

## Review Article

# The Many Faces of Vulnerability

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### Introduction

Social injustices, structural and personal crises as well as intensifying stress on some citizens seem increasing preoccupations in contemporary society and social policy. In this context, the concept of vulnerability has come to play a prominent role in academic, governmental and everyday accounts of the human condition. Policy makers and practitioners are now concerned with addressing vulnerability through an expansive range of interventions. As this special issue draws attention to, a vulnerability zeitgeist or ‘spirit of the time’ has been traced in contemporary welfare and disciplinary arrangements (Brown, 2014, 2015), which now informs a range of interventions and approaches to social problems, both in the UK and internationally. As prominent examples, ‘vulnerable’ people are legally entitled to ‘priority need’ in English social housing allocations (Carr and Hunter, 2008), vulnerable victims of crime are seen as requiring special responses in the UK criminal justice system (see Roulstone *et al.*, 2011; Walkgate, 2011), ‘vulnerable adults’ have designated ‘protections’ under British law (Dunn *et al.*, 2008; Clough, 2014) and vulnerable migrants and refugees are increasingly prioritised within international immigration processes (Peroni and Timmer, 2013). There is a long tradition in the field of social policy of critiquing the implications of particular concepts as mechanisms of governance, from poverty (Townsend, 1979; Lister, 2004) and social exclusion (Levitas, 1998; Young 1999) to risk (Beck, 1992; Kemshall, 2002) and resilience (Ecclestone and Lewis, 2014; Wright, 2016). Yet while vulnerability seems to be one of the latest buzzwords gathering political and cultural momentum, critiques and empirical studies of how it is operationalised in different policy and practice contexts are less well elaborated.

In the academic literature, many texts use vulnerability as an entry point for discussing inequalities or adversities of some kind, with the concept drawn on to anchor consideration of diverse interests and concerns. Prominent amongst these are insecurity, relative economic or social disadvantage, limited coping capacity and unmet need. Certain texts have emphasised how it is possible to be vulnerable yet able to cope or avoid harm (see Daniel, 2010; Walkgate, 2011). Attention to vulnerability often appears alongside research and ideas concerned with ‘risk’ (see Beck, 2009) – one of the most theorised terms in the social sciences – yet as has been noted elsewhere (Brown, 2015), vulnerability remains firmly in the shadow of its conceptual cousin. People are sometimes

described as vulnerable in relation to something specific, sometimes the designation is used as a stand-alone term. How vulnerability is deployed in research is to some extent contingent on the historical, political and disciplinary context in which the concept is utilised and, as many scholars have pointed out, wider and narrower uses overlap or are used inter-changeably. At the level of policy texts and everyday discourse, individuals and groups are labelled as 'vulnerable' in relation to a dizzying array of factors, with various practical implications operating through the use of the term, often implicitly.

The vagueness and malleability of vulnerability can result in a problematic lack of analytic clarity which in turn can have important implications for interventions and practices. As with other popular policy concepts such as social exclusion (Young, 1999) or anti-social behaviour (Burney, 2005), the use of vulnerability is often normative, implying deviation from usually undefined standards of life or behaviour, and as supporting powerful moral and ethical projects. This has led some to argue that accounts of vulnerability tend to be firmly anchored in prominent and long-running social policy debates and narratives about 'deserving' and 'undeserving' citizens (Brown, 2015). Moral and ethical dimensions of vulnerability are shaped by diverse political standpoints. Certain scholars have noted that the term is creeping further into understandings of the relations between state and citizen, with implications for citizenship such as diminished view of the human subject, erosion of collective movements and expansion of state-sponsored social control (Furedi, 2008; McLaughlin, 2012; Ecclestone, 2016). Others have emphasised its relevance in discussion and the operation of interventions for the most disadvantaged, and the sometimes problematic implications of this in terms of exclusivity (Brown, 2011, 2015). Therefore, while vulnerability has a deep discursive connection with connotations of empathy and compassion, and can be used in pursuit of enhanced support for certain individuals or groups, there is increasing attention to the ways in which it can also serve regulatory functions (Harrison and Sanders, 2006) when deployed in a normative way.

