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Lived-through Experience, Multi-perspective Methodology, Contentious Polysemy: Challenges in the Study of Vulnerability

Frithjof Nungesser[1] · Antonia Schirgi[1]

Abstract

The article concludes the special section on vulnerability. By reflecting on the arguments in and the convergences between the contributions to the preceding trialogue, it outlines three key challenges in vulnerability research. Across disciplinary, theoretical, and methodological boundaries, the contributions agree in their criticism of negative, individualistic, and/or essentialist conceptualizations of vulnerability; instead, they call for a non-dualist, pluralist, and participative approach to vulnerability that takes the lived-through experience of individuals as its starting point. Based on this decision, the challenges arise of (1) how to conceptualize and identify the structures of lived-through experiences of vulnerability and of (2) how the experiences of individuals and groups in different social positions can be collected, understood, and interpreted. The trialogue texts, we argue, provide important impulses for the development of a multi-perspective methodology, which permits to analyze vulnerability in a way that is theoretically, ethically, and methodologically appropriate. Finally, by taking lived-through experience as a starting point, the articles in this special section (3) contribute to a better understanding of the contentious polysemy of the term vulnerability. By analyzing the constitutive ambivalence and ambiguity of experiences of vulnerability as well as the difficulties of intersubjective communicability, the contributions help to understand why articulations of vulnerability are often vague and why vulnerability can be politically instrumentalized. In this way, the comprehensive understanding of vulnerability (e.g., as positive and negative, enabling and inhibiting), promoted in the trialogue, also becomes a means of moral and political criticism.

Keywords Vulnerability · Interdisciplinarity · Philosophy · Social sciences · First-person perspective · Methodology · Co-produced research

Debating Vulnerability: Complementarities, Tensions, Struggles

Interdisciplinarity is a popular catchword and is often presented as a requirement in academic discourse. For a variety of reasons, however, interdisciplinarity—understood as the exchange between and collaboration of scholars from different academic disciplines—is realized less frequently than it is proclaimed. The result is often mutual ignorance or the juxtaposition of different disciplinary positions rather than interactive and integrative intellectual cooperation. Yet, especially in the field of vulnerability studies, such a cooperation is urgently needed, as the notion is discussed in such a broad spectrum of disciplines—in very different ways and sometimes based on different epistemological and methodological assumptions (see our introduction, Nungesser & Schirgi, 2024). The format of this special section—and of the conference that preceded it[1]—addresses this problem. It is designed as a forum that enables a fruitful trialogue of different perspectives on the concept of vulnerability and the state of vulnerability research.

In their trialogue contributions, Elodie Boublil, Kate Brown, and Erinn Gilson provide insights into the main axes, central arguments, and current developments of their work on vulnerability in order to outline their perspective on the potentials and problems of vulnerability research. In this concluding article, we reflect on the arguments in and the interplay between the trialogue contributions and use them to outline key challenges in researching vulnerability. The positions presented in the three papers reveal substantial similarities,[2] but also important differences. These differences are hardly surprising, given the authors' different backgrounds in terms of their academic discipline (philosophy, social policy research/criminology), the local context in which they work (UK, USA, France/Canada), and their different theoretical orientations (especially phenomenology, feminist theory, critical social policy research). As will be shown, some of the differences take the form of complementarities and thus contribute to a more complex and complete view of important aspects of vulnerability. Other differences, in turn, reveal tensions that can help to make arguments more explicit and precise. Yet, a closer look at the trialogue shows that the complementarities and tensions between the three contributions must be understood against the background of fundamental commonalities. What unites the three positions is a non-dualist and pluralist orientation and thus the criticism of negative, individualistic, and/or essentialist conceptualizations of vulnerability. In other words, the authors reject conceptualizations that ignore that vulnerability is not only the source of negative experiences and problems, but also the basis of positive experiences and a driving force for action, for example in the form of compassion, care, and solidarity. They also reject approaches that conceptualize vulnerability as a deviation

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[1] As described in the introduction to this special section (Nungesser & Schirgi, 2024), the idea for the preceding trialogue goes back to the concluding plenary discussion of the conference *Vulnerability. Theories and Concepts in Philosophy and the Social Sciences* at the University of Graz in October 2022.

[2] Some similarities and common lines of argumentation have already been discussed in the introduction (see Nungesser & Schirgi, 2024).

or distinctive feature that characterizes specific individuals or groups who are externally classified as vulnerable without inquiring into the contingency and sociopolitical construction of these classifications and without including the people classified in this way in their research. The trialogue thus reveals transdisciplinary overlaps and a transdisciplinary coalition against fundamentally different conceptualizations of vulnerability (which are also transdisciplinary in character). In our view, such a non-dualist and pluralist position has gained ground in various disciplines in recent years, but has by no means become generally accepted. It is also confronted with the problem that negative, individualistic, and/or essentialist conceptualizations of vulnerability play a prominent role in cultural and political discourses and shape concrete social policies and administrative practices.

The complementarities of and tensions between the trialogue contributions as well as the joint struggle against fundamentally different conceptualizations of vulnerability draw attention to important conceptual and methodological challenges in the study of vulnerability. In the following sections, we will discuss three such challenges.

