



Toward a Pluralist Approach to Vulnerability: A Contribution to an Interdisciplinary Dialogue on Vulnerability

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Abstract

This paper is part of a special section devoted to an interdisciplinary exploration of vulnerability, assessing the theoretical elaborations of the concept, its uses, its political significance, and methodological issues in studying it. By foregrounding feminist and phenomenological philosophical methods that center on lived experience, the paper elaborates a multidimensional theoretical framework for understanding vulnerability as a complex experience and concept. It advances a pluralist understanding of vulnerability, seeking to connect dimensions of the concept that may be fragmented and focusing on its relational nature. Such a non-dualist approach entails that the political and ethical conclusions that can be drawn about vulnerability are complex and thus require critical analysis, especially of how vulnerability becomes a matter of political rhetoric, rather than straightforward prescription. Finally, in light of its complexity and ambiguity, adequate and socially just theorizing about and application of the concept of vulnerability requires more thoroughgoing interdisciplinary collaboration.

Keywords Vulnerability · Feminism · Phenomenology · Interdisciplinarity · Non-dualism · Pluralism · Ambiguity

Academics often write about vulnerability in a theoretical way. The theoretical perspective can produce, however inadvertently, a kind of detachment: one is writing about ideas rather than experiences, cases rather than people. One uses the impersonal pronoun, per academic convention. When one writes and thinks about the topic often, it can begin to feel rote, if not false, to consider something so fundamental to our lives in this somewhat detached manner. What is vulnerability like as it is being

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lived — in my life and the lives of those I know? In the lives of others both near and far from me, different and similar?

Vulnerability is the anxiousness experienced before a minor surgery: It is an incision made into a delicate part of the body and the wound that incision creates. It is the uneasiness of having to trust others, whom you do not know, to take care of you, to tend to your body while you are unconscious. It is putting yourself into the hands of others. Vulnerability is worrying about the impact of poor air quality from out-of-control wildfires on your child; it appears anew when you realize that what you consider poor air quality is a good day to your sister who lives on the West coast of the US and that your concerns are minor compared to those in much closer proximity to the fires who face far greater threats to their health and wellbeing. Vulnerability of so many types defines the experiences of the young girl who migrates from Guatemala to the US unaccompanied by her parents only to find herself pushed into working the night shift loading Cheerios into cardboard boxes at a food processing factory, struggling to stay awake during the school day, her stomach twisting in knots from stress (Dreir, 2023). Vulnerability is the stress, fear, and grief that Black Americans in the US disproportionately feel in the wake of yet another instance of police violence against Black people (Braithwaite & Graham, 2023). Vulnerability is being affected and moved by the plight of others, feeling empathy.

Vulnerability is physical and psychological; it is emotion and it is bodily condition. It is imminent susceptibility to harm and it is uncertainty about what will occur in the future. It characterizes human existence in both its bodily and its social dimensions. It is shared by all and it is always a distinct experience, different for everyone. Vulnerability describes both an exceptional condition and an unavoidable fundamental one.

Most significantly, vulnerability is named as a problem (Drichel, 2013). In the now extensively developed discourse on the concept, vulnerability emerges in pre-occupations with security, safety, emotional life, violence, and inequality. It names what people experience as a problem and, frequently, what they reject and repudiate in their experience. The way vulnerability is a problem is complex and compound. Most simply, vulnerability is often understood as a diminished capacity to withstand attack, loss, or injury or as being more susceptible to harm than is ordinary, a condition that calls for ethical responses of protection and amelioration. In the contemporary socioeconomic context, however, vulnerability is also a political condition and problem. Critique of dominant neoliberal ideology and policy pinpoints how neoliberal privatization intensifies vulnerability. Precarity increases due to reductions in social welfare support and state responsibility via austerity. At the same time, the neoliberal discourse of individual responsibility induces people to understand themselves as both perpetually insecure and vulnerable and infinitely responsible for their own condition. Pairing vulnerability and responsibility in this way promotes continual self-management with the aim of vulnerability-avoidance and self-maximization. This combination of ideology, policy, and practice entrenches and exacerbates inequality — self-maximization and individual responsibility are more accessible the more socioeconomic resources one has — which is yet another form of harmful vulnerability (Lorey, 2015). Construing vulnerabilities as private problems to be dealt with through private means and framing invulnerability as the solution to these problems leads to idealizing invulnerability and disregarding its ultimate illusoriness

