Childhood Vulnerability: Systematic, Structural, and Individual Dimensions

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Abstract This article examines the concept of vulnerability as an analytical category to be applied in childhood studies. It takes neither a clinical nor a psychological perspective, but one based on the theory of childhood. The focus is on which elements in the shaping of society make childhood particularly vulnerable and place children at risk. Modern childhood and adolescence are based on ideas of development, education, protection, and rights. But this implies that these very goods are always endangered, insecure, vulnerable, and threatened. Therefore, this article starts by formulating an approach within the theory of childhood that links vulnerability to an important idea in social theory, namely, that of insecurity. It then reconstructs the use of the concept of vulnerability and discusses its potential as an analytical category in childhood studies. The final section sketches a provisional taxonomy that differentiates between system-related and structural dimensions and can be used to address the question of vulnerability in the childhood life phase.

1 Introduction

In this article, I wish to show how the concept of vulnerability may serve as an analytical category in childhood studies. I shall take a perspective based on the theory of childhood that focuses on defining what makes childhood particularly vulnerable and places children at risk. I shall examine how this concept of vulnerability relates to the concept of child well-being by drawing on some relevant findings from our study on child well-being in Germany. Because vulnerability can be conceived on different levels, it has to be viewed in relation to the structure, the system, and the individual. Structural conditions such as poverty are particularly relevant here, because structural risks can be used to extend the theory of childhood and conceive children as strong

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subjects who are, nonetheless, simultaneously vulnerable during the childhood life phase. This once more delivers systematic ties to the concept of child well-being. From this perspective, one important starting point is the social-constructivist assumption that childhood is shaped by social institutions, by legal regulations of the relation between the generations, by educational and other practices, by cultural ideas on what constitutes a good childhood and good parent–child relations, and by society's ideas regarding what kind of education should be acquired during childhood. Viewed historically, the idea of actively defining childhood as a distinct life phase is based on a welfare-state notion of child well-being and the minimization of risk. Over the last 20 years, this has been reinforced by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. However, it is still necessary to ask whether the ways in which childhood is shaped can themselves have negative effects and, for example, contribute to or even heighten social inequality in this life phase (Lareau 2000, 2003). This suggests the need to examine whether and how far vulnerability in childhood can also be explained by inequality-related categories such as class or social origins, gender, and ethnic background.

Hence, I shall first focus on vulnerability in the socially shaped phase of life known as childhood before asking which children or groups of children grow up under particularly risky conditions. I shall define childhood actively as a distinct life phase; that is, one in which children are particularly vulnerable. A wide range of different assumptions underlie not only the concept of vulnerability but also the theoretical and empirical assessment of "children at risk" (Finkelhor 2008). These depend strongly on what is viewed as a risk to whom, and how far individuals are held responsible for managing these risks. This, in turn, depends on what is in any way defined as a risk. For example, the risk of poverty in childhood turns this life phase into a period of insecurity for children. In Germany, one manifestation of this is less participation in extracurricular education compared to more privileged children (World Vision 2010). If the concern is with acquiring high levels of competence in, for example, literacy or mathematics, then learning disabilities in individual children are viewed as a strong risk of not attaining these levels. Such examples show how differently risks can be defined and which future threats are linked to them.

In this article, I shall concentrate on vulnerability as an analytical category that should also permit a systematic view of children and groups of children at risk. Nonetheless, my primary concern is with systems and contexts, that is, with those social dimensions that make the childhood life phase vulnerable and expose certain children to particular risks, and that do this right now and not at some distant time in the future.

In the following section, I shall develop the approach in childhood theory and link it to an important concept related to vulnerability in sociological theory, namely, that of insecurity. This links up with research on indicators of child well-being. Empirical studies have shown that one central indicator is security. Vice versa, a feeling of insecurity is a major indicator of vulnerability in childhood—along with experiencing insecure situations, relationships, or residential environments. In the subsequent third section, I shall reconstruct different concepts of vulnerability, which have previously emerged only on the periphery of childhood studies, in order to present a provisional taxonomy. The fourth section addresses the potential of vulnerability as an analytical category for childhood studies and the different disciplinary approaches to vulnerability

that can be reconstructed up to now. Finally, the fifth section formulates a provisional taxonomy that should help to address the question of vulnerability in the childhood life phase. This will distinguish between system-related and structural dimensions.