(1) We begin with one of the most striking convergences between the three contributions, namely the fundamental analytical decision to take the *lived-through experience* of individuals as the starting point for studying vulnerability. Although they set different foci, each of the articles is characterized by the impulse to analyze the bodily, situational, and social structure of lived experience—the experiential structures of vulnerability. The fact that the experience of vulnerability is structured, does not imply that it is determined, uniform, or passive. Rather, the general and social structuredness of experience allows for a considerable degree of individuality of this experience and the way this experience is lived, felt, and dealt with. Examining vulnerability as lived-through experience means taking the first-person perspective as a starting point. This decision, in turn, poses the problem of how to capture vulnerability from a second- and third-person perspective as well as how to comprehend the particular vulnerabilities of individuals in different social positions. The problem here is not (or not primarily) the irreducible specificity of the individual experience, but how to access and understand the (socially) structured experiences of individuals or groups in certain social positions.

(2) By taking the lived-through experience and, thus, a first-person perspective as a starting point the trialogue authors position themselves against external and paternalistic interpretations of the experiences of others. Examining vulnerability from the first-person perspective, however, leads to crucial methodological challenges resulting from the question of how the (lived-through) experience of individuals as well as members of other social groups can be collected, understood, interpreted, and presented. As we argue in the third section, the trialogue texts provide important impulses for the development of a *multi-perspective methodology*. This methodology not only brings together the first-person and second-person perspective, but also permits an innovative connection to the third-person perspective. As the researchers emphasize in the trialogue, partici-

patory and co-produced research can be an important means of such a multi-perspective methodology, which permits to conduct empirical research on vulnerability in a way that is theoretically, ethically, and methodologically appropriate. Given these arguments the impulse to find more inclusive, participative, and democratic forms of research is logical. However, it raises thorny methodological questions that will likely generate additional debate in future vulnerability research.

(3) A third challenge—identified in numerous publications—concerns the polysemy of the term vulnerability. As the trialogue contributions critically note, the term "vulnerability" is often used vaguely and/or in a one-sided way in public and academic discourse. Contrary to such vague and one-sided understandings, the trialogue authors strive to comprehend both the approach taken towards vulnerability as well as vulnerability itself in its ambivalence and ambiguity. This enables them to gain a more comprehensive understanding of vulnerability by seeing its different effects as well as the different sides of vulnerability (e.g., positive/negative, enabling/inhibiting). As the authors repeatedly illustrate, the terminology of vulnerability has been incorporated into a variety of social discourses, political narratives, and specific policies and practices of public authorities. Debates about the correct conceptualization of vulnerability are therefore not just an academic matter. Rather, the terminology of vulnerability is an important element of conflicts within and between different social arenas, which is why we speak of a *contentious polysemy of vulnerability*.

Vulnerability: Experience, Structure, and Perspective

A common thread in the positions of the three authors is that they advocate a concept of vulnerability that is based on the experience or the living through of being vulnerable. Thus, their approach takes, at least on the outset, a first-person perspective. This is a position that is central for phenomenological approaches as well as in some areas of the social sciences. Phenomenologists claim that humans are bodily beings that are open toward the world and others. This openness implies that they are 'intentionally' directed towards something (in the world, but also in their thoughts, dreams, or desires) and thereby experience a particular 'thing'. Experience is not a purely subjective occurrence, but a form of relation of the body and the world (Zahavi, 2019: 20). However, in our pre-reflexive directedness towards the world and others this experience is given as "subjectively lived through" (Zahavi, 2014: 16). The social sciences, too, are often concerned with the study of experience. Drawing on phenomenological perspectives, various hermeneutic or interpretative approaches in qualitative research not only analyze the lived experience of the researched subjects but also insist that the analysis of lived experience must be the foundation of all social research (e.g., Hitzler & Honer, 2015; Rosenthal, 2018).

In their contributions to the trialogue, the authors mutually acknowledge this shared orientation of their approaches. Moreover, they all state that the study of lived experience does not imply a one-sided focus on the individuality and uniqueness of experiences of vulnerability. Instead, they all search for conditions that underlie and

structure the lived-through experiences of vulnerability. Yet, in their articles, they each emphasize different aspects and conditions of the lived-through experience that they consider essential for understanding vulnerability and thus it seems debatable whether the meaning of the term "lived-through experience" coincides completely in their approaches.

The two philosophical contributions in particular emphasize that the experience of vulnerability is part of the ontological and/or anthropological condition of human beings, founded in their corporeality and finitude. In this way, experiences of vulnerability are integrated from the outset into an ontological and anthropological framework, which, however, leaves room for far-reaching variability. Accordingly, the authors emphasize that paying attention to this general condition does not imply to overlook or eradicate difference; rather, vulnerability "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" (Gilson, 2024: introduction). For Boublil (2024), too, vulnerability is both, a universal condition and a lived-through experience. In her analysis, she also explicitly turns to the anthropological basis of our understanding of vulnerability in relation to conceptions of the self and other.

