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EMPIRICAL STUDY/ANALYSIS

Vulnerability and Social Control at the Margins: A Contribution to an Interdisciplinary Trialogue on Vulnerability

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Abstract
This paper is part of a special section which brings three different approaches to vulnerability into conversation with one another to foster interdisciplinary co-operation in vulnerability studies. The essay focuses on UK-based applied social science research which centres dynamics of care and social control in how vulnerability is created, experienced and governed, through attention to the voices and perspectives of those deemed vulnerable. Bringing together key themes from a number of empirical studies, the essay provides an overview of theoretical approach on vulnerability, associated research methods including co-production with 'vulnerable' people, then draws together insights from the studies and implications for future directions in vulnerability studies. In focussing on lived experiences of those who are socially disadvantaged, disproportionately victimised and at the same time deemed a social problem and controlled in ways that intensify suffering, the essay sets out how social control and marginalisation might usefully be held more to the fore in vulnerability conceptualisations to offer firmer foundations for supporting social justice.

Keywords Vulnerability · Social control · Social policy · Justice · Exclusion · Victimhood

1 Introduction

Somewhat by stealth, the concept of vulnerability has crept into a raft of contemporary policies and practices, in domains ranging from violence against women to volcanoes, with vulnerability now something of a conceptual zeitgeist or 'spirit of the time' in contemporary social policy in the UK context and beyond (Brown, 2015: 1). In diverse domains and contexts, the notion is intellectually fashionable,

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reflecting and influencing governance processes at local, national and international levels as well as in research. Asserting the state's duty to protect vulnerable people gives rise to powerful forms of social intervention. The forms which vulnerability interventions take in many economic liberal democracies often involve a blending of impulses of care and support with currents of social control, especially in relation to marginalised people, with the politics of vulnerability increasingly significant in shaping opportunities and oppressions in society.

Prominent examples of vulnerability governance in the UK include how 'vulnerable' people are legally entitled to 'priority need' in English social housing allocations (Carr & Hunter, 2008); how 'vulnerable adults' have had defined 'protections' under British law (Dunn et al., 2008; Clough, 2015) and the designation of vulnerability in the English and Welsh criminal justice system triggering exceptional treatment (Aliverti, 2020; Dehaghani, 2019; Roulstone et al., 2011) such as processing people as victims instead of perpetrators in (certain) circumstances where they have been coerced into crime (see Koch et al., 2024). Internationally, vulnerability has been a key concept in the natural sciences and international development work for decades, offering a means of understanding and responding to varying levels of exposure to poverty (Chambers, 1989), hazards/disasters (Watts & Bohle, 1993) and the effects of the climate emergency (Adger, 2006). Other notable international developments include how vulnerable migrants and refugees are increasingly prioritised within transnational immigration processes (Peroni & Timmer, 2013; Smith & Waite, 2018) and the spread of vulnerability governance through security and 'anti-terrorism' projects (Heath-Kelly & Gruber, 2023). In policy contexts where it is prominent, vulnerability appears most frequently as a general classificatory concept, configured in situational or individual terms around physical safety or other risk of harm. Definitions are sometimes given; set out in statute (for example homelessness legislation in England) or in high-profile operational guidance (for example national police guidance documents in England and Wales see NPCC, 2023a); but often not. Where they are given, definitions vary wildly across and even within policy domains (for example, on English policing see Keay & Kirby, 2018) and are operationalised in divergent ways. This makes for a messy picture of operationalisation in one national context like the UK and an international picture that is even more bewildering, with the aggregate implications for those governed in the name of vulnerability remaining elusive.