2 Vulnerability and Insecurity: Childhood as a Classificatory Aspect of Social Theory

The first reference to empirical research in this section addresses the finding that alongside the experience of autonomy and care, another indicator or relevant dimension of child well-being is security. The British studies on child well-being (Rees and Lee 2005; Rees et al. 2011) have shown that a secure environment is essential for subjective well-being. The World Vision childhood studies report similar findings in 6- or 8- to 11-year-olds in Germany (World Vision 2007, 2010, 2013). They showed that, from the children's perspective, the issue of security encompasses the family and the care they receive from parents as well as the school and their experiences of the general school climate. However, in the 2007 study, children also mentioned experiences of violence among peers at school as well as violence and insecure situations in the urban areas in which the live. According to empirical findings on the well-being of children aged 6–12 years, insecurity is linked, first, to experiences of violence, and, second, to a lack of self-efficacy—above all in the context of experiences at school. Further sources of insecurity are the quality of relationships to parents, to other adults in educational institutions, and to peers.

Insecurity is also an important dimension for parents and their ideas on child vulnerability. This finding relates to David Finkelhors (2008) observation.

> Parents make considerable efforts, some more than others, to try to keep their children safe. They move them to the suburbs. They give them karate lessons. They drive them to school to keep them off the streets or the bus. They sometimes invest in wearable alarms, wristwatch Global Positioning System devices, and babysitter-surveillance cameras. (2008, p. 47).

This diagnosis of the parental need for security by David Finkelhor, a researcher specializing in childhood and violence, points to a notable consensus among adults: Children are considered to be at risk, and they are particularly insecure in public spaces. This is reflected in the fact that protection is one of the fundamental orientations of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child alongside development, education, and participation. Not only parents and other adults in their concrete interactions with children but also institutions in their formal shaping of childhood develop and establish more or less successful strategies to make the childhood life phase as secure and safe from harm as possible. However, what exactly is perceived as a threat or a risk depends decisively on the contexts in which children are growing up: the educational level and status of their parents, the public discourses over risks, or the norms of the state and civil society. In addition, it is precisely social contexts that are linked closely to normative attributions. For example, there is one discourse shaped primarily by moral panic. It views a childhood spent growing up with unemployed parents as a risk. However, this notion of risk does not refer to any effects on children that can be

explained in structural terms, but is based on a critical evaluation of the behavior of unemployed parents.

Another example addresses the significance of legally formulated norms and the associated obligations imposed on the daily interactions between children and adults. For instance, several European countries have granted children the legal right to be reared without violence. In Germany, this was encoded in civil law—but not criminal law—in 2000. This now makes it possible to examine how such a fixed consensus in civil society influences the practical and everyday interactions between parents and their children or between educators and children and to examine whether and how far this is leading to changing attitudes among adults (Bussmann 2002).

Despite such reforms to civil law, there is still no empirically unequivocal knowledge about what makes children into threatened beings and at what ages they are threatened. And "sadly, social science has been little help. There is surprisingly little research about exactly which children are at risk and what works to reduce that risk" (Finkelhor 2008, p. 47). One impressive example for the lack of precise knowledge as well as for misguided perceptions is the concern that children may become victims of violence inflicted by strangers. Available findings, however, point in another direction, even when the dark figure, that is, our lack of knowledge, is particularly pronounced: It is above all in close proximal space, that is, in the family, among friends and relatives, and at school, that children become victims of violence and are exposed to other threats to their well-being.