When Boublil argues for a position that takes into account the "lived-through experience undergone by people," she does so from a phenomenological point of view. This is to say that she is philosophically investigating the "experiential structures" (Zahavi, 2019: 26) of those experiencing vulnerability. She is therefore interested in the "intentional and relational structure of consciousness and its meaning-making activity" (Boublil, 2024: Sect. 1). Even if she is concerned with this experience, she does not reduce vulnerability to experience. Rather, for her "human vulnerability is the structure that institutes the relational dynamics that create a higher form of intersubjectivity" (Boublil, 2024: Sect. 1). If vulnerability is that structure that "creates a higher form of intersubjectivity" (Boublil, 2024: Sect. 1) of subjects that are always already in a situation of "openness and exposure to the world and others" (Boublil, 2024: Sect. 1) then this is also part of the structure of our experience of others and the world (even if this might not be 'consciously' felt). These different experiences are not random. Rather, they depend upon the particular relational dynamics in place and are therefore institutionalized and socially structured or framed.

Vulnerability structurally touches different persons differently and they therefore experience it differently. Only by looking at the specific social and historical context can the questions be examined as to how the risks for certain experiences of vulnerability are distributed in society and how the presence (or absence) of cultural, political, and legal vocabularies permit (or prevent) the interpretation of specific occurrences as experiences of vulnerability or even as illegitimate violations. These social and cultural conditions that structure the experience of vulnerability are taken into account by the trialogue contributions. This is implied in the following example in Erinn Gilson's article: "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" (Gilson, 2024: introduction, referring to an article by Patia Braithwaite and Tiffanie Graham). The specificity of the experience here does

not simply result from subjective differences, but follows from institutionalized, socially structured differences in the exposure of certain human beings to (potential) harm. Experiences "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" (Gilson, 2024: Sect. 1). As for Boublil, for Gilson too, particular vulnerabilities of particular persons or groups are a social and structural issue.

Brown takes an intersectional perspective, that follows Gilson's argument, that vulnerability is "ascribed unevenly" (Brown, 2024: Sect. 3.1). How vulnerability is lived depends on the particular "social, historical, economic and cultural continuities and changes" (Brown, 2024: Sect. 4). For her, in vulnerability studies three interconnected areas are of central relevance: "(i) how vulnerability is *lived*; more exceptionally—homelessness, sex work, trauma and so on—and also more ordinarily—for example, ill health, sense of fear for the future, human experience of everyday life and temporality; (ii) how vulnerability is *mobilised in social interventions* (policing would be an example); (iii) how it is understood in theory (e.g. growing appreciation of intersectionality as a way of making sense of lives and experiences)" (Brown, 2024: Sect. 4). As a social scientist, Brown is less concerned with the ontological and anthropological foundations of vulnerability, but more directed towards the particular forms of how vulnerability is lived by persons belonging to particular groups, having particular social criteria or living under particular historical and cultural circumstances. These particular social, historical, economic, and cultural vulnerabilities are institutionalized and forcefully ascribed to some and less or not upon others. She is then interested in the practical consequences (how this vulnerability is mobilized in social interventions) and theoretical implications. This differs from Boublil, who is, in addition, interested in the historical and cultural conditions of particular framings of vulnerability and invulnerability as well as in particular forms of precariousness of particular groups. Thus, Boublil's research objective is more theoretical—namely understanding the general structure of vulnerability, how this structure institutes relational and intersubjective dynamics, and how it relates to general intentional structures.

The three authors conceptualize vulnerability by bringing together an anthropological and ontological basis (that is stronger pronounced in the two philosophical accounts) and the lived-through experience. Further research is needed that investigates the relation between the universal condition and lived experience and that explores in detail how the general structures of experience are linked to intersubjective relations and sociohistorical situations. In a way, we encounter here again the familiar duality of "precariousness" and "precarity" (Butler, 2006: 19) or "inherent" and "situational vulnerability" (Mackenzie et al., 2014: 7). The contributions in the special section outline important arguments on both levels, but how the two sides of the conceptual couple are connected in detail remains a challenge for vulnerability studies.

A second challenge for further research on vulnerability is the following: If vulnerability is lived or has to be lived, what are the possible *perspectives* on

vulnerability? Can we only grasp vulnerability from a first-person perspective, as it was described so far? Can it be co-lived, that is, can others experience this living through by being co-present (in the sense of an intercorporeal relation, testimony, or participation as a methodological tool)? Can we gain a third-person understanding of vulnerability that is not paternalistic?