Deep-seated and intractable approaches to 'deservingness' remain in operation when vulnerability is deployed as an operative tool in social policy and criminal justice (Brown, 2019; Dehaghani, 2019), with criminology commentaries especially noting how vulnerability institutionalises what Christie (1986) termed 'ideal victimhood' (Munro, 2017; Walklate, 2011). It is mobilised widely within particular policy domains to delineate 'deservingness' on the basis of identity groups (e.g., women and children), shared social or developmental circumstances (e.g., growing up around domestic violence, facing mental health problems) and/or behaviours perceived as a 'problem' (e.g., drug use, sex work). Across these various social policy arenas, taken-for-granted assumptions about the concept tend to dominate. As vulnerability spreads its conceptual tentacles into ever-wider-ranging areas of policy, as we saw during the COVID-19 pandemic, the implications of such developments

require urgent consideration. It is this endeavour that my research has oriented around. Here I sketch my approach to vulnerability and research methods, then briefly summarise insights from empirical studies of vulnerability before reflecting on how the vulnerability studies of the future might best serve the advancement of social justice.

2 What Does Vulnerability Mean to Me?

My research focuses on how vulnerability is lived, governed, and theorised. I am foremost interested in the ways that social control coexists with support and care in contexts of social marginalisation, which I study through a focus on the lived experiences of those deemed 'vulnerable'. I have researched vulnerability and social control in the contexts of interventions with 'vulnerable' young people (Brown, 2014, 2015, 2017a), sex workers (Brown & Sanders, 2017; Brown et al., 2024), and sexually exploited children (Brown, 2019) and have curated different approaches to vulnerability scholarship for social policy research (Brown, 2017b). Informed by my previous career working in different support services in the voluntary sector, including as an outreach worker for sexually exploited children and sex workers as well as a manager in drugs services and a domestic abuse refuge, vulnerability research for me is a route into surfacing commonalities as well as a means of highlighting difference and diversity across governance in situations and contexts of adversity and social marginalisation; connections which practice experience indicated was lacking in policy responses that were often siloed around particular issues or demarcated groups despite their interconnectedness in people's lives.

A key theoretical orientation has been what has variously been described in my home disciplines of social policy and criminology as 'repressive welfarism' (Phoenix, 2009) or 'authoritarian therapeutism' (Wacquant, 2013: 249); new and intensifying forms of governance which regulate marginalised mainly urban populations through increasingly interwoven welfare and penal mechanisms within a wider context of welfare support erosion (Flint, 2019). As is well documented in the social sciences, 'late-modern' state interventions have focused heavily on those who are socially marginalised. In the UK this includes the centuries-long history of philanthropic charities and eighteenth-century local enforcement officials seeking to 'save' vagabonds. In the growth and designation of vulnerable groups in policy we see these traditions at work but in changing forms. Underpinning my vulnerability research is an ontological concern with the ways in which caring social interventions shade into more disciplinary processes which play out differently for different people. That many contemporary societies can be characterised by a 'culture of control' (Garland, 2001) has been an important influence but also how these developments have been more recently accompanied by what some scholars of state power have been calling a more compassionate 'humanitarian turn' (Aliverti, 2020: 1124); as well as spaces of resistance within contexts of regulation and power (see Foucault, 1980). Amidst austerity politics and diffuse social anxiety which now dominates the social conditions of economic liberal democracies such as the UK, we increasingly see inclinations to 'protect' taking root within wider failures to address intensifying

situations of inequality, oppression and injustice. This deeply troubling social context demands that lived experiences of marginalisation are suitably accounted for in conceptualisations of vulnerability for social justice.

