

Community Psychology and Public Health

Course summary

This course examines the interrelated fields of community psychology and public health psychology. These disciplines share a commitment to the promotion of well-being within a social and cultural context. Interweaving theory, research, and praxis, we interrogate concepts like risk and resilience, empowerment, social connection, and health promotion. We consider sociocultural and political factors that impact mental health, including housing access and eviction policies; health care access; stigma; and structural violence. Our conversations will be informed by readings, civic engagement opportunities, and guest speakers, and we will seek to forge an equitable and engaging learning community together.

Course objectives

- 1) to introduce key topics within the fields of community psychology and public health psychology
- 2) to sharpen critical thinking skills by exploring the assumptions, implications, and limitations associated with common approaches to alleviating distress and promoting wellbeing
- 3) to use relevant psychological scholarship to understand and improved lived experience
- 4) to contribute to the work of a nonprofit organization

Content warning

Class readings and discussion will frequently grapple with experiences that are painful for all of us and particularly challenging for some of us. These include, but are not limited to, depression and suicidality; sexual violence; homelessness; systemic racism; microaggressions; poverty and income inequality; and childhood trauma. Because these themes will arise so often, I cannot provide specific alerts. I encourage you to engage in self-care; please trust your judgment about when you need to skip part of a reading or opt out of a class discussion.

Instructor



Jaine Strauss (she/her)

Please call me Jaine (the "i" is silent; my name is pronounced just like "Jane"). If you prefer, you may also call me Professor Strauss (rhymes with mouse).

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Drop-in hours: You can come to my office without an appointment on **Mondays from 3:30-4:30 pm** and **Thursdays from 2:00-3:30 pm**.

I'm also very happy to set up meetings outside of drop-in hours at your convenience.

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Course activities

Participation and engagement	30%
Civic engagement	25%
Class facilitation	25%
Residence hall project	15%
Deeper dive	5%

Participation and in-class activities:

The content of this course invites your thoughtful inquiry, and lively discussion of the assigned materials will facilitate our achieving the course objectives. Please review the assigned materials carefully before each class meeting. I will try to keep the workload manageable given your other commitments. The materials will be on Moodle well before our class discussion so that you can review them at your convenience. If you review them way in advance, however, please take notes so that the material stays fresh in your mind. Periodically, you will also do some writing in class to help kickstart or process our class discussion and to confirm you've reviewed the assigned materials.

Participation is a fundamental part of the course experience. Your engagement with the course material and with each other can be demonstrated in different ways, including making well-informed comments, asking questions that draw out the views of others, seeking clarification about confusing concepts, and listening attentively and respectfully to others. I recognize that people vary in their comfort talking within larger groups, and there will be frequent opportunities for smaller group conversation. **You will create your own grading rubric to assess the quality of your participation.** We will talk about this in class, and additional materials are posted in the top box on Moodle.

I hope you will be able to attend every class session. I realize this may not be possible. If you miss class, you will engage with the concepts and practices from that day by writing a short reflection (1-2 pages) on the assigned material. These reflections will typically be due within 48 hours of the missed class, although if you need more time, please let me know and we can work out a timeline that fits your circumstances. **More information about attendance and absences is available on Moodle.**

Civic engagement experience:

You will spend a *minimum* of 20 hours during the term (ideally 2-3 hours each week) volunteering at a setting that reflects one of the central aims of community psychology or public health psychology; your time commitment includes any training that you undergo but does not include time spent commuting. The objectives of this course require that you **provide a service** to your setting; although observational learning and shadowing can be quite instructive, they will not suffice for this



Course activities (continued):

Civic engagement (continued):

assignment. Because the agency and, more importantly, its clients/consumers/residents will be counting on you, you will need to attend your placement each week. If you cannot attend for any reason, you must give the agency appropriate notice; you will work with them to figure out how to make up the missed hours.