At the same time though, accounts of vulnerability that seek to resist these potentially pathologising framings have also been advanced. A growing number of scholars have been carefully theorising vulnerability in order to chart the multiple dimensions of substantive environmental and social problems faced by individuals or groups (Chambers, 1989; Bankoff *et al.*, 2004; Emmel and Hughes, 2010). Ideas about 'universal' or shared human vulnerability have also been burgeoning within some disciplinary fields, where the notion is used as the basis for a citizenship model posed as an alternative to liberal models of understanding the individual in society (see Goodin, 1985; Turner, 2006; Fineman, 2008; Mackenzie *et al.*, 2014). For theorists taking a 'universal' approach, vulnerability is a fundamental feature of the human condition, biologically imperative and permanent, but also connected to the personal, economic, social and cultural circumstances within which individuals find themselves at different points in their lives.

Very little work has been done to bring these different understandings of vulnerability together. This article addresses that gap, aiming to provide an overview of the key contours of how vulnerability appears and is deployed in the social sciences literature, starting with normative uses of vulnerability and critiques of those uses, then moving on to models advanced across various disciplines and territories. Our review illuminates how vulnerability tends to appear in three main forms across the various literatures: as a policy and practice mechanism, which plays out in interventions, sometimes overtly and explicitly, sometimes subtly or unnoticed; as a cultural trope or way of thinking about the problems of life in an increasingly pressured and unequal society; and as a more

robust concept to facilitate social and political research and analysis. The article touches on other concepts that are closely allied with vulnerability where these are pertinent, including risk and resilience, but for reasons of space, the focus stays with vulnerability.

A key aim in drawing out some of the central themes across diverse vulnerability literatures is to identify critical challenges for research, namely understandings of human agency and questions of individual autonomy within debates about citizenship and governance. The article makes the case that a clearer grasp of the many faces of vulnerability is crucial at a time where vulnerability, used variously as vague notion, theorised concept and policy mechanism, increasingly plays a role in framing and re-working understandings of the connections between institutions, social practices, individuals and the state. We argue that more robust deployment of vulnerability and consideration of the potentially pathological implications explored in this article (and in this issue) might be steps towards mitigating risks attached to the rising popularity of vulnerability discourses and interventions.

### **Vulnerability as designation: normative dimensions**

Vulnerability appears widely across the social sciences literature as a kind of sociological shorthand or designation for worthiness, understood commonly as something innate, physical, connected to the life course (pregnancy, older age, childhood). The notion has been associated with childhood for centuries (see Rousseau; 1792 trans. by Foxley, 1974: 52) and has more recently emerged as a key concept in developmental childhood studies (James and James, 2008: 139; Brotherton and Cronin, 2013). Here it is held that, because children are not fully mature, they are vulnerable to adverse influences that may disrupt the 'normal' completion of the developmental process. As with other more biologically inclined accounts, such an approach proceeds from the premise that some people are 'naturally' more vulnerable than others. The idea that some adults might be 'innately' vulnerable surfaces in certain (now controversial) normative accounts of disability, running counter to the highly influential 'social model of disability' (Barnes and Mercer, 1996) which emphasises processes and mechanisms through which society disables individuals. Postmodern ideas about the social construction of social problems have highlighted how such normative accounts of the human condition vary across time and space, reflecting and reinforcing social norms and structured by political, social and economic factors rather than 'natural' ones, and 'innate' accounts of vulnerability, which have often influenced policy, are often questioned on this basis.

Normative accounts of vulnerability are also used to highlight situational concerns (Brown, 2015; and see also Mackenzie *et al.*, 2014), where the term is used to demarcate or describe particular adverse experiences, transgressions or groups of people who may be in circumstances of social difficulty. Situational vulnerability draws attention to the potential or possibility for harm as well as occurrences of actual harm having occurred (see Goodin, 1985; Mackenzie *et al.*, 2014). Examples of situational vulnerability might include groups such as homeless people, women who sell sex, asylum seekers and refugees, Roma communities, women experiencing domestic violence, drug users, poorer people and prisoners (especially women), but might also include more general populations such as women, or black and ethnic minority groups (see Peroni and Timmer, 2013). Here, the use of the concept of vulnerability is often drawn on to emphasise biographical experiences, individual or collective, which demand special treatment or exceptions to be made in

policy and practice processes. In a context where constructions of the objects and subjects of social interventions are predominantly configured in essentialising ways, notions of vulnerability and transgression often appear in a simultaneous framing (Dobson, 2015), which can support hierarchies of legitimacy in criminal justice interventions (Walkgate, 2011).