I have most often explored vulnerability within specific contexts or policy domains, seeking to also make connections between and across contexts in order to build tentatively towards rooted generalisation. For example, in a paper with Teela Sanders, we argue that sex worker vulnerability might usefully be conceptualised as 'a position in a social order where physical and emotional suffering is inflicted and patterned by economic and historic injustice, cultural stigma, and gendered, sexualised and racialised discriminations' where 'a multitude of identities, stories, embodiments, emotions, practices and performances' are in operation (Brown & Sanders, 2017: 439). In broad terms, drawing on my home disciplines of social policy, sociology and criminology, I tend to approach vulnerability as lived experiences of harm and social disadvantage constituted individually, relationally and structurally and connected by human agency, taking shape through time (see Brown, 2019 and discussed later in this paper). In more recent definition work and empirical studies (as well as in life experiences as a mother) I have been drawn to Erinn Gilson's approach, which addresses problems of exceptionalism or 'othering' in vulnerability studies, taking vulnerability as urgent situations of inequality, insecurity, and 'propensity for harm' (Gilson, 2021: 102) located within a wider human 'openness to being affected' (Gilson, 2021: 86). Approaching vulnerability this way, as Erinn (2024) shows in this special section, means seeing it as shared by all—but always a distinctive and different experience, helpful in holding together dynamics of care and social control that operate together in how vulnerability is created, experienced and governed.

Focussing on lived experiences in particular highlights how those subject to vulnerability interventions are often located in a 'vulnerability-transgression nexus' (Brown, 2015: 85); socially disadvantaged, disproportionately victimised and at the same time deemed a social problem and controlled often in ways that intensify marginalisation and suffering. Therefore I have argued vulnerability as a concept needs to be 'handled with care' (Brown, 2011); with social control and marginalisation—and lived experiences of these social processes—held at the fore to develop robust vulnerability theorisations that offer firmer foundations for addressing vulnerability in ways that resist impulses to control.

3 Researching Vulnerability: A Focus on Lived Experiences

My research has mainly involved qualitative in-depth investigation of the operationalisation of vulnerability, centering voices and perspectives of those deemed vulnerable and more recently including elements of co-production with 'vulnerable' people. I have also conducted policy review work on vulnerability governance. In empirical studies, people I have researched have been deemed vulnerable in terms of policy interventions. More recently I have focussed on vulnerability in the context of policing, in studies on sex work (Brown et al., 2019, 2024) and also with my colleagues at the *Vulnerability and Policing Futures Research Centre*. For reasons

of space I do not provide detailed research methods accounts here, but these can be found in publications from the studies (see for example Brown, 2015, 2019; Brown & Sanders, 2017; Brown et al., 2019). At the time of writing, I am working with colleagues at the *Vulnerability and Policing Futures Research Centre* on two projects. One is a place-based study of how vulnerability is operationalised in policing and multi-agency interventions in the English city of Bradford, using an approach called Q methodology (from psychology) which centres subjectivities. The other is a study of criminal exploitation in the context of drug markets, where vulnerable people are coercively involved in organised drug distribution networks.

Most of the studies mentioned have involved interviews with 'vulnerable' people and also vulnerability support professionals in welfare and criminal justice settings ('front-line' practitioners and those in more strategic roles). The studies have all deliberately straddled welfare and criminal justice as this enables a fuller appreciation of the implications of vulnerability governance in terms of care and control. They have involved research across the age boundary of 18 as, given the changes in legal responses and entitlements at this age, this is important for understanding how vulnerability relates to age as a dimension of difference. Our criminal exploitation study is national (England and Wales), but other projects have mainly been conducted in large Northern cities in England. Doing qualitative and co-produced research in close proximity to where I live and work (Yorkshire, UK) has been one way to ensure ethical rigour in working with vulnerable people. Whilst in-depth local study gives texture to understandings of vulnerability, remaining cautious about over-generalisation from case study approaches is also key; the dispersal and diversity of vulnerability governance in contemporary social policies, interventions, institutions and places mean fragmented spaces of struggle and vulnerability and its governance look very different from perspectives beyond economic liberal democracies (Wu, 2020) a point I return to in the final section.

