

# **Rethinking Vulnerability: Language, Power and Social Work**

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## **Abstract:**

The term ‘vulnerability’ has risen to prominence in social work and social policy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, understood generally as a popular signifier of clients, groups and communities that require ‘intervention’. Proportionate to the magnitude of its use, critical engagement with the definition, function and ramifications of the term’s meaning has been significantly lacking in social work scholarship. This literature review engages specifically with the instability of the many meanings held within ‘vulnerability’, aiming to broaden an understanding of the term’s diverse constructions. The research findings position vulnerability as a complex and critical category, which is both receptive and active within the contexts it emerges. Consequently, the findings orient social work away from a generalised, transferrable definition, and instead towards embedding a process of critical deconstruction and reconstruction when using and responding to ‘vulnerability’. Finally, it is suggested that a greater appreciation for the word’s contested terrain will enhance social justice work in the areas of labelling and oppression.

Key words: Vulnerability, Social Work, Social Constructionism

## **Introduction:**

Social Work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has observed the emergence of ‘vulnerability’ as a prolific and widely applied descriptor in research, policy, and practice settings. Amid growing global inequality, precarity and social disruption, clients are regarded as increasingly ‘vulnerable’, organisations and state programs are tasked with protecting ‘vulnerable’ groups, and services increasingly measure and assess ‘vulnerabilities’ to determine people’s eligibility. Disproportionately, critical engagement and reflection on the underpinnings and material consequences of the deployment of ‘vulnerability’ has been flagged as deeply lacking in the profession, and the definitional foundations of the term remain generally unstable and elusive to social work scholarship (Virokannas et al., 2020). The Australian Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics tasks practitioners with assisting clients who are defined as ‘especially... vulnerable’, though no extrapolation on the meaning of vulnerable is offered (AASW, 2010, p. 8). Moreover, the three most prominent and accessible social work dictionaries fail to list vulnerability as a term worthy of definition in the profession’s context (Barker, 2017; Pierson & Thomas, 2010; Wakeham, 2018). Importantly, within their socio-political contexts those ascribed as ‘vulnerable’ are often presented with significant structural barriers to exercising their agency in self-definition

and contribution to the label's meaning. Hence, a location of power becomes central to this review's analysis of 'vulnerability'. The aims of this research project centre on an exploration and critical analysis of the hegemonic constructions of vulnerability and the discourses which embolden them. The research aims to link constructions of vulnerability to their operation in social work, in order to generate insight and implications for the profession's use of the term moving forward.

## **Method:**

The data collection process took the form of searches on the University of Sydney Library search engine, Google Scholar and Proquest Central, entering the following search terms in various orders and combinations: 'vulnerability', 'social work', 'policy', 'critical', 'definition', 'oppression', 'construction', 'language', 'agency', 'model' and 'perspective'. 83 relevant results emerged from these initial searches.

Of these 83 relevant search results, articles were selected which a) centred vulnerability as a core component of their research focus and b) engaged critically with its definition and/or consequence of its use. Literature published pre-2000 was excluded to ensure relevant research findings. Contending with Social Work's relative lack of engagement with the language of vulnerability, articles were included from the broader social science disciplines, where direct implications for social work and service delivery were observed.

The process of selection and analysis was further informed by the adoption of social constructionism as the theoretical framework underpinning this research project. In holding that there are no objective truths, that knowledge is generated collaboratively in the social world, and that dominant constructions emerge as realities through political processes, this theory became useful in two key ways (Deweese, 1999 & Berger & Luckmann, 1967). First, in opening up the theoretical space to contend with multiple meanings of 'vulnerability', those which occurred simultaneously and in conflict with one another were able to be explored. Secondly, by conceiving of constructions as *realities*, the research enabled a focus on the material social consequences of a 'vulnerability' discourse.

In total, 26 articles were chosen for inclusion in the review. Of these, 6 articles grappled with vulnerability as an individualising category, a further 13 orbited vulnerability as a group identity, 6 sought to reframe vulnerability as tied to resistance, and 1 was identified as a review aligned with the aims of this research project.