When approaching the second- and third-person perspective the trialogue authors still take into account experience. Therefore, the starting point, for example, of Gilson's argument is the experience of vulnerability from a first-person perspective. She poses the following question: "What is vulnerability like as it is being 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?" (Gilson, 2024: introduction) A second person enters the stage at different points: It can be the one I feel vulnerable to, as Gilson shows when she describes "the uneasiness of having to trust others" (Gilson, 2024: introduction), for example in the case of a surgery. Moreover, the second person can be the one whose vulnerability bothers me, as she describes using the example of worrying about the consequences of poor air quality for one's child. In this case "[v]ulnerability is being affected and moved by the plight of others, feeling empathy" (Gilson, 2024: introduction). Also in this second case vulnerability remains an experience from a first-person perspective, but it is one caused by the relation to a second person. Gilson advocates for further research on these relations and on how they create particular situations and forms of vulnerability (Gilson, 2024). Boublil's approach is also based on the first-person perspective and it also proceeds with a relational argument. For her, vulnerability is a "general structure that makes us open to others and permeable to their affects, value judgments, and representations"; it is, therefore, "intersubjectively constituted" and "relational" (Boublil, 2024: Sect. 1). This argument is grounded in phenomenology—humans are essentially open towards others and the world (see Merleau-Ponty, 2014). When Boublil argues that vulnerability is relational, she presupposes this openness. Vulnerability is the potential to be wounded (not an actual wound), or, in other words, "a capacity to be sensitive to someone's expressive unity, to be sensitive to differences and creations" (Boublil, 2018: 184). Even if humans are not entirely independent, but in a constant relation to others and the world, the perspective from which vulnerability is a "lived-through experience" is the one of the first person.

Vulnerability can also be studied from a second-person perspective, meaning from the perspective of another person who immediately co-lives one's vulnerability. For Boublil, this implies studying the responses to vulnerable persons by individuals and communities. "This perspective examines, more specifically, empathy as grounded in intercorporeity and interaffectivity" (Boublil, 2024: Sect. 2). This is in line with what Kate Brown aims at with her co-productive research methodology. Gilson positively refers to these research efforts, because they allow a turn to the complexity and ambiguity of vulnerability (Gilson, 2024). Nevertheless, the endeavors of Boublil and Brown also differ: While Boublil is interested in the experiential structure of how any person can gain a second-person understanding of the lived experience of vulnerability, Brown strives to obtain a second-persons perspective as a researcher (whereas traditionally researchers would hold a third-person

perspective, see Schütz, 1972). Furthermore, this second-person approach includes a mobilization of vulnerability in a process of social change (Brown, 2024).

Following her reflections on the second-person perspective and interaffectivity, Boublil identifies the potential for a "hermeneutics of vulnerability" that she presents as a third-person perspective approach to vulnerability. Such an approach "correlates the subjective dimension of vulnerability as a lived-through experience and the objective settings and institutional frameworks that create the conditions for the negative effects of vulnerability, namely inequalities, violence and injustices that require from us political solutions and corrections" (Boublil, 2024: Sect. 2). This third-person perspective is not immediately touched upon in the other trialogue articles. Nevertheless, it is present in all three texts in two different ways: First, the general need to link experiences of vulnerability with organizational and institutionalized settings and frameworks is emphasized by all three authors. Second, the third-person perspective of organizations, especially of public authorities and their representatives, is repeatedly discussed. This applies, for example, to cases where people belonging to certain groups are classified as vulnerable, even though they may not consider themselves vulnerable, or in cases where others experience themselves as vulnerable but are not seen and acknowledged in their vulnerability, or in cases where only some dimensions of vulnerability are acknowledged, but not others (as in the case reported by Brown (2024: Sect. 2), where sex workers were classified as vulnerable because of their work, but not because they were migrants).

Experience, Structure, and Perspective: Methodological Challenges

In both philosophy and the social sciences vulnerability is often defined and discussed from a third-person perspective. This perspective primarily aims to identify vulnerable individuals or groups within the population in order to better understand the causes and consequences of their vulnerabilities and to analyze and/or suggest political, legal, ethical, or administrative responses. The way in which vulnerability is attributed from the third-person perspective differs within and between disciplines. In medical and bioethics, for example, individualistic approaches ascribe vulnerability in particular due to "diminished individual autonomy" (Ten Have, 2016: 2) and the associated restrictions of the ability to make independent decisions and to give informed consent. More social or political perspectives, on the other hand, emphasize the unequal distribution of medical vulnerabilities due to social, economic, and political conditions, dependencies, and differences in power (Ten Have, 2016: 124–148). Similar debates about vulnerable individuals and groups also exist in other disciplines—from criminology and social policy to geography and climate science (e.g., Brown et al., 2017; Chambers, 1989; IPCC, 2022). The risks that are discussed in each case—such as drug abuse, homelessness, crop failure, or climate migration—differ. Still, the approaches in the different disciplines are similar from a theoretical and methodological perspective. In each case, the aim is to identify vulnerable individuals and groups (or even countries and systems) on the basis of specific characteristics, factors, or indexes. The definitional authority lies with the scientific community, which defines and ascribes vulnerability.

This logic of external definition and attribution is criticized by the trialogue authors. As already shown in the last section they develop a different notion of vulnerability that takes into account the lived-through experience, thus starting from a (philosophical and/or sociological) first-person perspective. The lived-through experience of members of different, often disadvantaged and marginalized, groups can and should not be interpreted from the 'outside,' i.e., from an allegedly distanced and neutral point of view. Such an external viewpoint promotes analytical paternalism, which can contribute to a pathologization and disempowerment of social groups. Crucially, however, it would also be unacceptable to withdraw from areas labeled as disadvantaged or problematic due to a 'fear of paternalism' and to rely on the fact that these groups can necessarily speak for themselves. In particular, it is problematic to assume that groups labeled as vulnerable are always able and willing to choose a form of articulation that makes their vulnerability or specific violations apparent and understandable to others.