as well as to treating other ('vulnerable') people likewise as problems to be managed. Public policy to protect 'the vulnerable' likewise often results in paternalistic and controlling interventions, as Kate Brown demonstrates so aptly in her essay in this special section: vulnerability is central in "new and intensifying forms of governance which regulate marginalised mainly urban populations through increasingly interwoven welfare and penal mechanisms within a wider context of welfare support erosion" (Brown, 2024: Sect. 1). Within this sociocultural context, it is harder and harder to recognize vulnerability as an unavoidable and meaningful dimension of living.

1 What is vulnerability?: Conceptualizing Vulnerability

Thus, vulnerability means different things to different people: scholars, practitioners in a range of fields, and people in general. It is an experience and a concept, a theoretical lens and a normative notion, and, as the contributions from Elodie Boubilil and Kate Brown illuminate, how it is understood and experienced, as each varies. The concept of vulnerability with which I work is the one I find most adequate to the human experience of vulnerability in all its complexity, namely, a pluralist one. From my orientation, a pluralist concept of vulnerability is also necessarily a non-dualist feminist one, a methodological point about which I will say more in the second section. It is an account of vulnerability that seeks to hold together dimensions of the concept that are commonly regarded as separate or perhaps even opposing and to account for the interconnections among them. Is vulnerability an increased susceptibility to harm or a constitutive fundamental condition? Is it exceptional or common and shared? A pluralist account says, "all of the above". In what follows, I elaborate six core dimensions of the concept that delineate its complexity and the importance of pluralism with respect to it.

First, vulnerability is both ontological and situational: it is both an unavoidable condition that all share and a condition that is socially mediated and so necessarily experienced in particular, concrete ways that differ significantly. Ontological vulnerability can be defined broadly as an openness to being affected. Such ontological vulnerability has an anthropological dimension in the unavoidable corporeality, interdependence and relationality, and temporality and finitude that characterize human existence.¹ As Elodie Boubilil notes, it "characterizes the very condition of subjectivity as being in the world with others, always immersed in intersubjective dynamics and networks of relations" (Boubilil, 2024: Sect. 1). These anthropological aspects of vulnerability may be shared — we are all finite — but the ways we experience them differ. They differ not just because each individual is unique but because the socially mediated nature of vulnerability means that people's complex social positions and identities shape whether and how they will experience particular forms of vulnerability; like much else, vulnerability is subject to social patterning. Thus, second, vulnerability is simultaneously material and social: it manifests both in corporeality, being

¹ What I term "anthropological" vulnerability is akin to what Fuchs (2013: 4) describes with the term "existential vulnerability," which names the way these fundamental aspects of human existence are revealed to those who experience a kind of hypersensitivity to their significance.

physically affected, and in intersubjectivity, being socially affected through relations with others, their perceptions, and social meanings. As explored in Elodie Boublil's phenomenological approach and Judith Butler's work on vulnerability, precariousness, and precarity (2024), these two dimensions are fundamentally intertwined.

Third, vulnerability is characterized by distinct modes of temporality. Insofar as it is a condition of potential, it is an openness to something in the future that has not yet occurred. Yet, vulnerability also describes an actual affective experience, a present feeling of susceptibility in the face of uncertainty, unknowability, indeterminacy, and uncontrollability. The ways vulnerability is experienced in the present and the forms of future vulnerability that are anticipated are both shaped by past vulnerability. In present experiences of vulnerability, we may be as vulnerable to our pasts as we are to our futures. This divergence in vulnerability's temporality is central to transformation. The gap between what one anticipates (in the present) and what will happen (in the future) is the space of resistance and change: within this gap, something different can occur, a departure from what is expected can take place. Because that to which one is vulnerable has not yet happened it could happen differently. The ambiguity in the temporality of vulnerability — it is happening now and has yet to come — is vital to preserving a non-reifying, non-reductionist understanding of what it is to be vulnerable.