As you know from my email to you last month, I've been working closely with Derek Johnson at the Civic Engagement Center to identify community partners, and he remains a great resource. I am also happy to meet with you to help you figure out the best option for you. Once you've secured your site, you will lay out your goals for your civic engagement experience using the **civic engagement plan** form on Moodle. These goals may change as the semester unfolds, but you will find it useful to have specific objectives in mind throughout your experience. This will help you continue to learn once your learning curve begins to plateau.

We will periodically devote portions of class to conversations about your placement experiences. These discussions are intended both to inform you about what your fellow classmates are experiencing and also to help people learn from each other (e.g., link theory to praxis in the context of your placements; problem-solve around complex concerns; recommend resources; provide support; combat burnout).

You will maintain a **weekly journal** detailing what you've been experiencing and what you've been learning at your site. **Do not use identifying information in your journal!** We will all be bound by the strictest ethical guidelines in our dealings this term, and you must protect the confidentiality of those with whom you will work this term. **Please let me know as soon as possible if you are experiencing problems at your site;** the sooner we identify the challenges, the sooner we can work toward solutions. Additional information about journaling is available on Moodle.

Midway through the semester and at the end of the semester, you will complete a self-assessment form about your civic engagement experience (available on Moodle).

Class facilitation

The goal of the class facilitation is to put you in charge of your education. The experience of leading class is intended to enhance your engagement with and learning from the course, to build your sense of connection as a community of scholars, and to offer a wider variety of classroom experiences. Here's how the class facilitation will work: each of you will sign up for a 30-minute



Course activities (continued):**Class facilitation (continued)**

block of time during which you will facilitate class. I will ask you to choose a topic early in the semester, and then I will assign you to a date. My hope is that most of you will facilitate class with two other partners so that we can dig more deeply into your topics. Your responsibilities for this experience include:

- Undertaking a thorough research process to learn about your topic (starting early will be critical to your success, as you will likely need to order some articles through interlibrary loan). This research process may involve web resources but must involve substantial, peer-reviewed journal-based scholarship. You will turn in an **annotated bibliography** of the six *best peer-reviewed sources* you used to prepare for your class facilitation; each member of your facilitation team will contribute six unique articles.
 - ◇ You will read MANY more than six articles before arriving at the half-dozen that are most useful. This bibliography showcases only the very best of what you discovered.
 - ◇ The annotations will typically be about a paragraph long. You will write a very brief summary of the article and then several sentences where you identify the features of the article that you found most useful for your class facilitation. Bullet-point format is fine.
 - ◇ The annotated bibliography is my chance to see how your research process informed your facilitation (as you'll see on the Class Facilitation handout, I do not want you to march your classmates through a laundry list of studies). If you aren't sure whether your bibliography is making clear how you prepared for your facilitation, please see me.
- Choosing a reading or two to edify and engage your classmates. To identify the best reading(s) for your class facilitation, you will share several options with me at least two weeks before your class facilitation, and I'll help you narrow down your selection. Your main reading should be a peer-reviewed scholarly article or chapter, but you may supplement this with materials from newspapers or blogs, videos, podcasts, etc.
- Leading the class for ~85 minutes with two partners, 60 minutes with one other partner, or, in rare cases, 30 minutes by yourself. Typically, you will spend this time using a combination of pedagogic techniques: leading discussion, providing new material using a



Course activities (continued):

Class facilitation (continued)

slideshow, offering an engaging activity, showing a video clip, staging a debate, etc. The best class facilitations show a high degree of organization and creativity. Less successful class facilitations reflect inadequate preparation with regard to the topic as well as the presentation of that topic.

I recognize that this is a welcome assignment for some and a dreaded nightmare for others; some of you will relish the chance to lead the class, while others would rather endure an eternal polar vortex without mittens. *We all share the responsibility for creating a classroom climate where all students feel comfortable engaging in this experience.* For what it's worth, the vast majority of course alumni report that they enjoyed the experience of leading class, and many wish they'd had more and longer opportunities to do so. *I will meet with you at least twice to help you with this assignment – once right after you begin your research on your topic and another time closer to when you are scheduled to lead class so that we can review and fine-tune your game plan.* I am happy to meet with you as often as you wish to ensure that the class facilitation is a positive and meaningful experience for you and for your classmates. **A more detailed overview of the expectations for your class facilitation experience is in the top box on Moodle.**