Situational vulnerability configurations can emphasise the active input of a problematic or malign third party or structural force, but might also be imagined to contain elements of individual agency or choice. Thus accounts of situational vulnerability may contain socio-political, family or community elements. Narratives which highlight the situational vulnerabilities of certain groups may be linked with increasingly visible ideas about 'victimhood' and concerns regarding the particular obligations that society is assumed to owe to those classified as 'victims' (see Walkgate, 2011). However, in policy at least, these tend to remain focussed at individual level rather than on national or transnational economic, political forces, or on large cultural changes affecting the whole of society. Whilst some activists and social movements have regarded the identification of vulnerability as an important means of obtaining external, usually state-sponsored, protection for certain individuals or groups (see McLaughlin, 2012), others associate ideas about innate or situational vulnerability as a pervasive form of 'victim blaming' (Wishart, 2003), focussing attention on individual deficit rather than wider structural issues and problems.

### **Vulnerability and social control**

A growing literature across a wide variety of disciplines and empirical research arenas has started to critique the increasingly prevalent normative use of vulnerability discourses, especially in policy. These writings share concerns about social divisions, exclusion and behavioural regulation. In a context of broader moves to narrow welfare provision and to make entitlements increasingly conditional on certain behaviours (see Dwyer, 1998; Flint, 2006; Harrison and Sanders, 2014), critics of normative vulnerability narratives have argued that these can reinforce rather than challenge pathologies of difference (Harrison and Sanders, 2006; and see also Quesada *et al.*, 2011). These authors have underscored how ideas about vulnerability (especially when deployed in policy) can be controversial due to how these can mix concerns about *risk to* certain groups with anxieties about *risks from* these groups (see Harrison and Sanders, 2006; Brown, 2011), and can give limited space for acknowledgement of human agency (see Brown and Sanders, this issue), augmenting tendencies for 'vulnerable' people to be 'done to' by policy-makers (see also Hasler, 2004).

Such writings connect understandings and uses of vulnerability, whether by the state or as part of a progressive politics, with an intensification of social control (Furedi, 2008; McLaughlin, 2012; Ecclestone and Lewis, 2014; Ecclestone, 2016), playing a role in facilitating a wrestling of power from receivers of services. Behavioural dimensions of vulnerability management techniques have been highlighted as having important implications for questions of 'difference'; for example, forms of social control expressed through vulnerability rationales in policy and practice might be gendered, raced, classed and ableist within a deeply unequal society (see Harrison with Hemingway, 2014). Disability scholars in particular have been at the forefront of arguing that when vulnerability discourses are operationalised, they are bound up with disempowering

and patronising social processes, undermining the position and rights of citizens and diminishing attention to the responsibility of society in creating adversity (see Wishart, 2003; Hasler, 2004; Hollomotz, 2009). These dangers can have the paradoxical outcome of increasing lived vulnerabilities (Hollomotz, 2011). Other accounts of paternalism and pathologisation appear in policy areas from mental health (Moon, 2000; Warner, 2008) and sex work (see Phoenix and Oerton, 2005; Munro and Scoular, 2012), to those considered to be Muslim 'extremists' (Richards, 2011; Coppock and McGovern, 2014).

The potential for vulnerability to serve controlling forces under the guise of assistance and protection has also been noted by scholars working in a range of areas including teenage parenting (Van Loon, 2008), disadvantaged youth (Brown, 2015) and trafficked women/children (O'Connell Davidson, 2011; FitzGerald, 2016). In parallel with critiques of 'risk' (see O'Malley, 2000; Taylor-Gooby, 2000), social policy scholars have argued that the management of vulnerability in practice might also be understood as a moral enterprise within a context of moves to 'responsibilise' individuals (Munro and Scoular, 2012, 2013). Parallels to debates about resilience are useful to note here (see Wright, 2016). Scholars concerned with creeping state intervention in citizens' lives have argued that vulnerability as a policy mechanism is deeply problematic (see Ecclestone, this issue), not least because an internalisation and normalisation of vulnerability can expand mechanisms for self-governance, where individuals regulate their own behaviour in ways that conform to particular norms about 'correct' or 'appropriate' behaviours.