This dilemma is recognized and identified as a problem by the three authors. As Kate Brown in particular shows, vulnerability or protest against violations are often expressed in a way that does not correspond to the prevailing notions of vulnerable groups in society. Since these ideas and judgments also shape governmental policies and practices, ignoring or misinterpreting these articulations can have dramatic consequences for individuals.

> "Bringing lived experiences of vulnerability centre stage showed that vulnerable people's lives and perspectives did not align well with the template carved out by traditional accounts of vulnerability which emphasise weakness and fragility. […] People deemed vulnerable are often unwilling or unable to respond in the ways that services demand – refusing to be 'saved' from people or circumstances. Time and again my studies have shown how adaptive behaviours used to cope with significant or extreme adversity became the target of interventions designed to address 'vulnerabilities' or 'risks,' or to encourage 'positive choices,' which lead to resentment and carceral looping rather than support in state response" (Brown, 2024: Sect. 3).

Both paternalism and withdrawal from the field thus promote the danger of overlooking or misunderstanding drastic and systemic experiences of vulnerability. The question of the appropriate perspective on experiences of vulnerability is, as it becomes clear, of fundamental importance for questions of both research ethics and methodology. If vulnerability as a lived-through experience differs not only on the basis of individual characteristics but also has to do with systematic and structural conditions, the question arises as to how those who belong to one group (e.g., identifying as men, locals) can recognize and understand the vulnerability of those who belong to another group (e.g., identifying as women, migrants). A purely external third-person perspective is highly problematic in this context, while a direct first-personal approach to the situation is (usually) not possible. In light of this dilemma, the aim of integrating an empirically saturated understanding of vulnerability from a reflective and empathetic second-person perspective seems to be a logical and

important step for vulnerability studies.[3] Reconstructing such a second-person perspective not only presents important challenges to philosophy and empirical social science in general but also seems to be underdeveloped in both research fields (for an approach to comprehend vulnerability from a second-person perspective as a form of "testimony," see Peter, 2018). We see an important contribution of the trialogue authors in the fact that they provide valuable impulses for how a multi-perspective methodology can be developed that incorporates the second-person perspective.

How can research explore the lived-through experience of vulnerability using a multi-perspective methodology, thus escaping the dilemma of paternalism and withdrawal? First, as Kate Brown (2024: Sect. 2) emphasizes, such an undertaking requires precise knowledge, familiarity, and direct interaction with the field, which also guards against the danger of overgeneralizing empirical insights. In order "to ensure ethical rigour in working with vulnerable people" Brown therefore conducts her research locally "in close proximity to where I live and work" (Brown, 2024: Sect. 2). Even if this is a problem that is particularly pressing for those conducting empirical research, it is also mentioned by the other authors (Boublil, 2024).

Building on knowledge of and familiarity with the field, it is then possible to bring the field itself into the research process in the sense of participation and co-production. In their trialogue papers, the three researchers identify participatory and co-produced research as an innovative and important way of dealing with the problem of perspectivity. Kate Brown has already conducted co-produced research repeatedly and describes important results and insights in her article using various examples (Brown, 2024). Boublil and Gilson regard this form of research as a way of giving the anti-dichotomous thrust of their conceptualization of vulnerability a concrete empirical form. According to Boublil, for example, "collaborative and inclusive research seems to be key to avoiding any reification of the concept" (Boublil, 2024: Sect. 4). Erinn Gilson (2024: Sect. 4), in turn, welcomes co-produced research designs as they provide a way "to recognize that the line between those who theorize and apply the concept [of vulnerability] and those who are classified by it is often yet another false binary division". Co-produced research, the three scholars agree, can contribute to undermining traditional dualisms of research such as subject and object, active researchers and passive research subjects, theory and practice. It also makes research recognizable as a situated process instead of presenting it as an isolated and distanced practice.

Against this background, participatory and co-produced research appears to be a promising way of dealing with the research ethical and methodological challenges identified above and integrating experiences of vulnerability from a second-person perspective into a multi-perspective methodology. The broader use, advancement, and critical reflection of this approach seems to be another key challenge in the field of vulnerability studies. Obviously, important questions arise with regard to this methodological instrument, such as: Which aspects and which steps of the research process follow a participatory logic? Does participation primarily serve to generate data? Does the interpretation of the data take a participatory form? What does this

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[3] Erinn Gilson (2024) draws attention to the tension between the distance and detachment typically demanded of researchers on the one hand and the empathy and involvedness necessary to openly approach phenomena of vulnerability on the other.

mean for questions of authorship? How do co-production and participation in the research process relate to conceptual rigor and traditional quality criteria of social research? How do researchers deal with the issue that "complex power relationships and often competing or conflicting incentives, expectations and priorities may frustrate the research process" (Flinders et al., 2016: 262)? These questions are, of course, not limited to the field of vulnerability studies, but are increasingly being discussed in a more general form in the field of qualitative research (e.g., Flinders et al., 2016; Dunrose et al., 2018).