Hence, it is those time periods, spaces, and actions that are perceived to be insecure that influence the social shaping of childhood and the strategies of adults. This provides the theory of childhood with an approach to assumptions in sociological theory that refer to the shaping of the social, for example, between the generations and genders, in the distribution of goods, and in the granting of rights. Because I cannot address this systematic integration of the theories of childhood and the social in detail here but only sketch it, I shall restrict myself exclusively to the aspect of insecurity—not least because the need for security is a characteristic feature of modern societies, and the differences in the fears of threats to security have contributed to the specific ways in which the childhood life phase is shaped within the generational order.

A series of historical studies starting with Philippe Ariés' L'enfant et la vie familiale sous l'ancien régime [Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life] (1962; first published in French in 1960) has reconstructed the formation of modern childhood and adolescence as a phase to be shaped as securely as possible. The shaping of childhood and adolescence as a protected and protective space, as a moratorium in the words of the psychoanalyst Erikson (1950, 1968; see Andresen 2006), was partially triggered by the growing demands in society to educate the young generation. This also required, first, an awareness of the "fact of development" (Bernfeld 1925/1973) in the child generated by new scientific disciplines such as psychology and education, and second, the spread of the welfare-state approach to structural insecurity through, for example, the introduction of youth employment protection laws or family welfare. From a historical perspective as well, the discourses over children at risk and vulnerability would be inconceivable without taking into account all the other efforts made to reduce insecurities, risks, and threats as far as possible.

This diagnosis ties in with the work of the French sociologist Robert Castel. In his book L'insécurité sociale: qu'est-ce qu'être protégé? [Social insecurity: What is to be

protected?] (2003), he points out how the production of security is regulated by legal, social, and economic systems. One aspect of these systems is the shaping of the relation between the generations and the distribution of responsibility for not only children and adolescents but also the older and the aged in order to cushion against the fortuities and adversities of life. Castel views uncertainty as a part of daily life that helps to structure all social experiences. However, the tension between the feeling of insecurity and the human need for security impacts on individuals and groups in highly different ways. The ambivalent relations between protection and insecurity, between insurance and risk, between autonomy and dependence have different consequences depending on one's social origins, age, ethnicity and migration background, health, and gender. Castel's appraisal is based on both a historical reconstruction and a critical analysis of the present day, and it offers a systematic approach to vulnerability in childhood.

The place in which bourgeois insecurity and social insecurity manifest in daily life is namely the family. Its members are particularly vulnerable under these conditions, and Castel also sees how problematic it is when risks accumulate.

> Living insecurely day after day means no longer being able to build up relations with one's fellow human beings, means perceiving one's environment as a threat and not as an open exchange. What makes this insecurity even harder to justify is that it particularly strikes those persons who also have the greatest lack of other resources (income, quality housing, the benefits resulting from a safeguarded social life), namely, all those who are also victims of social insecurity. (Castel 2005, p. 130, translated from the German translation).

By taking the need for security and the threat due to lasting insecurity as a starting point in both a theory of society and a theory of childhood, one can then ask in which social contexts or through which behaviors can children experience security and insecurity. Finkelhor addresses this with his question "What puts children at risk?" thereby focusing on the risks of abuse, social isolation, and, above all, violence. He considers that the major aspects transforming childhood into a vulnerable phase for those exposed to insecurity are geography and neighborhoods, family disruption, emotional deficits and difficulties, risk-taking behavior, and prior victimization. Children growing up in a war-torn country, those who live in dull and uninspiring neighborhoods with a high incidence of violence, those whose single-parent mothers suffer from addiction, or those who become victims of peer violence when in temporary care; these are the ones who experience feelings of insecurity and live in factual conditions shaped by social insecurity. Empirical studies have shown what dire consequences this can also have for learning achievement (Dragano et al. 2010).

This taxonomy can also link up with the formation of indicators of well-being for children and adolescents. Indicators taken from child well-being research can be used just as well to observe, describe, and interpret risks and threats. Alongside the individual disposition of the child, such indicators include poverty, violence, social isolation, neglect and abuse, lack of support, insecure residence status, sick parent or parents, and inadequate networks (Axford 2008).