The findings of the review are presented according to their main thematic construction of vulnerability. The three categories emerged and were identified inductively by the author

throughout the review process. Finally, the research findings are discussed and connected to a critically reflective path forward for the profession in relation to the language of vulnerability.

## **Results:**

### **Vulnerability as individualising:**

Literature arranged within this construction of vulnerability examines its use as a tool to measure, assess and pass moral judgement on subjects, locating it as an organising principle of the service delivery models of most contemporary welfare states. Largely, this vulnerability serves to responsabilise individuals for social problems and intervene to ‘protect’ in ways which are innately demeaning. Fawcett’s review challenges the universality of vulnerability in its applications in social work and health settings, turning a lens onto the term’s emphasis of weakness and incapacity in the mind of a practitioner (Fawcett, 2009). Conceiving of vulnerability as reductionist, Fawcett traces how the model is closely tied to risk, where clients are constituted entirely as a series of risk factors and not the complex and full humans they are (Fawcett, 2009). Of value in this article is an explicit recognition of malleability when defining vulnerability, examining how social work interventions under this risk model are dependent on the workers’ conception and assessment of their vulnerability (Fawcett, 2009).

In an encyclopaedic account of vulnerability in the service sector, Wisner aligns his analysis with Fawcett of vulnerability as a deficit model, yet expands on this construction in foregrounding the power imbalances imbued in the term’s institutional context (Wisner, 2016). Here, despite sociological progress occurring outside of state welfare, which increasingly honours the agency and capacity of people to assess and define their own vulnerability, service systems continue to actively exclude client participation in the process of determining vulnerability (Wisner, 2016). Thus, in combining Fawcett and Wisner’s accounts, a particular vulnerability emerges which is both functionally oppressive and reductionist, administered unilaterally from institution to client.

Turning to social work practice, the remaining literature in this thematic bracket targets the worker-client dynamic as it administers, and mediates, vulnerability in ways which add nuance and complexity to its construction. Ferrarese’s scholarship unpacks vulnerability and its relation specifically to critical theory and the delivery of social services, key to which is a representation of relations between subjects as ‘institutions’ (Ferrarese, 2016, p. 12). Defining vulnerability as ‘an exposure to another’s power to act’, this dyadic relation is imbued with the broader normative assumptions and moralising agendas discussed in the literature above (Ferrarese, 2016, p. 81). Whilst this itself may not be seen as a deterministic construction of vulnerability, Ferrarese delineates a political space for its operation in the interpersonal relation between social worker and client. Here, clients can be seen as at the mercy of a worker’s construction of their vulnerability, which is at once oppressive, yet can also be moulded and critically reimagined. Moreover,

O'Higgins research on social work and young refugees in the United Kingdom echoes the influence of micro social work relations, arguing that clients would internalise expectations of vulnerability and perform these to workers in order to receive support (O'Higgins, 2012). Paradoxically, by presenting in ways which illustrated a passive and hopeless vulnerability, young people were in fact enacting their agency and demonstrating capacity to access services (O'Higgins, 2012).

On conformity, Bauer and Wiezorek's work on 'vulnerable families' and social work presents an alternate process where vulnerability is enacted unilaterally from worker to client, however the outcome of a client conforming to workers' expectations remains the same (Bauer, & Wiezorek, 2016). Here, in seeing families as vulnerable, workers aim to move families towards a normative standard of functioning which erases important individualities and diversity of family units. Hollomotz, grappling with the limitations of vulnerability in this space, mounts the argument for a rejection of it as a lens, exploring instead an ecological model for social work to capture the complexity of people's lives and capacities (Hollomotz, 2009). Nevertheless, the literature here illuminates the operation of vulnerability as a normalising, regulating and disempowering force in contemporary service delivery.

