

Institute on Violence, Power & Inequality

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Introduction

President Sullivan called upon the University of Virginia “to dedicate ourselves to becoming a model institution” in preventing and responding to violence, including and especially sexual violence. A *Violence, Power and Inequality* (VPI) Institute would help establish the University of Virginia as the premier institution in the country for understanding violence rooted in inequalities of power, such as sexual violence, providing UVa with a competitive edge in higher education while also responding to the pressing public need for a broad strategy when it comes to addressing violence in our communities, the commonwealth, the nation, and around the globe.

Intellectual Scope

Adapting the World Health Organization’s definition, we understand violence to be the threatened or actual use of physical force or power against oneself, another person, group, or community that leads to (or is likely to lead to) injury, psychological harm, maldevelopment, deprivation, or death. Its sources range from the immediate and interpersonal to the institutional and structural. Within this very broad category, the Institute on Violence, Power and Inequality would focus on the subset of violence that is rooted in inequalities of power and authority, or structural violence. Sexual violence is one important example of how direct physical violence intersects with structural violence. Others include racial violence, such as racial profiling by police, and sexuality-based violence, including crimes against those with marginalized sexualities. We believe that violence rooted in power and inequality presents unique challenges to understanding and to remediating, because its causes and consequences both extend well beyond the immediate context of a particular violent act.

Specifically, gender-, race-, sexuality-, and other power-based violence are particularly complex and intellectually important because they all occur at the intersections of systems of legitimate and illegitimate power and formal and informal systems of authority. Physical violence often serves to buttress systems of structural inequality, and is often perpetrated precisely when those less obtrusive mechanisms of social and interpersonal control are threatened or begin to fail. For example, violence against women often increases as male unemployment rises, because male unemployment undermines a man’s control of the household budget, weakening the foundations of patriarchal authority in the family. We therefore envision a mandate for the VPI Institute that includes a focus not just on physical violence, but also on the more distal antecedent factors—from the physiological to the economic and cultural—that undergird and set the context within which multiple forms of violence are perpetrated.

While gender-, race-, sexuality-, and other power-based violence all share a connection with systems of power and authority, each is uniquely shaped by the very different system of social stratification

DRAFT

and inequality within which it operates. The Institute would foster a broadly comparative approach to exploring these systems. This would facilitate research and teaching that compares and contrasts across gender, race, sexuality, and other systems of social stratification to explore the unique ways that violence is implicated in each; and to elucidate the ways that these different systems constitute, cross-cut, and shape each other.

Interdisciplinary Approach

The causes and consequences of power-based violence operate and interact across the levels of analysis that often define disciplinary approaches. The roots of a particular case of physical violence lie in part in the neurobiology of threat and aggression as it operates in the individuals involved. But these immediate causes are shaped and given meaning by intimate institutions, like the family; community institutions, like social clubs, neighborhood watch programs, and local schools; aspects of the physical environment, like public housing projects or limited access to clean water, and broad cultural and social institutions like the news media that shape perceptions of what is threatening. Threats can be immediate and physical, like a rapist in one's bedroom, but also abstract and existential, like the fear of a rapist lurking behind a bush on a dark street. Similarly, acts of violence have immediate physical, psychological, and interpersonal effects on individuals, families, neighborhoods and workplaces, as well as broader impacts on society and culture, including post-traumatic stress syndrome, lost work time, and rising public health costs. To understand fully both the causes and the consequences of power-based violence we must therefore transcend the boundaries of the natural sciences, medical and social sciences, humanities, and the arts with an integrated approach to power-based violence.

This vision builds on the ecological approach developed in the literature on gender-based violence, which conceptualizes the individual, family, local community, civil society, and larger structures like the labor market, political regime, values and artistic expressions of a society as situated within a set of concentric circles with equal import but distinct effects. Traditionally, scholars have specialized in one circle, such as psychologists who study individuals, but have not worked across these circles on specific themes when analyzing power-based violence. A VPI Institute would create the opportunity to practice the ecological approach by reaching not only across disciplinary boundaries but also across the boundaries that define epistemological perspectives--such as the boundaries that make mutual engagement difficult between social science and humanities disciplines, or between hard sciences like medicine and the arts.

A VPI Institute would provide a basis for understanding the causes, history, effects, and necessary responses to power-based violence by reaching across the university. It would create an institutional home for scholars working separately in numerous disciplines—including scholars in American Studies, Art History, Bioethics, Business, English, Environmental Sciences, Global Studies, History, Law, Media Studies, Politics, Music, Psychology, the Medical School, School of Nursing, and Women, Gender & Sexuality--on issues related to violence, power, and inequality. Although many scholars at UVa are working on these issues, each works in her own circle. Indeed, as in most universities, researchers at UVa are often isolated in academic departments among colleagues with whom they share a discipline but not a field of study. A VPI Institute would provide the space and opportunities for scholars working on themes that cut across the concentric circles of power-based violence, bringing together faculty, graduate and undergraduate students to foster creative

intellectual collaboration that would become a unique platform for securing external research funding and strengthen our ability to attract and retain a diverse faculty and student body.

