posted by 9 AM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Integrating Theoretical Perspectives</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>Monday 10/09 posted by 9 AM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Representations of Violence</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>Monday 10/30 posted by 9 AM by sign-up: 10/30-11/29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Presentation</td>
<td>10%</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paper Prep</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>Monday, 11/06 posted by 9 AM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Paper</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>Papers should be posted on Collab by 2 PM on 12/4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A+ = 97% +  A = 94-96%  A- = 90-93%  B+ = 87-89%  B = 84-86%  B- = 80-83%  
C+ = 77-79%  C = 74-76%  C- = 70-73%  D+ = 67-69%  D = 64-66%  D- = 60-63%  F = < 59%
Attendance & Participation (20%)

Students are expected to attend every class. Unexplained absences will affect your final grade. If you must miss a class, please speak to me in advance or as soon as possible.

Students are expected to actively participate when opportunities arise. Although class will be centered around lectures, discussions of readings and assignments are an important way in which to integrate the materials that are covered. Students should be aware that they may be called on to analyze the readings during class. It is expected that all students will (1) attend class, (2) have read all required readings and prepared thoughtful comments and questions about the reading prior to class, (3) be active participants.

Active participation includes...
- arriving to class on time.
- using your computer only for taking notes or referencing readings.
- completing the assigned readings by the specified deadline.
- speaking up during class discussions, including disagreeing respectfully.
- doing your fair share during in-class group activities.
- asking questions of me and your fellow students.

If you don’t typically feel comfortable contributing to in-class discussion, please let me know so we can find an alternative way for you to participate in class!

A Note on the use of computers: A number of studies have shown that students take better notes by hand than on a laptop. For this reason, it is highly recommended that you take notes with pen and paper. If you choose to use a laptop for note-taking, please know that laptop screens can be very distracting to the people sitting behind you, especially if you are engaged in activities not related to class (e.g., checking email, responding to messages, checking Facebook, online shopping, etc.). If you’re found to be using your computer for anything other than note-taking, you will be asked to leave class and your participation / attendance grade will be impacted.

Assignments (50%)

Formatting for assignments: All written assignments should be completed in 12-point Times New Roman, double-spaced, with 1-inch margins and APA-formatted references. All assignments must be submitted on Collab by the specified deadlines. Please do not email me assignments as attachments. Written assignments should be submitted as Word documents.

Critical Reflection: Statement of Reflexivity (10%)
The purpose of this assignment (750 words minimum) is to help you examine and clarify your personal perspective (values, attitudes and beliefs) about aggression and violence. This paper is intended to be YOUR perspective. As such, you do not have to reference any outside readings or resources. In completing this assignment, you may wish to consider the following questions:
- In what ways has your culture, social setting, ethnicity, race, socioeconomic class or upbringing affected your beliefs about the origins or expressions of aggression / violence?
- Can you identify any assumptions you may have about aggression / violence? If so, what are the norms and beliefs in your background that have influenced these assumptions?
- Have you ever experienced any forms of aggression / violence against you?
- Have you witnessed experiences of aggression / violence against others that have impacted you?
- Have you engaged in any forms of aggression / violence against others?
- In thinking through this assignment, did you have any particular insights that surprised you?

**Critical Reflection: Issues of Measurement (10%)**
The purpose of this assignment (750 words minimum) is to help you consider issues around the measurement of violence. To examine these issues, investigate one of the crowd-sourced databases on police-involved civilian deaths:

- [The Counted](#)
- [Fatal Encounters](#)
- [Washington Post’s Fatal Force](#)

Critically reflect on the information the archive provides. What does the database do well? What is missing? What kind of conclusions can we feel comfortable drawing from it? In order to give an informed analysis, please download and review the raw data from the database. What variables are provided in the database? What else should be included? Use one or more specific cases contained in the database in order to inform your perspective and highlight any issues you’ve identified. Finally, it is recommended you review at least one article (please provide a link) relying on the data in the archive you chose. Does the article accurately represent what the data can tell us?

**Critical Reflection: Integrating Theoretical Perspectives (10%)**
The purpose of this assignment (750 words minimum) is to help you consider the benefits and challenges of integrating inter-disciplinary theoretical perspectives on violence. Referring back to readings and lecture, you may wish to consider the following questions:

- Can you identify the underlying assumptions about the nature of violence / aggression that guide different theoretical perspectives on violence and aggression?
- To what extent do different theoretical perspectives on violence / aggression complement or contradict each other?
- How can we navigate the contradictions between theoretical perspectives on violence and aggression while aiming to reconcile disciplinary perspectives?
- How can different theoretical approaches to violence and aggression guide the consideration of effective intervention or prevention efforts?

**Critical Reflection: Representation of Violence (10%)**
Critically reflect on a portrayal of violence of your choice (750 words minimum). To analyze a representation of violence, you will identify and examine a portrayal of a particular act or type of violence. You may select from a wide spectrum of representational media such as public memorials, museum exhibits, entertainment media (TV, movie, comic books etc.), personal narratives, journalism, documentary film, photo reportage, or websites. You can go about finding the portrayal in two ways: 1) identify an area of violence of particular interest to you and then search for a representation of that topical area, or 2) locate a portrayal of violence that you find particularly compelling or problematic. Please consult me if you need ideas for your reflection.
While this assignment can be approached in several ways, here are a few questions you might address:
- What is the incident or topic of violence that is presented? When did it happen? What were the contributing factors?
- What is the goal of the portrayal? Considering the principles discussed in class, how successful or problematic is the portrayal?
- Describe your experience with your chosen portrayal of violence. What feelings did this portrayal of violence elicit in you?