Residence hall project

We have a unique opportunity this semester. The health promotion team at the Hamre Center for Health and Wellness is consulting on the design of a new campus residence hall. You will work in small groups to develop recommendations based on principles of healthy architecture, relevant peer reviewed scholarship, and ideas from similar institutions; you will consider relevant stakeholders and potential barriers. Each group will focus on a particular dimension of wellbeing (e.g., sexual violence prevention; connections to nature). Your group will “pitch” your recommendations to the health promotion team. You will then integrate feedback from this experience into a brief write-up for the health promotion team. I will provide additional details about this project later in the term, as the health promotion team is still figuring out what would be most helpful to them.

Deeper dive

In the final weeks of the semester, you will have the opportunity to reflect more deeply on one aspect of your work in the course: your class facilitation, civic engagement experience, or residence hall project. You will reflect on your experience and relate it to one or more key concepts from the



Course activities (continued):

Deeper dive (continued)

field of community psychology. In some cases, you might opt to identify scholarly research to help deepen your understanding of the phenomena you encountered and to enhance your learning. You will share these reflections with your classmates in a brief presentation at the end of the semester, and you will provide a self-assessment of your work.

Grading philosophy and practices

Last year, I began experimenting with a different approach to grading that focuses on your engagement with the course materials and concepts and on your commitment to learning and improving. In keeping with the core values of community psychology, I seek to increase your agency and ownership of your education and to decrease your stress. Although I will provide feedback to you about your work in this course, you will be responsible for assessing your progress and accomplishments. I do not expect this course to be “easy” - I hope we will challenge ourselves and learn a lot with and from each other - but I hope that getting the grade you want will not be hard.

Flexibility on deadlines: I recognize that you are balancing many competing demands on your time and attention, and I want you to prioritize your wellbeing. You will start the term with **four** “flexibility tokens” that allow you to stay on track even if you miss a deadline. One token may be redeemed for one 24-hour extension for an assignment (e.g., your midterm civic engagement self-assessment). If you miss a class meeting, you can use **two tokens** to skip turning in a reflection on the materials covered that day. Your tokens may be used in any combination. The tokens are your safety net, but you need not use them. Please note that the dates set aside for your class facilitations and final presentations are set and can only be modified under extraordinary circumstances.

The flexibility tokens are meant to help you manage your workload for this course under “typical” circumstances, which include assignments from other courses, personal commitments, employment, sports practice and games, concerts and play rehearsals, etc. If you’re dealing with extenuating circumstances, you and I will work together to figure out a strategy to complete this course. Similarly, if you have accommodations that call for flexibility in turning in assignments, we will customize your contract accordingly. Please talk to me about this as soon as possible. ***I am committed to your success in this course – and beyond.***



Guiding principles and policies

- I encourage you to make your overall wellbeing a priority during your time at Macalester and in your life more generally. Taking care of yourself will not only ensure your physical and emotional health but will also help you engage more fully in your academics. I value, and I hope you also value, the wisdom of your experiences, thoughts, emotions, and identities. This wisdom will guide how you handle the stressors you encounter. In this class, please trust your wisdom and care for yourself. If you need to step away from a class meeting – to go to the restroom, to get a drink of water, to take a moment to process thoughts or feelings that arise during our discussions – please do so. If you'd like help working through any particularly challenging experiences, feel free to talk to me or to seek support through campus resources (e.g., the Hamre Center for Health and Wellness; the Department of Multicultural Life; the Office of Student Affairs).
- I am committed to the success of all students, and therefore I am eager to provide reasonable accommodations to students with disabilities. Please consult with the Disability Services staff (disabilityservices@macalester.edu) as soon as possible. You can schedule an appointment using [this link](#). The DS staff will send me a confidential letter detailing the appropriate accommodations for this course, and then you and I can discuss how those accommodations apply to this course.
- Macalester has many resources (e.g., the Hamre Center; the MAX Center; Department of Multicultural Life; Open Pantry) to support students, and we also have a number of policies (e.g., Title IX; academic integrity; COVID protocols) meant to safeguard the community and promote wellbeing. Links to these resources and policies are in the top box on Moodle.