I shall close by illustrating this with another empirical example. In all three World Vision Children studies (2007, 2010, 2013), we examined children's educational aspirations by asking them what level of secondary education they hoped to attain.

Children whose daily lives are shaped by poverty, whose parents are unemployed, whose parents do not give enough time and attention to them, and—in the 2007 study—who more frequently report experiences of violence and perceive their residential area as insecure have significantly lower educational aspirations than children with a stronger feeling of security (Andresen and Fegter 2011). Under these conditions, the term children at risk proves to address a childhood self-limitation of educational achievements and options.

3 Vulnerability: Reconstructing its Use as a Concept

3.1 Essentialist and Constructivist Perspectives

In the German-speaking world, the concept of vulnerability was used originally in medicine before being extended to also characterize threats in ecological domains. Nowadays, however, it is also applied in relation to social contexts in which it is associated frequently with the concept of resilience (Christmann et al. 2011). It is possible to reconstruct two systematic approaches for each of these concepts. I shall sketch these briefly here because they can contribute to childhood studies. First, vulnerability is conceived as a factual susceptibility; resilience, as a factual coping ability. This essentialist perspective can be contrasted with a constructivist one.

> In this logic, vulnerability is not (just) an objectively given exposure but a shared assumption that one could be threatened and vulnerable. In this sense, it is the product of a social construction when, for example, members of society draw on an accumulation of a great variety of extreme weather events to derive the shared assumption that the climate is changing, when they anticipate potential future threats to themselves and/or their goods, and when they additionally derive the need to act in a specific way or to take specific protective measures. (Christmann et al. 2011, p. 5, translated).

The conceptual differentiation between essentialist and constructivist is also helpful for a heuristic of vulnerability in childhood and children at risk. For example, can one ascertain an essential vulnerability with regard to, for example, the possibilities of learning basic arithmetic when children reveal learning disabilities? Or which understandings of what makes childhood vulnerable are constructed within which groups? A further differentiation needs to be considered: the susceptibility and vulnerability of the entire childhood phase compared to that of individual children. Hence, it can be seen that the access to vulnerability changes according to the focus of interest.

3.2 Individuals, Systems, and Structures

Drawing on the systematic reconstruction of the concept in Christmann et al. (2011), vulnerability can also be described and analyzed in relation to individuals, to systems, and to structures. This differentiation is reflected in the scientific disciplines studying vulnerability. A classic case is, for example, psychology: its primary interest is in the vulnerability of individuals, and it uses vulnerability to describe an individual

disposition that may indicate a potential disorder. Psychology then searches for social, genetic, mental, and organic conditions or for traumatic events that may lead to or have already led to disorders or illnesses. American Psychological Association (2006 p. 991) accordingly defines vulnerability as a "susceptibility to developing a condition, disorder, or disease when exposed to specific agents or conditions."

The vulnerability of systems abstracts from the individual, even though personal effects may be extreme. The consequences of a potential climate change may impact on ecosystems, societal systems, and individuals. The crisis in the financial system can also be taken as an example of the vulnerability of systems, and analyzing it can also help to draw attention to the consequences for unemployed youth in southern Europe. However, what is decisive for the constructivist perspective is for there to be some kind of agreement that a system is, in fact, vulnerable.

The third approach is to focus on vulnerable structures, and this is where, according to Christmann et al. (2011), progress in research on poverty has had a decisive impact. It started to apply the vulnerability concept in the 1980s and has continued to focus on structurally determined vulnerability ever since. In the domain of research on poverty, the vulnerability of individuals and social groups refers to their precarious and continuously threatened access to existentially necessary resources such as food, water, or income (Christmann et al. 2011, p. 2).