### **Vulnerability as a problematic cultural trope**

Some sociologists have argued that there are prominent social, philosophical and political trends to configure an increasing number of citizens as 'vulnerable', undermining expectations that the human subject is capable of agency, rationality and autonomy. They argue that vulnerability has taken off as a way of understanding the self in contemporary society because it resonates with and reinforces diminished expectations of human subjects (see Furedi, 2008; McLaughlin, 2012; Frawley, 2015; Ecclestone, this issue). This strand of critique argues that vulnerability is becoming a pervasive and problematic defining feature of the state's relationship to the individual. For McLaughlin (2012), for example, vulnerability now occupies a position at the forefront of individuals' relationships with social structures, a development that he sees as directly linked with a decline in the power of collective social movements and political activism and, in turn, enthusiasm for claims to social justice based on recognition of vulnerability. In a related vein, Furedi (2003) has linked vulnerability to a 'culture of fear', where anxieties about risk-taking have become central to experiences of everyday life, bolstering an ever-expanding state into more and more areas of our lives (Furedi, 2007, 2008). Frawley (2015) argues that a decline in political optimism about social and economic progress, and a corresponding turn to the 'therapeutic' in left/Liberal agendas for social justice, has contributed to the rise of vulnerability as a cultural metaphor to describe a hugely expanding range of experiences and responses to them. From this perspective, vulnerability reflects a different type of problematic normative framing that, citing Furedi, 2004; Frawley (2015) sees as creating a 'morality of low expectations'.

In work on the increasing normalisation of vulnerability in the education system and beyond, Ecclestone (2016; see also this issue) has noted two problematic implications of its growing resonance. First, ever-expanding and competing claims on vulnerability as

a means of seeking and gaining more support can obscure more acute claims for social harms experienced by the most disadvantaged and divert resources from them. Second, appropriation of vulnerability by the liberal Left as a foundation for 'progressive' politics emphasises psycho-emotional dimensions of vulnerability. In a context of a prevailing sense of crisis about mental health, she notes this risks creating a form of cultural priming in a circular process of defined need and externally offered psycho-emotional support. Writers concerned about vulnerability as a cultural phenomenon argue that this can bolster advancement of state-sponsored strategies for managing individuals through new forms of self-governance (Furedi 2004; Ecclestone and Brunila, 2015; Frawley, 2015; Ecclestone, 2016), raising concerns about appropriating universal vulnerability (see below) as a counter to pathologising or oppressive depictions of agency can turn subtly from progressive understandings and enactments of empathy and collective understanding to normative forms of interventions that aim to shape relationships and behaviours, closing down expectations of rational autonomy, debate and challenge (see Ecclestone, this issue). Critiques of the ways in which vulnerability narratives can serve regulatory functions signal the need to scrutinise what constitutes 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' forms of moralising or normative framing and how these align with old notions of liberal, Left and Right political understandings. They also highlight a need for more nuanced critiques of what it means to have a 'progressive' understanding of vulnerability.

### **Theorising vulnerability**

Arising from critiques of a normative moral/ethical project described in the preceding sections is an expanding literature that seeks to position conditions and experiences of vulnerability in sociological and other theory. Sometimes used in seeking to understand what have been called 'wicked problems', or highly intractable, complex matters with ambiguous and contested solutions (see Rittel and Weber, 1973; Richardson, 2011; Bache *et al.*, 2015), vulnerability can be understood as connected with increasing demand for citizens to find new ways of coping with the changing nature and sense of risks in society. 'Risk society' theorists (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992; Bauman, 2000) have argued that modernisation processes, rapid quickening of the pace of change and an apparent loosening of the structural ties that bind and constrain the lives and life courses of individuals, have resulted in citizens feeling less in control of their lives and willing to experiment with or seek control of particular individual and social risks in new ways. Such ideas have obvious explanatory power in terms of the popularity of ideas about vulnerability and, indeed, the 'risk society' thesis is often a point of reference in explorations of vulnerability (Beck, 2009: 178; Misztal, 2011; Kirby, 2006). While providing compelling accounts of social process at an abstract level, recourse to notions of risk society, liquid modernity and structuration tend to obscure the somewhat 'compounded sets of facts and relations' (Wright Mills, 1959: 34) social scientists of vulnerability have sought to describe, interpret and explain. These accounts are the focus of the second part of this article.