### **Vulnerability as Group Identity:**

Articles classified within the following section saw vulnerability as a massifying and engulfing label used to demarcate social, cultural, and demographic groups in government policy. At the conceptual level, Petherbridge's surveyance of social scientific analysis of vulnerability emerges as a useful framework to reckon with its linguistic and governing functions. The article understands vulnerability as both generalising *and* accentuating, where the term's operation in policy acts to subsume individuals' experiences into a measurable 'whole', while simultaneously demarcating the group or population as distinct from wider society (Petherbridge, 2016). Importantly, because this vulnerability is ascribed by external forces, it fails to represent the diversity of individual and collective agency extant within these populations. Consequently, Petherbridge facilitates a connection between an imposed 'vulnerable' identity and the emergence of heightened governmentality and surveillance, in which governments and services seek to manage and investigate its causes (Petherbridge, 2016).

Brown's work on social policy and vulnerability entrenches a link between the discursive production of society's 'most vulnerable' and a rationale for the state to 'protect' them (Brown, 2012). Shrouded in language of social justice and generosity, Brown resists a rescue discourse by problematising its paternalistic and oppressive undercurrents (Brown, 2012). Circling back to Petherbridge, it is the broad application of vulnerability based on an external perception rather than an embodied experience which leads to paternalistic and ineffective attempts at social control (Petherbridge, 2016 & Brown, 2012). Contextualising this process, Munro and Scoular's research

into contemporary regulation of sex work provides necessary nuance in demonstrating the dangers of vulnerability as a collective label (Munro & Scoular, 2018). Tracing how the UK government's construction of sex workers as vulnerable victims has led to the criminalisation of sex work, increased legitimacy for intrusive state intervention and governance emerged as a direct consequence. Here, the authors contend that 'vulnerable' conflates myriad experiences and sidelines the complex causes and influences of risk, generating social consequences of increased instability and precarity for sex workers supposedly 'protected' under this approach (Munro & Scoular, 2018).

Theorising further a collective 'vulnerability', a selection of literature examines a process of exclusion and obfuscation which occurs when the label is deployed. When constructed as vulnerable, groups are denied the space in our public consciousness for complexity, strength and resistance to disempowering processes. Yeo's work researching the impacts of a 'vulnerability' label on asylum seekers living with a disability challenges its euphemistic language, arguing for greater contextual consideration of the systemic reduction in services and resources for this group (Yeo, 2020). A vulnerability discourse here justifies and protects a threadbare social safety net, because the emergence of this vulnerability has been linguistically divorced from the very interventions and policies tasked to protect it. This population label obscures systemic oppression and absolves policy and government for their responsibility to uphold the rights of their citizens, positioning the state as protectors, rather than producers of risk. The divorcing of asylum seekers' vulnerability from the adversarial social conditions imposed upon them risks essentialising a hegemonic construction of their lives being less *worthy* and thus less deserving of social support (Yeo, 2020). An important distinction made here is between an *inherent* vulnerability and one which is *contingent* on social conditions. Where a population is perceived as inherently vulnerable, any specialised support is seen as a burden on society and the state, whereas vulnerability as contingent on social structures can be leveraged to reform oppressive systems and access greater resources (Yeo, 2020).

Furthermore, research in the legal discipline illuminates the reductionist effect of essentialising vulnerability in connection to a social group or identity (Dunn et al., 2008). In this way, it is the perception of people as belonging to a group of 'vulnerable adults' which influences and justifies their particular treatment under the law. Aligning with an earlier construction of vulnerability as individual deficit, the article integrates the two by unearthing how an external perception of belonging to a vulnerable group obstructs, and thus disempowers, one's opportunity for self-definition (Dunn et al., 2008). Finally, the work of Hunter introduces the concept of 'absent vulnerabilities' to denote lived experiences of vulnerability which are left out of public policy and legal constructions (Hunter, 2011, p. 23). Regarding the label of vulnerable as externally applied, Hunter exposes how non-British citizens who were victims of forced marriage were not included in the 'vulnerable' population of Britain's social policy response to the overall social problem, despite residing in the same country as the citizens deemed in need of 'protection' (Hunter, 2011).

Here, a recognition of the agendas and political processes undertaken in demarcating the boundaries and extent of vulnerable groups in society becomes key to exploring its complex social consequences.