Hence, there are various methodological challenges and problems that a multi-perspective methodology has to face. At the same time, however, there is great potential. Among other things, it can possibly provide a more reflective and more elaborate approach to a third-person perspective than is the case with research that adopts such a perspective from the outset. For example, co-produced research can involve political actors, authorities, and the various actors on the ground and thus promote mediation between the perspectives. Moreover, in dialog with the "vulnerable" subjects, research can try to reconstruct the effects that general discourses, attributions, or interventions produce in their experiences. In this way, the third-person perspective comes back into view, but in a form that takes interpretative sensitivity and responsibility seriously. An elaborated multi-perspective methodology could therefore complement the "hermeneutics of vulnerability" envisaged by Elodie Boublil (see Sect. 2 above) as a tool for empirical research.

From Unspecific Vagueness to Comprehensible Ambiguity

As we noted in the introductory article (Nungesser & Schirgi, 2024), many publications criticize the lack of explicit and elaborate definitions of vulnerability. This criticism is reiterated in the trialogue contributions. Brown (2024: introduction), for example, notes that the different framings and operationalizations of vulnerability in current UK policies make for a "messy picture". Referring to Didier Fassin, Boublil (2024: Sect. 1) describes vulnerability as a "floating signifier" that is used in various contexts, at times implying opposite strategies. Gilson, too, notes the necessity to "make accounts of the concept [of vulnerability] 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" (Gilson, 2024: Sect. 4). These brief statements already reveal two dimensions of the contentious polysemy of vulnerability: On the one hand, it becomes clear that the concept of vulnerability is criticized both for its vagueness and for its one-sidedness; on the other hand, it becomes apparent that the concept is contested both in academic discourse and in public, and especially political, discourse.

What steps do the authors propose in the trialogue to deal with this contentious polysemy of vulnerability? The first step is to follow Gilson (2024: Sect. 1) in her distinction between the characteristics of the 'thing' itself and the approach taken to understand it. Accordingly, a distinction has to be made between the analysis of the 'thing' that is vulnerability and its experience on the one hand, and the way in which vulnerability is discussed in research, politics, or everyday life on the other.

Let us first turn to the second aspect, i.e., the semantic or terminological level. At this semantic level, a vague application of the term vulnerability is problematic. The term vulnerability means different things to different persons in different contexts; the specific meaning is often not defined so it remains vague.[4] In everyday life, this vagueness hinders mutual understanding and constructive exchange; in academic discourse, vagueness contradicts the requirements of the field and limits the comparability of different accounts. Importantly, the contributions criticize not only vague but also simplified or one-dimensional semantics of vulnerability. For example, Erinn Gilson (2024: Sect. 3) urges "not to regard vulnerability in a decontextualized manner as a simple bodily state and an individual matter" and warns that "vulnerability, or its alleged absence, is never simple and transparent even when it seems to be". Within the academic discourse, the authors reject primarily two variants of the one-sided understanding of vulnerability: firstly, the one-sided focus on certain dimensions, especially the propagation of a reductively negative concept of vulnerability; secondly, the external definition and attribution of vulnerability with regard to specific individual characteristics or groups (e.g., Boublil, 2024; Brown, 2024; Gilson, 2024).

How can we deal with the peculiar mixture of semantic 'messiness' and 'simplification' in the vulnerability discourse? From the perspective of the trialogue authors, the answer must be twofold: First, concepts are needed that do not presuppose an understanding of vulnerability, but make it explicit. Second, vulnerability must be explicated in an elaborate form that is able to do justice to the complexity of the phenomenon as a lived-through reality. It is no coincidence that people frequently talk vaguely about vulnerability. In many situations, vagueness and inarticulateness, tensions and conflicts are important dimensions of the phenomenon—but these dimensions require an explicit and elaborate terminology. This is a key problem to which the authors respond in the trialogue. As Gilson demonstrates, vulnerability as a relational structure, an ontological concept, and vulnerability in general is both, ambivalent and ambiguous. It is ambivalent because it "can produce two effects of opposing value such as care and injury" (Gilson, 2024: Sect. 1), meaning that the "value" of the results that vulnerability may produce is uncertain (Gilson, 2014: 138). Vulnerability is also ambiguous "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" (Gilson, 2024: Sect. 1). Therefore, vulnerability at this general level is not simply good or bad, but it is indetermined, it is ambiguous in a way that cannot be put in order, resolved, or overcome (Gilson, 2014: 138). This ambiguity of vulnerability is essential for Gilson's non-dualist approach to vulnerability, meaning an approach that does not reduce vulnerability to one of those sides. "For instance, as ambiguous, vulnerability may be both weakness and strength, not merely passivity but an active navigation of one's circumstances" (Gilson, 2024: Sect. 1). She develops these two notions on the basis of Simone de Beauvoir's *Ethics of Vulnerability* (Gilson, 2014: 78) as well

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[4] This can be compared to the semantic problem of the usage of the term "theory" as it was highlighted by Gabriel Abend (2008)

as Deleuze's terminology (Gilson, 2014: 138). Similar considerations can also be found in Boublil's contribution. She also argues that the two-sidedness of vulnerability is an essential characteristic of the condition of subjectivity and human beings, who are in the world with others and "immersed in intersubjective dynamics and networks of relations" (Boublil, 2024: Sect. 1).