This agenda for the VPI is quite broad. While we embrace that breadth, we do envision focusing the work of the Institute within a set of four themes. These themes would serve as the basis for organizing a range of different activities to foster interdisciplinary research and teaching. This would include lectures, symposia, conferences, exhibits, seed funding for grant and program development, graduate and faculty research groups, dissertation writing groups, and enhanced undergraduate and graduate training through team teaching and other innovative strategies linking the classroom to the real world through collaboration with the Teaching and Resource Center and the Women's Center. In what follows we briefly describe each thematic area and offer examples of the sorts of research and teaching efforts that might fall within it.

Themes

The University, The Criminal Justice System, The Military

This theme would focus broadly on the role of formal social and political institutions in fostering, shaping, and preventing power-based violence. To do so it would focus in particular on three central institutions in contemporary society: the university, where future citizens are made; the criminal justice system, where societal rules are explicitly enforced; and the military, where citizens become the soldiers who defend societal rules.

Examples of possible topics include:

- Test whether gang rape in highly masculinized environments like the military, prisons, and university sports teams is caused by social bonding and status seeking. Research team might include faculty from: American Studies, anthropology, Curry School, sociology, political science, the School of Nursing, psychology, Women, Gender & Sexuality, and the Woodson Institute.
- Investigate police racial profiling and its consequences for the health and wellbeing of African Americans. Research faculty: cognitive psychology, economics, English, political science, the Schools of Medicine and Nursing, and the Woodson Institute.
- Expand on an existing UVa study researching how suspects of domestic violence in the justice system pressure victims to drop charges by comparing their tactics with those used by suspects in the military and university. Research faculty: anthropology, the Law School, sociology, the School of Nursing, psychology, and Women, Gender & Sexuality.

Gender, Race and Class

This theme would focus on analyzing how gender, race, class and other forms of power-based difference interact in complex ways, sometimes even at cross purposes with one another, to make some people more vulnerable to power-based violence and others more likely to be perpetrators or by-standers, and how to redress these inequities.

Examples:

- Expand on an existing UVa study that investigates whether poor, pregnant minority women will more frequently report domestic violence with the use of Health technology by

investigating how the services accessed by these women could be improved given their minority and class status. Research team: the Batten School, economics, Law School, political science, School of Nursing, sociology, Women, Gender & Sexuality, and the Woodson Institute,

- Investigate whether and to what extent stereotypes like the “welfare queen” and “business leaders” deepen all women’s vulnerability to structural violence while immunizing all men. Research team: American studies, anthropology, sociology, political science, psychology, Women, Gender & Sexuality, and the Woodson Center.

Communicating Violence

This theme would address how, what and why people and groups—including individuals, teachers, artists, corporations and the media—communicate about violence to reinforce or challenge power and inequality.

Examples:

- Study sports scandals involving violence and sexual abuse, like the Ray Rice video, to understand how these scandals interact with cultural narratives about race, gender and class to gain traction, inform public opinion, and affect the financial prospects of professional athletes and sports teams. Research team: anthropology, Darden, economics, media studies, psychology, sociology, and Women, Gender & Sexuality.
- Study the efficacy of public service announcements against sexual violence and their effects on cultural narratives about women as victims and men as perpetrators. Research team: anthropology, Batten, media studies, psychology, sociology, School of Nursing, Women, Gender & Sexuality, and the Woodson Institute.

Globalization

The final theme would situate power-based violence research and teaching in transnational flows of people, capital, trade, and ideas.

Examples:

- Analyze the relationship between the economic development of indigenous land and its effects on the health, viability and levels of violence among indigenous peoples. Research team: anthropology, Darden, economics, environmental science, global studies, Latin American Studies, the Schools of Medicine and Nursing, and the Woodson Institute.
- Investigate the explosion of human trafficking and slavery over the past several decades, its effects on human health and development, and efforts to contain it. Research team: the Batten School, Darden, economics, Law School, political science, sociology, and the Schools of Medicine and Nursing.

Institutional Activities

The Institute would focus its activities on Research and on Teaching & Graduate Training. Though we list activities separately in these two categories the ultimate goal of them all is to foster an interdisciplinary community; thus, in practice many of the various activities will advance both teaching and research.

Research

The VPI would sponsor and support a variety of activities related to research on violence, power, and inequality. These would be aimed at fostering new collaborative research projects as well as enhancing existing work. In the realm of research we envision that the Institute would sponsor a high-profile speakers series, that would bring prominent national scholars to grounds about once per semester; a series of research talks by on-Grounds and external guests; a research seed grants program; a summer research grants program; a visiting scholars program that would fund semester- and year-long visitors on Grounds; and a post-doctoral fellowship program.

Research

In the realm of teaching and graduate training, we envision a pre-doctoral (dissertation completion) fellowship program; funding for course design and major revision; an eventual undergraduate minor; and an eventual graduate certificate program.