Fourth, as Kate Brown's empirical work on the lived experience of vulnerability powerfully shows (2019), vulnerability is both ambivalent and ambiguous. My pluralist perspective on vulnerability centers on ambiguity, which is a central feature of both vulnerability itself and the approach taken to understand it (Gilson, 2016). Ambivalence suggests that vulnerability can produce two effects of opposing values such as care and injury. Ambiguity goes further in revealing the complexity of vulnerability, referencing how what seem to be opposites — agency and vulnerability, for instance — can be experienced simultaneously and how the value of vulnerability may be both negative and positive or even unclear. Finitude, for example, is an essentially ambiguous facet of human experience: our finiteness is due to the inevitability of death but describes our mode of existence while living; it is the occasion for sorrow, grief at anticipated and actual loss, but also the basis for joy, with meaning found only in the finiteness of experience, the reality that things do not go on forever and so are precious. Thus, ambiguity and ambivalence are central to a non-dualist, non-reifying account of vulnerability: comprehending these features of the concept prevents dualist approaches to vulnerability, which would reduce 'vulnerable' people to powerlessness, weakness, incapacity, and other devalued qualities — and construe these as nearly innate qualities — in opposition to the powerful who would either exploit or protect them, depriving them of recognizable agency or regarding exercise of agency as the basis for exclusion from the category of 'vulnerable' (Brown, 2024). For instance, as ambiguous, vulnerability may be both weakness and strength, not merely passivity but an active navigation of one's circumstances.

Fifth, as Elodie Boublil also emphasizes, vulnerability is relational: ontologically, it "is the structure that institutes the relational dynamics that create a higher form of intersubjectivity" (Boublil, 2024: Sect. 1). To be vulnerable is to be open to being affected through relations (with others, with aspects of one's environment, etc.). Defining vulnerability as relational runs counter to some harmful dualist assump-

tions about it. One common assumption about vulnerability is that it is simply a quality or attribute of persons. Following from that assumption is the implication that vulnerability is relatively fixed; it is implicitly regarded as an attribute belonging to people rather than a way people are affected by situations and relations. Shifting the focus to relations and their effects has two other implications: it prevents stigmatizing, pathologizing, and paternalistic responses to people's vulnerability, the kind which Kate Brown's work has criticized (2011), Brown et al. (2017), and it directs attention to the sources of harmful vulnerability, namely the kinds of structural and social relations that expose people to harm, deprive them of what they need to sustain themselves and their communities and afford some people excessive power relative to others. A relational account of vulnerability turns attention not only to the relations that generate vulnerability and the vulnerability of our relations (Boublil, 2024) but also to relations to vulnerability — avoiding vulnerability, projecting vulnerability, performing vulnerability, claiming vulnerability, and so on — and how these relationships and accompanying attitudes are interconnected.

Lastly, sixth, vulnerability is both an ethical concept and experience and a political one, as this set of essays indicates. Significant attention has been paid in the literature on vulnerability to the normative meaning of the concept and to debate about its role in ethics and politics (Butler, 2004, 2009; Cole, 2016; Ferrarese, 2018; Petherbridge, 2016; Rogers et al., 2012). The ethical import of vulnerability is described in a variety of ways: in terms of obligations to protect vulnerable persons and prevent vulnerability, as a disposition that can facilitate ethical responsibility to others, and as a feature of life that entails care and support for one another. The latter point is usually at the heart of vulnerability's political significance as well: shared anthropological vulnerability — dependence and interdependence, bodily susceptibility, social exposure — calls for forms of support that sustain lives and enable thriving (Boublil, 2024; Butler, 2012). The political significance of vulnerability might be framed as having two facets: on the one hand, a concern for political responsibilities (laws and policies) in light of vulnerability and, on the other hand, a concern for how vulnerability is the object of politics, a subject of contention, and so a rhetorical tool at the time as it is a lived experience (Oliveiro, 2016). More will be said on this point in the third section.