Regarding the issue of vulnerability in childhood, the manifold effects of poverty impact particularly strongly on educational chances. There is a need for national and international monitoring to more intensively observe how poverty develops over the long term. This would have to focus particularly on asking which groups are exposed to experiences of poverty at an early age, for how long, and how permanently. One of the few longitudinal studies to examine in Germany is the AWO-ISS (2012). As well as analyzing how child poverty rates change over the years, this study is investigating how being subjected to poverty as a child impacts on later life. The AWO-ISS longitudinal study of child and youth poverty takes a multidimensional and resource-oriented approach and is following up 900 children over a period of 15 years. By comparing the circumstances of children from low- and mid-income families in several areas of life and identified three groups of children living in poverty.

- Poor children who, despite familial income poverty, do not exhibit any social, cultural, health-related, or material constraints ("poor, with well-being")
- Poor children who reveal impairments in a few domains and therefore have to be viewed as disadvantaged ("poor, disadvantaged")
- Poor children who exhibit massive problems or impairments in various domains ("poor, multiply deprived")

The longitudinal approach shows that a large proportion of children were exposed to poverty at preschool age and went through repeated experiences of poverty as they grew up (AWO-ISS 2012). In adolescence, these children had a higher risk of multiple deprivation, disadvantages in all areas of life, and a low sense of well-being. In contrast, there are no negative consequences of experiencing poverty in early childhood if it is overcome permanently in later years. Similar results are also reported in the UNICEF Report Card 10 UNICEF Office of Research (2013) This international comparison

delivers important findings on the general framing conditions and individual conse-
quences of vulnerability due to poverty.

Proceeding from the orientation toward the concept of vulnerability in different
scientific contexts along with the marked entanglement of individual dispositions,
experiences, and given environmental conditions, I shall use the next section to
examine whether and how research conceives and examines vulnerability both in
childhood and in children as a specific group.

4 Vulnerability as an Analytical Concept in Research on Children and Childhood

An inspection of the literature reveals one finding straight away: The way vulnerability
in childhood is perceived and studied depends on the individual scientific discipline. It
is obvious that medicine, for example, with its clinical approach, has a major research
interest in vulnerable children and vulnerable phases of childhood, and the same holds
for disciplines at the interface between medicine and the social sciences such as public
health or psychotherapy research. The question of vulnerability is also of interest to
psychology and educational science in which it links up with studies on deviation, on
developmentally determined constraints to mobility, or on specific weaknesses such as
childhood learning disabilities. Judith Rich Harris (1998), for example, understands a
vulnerable child as one with an individual disposition to be very active, impulsive,
aggressive, and easily angered; one who is quickly bored by routine and seeks external
stimuli; one who exhibits a clear lack of anxiety about the (negative) consequences of
own actions and has little sensitivity for the feelings of others; and one who has a
below-average IQ (Rich Harris 1998).

Psychological approaches are of limited use when it comes to examining the
individual dimension of vulnerability in childhood studies. It might be easier to find
a systematic access to childhood vulnerability in ethnographic and praxeological
approaches. Although it has hardly been exploited up to now, ethnographic methodol-
ogy has a particularly strong potential for studying differences shaped by such catego-
ries as gender, class, and/or ethnicity (Fritzsche and Tervooren 2012). Knowledge about
vulnerability in childhood can also be gained by observing, describing, and analyzing
practices (Reckwitz 2003) in insecure contexts.

In this section, I would particularly like to emphasize recent childhood studies that,
despite their disciplinary roots in sociology, now take a far more interdisciplinary
approach and particularly integrate questions and approaches from cultural studies.
This also links up with asking whether and how vulnerability is addressed in child
indicators research and in the research on child well-being that Ben-Arieh (2005) has
called a "movement." This section should form the basis for my attempt to systematize
childhood vulnerability into a provisional taxonomy in the following Section 5.

Any such taxonomy confronts childhood studies with several challenges: First, it has
to be seen that a vulnerable child can simultaneously be a strong child: Vulnerability
does not rule out potentiality. Second, it is necessary to clarify whether children and
adolescents are vulnerable in different ways than adults. Third, it is essential to avoid
stigmatizing vulnerable children or adolescents through the way we look at them. There
is a clear need for empirical research to generate new knowledge on these challenging
aspects.