Vulnerability has also been analysed as performing a normative function, where ‘vulnerable’ people or clients are not only *lacking*, but in fact *deviant*. Homing in on the ‘vulnerability zeitgeist’, Kate Brown deconstructs its linguistic function in contemporary welfare states, in which clients are understood as either ‘vulnerable’ or *not* ‘vulnerable’ (Brown, 2017). By dichotomising vulnerability in this way, governing bodies position a state of invulnerability as the desirable norm, and thus vulnerability is assessed as an abnormality. Fundamentally diminishing a view of the client, this construction of deviance places vulnerability as an innate or natural category within oppressed, disadvantaged or marginalised people as distinct from others in society. Strong in Brown’s analysis is the interrogation of a political context and agenda behind the use of vulnerability, paying specific attention to the construction of a ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor (Brown, 2017).

Connecting at the political stratum here, the work of Martha Fineman underscores Brown’s assertion that vulnerability is constructed as an individual deviance, however solidifies its link to neoliberal governance and welfare, in that those who are vulnerable are seen to have failed at the neoliberal economic project (Fineman, 2010). In this way, neoliberalism’s reduction of state intervention in the market plunges more people into ‘vulnerability’ whilst positioning welfare as a generosity rather than a human right and social obligation. Particularly insidious in this form of vulnerability is its obfuscation of relations of oppression and the production of social inequality through economic structures. Ewijk mounts an adjacent argument that social complexity and increasing vulnerability must be understood as a social, not individual problem, seeming at first to resist this dominant construction, however falls victim to neoliberalism’s responsabilisation of individuals in arguing for increased support and intervention to assist vulnerable people in building social skills and social literacy (Ewijk, 2018). In doing so, Ewijk underscores the notion that social vulnerability results from many individuals failing to successfully navigate the complex social world, rather than as a direct product of our unjust social infrastructures and the state’s failure to equitably administer services and resources (Ewijk, 2018).

Additionally, literature in this space has problematised the construction of group vulnerability as a fixed and immutable category, demonstrating the ways in which people and communities move in and out of a range of vulnerabilities. In a context of natural disasters and older adults, Barusch’s article explores the ways in which, as a group, older adults may be at once vulnerable to the physical effects of disasters, yet simultaneously demonstrate greater resilience and capacity to cope emotionally with its effects (Barusch, 2011). As such, Barusch argues that a simplistic notion of older adults as vulnerable presents as a barrier for effective social work intervention, whereby a more nuanced and complex recognition of older adults’ capacity promises to generate better outcomes (Barusch, 2011).

In the disability advocacy space, Beckett outlines how ableist constructions of vulnerability for people with a disability are inextricably tied to perceptions of capacity and social functioning. Alternatively, Beckett argues that people with a disability are indeed vulnerable, though in his mind their exposure to risk is the consequence of a ‘disabling society’ rather than the dominant construction of a lack of capacity (Beckett, 2006, p. 3). Surveying intricate ties between vulnerability and power relations for women with a disability, Arstein-Kerslake (2019) theorises further a hegemonic vulnerability discourse and its link to perceived incapacity. Grounded in the historic construct of a ‘vulnerable female subject’, women with a disability are ruled incapable of legal decision-making in particular circumstances with greater ease and frequency under the guise of protection (Arstein-Kerslake, 2019, p. 1). As such, a cycle perpetuates where the hegemonic construction of ‘vulnerable’ disabled women is bolstered by its very effect on the denial of legal capacity. Arstein-Kerslake (2019) argues that beyond simply reinforcing a negative and inaccurate stereotype, such denial of capacity has significant material detriments to exercising autonomy in the public realm, thus doubly disempowering women living with a disability.

Looking beyond the use of ‘vulnerable groups’ as a descriptor, further research in a public health setting echoes its failure to capture complexity and dynamism (Zarowski et al., 2013). Instead, such research proposes an *inductive* process which emerges in context and does not take a predetermined definition of vulnerability, finding that while some elements of vulnerability were affirmed, others were challenged (Zarowski et al., 2013). Demonstrably, though groups of people may indeed embody vulnerability as lived experience, the label’s development as a fixed condition in social policy to identify and govern social problems carries unjust consequences for those on its receiving end.