Land acknowledgement

Please take a moment to acknowledge the fact that Macalester College is built on the ancestral homeland of the Dakota people – forcibly exiled from the land because of aggressive and persistent settler colonialism. Our campus sits near Bdote, the sacred meeting point of the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers. In the words of Reverend Jim Bear Jacobs, Bdote is a place of genesis and genocide, both realities alive in the land at once.

This acknowledgment strives to honor the Dakota people, ancestors, and descendants, as well as the land itself. This acknowledgement itself is not enough; it only serves as a first step towards decolonization and justice.



Tips for optimizing your experience in this class

1. Set up a time – or multiple times! - to talk with me – about this course, about life beyond Macalester, about whatever. I am eager to chat with you during drop-in hours, but please also send me an email to arrange appointments if other times work better for you or if you'd like to talk for more than 5-10 minutes.
2. I hope that the course's emphasis on self-assessment will help you can engage the material with curiosity and without stress. Figure out what's most interesting to you, and build on that spark.
3. View feedback as an opportunity for growth – because that is its intent.
4. Be patient with yourself, with your classmates, and with me. We are all finding our way during an extraordinary time, and we can use all of the compassion that comes our way.

Course topics

All materials are on Moodle

- Community + Psychology: Social networks and wellbeing
- Person-in-context: Ecological perspectives
- Sense of community
- Social support
- Partnerships across social structural identities
- Power and empowerment
- Poverty, income inequality, and wellbeing
- Housing and homelessness/houselessness
- Building for community, building for health
- Serious and persistent mental illness
- Behavior change and public policy
- Other topics determined by class interest (e.g., behavioral health [nutrition, exercise, chemical health, sleep]; sexual health and reproductive justice; climate justice and ecopsychology; the criminal justice system; intimate partner violence; sexual violence; politics and community engagement; wellbeing and the arts; spirituality and religion; technology and wellbeing; community organizing).



Important Dates

ASAP:	Contact civic engagement sites
September 8:	Class facilitation interest sheet
September 15:	Civic engagement goals ; personalized participation rubric
Varied dates:	Class facilitation documents: annotated bibliography and self-assessment
October 18:	Midterm self-assessment of participation and civic engagement
October 27:	Site visit to YouthLink and Family Tree (leave Macalester at 9:30 am and return by 12:30 pm)
November 17:	Plan for deeper dive
December 1:	Pitch for residence hall
December 8:	Deeper dive presentation
December 9:	Residence hall project due
December 16:	Final self-assessments of participation , civic engagement , residence hall project, and deeper dive



Principles of Community Psychology
(from the Society for Community Research and Action's website)

Community psychologists go beyond an individual focus and integrate social, cultural, economic, political, environmental, and international influences to promote positive change, health, and empowerment at individual and systemic levels.

- We seek to expand “helping” beyond traditional psychotherapy to promote wellness.
- We engage in action-oriented research to develop, implement, and evaluate programs.
- We build collaborative relationships with community members, groups, and organizations to solve social problems.
- We analyze government, civic life, and workplace settings in order to understand and improve fair and diverse participation.
- We base our work on a scientific foundation to better understand the multiple influences of the social environment on health and wellness.
- We consult with and provide tools to organizations to build capacity to address social problems such as exploitation and victimization.
- We work with marginalized people to build empowerment, fight oppression and reduce social inequalities.

Critical community psychology demands that we be acutely aware of the pervasive influence of power in creating and maintaining unjust social conditions. In solidarity and close partnership with groups—oppressed through violence, exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, or cultural imperialism—critical community psychology seeks to draw attention to the socially divisive and ecologically destructive broader patterns and structures—such as capitalism, neoliberal globalization, patriarchy, colonialism, hegemony, and racism—that condition the scope of social problems and engage in collective action to dismantle oppressive social arrangements.