### **Theoretical frames for social vulnerability**

Vulnerability has been a key concept in the natural sciences and international development literature for decades, offering a way of framing and analysing varying levels



of exposure to poverty (Chambers, 1989), hazards/disasters (Watts and Bohle, 1993) and the effects of globalisation (Kirby, 2006). Spatial or environmental theories of vulnerability alert us to the concept's link with 'assets' or the ability to cope with adversity, as well as to the capacity of institutional practices to cushion the effects of negative events. This literature offers, primarily, a structural account of vulnerability, focussing often on geographical areas and bringing into view the role of institutions and resources in shaping the varying detrimental impacts of a range of hazards on certain populations and not others (Adger, 2006; Bradshaw, 2013, offer useful overviews). Studies in this tradition have involved quantitative metrics to develop social vulnerability indices according to key variables (see Hewitt, 1997; Ebert *et al.*, 2009) and spatially or geographically focussed approaches (see Cutter, 1996; Bankoff *et al.*, 2004). Attention to vulnerability in this arena seems often to appear alongside increasing attention to 'resilience' (see Pugh 2014 for resilience as a buzzword in policy and also Chandler, 2014; Wright, 2016) or 'geo-risk', and these accounts are orientated towards social and environmental systems rather than the circumstances of particular individuals. This literature underlines distinctions in approaches between individual/psychological vulnerability and collective modes of vulnerability, which are also paralleled in commentary on resilience (see Wright, 2016).

Chambers' (1989) analysis of systems that give rise to vulnerability has had a substantial influence on this tradition. Chambers sees vulnerability as related to defencelessness, defining it as referring to 'exposure to contingencies and stress, and difficulty coping with them' (p. 33):

Vulnerability thus has two sides: an external side of risks, shocks and stress to which an individual or household is subject; and an internal side which is defencelessness, meaning a lack of means to cope without damaging loss. (Chambers, 1989: 33)

Developing this definition further, Watts and Bohle (1993) map locally and historically specific configurations of poverty, hunger and famine using 'co-ordinates' of vulnerability (p. 45) simplified as follows: (i) risk of exposure to crises, stress and shocks; (ii) risk of inadequate capacities to cope with these; and (iii) risk of severe consequences arising in these instances. Watts and Bohle (1993: 46) explore 'choice' and 'constraint'; or 'degrees of freedom' which determine exposure, coping capacity and potentiality. Drawing on Sen's (1981) work which powerfully argues that entitlement of an individual stands for a set of differently constituted commodity bundles acquired through the use of various legal channels open to a person, Watts and Bohle (1993) argue that vulnerability is mediated by entitlements and capabilities, shaped by institutional and environmental structures, and also by the spaces where human agency operates.

Seeking to elaborate critical realist models of the causal structures of vulnerability, these ideas have been utilised in social sciences work as a means of exploring nuanced and 'textured' understandings of lived experiences of deprivation. Emmel and Hughes (2010: 171) conceptualise a longitudinal 'social space of vulnerability' with coordinates which relate to: (i) material shortages in households, characterised by 'making do' with limited resources for basic everyday needs; (ii) a lack of capacity to address needs in the present and plan for the future; and (iii) an uncertain reliance on welfare services acting to address crises when they happen (see Emmel, this issue). Central to Emmel and Hughes' model is the idea that vulnerability involves relations between individuals and households and the institutions and services that address their basic needs. Setting out a relational account of vulnerability, in later work focussing on inter-generational patterns of

disadvantage, Emmel and Hughes (2014) further develop a 'temporal dimension' to how they conceptualise vulnerability, calling this their 'Toblerone model' (see also Emmel, this issue). According to this model, the three coordinates are the 'face' of the triangular vulnerability prism and the length is a fourth dimension: time. The relationship between agency and institutions is emphasised through the ways in which failures to conform with the temporal patterns of service delivery tip people into further difficulties or crises.