By drawing on the concepts of ambivalence and ambiguity it becomes possible to grasp the vagueness, paradoxes, and tensions, which characterize many—but not all[5]—everyday individual experiences of vulnerability in a comprehensible way. This applies, for example, to many of the empirical cases described by Kate Brown (2024), in which moments of dependency and agency, vulnerability and revolt, violence and attachment are inextricably entangled. This becomes particularly clear in Brown's research on child sexual exploitation, which shows "how desire and meaning in sexual relationships existed alongside consciousness of abuse and exploitation" (Brown, 2024: Sect. 3.2). It is insights like this that lead Erinn Gilson (2024: Sect. 1) to note that "Kate Brown's empirical work on the lived experience of vulnerability powerfully shows [that] vulnerability is both ambivalent and ambiguous". In this way, the combination of theoretical differentiation and co-produced research contributes to a clearer understanding of the complexity and vagueness of specific experiences by employing the concepts of ambivalence and ambiguity. Accordingly, when studying vulnerability, it should be considered that biographical occurrences contain ambiguous moments and in many cases are open to different interpretations; and that these interpretations are linked to specific cultural context, social relations, emotional ties, and power relations.

The concepts of ambivalence and ambiguity can not only help to reconstruct the complexity of everyday experiences of vulnerability, but also to identify misrepresentations and simplifications of vulnerability in public, and especially political, discourse. In public and political discourse vulnerability is frequently framed as simple even if it never *is* simple and transparent (Gilson, 2024). It is thus the very ambivalence and ambiguity of vulnerability that is often ignored. Increasingly, vulnerability even becomes the object of strategic political simplification: "The political maneuver is to make vulnerability appear simple, to incorporate it into a political struggle between good and evil, oppressed and oppressor" (Gilson, 2024: Sect. 3). Boublil (2024) agrees with Gilson that in current discourses vulnerability is deprived of its ambiguity—only its negative side is seen. Overcoming this "polarization" of vulnerability, Boublil (2024: Sect. 3) argues, requires a return to the complex situations of vulnerability and the ambiguity of the feeling of vulnerability.

While political discourse often erases the multivalence of vulnerability, the political effects of this polarization remain ambivalent. On the one hand, vulnerability is deployed normatively—vulnerability should be "overcome," the "vulnerable"

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[5] Emphasizing the importance of ambivalence and ambiguity does not mean that all experiences of vulnerability are ambivalent or ambiguous. In fact, they can be perceived clearly as negative or positive. However, the concepts help to understand why experiences are often or at least temporarily unclear and clarify that this is not an aberration or pathology, but is rooted in the basic characteristics of vulnerability.

should be protected –, while on the other hand, it is applied as a political tool. Boublil (2024: Sect. 3) explains this very clearly with an example, namely the situation of asylum seekers in Europe: "Migrants must prove their vulnerability to legitimate their status. However, the economic, social, and psychological condition in which migration puts them reinforces their lack of capacity to meet the standards expected by the host country if they are not first being taken care of and assisted". Thus, the politics of asylum and the politics of care are not to be seen separately. Other variations of this clash of lived-through multivalence on the one hand and political and administrative simplification on the other can be seen in many of the empirical cases described by Kate Brown (2024). Drawing on her research on socially marginalized people she argues that the unwillingness or the inability to respond to support services in the expected and demanded manner is often framed as an individual failure rather than a result of the vulnerabilization and passivation of persons and the dismantling of social protections (Brown, 2024: Sect. 3.2). She identifies a far-reaching development towards the individualization of vulnerability through processes of political and administrative responsibilization. It is this diagnosis that underlies her skeptical assessment, according to which "the normative force of vulnerability can reinforce rather than challenge excluding tendencies, hardening binaries which are ill-matched with the ambiguities of vulnerability as it is lived and entrenching exclusions faced by the most marginalised" (Brown, 2024: Sect. 3.2). In addition, against this background, it becomes easier to understand why such a research perspective potentially comes into conflict with the perspective of public and administrative authorities. While (at least qualitative) research aims to reconstruct the complexities and tensions of a case, in everyday administrative practice it is usually necessary to clearly classify cases and process them accordingly.

Looking at these considerations, it can be stated that the three authors identify a marked vagueness of the concept of vulnerability, which is particularly due to its everyday application and politicization. Gilson develops a deeper understanding of the vagueness of the concept by introducing the terms of ambivalence and ambiguity, a terminology that is taken up by Boublil and Brown. Within their contributions to the trialogue, the authors direct their attention to different moments of this multivalence: Gilson turns to the experience of the deeply rooted ambivalence of vulnerability, Boublil seems to be more interested in an analytical and conceptual (not immediately experiential) integration of the different sides, Brown refers in particular to the consequences of vague or one-sided operationalizations in the policies and practices of authorities for those who are defined as "vulnerable". All three highlight and criticize the dominant political incapacity to integrate the positive and negative sides of vulnerability. In various fields, as the three contributions demonstrate vividly, vulnerability is increasingly becoming a "piece of politicized rhetoric" (Gilson, 2024: Sect. 3). Hence, they confirm other researchers who also emphasize that a differentiated view of the polysemy of vulnerability is particularly important in the political domain (e.g., Cole, 2016; Ferrarese, 2016).