Later qualitative studies have included more co-production elements. This has involved working with 'vulnerable' people to design and deliver the research as well as in creative processes of making some kind of 'product(s)' together for social change as an output of the research. For example, a child sexual exploitation (CSE) study involved working with a group of young women with experience of CSE (the lionesses at Basis Yorkshire) to make an animation and set of print resources which features their life stories told in their own words (Brown, 2016). These have been used by Basis and other national CSE training organisations, with young people leading discussion of vulnerability solutions and featuring on national BBC radio when these resources launched. A study of the role of a specialist police Sex Work Liaison Officer[1] (or SWLO; Brown et al., 2024) involved working with sex workers through discussion groups and arts workshops to develop research instruments and frame findings, also co-producing a set of images (see Fig. 1) which convey key messages. Findings were used to co-produce (with sex workers and police) a publicly available role descriptor (or job description) for SWLOs, available for police forces looking to embed 'best practice' (see University of York, 2024). This features in the

[1] The research was funded by the N8 Policing Research Partnership in England.

Fig. 1 Image co-created with sex workers to convey key messages on the SWLO role

latest national guidance document on the policing of sex work (NPCC, 2023b). In this special section, Erinn Gilson (2024) and Elodie Boublil (2024) both argue that writing new scripts of vulnerability is one way to break down harmful dualisms and divides in how the concept is used, and working with those deemed vulnerable on creative outputs to address vulnerability for me is one way of contributing in modest ways towards this endeavour.

Proceeding from the starting point that knowledge is a product of social life, not something independent of it (Jasanoff, 2004), and inspired by feminist theories which stress how we can deepen the understanding of the social world from using how we live as well as from what we read (Ahmed, 2017), my research is heavily informed by my background as a practitioner and experiences working as a researcher. Fifteen years as a Trustee and Chair of Trustees for a regional sex work support project also shaped research approaches, especially to co-production ethics and amplification of perspectives not traditionally 'heard'. I was research lead on Leeds City Council's Sex Work Strategic Partnership at a time where we piloted and formalised a new approach to sex work in the city which centred vulnerability rather than enforcement. Working with the local council in a politically contentious area made me more optimistic about vulnerability interventions initially, but I later resigned from this role after national anti-trafficking week in October 2016, when an 'anti-trafficking' operation in Leeds' street sex work area resulted in 11 migrant street sex workers forcibly detained in Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre or deported to their country of origin (see Basis Yorkshire, 2016); all in the name of protecting vulnerable women from harm.

Primarily I have deliberately focussed on contexts where vulnerability governance relates to transgression and the regulation of groups who are seen as 'problematic'. Given my home in the applied disciplines such as social policy and criminology, I recognise the 'reformist impulse' (see Loader & Sparks, 2011: 6) deeply embedded in research traditions I am part of, and note the influence of these also on my own approach. Although I critique research and policy which sees vulnerability as a 'problem' to be 'solved' as part of an 'othering' of vulnerability, I myself to a degree also work in ways that are orientated to 'solving' vulnerability, mirroring the dynamic that I have worked to critique. I reflect further on this tension and the normative agenda in vulnerability research in the final section of the essay, after introducing an overview of what empirical studies of care and control through vulnerability governance offer as insights into the political dynamics and ambivalences associated with the concept of vulnerability.

4 Political Dynamics of Vulnerability: Alleviating and Entrenching Exclusion

Foregrounding insights from empirical qualitative and mixed method studies which especially focus on lived experiences of vulnerability, I now outline common dynamics of vulnerability governance at grass roots exploring (i) the question of whether vulnerability governance alleviates or entrenches exclusion (ii) winners and losers in vulnerability governance and (iii) the dilemmas of making sense of human agency in vulnerability governance. In experiences of how vulnerability interventions are delivered and received, we find echoes of Erinn Gilson's (2024) focus on the ambivalence of vulnerability as a classificatory concept as well as illustration of 'hidden ideological sentiments' that Elodie Boublil (2024: Sect. 2) notes are so vital to contend with (and integrate) in vulnerability work. Quotations here have been selected from across the various qualitative studies for illustrative purposes, rather than to provide a systematic account of research findings.