### **Vulnerability as tied to resistance:**

Articles constructing vulnerability as resistance sought to theorise its generative capacity, when oppressed people operationalise their vulnerability to demand social change. Understanding vulnerability as an embodied experience, the work of Judith Butler seeks to reframe the dominant construction of vulnerable people as weak, incapable and lacking agency. Instead, Butler argues that in contexts of political demonstration, oppressed people expose their vulnerability in public as a resistance to social injustice and its induced risk (Butler, 2016). Importantly, Butler introduces ‘precarity’ as linguistically distinct from vulnerability, focusing responsibility onto failures in infrastructure and social systems rather than people (Butler, 2016). Hence, Butler’s theory allows a view of people as simultaneously vulnerable *and* agentic, positioning vulnerability as a resource in the fight for social change.

Concurrently, Martha Fineman’s work around vulnerability and a responsive state sees the experience of being vulnerable as a universal rather than a differential category (Fineman, 2010).

Alongside Butler, Fineman concentrates a focus back onto the institutions and structures which are tasked to manage our “common vulnerabilities” thus reframing it as a failure of the initial state project to protect all citizens, rather than the failure of a responsabilised person (Fineman, 2010, p. 161). Here, it is argued that vulnerability can be used to leverage government and policy action, underscoring a rationale for greater support and more responsive systems. Beyond social change, further literature has explored the capacity for vulnerability to generate growth and resistance at the interpersonal level. Jordan’s work on valuing ‘vulnerability’ in a therapeutic context demonstrates its function in strengthening connection and an openness to others (Jordan, 2008). Whilst important in resisting a deficit focus of vulnerability, this construction must also be intertwined with a discussion of the socio-political context from which such vulnerability emerges.

Further studies highlight how marginalised and oppressed people act protectively and with ingenuity when found in situations which might exacerbate vulnerability. Initially, through the ‘intersectionality of vulnerabilities’, research has uncovered how HIV-positive, sub-Saharan women in a migratory context activated networks and facilitated interpersonal links which served to manage their social risks (Mellini et al., 2018, p. 153). Here, vulnerable people are found to be agentic and capable, a notion which researchers argue should underpin policy responses to ‘vulnerable’ groups (Mellini et al., 2018). Furthermore, accounts of migrant women in Greece demonstrate how, in the face of intense governance and surveillance, the women’s silence and covert survival strategies must be understood as active and deliberate resistance to oppressive forces (Christopoulou & Lazaridis, 2012). In defining these women as vulnerable, governments remain oblivious to such acts of personal and political resistance.

Tying these research articles together in a social work context, scholars have suggested a reimagining of the strengths-based model embedded in many practice contexts (Guo & Tsui, 2010). Replacing a focus on ‘resilience’ with one of ‘resistance’, it is argued that a greater array of strengths, capacities and activities of ‘vulnerable’ people can be identified and mobilised to generate structural and systemic change (Guo & Tsui, 2010). Thus, such research has demonstrated a function of vulnerability to instigate and provoke creative resistance and agency in disadvantaged groups, prompting a need for social work to acknowledge and integrate its potential for social justice work.

## **Discussion and Conclusion:**

Diverse and complex interpretations of vulnerability were examined throughout this review of available literature. Contrary to a popular imagination of vulnerability as universal and self-evident, the research findings unveil its terminology as a critical category which can at once be imbued with meaning, and simultaneously function to exert meaning onto those it is applied. Encompassing an array of theoretical perspectives, practice settings and social relations, the research further found vulnerability to respond malleably and fluidly to the context in which it was



constructed. Hence, the endeavour to cement a workable and transferrable definition of vulnerability in social work is found to be futile, replaced instead with an evidenced rationale for the profession to undertake critical reflection on its transitory nature in any given circumstance, paying particular attention to the factors influencing its construction. Beyond futility, the social work profession's staunch commitment to valuing diversity, individual expression and self-determination means an attempt to unify a notion of vulnerability would also be antithetical to its social justice principles. Heretofore, the social work profession lacks sufficient critical engagement with the language of vulnerability, proportionate to the magnitude of its use and the significance of its social consequences.