Whilst these critical realist social science accounts of vulnerability offer different perspectives to ecological or environmental models in certain respects, they share a concern with vulnerability as a tool for understanding socio-material realities and the structures which underpin them (see also Caraher and Reuter, this issue). In a somewhat separate strand of vulnerability scholarship, other more philosophically inclined scholars have sought to do something similar, but in a way that proceeds from the starting point that we are all vulnerable.

### Vulnerability as a universal condition

There is a burgeoning literature which seeks to posit a more 'radical' view of vulnerability, mainly located in critical legal studies (see Fineman, 2008; Wallbank and Herring, 2014; Mackenzie *et al.*, 2014) and ethics literature (see Goodin, 1985). This is sometimes referred to as the 'universal vulnerability' approach (Turner, 2006) or the 'vulnerability thesis' (see Fineman, 2008, 2013). Generally speaking, according to the universal vulnerability approach, we are all vulnerable by virtue of our human embodiment or 'corporality' (we all have bodies which decay and die), but the degree of our lived vulnerability varies through the life course (Fineman, 2008) and according to wider relational processes of differentiated politically constituted subjectification and sociality (see Goodin, 1985; Butler, 2004; Turner, 2006; Harrison, 2008). Vulnerability thesis scholars from a range of different disciplinary backgrounds have argued that this approach can be used to develop a citizenship model based on interdependency, empathy and a foregrounding of ethical social obligations to others (see Goodley, in Ecclestone and Goodley, 2014).

Debates amongst vulnerability theorists are evident (see Mackenzie *et al.*, 2014), but commonly, these works seek to subvert the elevation of 'active' subjectivity, purposeful activity and 'positive capacity' around which dominant western philosophical traditions tend to converge (see Harrison, 2008). Such ideas have obvious relevance for debates about autonomy, agency and citizenship within the social policy field. Fineman and Grear (2013: 2) make the case that the vulnerability thesis offers a powerful alternative to the 'mythical autonomous liberal subject of neoliberal rhetoric'. Fineman's work pioneering this theory develops the idea of a 'responsive state', driven by meeting the practical and ethical obligations involved in the always and inevitably messy realities of the life course of our vulnerable bodies and governing vulnerability as it is lived universally (see also Clough, this issue). These ideas have been influential in critical feminist literature in particular, where authors have deployed vulnerability as a mechanism for understanding and placing importance on the role of caring for dependents within society and policy (see Kittay, 1999; Dodds, 2007; as well as Fineman, 2008, 2013). They have also been used to theorise disability in ways that seek to challenge oppression and problematic paternalism (see Beckett, 2006; and Clough, this issue).

Certain authors have particularly stressed a relational understanding of shared human vulnerability (see Goodin, 1985) with recognition as a key feature. Mackenzie *et al*



(2014) develop relational understandings in moral philosophy work on vulnerability and relational autonomy, with a ‘taxonomy of vulnerability’ (Mackenzie *et al.*, 2014: 7–9) which encompasses both inherent (or universal) and ‘context-specific’ forms of vulnerability, as well as ‘pathogenic’ forms (related to oppression and discrimination), supporting theorising which seeks to capture balances between the citizens’ rights to a self-determining life and societal and institutional obligations to protect disadvantaged citizens. In work on the September 11 terrorism attacks, Butler (2004: 31 and 44) draws on the idea of a ‘common human vulnerability’ – bodily and inescapable – but also constituted politically and according to ‘norms of recognition’ (see also Butler, 2009). She argues that some vulnerabilities ‘count’ more than others, and that more equal recognition of vulnerability is essential in the battle for a more just society.