4.1 Vulnerability and Exclusion

In interviews with practitioners about the operationalisation of vulnerability in their work, normative judgements about deservingness are a common theme. The studies with 'vulnerable' young people and also on local sex work interventions both underlined how vulnerability narratives can support and advance understandings of how people were not 'to blame' for their difficult circumstances and needed support and assistance. Here, a Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) psychologist uses the concept of vulnerability as a dynamic and systemic way of conceptualising social difficulties:

> … vulnerability enables us to kind of not pigeon hole people into kind of different areas so we're working with the whole young person; they may self-harm, they may have experienced loss, they may not get on with their parents

> […] we're able to work with all of it so if they are vulnerable in terms of their – and we also assess in terms of vulnerability and what we're looking into is what support structures they have in place and their ability to cope. (taken from Brown, 2017c: 672)

Generally speaking, when operationalised, vulnerability classification configures (and re-configures) how individual social difficulty is understood in relation to wider structural and social circumstances, with tendencies to focus attention on the 'personal' face of disadvantage rather than structural dimensions.

Sex worker's perspectives on vulnerability offer important insights for wider vulnerability debates. In England, it is not illegal to sell or pay for sex, but soliciting is prohibited, along with any organisation of sex work such as working with others, running a brothel, and involvement of third parties (Release, 2017). Research has underlined how sex workers are *made vulnerable* through criminalisation but are also the focus for local multi-agency initiatives which aim to *mitigate vulnerability*, especially via community safety agendas (Grenfell et al., 2023). Vulnerability is, therefore, a deeply contested concept in sex work, bound up with 'rescue politics' and fractious debates about agency (Brown & Sanders, 2017) but potentially also supporting harm reduction and nuanced approaches to victimisation and offending (Sanders et al., 2021).

In work exploring vulnerability policing via the role of specialist designated Sex Work Liaison Officers (Brown et al., 2019) we show how a focus on vulnerability supported better access to the criminal justice system for situations of actual and potential victimisation, valued highly by sex workers and helping mitigate the worst and most punitive responses to sex workers. However, it did little overall in terms of addressing sex workers' most urgent safety and justice issues. In most cases, sex workers did not see their reported cases progress through the Criminal Justice System and command structures which supported the longstanding justice gap carved out by criminalisation, stigmatisation and police institutional hostility to sex workers—which caused vulnerabilities the role sought to mitigate—were left unchallenged. In policing and multi-agency responses to the vulnerability of sex workers (Brown & Sanders, 2017), political dimensions faded into the background, where personal empathy, pathology, and 'othering' were more prominent:

> I hear the details of their stories and they are horrific and we must do everything we can do to keep them safe. We are here to make vulnerable people safe and it doesn't matter what background they come from, we need to make them safe. (Senior Police Officer, in Brown & Sanders, 2017: 434)

Vulnerability policing of sex work foregrounds police duty and powers to protect sex workers (usually from dangerous men), rather than the harms of criminalisation being the foremost driver of vulnerability. Notably though, there were cases where practitioners also used vulnerability creatively to subvert traditional pathologies and focus on structural dimensions of sex worker vulnerability, reminding us how vulnerability (as with other concepts) is malleable, used in a context by people rather than imbued with meaning in itself:

> [Sex workers] can be [vulnerable] because of the spaces that they are in, but I don't think they are vulnerable otherwise. I think the environments that they can be placed in can massively contribute to their vulnerability, but I wouldn't have said that they are [vulnerable]. I think they are very, very strong, powerful people actually because of the work they engage in. (Sex Work Support Worker, in Brown & Sanders, 2017: 434)

In a context dominated by relentless punitiveness, sex work vulnerability findings in particular alert us to the potential for vulnerability governance to support incremental movement in the direction of strengthening marginalised citizens' social rights and protections. From empirical study of UK border policing, Aliverti (2020) argues vulnerability opens valuable space for empathy in service responses to acute social oppressions and marginalisations—echoing what Elodie Boublil (2024: Sect. 2) notes as the potential of vulnerability to support empathy grounded in 'interaffectivity'. Yet concerns remain about further entrenchment of transformation of social provision that is based on 'gifts' rather than 'rights' (see Harrison with Davis, 2001). As Elodie Boublil (2024: Sect. 1) notes, if vulnerability is to be an ethical operative tool it must be based on understandings that can hold together both a politics of care and support for rights affirmation; this can seem a remote possibility from the vantage point of practice.