Class Presentation: Representations of Violence (10%)
You will give brief presentation and lead a short discussion examining the representational media you analyzed for the prior written assignment. Please be ready to show us the representation you’ve chosen and present your analysis based on principles discussed in class and your own research.

Paper Preparation Assignment (5%)
The purpose of the paper prep assignment is to ensure that you are well prepared to write your final paper with a strong thesis and an appropriate combination references. The assignment should include your (1) paper topic, (2) general stance that you will take within your paper, (3) psychological studies and other references that are relevant to your topic (e.g., support your thesis or provide counterpoints), (4) a general outline of your paper. The paper prep assignment serves as your opportunity to ask any questions about how best to structure your paper, as well as to identify areas where you may become stuck. As you will receive detailed feedback on this assignment, it is in your best interest to have gotten as far on the paper as you are reasonably able.

Final Paper (25%)
To integrate and extend what you have learned in the course, you will write a 2500-3000 words final paper (excluding references) on an area of violence not covered in class. Your topic must be approved by me in advance. Even though you will submit your paper topic as part of the Paper Prep assignment, feel free to touch base with me at any time during the semester to get approval for your proposed topic. Possible areas of interest are listed below (feel free to come up with your own!).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Female delinquency</th>
<th>Abductions</th>
<th>Murder / serial murderers</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bullying</td>
<td>Hate crimes</td>
<td>Road rage</td>
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<tr>
<td>Terrorism</td>
<td>Cult behavior</td>
<td>Hazing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workplace violence</td>
<td>Elder abuse</td>
<td>Animal cruelty</td>
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<tr>
<td>Violence in sports / fan violence</td>
<td>Suicide</td>
<td>School violence / school shootings</td>
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<tr>
<td>Modern-day slavery</td>
<td>Human trafficking</td>
<td>Mass imprisonment / prison violence</td>
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<tr>
<td>War crimes</td>
<td>Torture</td>
<td>State-sponsored violence</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mass shootings</td>
<td>Gender-based violence</td>
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A more detailed grading rubric will be distributed in class, but your paper must include academic references and address the following areas:
- An overview of a particular area of violence, exemplified by specific example(s) (e.g., School shootings, exemplified by the Columbine shooting and/or Sandy Hook)
- An integrated interdisciplinary theoretical analysis of how this type of violence or the incidents of violence may be best interpreted.
- A review and evaluation of recent, rigorous scientific research in the area of violence you’ve selected.
- An examination of the availability of existing preventive/intervention efforts.
- As applicable: current/best practices for psychologists and/or legal background, including applicable court cases or legal guidelines to the extent available.

Your paper prep assignment and final paper are the single largest component of your course grade, and so I highly encourage you to come to office hours or set up an appointment with me to discuss your paper. Papers are due on Collab on December 4th. After this time, papers will be docked one-third letter grade (i.e., an A- will become a B+) and for each day thereafter that the papers are not turned in by 9 am. Papers will not be accepted after 5:00 PM on December 8th. If you’d like to receive individualized feedback on your paper (beyond simply receiving a grade), please email me by the paper’s due date.

**Extra Credit**

Students who complete the psychology department’s online course evaluation for this course will receive 4 extra credit points towards their participation grade. We will not be able to match your name with your evaluation comments, but the psychology department will provide us with a list of those students who complete the evaluation.
# TENTATIVE Class Schedule

Readings should be completed and submitted by Monday’s class.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Topics</th>
<th>Readings and Assignments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wed. 8/23</td>
<td>General Course Information</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wed. 8/30</td>
<td>Introduction to Violence: Identifying &amp; measuring violence</td>
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</table>
### Theories of Violence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Reading/Activity</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mon. 9/11</td>
<td>Biology</td>
<td><strong>Reflection: Issues of Measurement due by 9am</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wed. 9/13</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mon. 9/18</td>
<td>Sociology</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wed. 9/20</td>
<td>Anthropology</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mon. 9/25</td>
<td>Political Science</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wed. 9/27</td>
<td>Criminology</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mon. 10/2</td>
<td>No Class - Reading Holiday</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wed. 10/4</td>
<td>Integrating theoretical perspectives</td>
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</tbody>
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| Mon. 10/9 | SCREENING: A Girl in the River  
Reflection: Integrating Theoretical Perspectives due by 9am |
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mon. 10/16</td>
<td>Risk Assessment: Measuring &amp; Predicting Violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wed. 10/11</td>
<td>Violence and Mental Health</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Violence, Mental Health & Predictions of Dangerousness


Representations of Violence

Wed. 10/18
SCREENING: Frontline: Witness South Sudan

Mon. 10/23
Visual Representations of Violence


Wed. 10/25
Narrative Representations of Violence


Special Topics in Violence

Mon. 10/30
Cultural violence Reflection: Representation of Violence due by 9am Presentations


Wed. 11/1
Structural violence Presentations


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**Mon. 11/6**

**Direct violence:** Violence against women

**Paper Prep Assignment due by 9am Presentations**


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**Wed. 11/8**

**Preventing violence against women Presentations**


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**Mon. 11/13**

**Direct violence:** Child abuse & neglect

**Presentations**


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**Wed. 11/15**

**Preventing child abuse & neglect Presentations**


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**Mon. 11/20**  
Direct violence: Youth & gang violence  
**Presentations**

**Wed. 11/22**  
No Class – Thanksgiving

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**Mon. 11/27**  
War, genocide, crimes against humanity  
**Presentations**

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**Wed. 11/29**  
SCREENING: Long Night’s Journey into Day  
**Presentations**

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**Mon. 12/4**  
Wrap-up  
**Final Papers Due**  
No readings