From the perspective of the sociology of knowledge, vulnerability is one of the marginal topics in recent sociological childhood studies. In other disciplines such as public health, in contrast, the special vulnerability of children is almost omnipresent. However, these bodies of knowledge feed into childhood studies particularly as a discourse over the threats surrounding children. Childhood studies themselves focus more on the strengths of children, on their status as subjects, as actors, and as the experts on their own life world. This orientation also has its roots in the formation of a critical perspective on the dependency of the child, one that is accompanied by criticisms of the socialization and development paradigms, of the deficit orientation, and of the adult-centeredness of research (Schweizer 2007).

Last not least, the orientation toward children's rights that should help to establish and ensure their legal status has also become a guiding motive in childhood studies. This position is often also accompanied by a general skepticism regarding educational interventions in children's lives; that is, regarding everything associated with childrearing and education. Criticism is directed particularly toward an educational science that describes children as incomplete beings in a stage of learning and developing and thus implicitly deficient through their need to be reared. This is contrasted with a focus on the child's self-will, on the parallel cultures of children that establish themselves in educational contexts, and on the backstages of school teaching that receive more attention from researchers in childhood studies than educational science's focus on more or less adaptive learning environments in which children with different backgrounds find good conditions for learning, acquiring competencies, solving problems, and applying new knowledge.

The systematic question facing childhood studies asks about the role of the phenomenon of human or childhood dependence within the "generational order" (Honig 2009). The fact that children have an elementary dependence on certain framing conditions during the course of growing up and are in need of human activities involving care and welfare but also love and teaching is clear confirmation of their dependence as human beings—but not necessarily as children. How dependencies between the generations are negotiated within the generational order and how this produces not only childhood but also adulthood is a focus of research in the sociology of childhood. Historical childhood studies have also shown the significance of reconstructing the contexts in which different forms of being a child and being dependent have developed.

Child indicators research and the concept of child well-being also follow certain motives defined by childhood studies: They criticize a strong orientation toward the future, they turn away from the deficit perspective on children as still incomplete adults, and, particularly in recent times, they focus on the subjective well-being of children (see, e.g., Children's Worlds Internet page: http://childrensworlds.org/). However, every conceptualization of child well-being always allows the reconstruction of the "opposite" of well-being, and this delivers a systematic link to vulnerability in childhood and the question whether children are particularly vulnerable simply because they are children.

Concepts of child well-being are oriented more toward Aristotle's idea of eudaemonism than Bentham's hedonism that, put rather briefly and pointedly, subjects human beings and their lives to the fortuities of pleasure and suffering. Eudaemonistic approaches aim toward the principle of a successful and therefore virtuous life and

toward the accompanying human flourishing that is so relevant for both the individual and society.

Alongside these philosophical and theoretical issues, research on child well-being is based on a self-defined goal of wanting to transfer the knowledge it generates to the fields of policy and education in order to exert a positive influence on the lives of children and adolescents, that is, to curb their vulnerability. This was also the idea in the preamble to the Innocenti Report Card No. 7.

> The true measure of a nation's standing is how well it attends to its children – their health and safety, their material security, their education and socialization, and their sense of being loved, valued, and included in the families and societies into which they were born. (UNICEF 2007, p. 1; see also Bradshaw 2011).

As I pointed out in the previous section, the perspectives on vulnerability and "children at risk" in developmental psychology, learning psychology, and the neurosciences are oriented primarily toward the individual factors in children that make it far more difficult for them to acquire competencies and learning abilities while continuing to develop. I mentioned that one problem is that the children concerned are scarcely able to participate in the different domains of society. The approach to vulnerability and "children at risk" in educational economics, educational sociology, and, to some extent, educational science analyzes social factors that make growing up a risky matter for certain children or for childhood when it is shaped in certain ways. However, future approaches will essentially need to take an interdisciplinary approach in which an intensive integration of individual and social phenomena in childhood will make it possible to observe, describe, and analyze how both phenomena interact. It is also particularly necessary to take a closer look at the frequently found accumulation of risks.