Scholars have suggested that vulnerability is more often framed as an ethical concept, its political dimensions sidelined. Yet recent theoretical work focuses squarely on the political life of vulnerability (Butler et al., 2016; Ferrarese, 2018; Michel, 2016; Oliveiro, 2016; 2018; Sabsay, 2020). As with the other dimensions of the concept, the ethical and political aspects of vulnerability are inextricable from a pluralist perspective. Vulnerability's ethical significance is complicated by the political and social dimensions of it; it is neither merely a condition to be mitigated nor simply an experience to avow and a disposition to cultivate. Knowing what kind of ethical and political responses are called for by any particular instance of vulnerability requires a critical analysis of its political significance, which most importantly includes the relations that generate vulnerability and surround it (see Gilson, 2021b): Who is vulnerable? In what ways? What forms does vulnerability take? Why are people vulnerable? What institutions, groups, and other actors are in relation to and affecting one another? What forms of change are likely and how likely are they? What kinds of uncertainty are at stake? How is vulnerability defined and understood by different

parties? The ethics and the politics of vulnerability thus cannot be divorced from one another.

2 How should we study vulnerability?: Exploring vulnerability

A pluralist conception of vulnerability calls for a pluralist method. There are diverse approaches to philosophical methodology but they share the belief that philosophy entails a deep analysis of central concepts, an analysis that questions common sense understandings (Langer, 1961). Vulnerability is one such concept, especially given the growing interest in it and use of it. Thus, I have sought to question common sense assumptions about the concept such as the assumption that vulnerability is just susceptibility to harm, its meaning captured fully by the term's etymology (Gilson, 2014). Yet vulnerability is most importantly a matter of experience, so my methodology centers a phenomenological approach to the lived experience of vulnerability (see Boubilil, 2018, 2024), conjoining it with post-structuralist and feminist critical perspectives on relations of power and their impact on experience. At the heart of my pluralist method are feminist tenets: non-duality, concern for justice and equity, critical attention to gender, and a focus on how gender intersects and interacts with other salient social identities and group memberships.

Philosophical study of vulnerability has deep roots in feminist thought, which has brought the vulnerable facets of human existence to the fore in the face of dominant liberal and neoliberal traditions. Feminist ethics and politics paired critical and constructive projects to challenge the masculinist bias, both explicit and implicit, of such traditions, which elevated invulnerability and associated traits and values over vulnerability, dependence, and relationality (Held, 1998; Miller, 2017; Gilson, 2021a). As with phenomenology, a feminist methodology begins with the nature and quality of lived experience and finds that vulnerability is central to that experience. An intersectional feminist perspective is particularly suited to the study of vulnerability insofar as it challenges all forms of oppression and is attuned to how race, socio-economic class, and other salient social group memberships intersect with gender, sex, and sexuality, thus requiring analysis of the various differences in how people are affected by others. Attunement to these complexities of experience entails attunement to the complexity of vulnerability, especially the intertwining of the social and corporeal facets of vulnerability (see Michel, 2016).

An intersectional feminist perspective demands the kind of non-dualism that is at the heart of a pluralist approach to vulnerability; such non-dualism is key to opposing hierarchy and thus injustice and oppression. As Val Plumwood articulates in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993), the myriad dualist divisions that plague the history of Western thought undergird the oppression of various human groups and the concomitant domination of nature. Vulnerability and its opposite invulnerability are entangled with such dualisms and given meaning through these associations: weakness/strength, dependence/independence, powerlessness/power, lack of control/control, permeability/imperviousness, incapacity/capacity, irrationality/rationality, and so on are all linked to vulnerability and invulnerability, often devaluing vulnerability. As hierarchies of value, dualisms shape our moral categories and thus how

we apprehend vulnerability in terms of “purity/danger, victim/offender, deserving/undeserving” (Brown, 2024: Sect. 4). Mapped onto gender, race, ability, age, and other social categories, dualisms establish and perpetuate social hierarchy and rationalize oppressive social relations. Feminist non-dualism thus aims both to undermine oppressive hierarchies and to develop a more accurate, non-fragmented picture of human existence. This picture may be one in which the terms of the dualism are themselves redefined and their relation to one another reconfigured: vulnerability is not merely the inability to protect oneself, a failure to be invulnerable, (i.e., a form of weakness born of passivity) but rather can be a capacity to be affected (i.e., a receptivity to ways of being affected that is an alternative form of strength and ability).