Factors emergent in this research which influenced a process of meaning-making around vulnerability can be represented as follows:

**a) Stakeholders**

The *who* of determining vulnerability has a fundamental influence on its overt and implicit meanings. The research findings of this paper underscore the importance of recognising stakeholders and their positions of relative power when critically engaging with vulnerability. Literature in this review has also demonstrated the oppression which occurs when those defining and ascribing a particular vulnerability are entirely dislocated from the experiences of being 'vulnerable'.

**b) Political Agenda**

Vulnerability is a politically charged term. Literature in this review details how it was always used *to an effect* in the social world, whether it be a government's advancement of a neoliberal agenda for governing the welfare state, or a collective political demonstration to enact positive social change, for example.

**c) Individual vs. Collective**

The level at which vulnerability is imagined and deployed emerges as a key consideration for understanding the term and its effects. Where individuals are constructed as vulnerable, the literature reviewed exposes its reductionist effect as a deficit model in the human services sector. When social groups were labelled 'vulnerable', literature highlights the link between hegemonic construction of weakness and a heightened governance and paternalism. Importantly, the research findings resist a bifurcation of the two, instead demonstrating how perceptions of collective and individual vulnerability interspersed to entrench marginalisation.

**d) Fixed vs Fluid**

Whether or not a construction of vulnerability holds space for individuals and groups to move in or out of vulnerable states is a key consideration when responding to its use. Particularly relevant to social policy and governance, the literature reviewed in this paper

engaged critically with a rigid application of vulnerability to social groups and its ensuing governance. When ‘vulnerable’ was a fixed category assigned to a group label, research found individuals to be repeatedly disempowered by their belonging to such a group. Importantly, the literature instead showed these individuals to embody nuanced, fluid and complex vulnerabilities.

**e) Universal vs Differential**

This paper’s research findings indicate an important consideration of whether a construction of vulnerability is universal or specific to a particular person or group. When vulnerability was universal, the literature highlights its opportunity for leveraging a more *responsive* state to more equitably manage vulnerability. Where vulnerability was constructed as differential, reviewed literature theorises its normative and stigmatising function, resulting in a dominant discourse of vulnerable people as fundamentally different and *abnormal*.

Integrating a focus on such factors with an existing model of critical reflection in social work holds the promise to support practitioners in reckoning with vulnerability’s complex terrain. Jan Fook’s process of critical deconstruction and reconstruction involves the interrogation and extrapolation of the foundations of discourse and language (Fook, 2002). Pertinent to this model is an enabling of practitioners to go beyond understanding vulnerability and its consequences and moving towards active participation in its reconstruction to align more closely with values of social justice.

Social workers across all sectors routinely find themselves in positions and relations where clients are vulnerable to their power to act. Social workers also routinely find themselves in positions requiring the use of vulnerability as a lens and tool through which they understand, assess and respond to clients. As a profession deeply committed to anti-oppressive practice principles, social work *must* engage critically and rigorously with the language of vulnerability both in our role and in broader society. The intricate links between vulnerability and power relations, woven throughout the reviewed literature, demand of social workers an interrogation of who gains from our uncritical use of ‘vulnerability’. Aligning with social work’s recognition of clients as experts in their lives and experiences, the profession can build a diverse and complex understanding of vulnerability grounded in people’s embodied experiences. Working in sectors saturated in a deficit discourse of vulnerability, such an approach harbors the opportunity for social workers to resist a hegemonic construction, capturing the strength, ingenuity and resistance that is too often subsumed under a label of ‘vulnerable’.

To conclude, this research paper has surveyed the available literature in social work and the broader social sciences relating to vulnerability as a definitionally contested term. In analysing the similarities, differences, and interactions between multiple constructions of vulnerability, a complex picture has emerged. Promisingly, models of critical reflection and a foundational

commitment to social justice position social work as a profession well-equipped to undertake greater participation in this complex area of inquiry.

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