5 Vulnerability as a Phenomenon in the Childhood Phase of Life

In this section, I shall apply the reconstructions and systematizations presented above to discuss vulnerability within the theory of childhood as a phenomenon in the childhood phase of life. Drawing on Christmann et al. (2011), I shall distinguish between three dimensions: the system, the structure, and the individual. I shall discuss only the first two dimensions systematically here, because the individual dimension is located on another level.

I shall link up with the ideas on the shaping of childhood introduced above by drawing on empirical findings to derive childhood-specific challenges in explaining vulnerability. When considering the system dimension, I shall also include the problems in shaping transitions; when looking at the structure dimension, children's exposure to violence.

5.1 System as a Dimension of Vulnerability in Childhood

In this section, I shall start with Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological socialization theory (Bronfenbrenner 2005; Evans and Wachs 2010) and its further extensions in the work

of James Garbarino (2008). I shall then again draw on the work of David Finkelhor to present a theory-of-childhood-oriented perspective on the social causes of vulnerability in childhood, before finally addressing the topic of transition.

Bronfenbrenner's work addresses the various domains shaping the life world of children that make it either secure or insecure. His model contains four components, namely, processes, persons, contexts, and time; and he distinguishes three superimposed systems that surround children: the micro, meso, and macrosystems (Bronfenbrenner 1976). The microsystem is formed by the child's immediate surroundings such as the family home, the residential block, and so forth. Here it is necessary to differentiate the spatial and material configurations, the individuals with their different roles for and relations to the child, the activities that these individuals engage in, and how these activities are interpreted socially. The mesosystem forms and limits the immediate environment, and this is composed of two subsystems: the social networks with their more informal structures and the institutions with their clearly fixed goals and rules. The latter include the institutions of the health, education, and social services. Finally, the macrosystem forms the ideological framework. Bronfenbrenner uses these components and systems to describe childhood development as an increasingly more complex process of reciprocal relationships between individuals and the environment.

He addresses one central aspect related to vulnerability when he asks about the networking of the child and her family and the risks that this harbors. Networks are essential for the growing reciprocity of the child's relationships, and the child's interactions—and the family plays a major role here. At the same time, however, networks open up gateways that can make growing up risky through, for example, isolation or relationships that threaten the child.

It is precisely this point that James Garbarino addresses, particularly in his work on violence toward children and adolescents. In his book Children and the Dark Side of Human Experience (2008), he calls for a new theoretical and systematic approach to children's development and the accompanying shaping of childhood. Garbarino relates the issue of individual dimensions systematically to that of the social conditions in which children are growing up and the shaping of childhood and adolescence. According to Garbarino (2008, p. 2), the dark side of the spectrum of human experience for children and adolescents comes from the sources and risks of social and psychological toxicity in their lives. These toxic environments threaten children as spiritual, psychological, and social beings.

> Children need to grow up with a sense that they have a positive place in the universe, that there is a force of loving acceptance that infuses and supports their lives, and that there is something more to life than the material experience to fit. They need this particularly as they move from childhood into adolescence (Garbarino 2008, p. 3).

What Garbarino is pointing to here is the special situation in what are called stages of transition. These may be developmentally determined stages or ones that accompany institutional transitions. The forms of these transitions decisively shape childhood and adolescence within the generational order. As a result, they have been a topic of research on adolescence for many years. Particular interest has focused on what is described as the fragile and risky transitions from childhood to adolescence and from

adolescence to adulthood along with the institutional arrangements associated with these transitions.