Although my methodological approach to vulnerability is rooted in philosophical analysis, I am increasingly convinced that an interdisciplinary approach, one that is even more thoroughly pluralist, is required. What are the aims of theorizing and applying the concept of vulnerability? Just as there are diverse perspectives on what vulnerability is and means, so there are diverse perspectives on why and how the concept should be used. Some aims include reducing harmful vulnerability and inequalities in experiences of vulnerability to harm, doing justice to people’s complex experiences of vulnerability, articulating an increasingly accurate conception of human existence (in contradistinction to the conceptions offered by liberal and neo-liberal traditions), and maintaining the plasticity of vulnerability as a foundational openness to being affected and altered. All of these aims, however, require critical analysis of vulnerability’s political significance and politicized deployment.

3 What is the Political Significance of Vulnerability?: Analyzing Vulnerability

Given the foregoing conceptualization of and approach to vulnerability, vulnerability’s political significance is itself ambivalent. On the one hand, the concept of vulnerability is frequently developed and proffered as possessing normative significance: we ought to protect vulnerable groups of people; we ought not to exacerbate harmful vulnerabilities; we ought to reckon with our own existential vulnerabilities, including mortality, and how avoidance of them precipitates harm. On the other hand, the concept of vulnerability is wielded as a political tool, with divergent ends and incompatible stances on political issues and situations. Consider, for example, the references to vulnerability with respect to migration (see Gilson, 2021b). Conservatives often position citizens, implicitly or overtly pictured as the dominant racial and ethnic populations within their nations, as vulnerable because of migration, depicting migrants as threats to security and economic prosperity. In contrast to this rhetorical framing, many migrants face dire circumstances that make them vulnerable to direct bodily harm: war and other forms of violence, political instability and repression, and environmental devastation that imperils life and livelihoods. Progressives who support them emphasize these material forms of vulnerability to harm along with the psychological, social, economic, and legal vulnerabilities that accompany the uncertain status of migrants. Even when certain social groups are classified as vulnerable there is no assurance that such recognition of vulnerability will lead to a socially

just response, as illustrated by Kate Brown's description of the deportation of eleven migrant women sex workers in Leeds in the name of protecting "vulnerable women from harm".

One conclusion about vulnerability's politically fraught invocation is that the ambivalence of and lack of clarity in the use of the concept mean that it is unhelpful (see also Boublil, 2024). In contrast, however, I suggest that the proliferation of 'vulnerability' discourses point to its significance and that the complexity, the lack of clarity, and the ambiguity and ambivalence surrounding vulnerability reveal the need for closer attention and deeper analysis. As Ferrarese (2018: 58f.) contends, vulnerability is the language of political claims: to claim to be vulnerable in a political arena is to express that a moral breach has occurred and to seek redress for it, and so competing or incompatible claims of vulnerability ought to lead to necessary political contestation. This contestation of course becomes all the more difficult, or even impossible, if there is little to no common ground, no shared recourse to facts and information, and if the category of 'vulnerable' is politicized so completely that its invocation defies reality.

Political dialogue (and theoretical work) addressing vulnerability thus needs to take up 'vulnerability' not only as an experiential condition and an instance of a moral breach and thus normative demand but also as a piece of politicized rhetoric. That is, the political 'problem' of vulnerability is also a problem of vulnerability in political rhetoric. One way to make sense of vulnerability rhetoric is to critique not just the ends to which vulnerability is put but also the conceptualization of vulnerability that is invoked. As Katie Oliveira (2018: 229) argues, conservative vulnerability politics relies on a set of reactionary "reflexes" that distill vulnerability down to a visual display of the suffering vulnerable body. This depiction makes vulnerability seem obvious and irrefutable and allows it to be essentialized, individualized, and thus decontextualized (Oliveira, 2018). The political maneuver is to make vulnerability seem simple, to recruit it into a political battle between good and evil, oppressed and oppressors. The end is defensive, restrictive, narrowing; if care is involved, it is directed only toward the 'in-group,' the ostensible victims and their would-be protectors. Thus, these political reflexes draw vulnerability back into the dualist framework from which a pluralist perspective seeks to extricate it; they dissemble to avoid ambivalence and ambiguity and thus to mandate clear, immediate action to protect those deemed vulnerable, albeit by exposing to greater harm those whose vulnerability is ignored, devalued, or rationalized. This kind of politicized rhetoric of vulnerability relies on a hyper-focus on what I have called a reductively negative conception of vulnerability (Gilson, 2011, 2014).