Universal approaches to understanding vulnerability have been brought into explorations of myriad empirical questions, with scholars experimenting with it as a way of furthering debates within their own specific area (see for example Wallbank and Herring (2014) on family law; Carr (2013) on housing; Carline (2009) on sex work; Beckett (2006) on disability; Satz (2013) on animal protection; Clough [this issue] on mental capacity; and Wiles (2011) on older age). In the light of this work, there seems potential for wider debate in relation to how far universal vulnerability theories might be a useful tool in work to halt or reverse the advancement of more individualised constructions of disadvantage. For social policy scholars, this literature raises interesting questions about the extent to which ideas about universal vulnerability can be operationalised meaningfully in policy settings where recipients of state welfare provision are so often characterised by understandings of agency which are insufficiently sensitive to the complex and contradictory dimensions of autonomy and human experience (see Hoggett, 2001).

### **Emerging challenges in vulnerability studies**

We conclude here by highlighting four key challenges that have affected these concerns and which need addressing in further research on vulnerability. First, the ubiquity and elasticity of vulnerability generates a sense of familiarity and common-sense or assumed understandings which conceal diverse uses with enormously varied conceptual dimensions, dependent to some degree on the disciplinary contexts and theoretical underpinnings of its deployment. Whilst the malleability of vulnerability can lead to a confused sense of understanding about what is meant by the term, some have argued that it is the indistinct boundaries of the concept that make it well suited to reflect the diversity of human experiences of adversity (Wallbank and Herring, 2014). Different constructions of vulnerability evidently have a diverse range of trajectories with manifold implications.

Second, as we have aimed to show, social research use of the concept of vulnerability is often implicated in normative moral and ethical projects, imbued by a sense of an undefined standard of behaviour, situation or way of life, to which people should not be exposed. These projects may or may not be acknowledged explicitly. In similar ways to notions such as resilience, we have argued that this normative use can inadvertently contribute to the individualisation and psychologisation of social problems, entrenchment of social divisions and potential diminishing of entitlements and subjectivities. In particular, generic discussion of vulnerability as a shorthand for deservingness can support the acceleration of a race to the bottom for scarce resources and a narrowing of entitlement for those who do not conform to commonly held expectations of how ‘vulnerable’ people

should behave. Seen in this light, critiques of subtle and overt forms of governance and self-governance through vulnerability, outlined above, signal a need for researchers to explore the further interplay between risk and vulnerability in specific policy and practice contexts.

Third, there is an imbalance in vulnerability studies. Much research focuses on theoretical debates and policy critiques and there are many fewer accounts that centre the empirical realities of vulnerability from the perspectives and experiences of various stakeholder groups, such as practitioners, service managers and service users/clients. This opens up important gaps between theorisations and lived experiences of vulnerability that policy scholars might be mindful of. Although disability, age and gender have received some attention in relation to the notion and realities of vulnerability in policy and practice, less is known about how these may shape other dimensions of difference, such as race and sexuality.

Finally, clearer definitions of vulnerability in research would seem important if policy and practice shortcomings and biases are to be addressed. The progressive potential and problematic dimensions of vulnerability have attracted scholars from various disciplinary traditions and empirical areas, many of whom seek to contribute to more progressive ways of thinking about the relationship between the individual and the state. In terms of research methods, careful deployment of vulnerability may have the potential to assist with theorising that animates dimensions of disadvantage and inequality in contemporary society and the ways in which these change and stay the same through time. Universal and relational vulnerability scholars would argue that these offer a way into reframing subjectivities in a direction that reflects the differentially experienced realities and inherent fragilities of life, and in ways which illuminate the duties of the state to respond appropriately. However, such accounts of vulnerability are rare, especially at the policy level, meaning that researchers have an important role to play in challenging more essentialist understandings of vulnerability.

Further consideration is required of how different narratives of vulnerability might give rise to different kinds of response. In particular, perhaps, there is a need to consider the potential for a more robust and defensible critical feminist and realist perspective. This avoids a problematic tendency for vulnerability to be characterised as a loose and vague notion or as the outcome of a moral and ethical project. Here we would argue that vulnerability is not inevitably socially constructed and therefore impossible to pin down. Rather, in making sense of vulnerability in contemporary society, we are forced to examine mechanisms which frame and re-frame corporality, adversity, agency, capability and entitlement. Given the deepening structural divisions and inequalities that shape debates about such matters, the notion of vulnerability seems set to be a key concept in the social sciences for some time to come. This makes a critical approach to research and debate on vulnerability essential, especially in relation to the ways in which vulnerability is lived and experienced in contemporary society.

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