Recent research is also discussing the early transition from the family to childcare facilities from the perspective of the particular threat to young children and thereby their vulnerability. Increased attention is also being focused on the transition from a preschool institution to school. Children may well feel particularly insecure during this transition from a familiar context such as the preschool to the school with the new demands it places on them if their mothers, fathers, or they themselves have been exposed to earlier and traumatizing experiences. Research by Leuzinger-Bohleber (2009) has shown the difficulties that confront children at school who have been diagnosed as being disorganized/disoriented-attached during preschool. Hence, when looking at vulnerability in childhood, it is necessary to observe and analyze the particularly relevant processes from the perspective of childhood experiences in distinctive transitions. This primarily concerns socially determined transitions, that is, those that are brought about by a change of institution or through socially disruptive changes. These can include transitions into a precarious familial situation due to divorce, the death of a family member; or just as much as transitions into a materially precarious life situation leading to poverty due to the sudden unemployment of one parent. Long-term illnesses and the accompanying impairments they bring to the child are also relevant here as well as early childhood experiences of violence or other traumatic situations. These primarily socially determined transitions can always be accompanied simultaneously by developmentally determined and even physiological ones.

5.2 Structure as a Dimension of Vulnerability in Childhood

Like Garbarino's approach, David Finkelhor's work is also shaped by a mixture of research on violence and on childhood. He draws on empirical research to seek a differentiated answer to the question why children can become victims of abuse and violence, that is, why they are vulnerable or particularly vulnerable compared to older adolescents and adults. He considers that one major aspect particularly shaping childhood is the dependent status of the child. This is why Finkelhor, with his focus on research on violence, emphasizes the need for a developmentally oriented victimology.

> The main status characteristic of childhood is dependency, which is a function, at least in part, of social and psychological immaturity. The violation of this dependency status results in forms of victimization, such as physical neglect, that are not suffered by most adults (with the exception of the elderly or infirm, who often also become dependent). (Finkelhor 2008, p. 27).

The question regarding the role of children's physical size and strength, for example, is in no way as unequivocal as often assumed: "But overall, physical smallness and weakness are not major and consistent risk factors, even though those conditions may create a subjective sense of vulnerability" (Finkelhor 2008, p. 7). Put specifically, it is not their lack of knowledge, experience, and self-control that leads children to become victims through certain risky behaviors (mostly this is not the way things occur in adolescence either). Instead, "young people, both children and teens, have more

developmental difficulty controlling certain aspects of their behavior than do adults; this is part of being literally immature, and this lack of self-regulation can increase the risk of victimization by others" (Finkelhor 2008, p. 8). Alongside the child's mostly physical inferiority and age-related deficits in knowledge, experience, and control, Finkelhor names "weak norms and sanctions against victimization," "lack of choice over associates," and a huge general lack of awareness of the vulnerability of children.

These three aspects are of far-reaching significance for a theory of childhood, and they mark a structural aspect of the generational order. When shaping childhood socially, it would seem essential to pay particular attention to their total lack of choice regarding the people they spend their time with—be it in the family, in the neighborhood, or at school. In general, Finkelhor stresses the ambivalence to be seen in the way in which the threats to children and their specific vulnerability are treated, and he points out how this ambivalence applies to both norms and sanctions.

> Some stems from the belief that these victimizations are different in nature from most others: that they are less serious, that they are simply an inevitable part of childhood and family life, and that they can even be educational or build character. (Finkelhor 2008, p. 9).

6 Conclusion

The goal of the approach taken here has been to contribute to a systematic clarification of vulnerability in childhood as an analytical category. I have focused on the way childhood is shaped as a social phenomenon and the socially determined risks associated with growing up in society. As well as embedding vulnerability within a theory of childhood, I have tried to show that it also needs to be embedded in a theory of society. I have discussed this particularly in relation to the significance of security and insecurity in childhood. The differentiation into the system and the structure dimension could encourage further empirically based analyses of, for example, poverty, violence, or migration. However, one central challenge for childhood studies continues to be to carry out research analyzing social inequality and its effects on children and social groups of children. This offers the possibility of systematically linking vulnerability as an analytical category to the identification of children at risk. Whether and how childhood studies can draw on the research on risks with its orientation toward the future or whether it should distance itself categorically from this field is a further systematic question that will need to be addressed in the future.

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