If we are not to regard vulnerability in a decontextualized manner as a simple bodily state and an individual matter, then analysis and use of it must focus on its relational aspect and on multiple levels of relations (interpersonal, institutional, structural, etc.): inequities in harmful vulnerability are unjust because of how some are made vulnerable so that others may attempt to avoid inevitable vulnerabilities or their fair share of harmful vulnerability. Systematically fragmenting what is a shared, unavoidable condition turns it into a divided burden, one that is all too often mapped onto traditional oppressive binaries (of race, nationality, gender, class, etc.) and treated as private, individual, and quasi-inevitable and/or a pretense for social

control. This systematic division distorts the relationships among people: denying actual dependencies on subordinated people, creating distance among those who rely on one another, obscuring the effects of the decisions of multiple actors, and shaping people's modes of relating in the direction of self-interest and wariness. Constraining the nature of the relationships among people constrains the meaning that vulnerability can have for them.

In this vein, the political ambivalences of vulnerability bear lessons for concrete applications of the concept in policy and practice, which result in specific modes of relationship among people. Kate Brown notes that “[a]s vulnerability classifications are largely ill-defined, they are especially prone to being shaped by the preferences, values, commitments and preoccupations of those who administer them in practice contexts” (Brown, 2024: Sect. 3). As a result, when operationalized, the ambiguity and blurriness of the concept renders vulnerability a locus for possible bias. One challenge for a politics of vulnerability in the service of justice is to mitigate or catch such biases. Thus, both dialogue about vulnerability and classificatory use of the concept need to be self-critical: vulnerability, or its alleged absence, is never simple and transparent even when it seems to be. Likewise, the ethical and political conclusions to be drawn about vulnerability — what should be done — are likely more complex and less transparent. There is a “strong correlation between politics and care,” as Boubilil (2024: Sect. 3) observes, and the relations through which care occurs need also to be the subject of critical analysis, a point feminist politics has continually emphasized.

4 What is the Interdisciplinary Potential of Vulnerability Studies?: Moving from the Past to the Future

In light of the political complexity and ambivalence of vulnerability, in what directions should studies of the concept go? The study of vulnerability has developed in various directions in distinct disciplines. As mentioned previously, vulnerability was central to the feminist critique of masculinist approaches to ethics and politics, which in its constructive dimension involved a reevaluation of vulnerability (and dependence) in political and legal theory (see Benhabib, 1987; Fineman, 2008; Held, 1998; Miller, 2017). Feminist theorists critiqued the masculinist normative ideal, masquerading as gender neutral, that human beings are to be autonomous, independent, and rational individuals. They proposed instead that human beings are just as much embodied, dependent and interdependent, and emotional beings with formative relationships to one another, and that these features are not flaws to be overcome in pursuit of an ideal but conditions of our individual and collective flourishing (Butler, 2012). Thus, one lesson of past studies of vulnerability is that the fabricated separations of dualism are errors (see also Ferrarese, 2016). This conclusion is all the more reason to believe that future study of vulnerability should be robustly interdisciplinary.

If vulnerability is indeed complex in the ways outlined previously, then a full-fledged interdisciplinary approach can increase the nuance and complexity of how ‘vulnerability’ is thought and applied. An interdisciplinary approach enables better comprehension of the structural conditions that intensify precarity, for instance. The foregoing discussion of the ethical and political significance of vulnerability high-