What to do with Vulnerability?

Vulnerability, it turns out, remains a prominent and influential concept at different levels and in various ways. But can we take this prominence as good news? What are its consequences? And what future does the concept have? All of the contributions to the trialogue contain arguments that suggest a skeptical assessment of the vulnerability discourse, but also arguments that underline the concept's positive potential.

What aspects underpin the skeptical assessment? All authors emphasize the continued prominence of negative, essentialist, and individualist conceptions of vulnerability—both within vulnerability scholarship and at the public and political level. The political relevance, in turn, exists on the one hand in the context of more general political frameworks and logic such as "the modern and neoliberal paradigm of human performance and the dominant contemporary quest for invulnerability" (Boublil, 2024: Sect. 1) or "the masculinist normative ideal, masquerading as gender neutral, that human beings are to be autonomous, independent, and rational individuals" (Gilson, 2024: Sect. 4). In Kate Brown's contribution, in particular, various problems that accompany the integration of the vulnerability concept into concrete policies and practices become apparent in an impressive way. According to Brown (2024: Sect. 4) "working closely with public sector providers and those on the receiving end of vulnerability interventions underlines the dangers in supporting further mobilisation of the concept". As she demonstrates, at least in certain social fields, using the concept "comes with real risks of deepening social inequalities for some groups. Harmful power dynamics in designations and classifications represent significant or even insurmountable issues to overcome. Those in positions of power—including researchers—are usually doing the defining and those with less power are usually the receivers rather than designers of interventions" (Brown, 2024: Sect. 4). There are therefore strong and varied reasons for a skeptical view of both the vulnerability discourse and specific forms of vulnerability governance.

What speaks in favor of a further use and propagation of the concept, according to the authors, is its potential as a means of conceptual criticism and as a possible catalyst for a "paradigm shift" (Boublil, 2024: Sect. 1). Elodie Boublil emphasizes this aspect in particular. According to her, "the concept of vulnerability becomes an ethical compass and an operative tool for philosophical critique—like a trigger that would help us reset and reopen anthropological and ethical questions to challenge the ideological assumptions of our *zeitgeist*" (Boublil, 2024: Sect. 1). As a tool of philosophical critique, vulnerability can help "to question the anthropological grounds that sustain our representations of the self and others and, ultimately, our philosophical conception of personal and collective individuation processes" (Boublil, 2024: Sect. 1). In this way, vulnerability plays an essential role in establishing a non-individualistic and non-dualistic position that recognizes relationality, embodiment, and affectivity as fundamental dimensions. Similarly, Erinn Gilson emphasizes the possibility of using the concept of vulnerability to overcome entrenched dualisms and dichotomies. She therefore

strongly promotes her pluralistic conceptualization of vulnerability. Closely linked to this pluralistic concept is the plea for a stronger and interdisciplinary connection between theory and empirical research: "If vulnerability is indeed complex in the ways outlined previously," Gilson (2024: Sect. 4) argues, "then a full-fledged interdisciplinary approach can increase the nuance and complexity of how 'vulnerability' is thought and applied". The potential of this interdisciplinary approach can be seen, in the trialogue authors' view, in methodological advancements such as co-produced research. "[D]oing the work of thinking and critiquing with, rather than about, those labelled vulnerable is integral to ending the problem of theoretical detachment" (Gilson, 2024: Sect. 4). As these arguments make clear, in addition to its potential for research, the concept of vulnerability also has ethical and political significance. Brown and Gilson would therefore certainly agree with Boublil (2024: Sect. 3) when she states that "any philosophical reflection on the notion of vulnerability is part of a questioning that is both political and ethical and which requires taking a position in the contemporary debate in a critical and informed manner".

According to the trialogue authors, the vulnerability discourse thus offers a mixed picture. In their contributions, a more positive view seems to be recognizable where the recent development of the academic discourse and specific theoretical and methodological innovations are addressed. In contrast, greater skepticism seems to prevail with regard to policies and practices of vulnerability governance, but also with regard to more general political discourse. So, what should we do with vulnerability? Probably we are not left with the choice of advancing the concept or abandoning it. After all, the term is already in the world in a prominent, diverse, and influential way. Whether it will be the victim of its own success or the harbinger of a paradigm shift remains to be seen.

Declarations

Conflict of interest All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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Authors and Affiliations

Frithjof Nungesser[1] ⬤ **· Antonia Schirgi[1]**

✉   Antonia Schirgi
     antonia.schirgi@uni-graz.at

     Frithjof Nungesser
     frithjof.nungesser@uni-graz.at

[1]   Department of Sociology, University of Graz, Universitätsstraße 15/G4, 8010 Graz, Austria