lights further the danger of artificial fragmentation, specifically, of dividing in theory, law, policy, and thought what is not fully separate in human experience. On this point, it seems insufficiently interdisciplinary simply to bridge different disciplines. The literature on vulnerability often questions how a concept with so many different valences can be productively used. A robust interdisciplinary approach to vulnerability should bring theoretical approaches and applied fields in particular into dialogue, as Kate Brown's work models. Theoretical accounts can be checked for their applied pertinence. Practical applications can encounter theoretical challenges. What can vulnerability as an ontological concept mean for institutions that address themselves to 'vulnerable' groups? How might the idea that all people are unavoidably vulnerable be compatible with the use of the concept to identify particularly threatening forms of vulnerability to which specific groups of people are susceptible? Is there space or a role for ideas of ontological and anthropological vulnerability in these applied contexts? What is the value of such ideas in contexts where vulnerability primarily signifies injury (see Ford et al., 2023)? At the very least, a pluralist concept of vulnerability reveals that efforts to protect and care for those classified as 'vulnerable' often have the perhaps unintended effect of exacerbating their vulnerability to harm and excluding those who fail to meet normative standards.

Thus, future study of vulnerability should seek to extend collaboration between those theorizing or applying the concept and those to whom it is applied. Kate Brown's co-produced research models such collaboration and generates important conclusions: that the experiences of people deemed vulnerable defy "traditional accounts of vulnerability[.]" speaking instead to the complexity and ambiguity of vulnerability especially in relation to agency, and thus that interventions based on vulnerability often "lead to resentment and carceral looping rather than support in state response" (Brown, 2024: Sect. 3.2). Can practitioners reject such traditional dualist accounts? It might be a start to recognize that the line between those who theorize and apply the concept and those who are classified by it is often yet another false binary division. For instance, could a pluralist concept enable social service workers, medical practitioners, educators, and others who work with groups of people who are typically labeled 'vulnerable' to regard themselves as vulnerable with others rather than as invulnerable in contrast to them? Can it facilitate practices of being vulnerable together? (see Brooks et al., 2023). How is doing so rendered more difficult by the bureaucratic contexts in which people must operate?

Expanding the dialogue that informs research can offer new ways of thinking about vulnerability — what it means, how to respond to it, and its interplay with intertwined experiences of dependence, illness, agency, capacity, and power. Ford et al. (2023: 8) write, "[i]n pluralising the practical meanings of vulnerability—in particular, what it requires, and from whom—and sharing the process of determining these things with those who will be affected, vulnerability could become destigmatised". As Elodie Boulil suggests, one aim is to begin "writing new scripts of vulnerability" (Boulil, 2024: Sect. 4). Vulnerability is a contested concept and category. Including those to whom it is applied in the study of it not only could make accounts of the concept more accurate, reflective of the full range of human experiences, but also increases the likelihood that its application will be appropriate, helpful, and just rather than harmful (see Ahmad et al., 2020).

In these ways, an opportunity and a challenge for future research on vulnerability is to adopt a relational focus in two ways: first, by centering the relational dimension of vulnerability, that is, how people are vulnerable only in and through relations with one another and their environments, and, second, by elaborating the relationships between the different senses and uses of the concept in different areas. To avoid false divisions, it is important to recognize that the different senses of vulnerability and the different arenas in which they are used are only separate because of how modern bureaucracies have divided up dimensions of human experience. Researchers may focus on a specialized area — law, medicine and health, social policy, disaster management, or education — but human beings' experiences of vulnerabilities in these areas are not isolatable. How might the application of the concept of vulnerability be pushed beyond a simple negative sense, which conduces to paternalist and pathologizing attitudes and treatment of 'the vulnerable,' and toward a complex relational sense? Beyond "How do we protect the vulnerable? How do we ameliorate harm?," we should ask, "How do we preserve and enable sustaining relations of interdependence and care for all? How do we preserve and enable openness to different modes of relating for all?" (see Boubilil, 2023). Critical analysis of the politics of care in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic has raised these kinds of questions (Care Collective, 2020). Those of us who use the concept of vulnerability can help develop responses and can do so best through interdisciplinary collaboration that moves between theory and practice, application and analysis, and ideas and experiences. On my view, incorporating aspects of ontological and anthropological vulnerability is key to overcoming the artificial separation between those who are positioned to be cared for, protected, provided services, disciplined, and managed and those who are positioned to do the caring, protecting, providing, disciplining, and managing while retaining awareness of the myriad differences in people's experiences. And doing the work of thinking and critiquing with, rather than about, those labelled vulnerable is integral to ending the problem of theoretical detachment with which this essay began.

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