Detailed qualitative study shows how the *performance* of vulnerability (Brown, 2015: 180) in line with behavioural expectations associated with deservingness remains key to being classified as 'vulnerable'. The vulnerable young people's study in particular showed that lacking motivation for change, not being forthcoming with details and overall demeanour were all factors which affected the support they received. In particular, young people who were 'troublesome' or not compliant enough often fell outside classifications of vulnerability, as in the following housing casework example of a young man who had been to prison a number of times before he had turned 18, meaning he would not be prioritised for social housing:

> ... if someone's lived at home and they're just being naughty and they keep going into prison, we wouldn't say that's vulnerability – that's just them they're not abiding by the rules and they just think it's a joke and they think it's a game… (Manager, City Council Housing Service, from Brown, 2015: 87)

The navigation of a 'tightrope' (Brown, 2017a: 667) between somewhat contradictory preoccupations about demonstration of *lack of* agency and also *active* agency surfaces in the dynamics of vulnerability governance. These are most prominent where people 'knowingly' manipulate or influence their positionality in relation to deservingness and vulnerability (see Brown, 2015: 88). Here we see the problems of what Elodie Boublil (2024: Sect. 1) calls the modern paradigm of invulnerability and pervasive binaries and dualisms which Erinn Gilson (2024: Sect. 1) notes perpetuate social hierarchies. As vulnerability classifications are largely ill-defined, they are especially prone to being shaped by the preferences, values, commitments, and preoccupations of those who administer them in practice contexts. As social policy literature routinely emphasises, practitioner preoccupations allow space for important subversions (Barnes & Prior, 2009) but also reflect strong currents of a

wider policy and societal context which has increasingly responsibilised socially marginalised people as 'to blame' for their own situations (Harrison & Sanders, 2014), yet this has happened also alongside growing awareness of social adversity and how political austerity has stripped away social protections for the same groups. The concept of vulnerability seems both capacious and resonant enough to express these somewhat contradictory sentiments, but with varied effects when mobilised in interventions.

4.2 Winners and Losers in Vulnerability Governance

As Erinn Gilson (2016: 44) has set out so beautifully, vulnerability is deployed politically in highly variable ways and ascribed unevenly to people who are situated differently in light of their race, gender, sexuality, and other identity-related group memberships, often in binary ways, 'imperiling or privileging' accordingly. Hierarchies or what Butler (2004) terms norms of recognition are entrenched in the operationalisation of vulnerability in welfare and criminal justice provision, evident in terms of which people, situations, and groups surface under the vulnerability agenda, then how they are processed, in turn shaping lived experiences of vulnerability. Gender is especially pronounced in terms of relevance for the vulnerability agenda in policy, but other axes of oppression can be just as significant and enjoy much less mainstream attention. Some examples from the child sexual exploitation (CSE) study can serve to illustrate this. For Daniel (18), his gender and sexuality were a major barrier to disclosure of his exploitation, after coming out at age 13:

> … my town was quite conservative — there weren't many out gay people around that I knew or could talk to. So, I downloaded a couple of apps onto my iPod that were gay chat apps and started talking to people on there about it, just asking questions, trying to understand it. From there it led to older guys messaging me and it spiralled down into sexual talk, meeting up, pictures […] I didn't want people to know anyway that I was sexually active so it wasn't something I shared. (from Brown, 2019: 630)

After his abuse was reported to the police, he experienced responses as highly gendered:

> …if I was a girl it would've been a completely different situation. I would've been sympathised with more. But because I was a boy it was more like, 'You're doing this yourself; you should be looking after yourself'. (from Brown, 2019: 630)

Natalie (aged 20), who grew up in care, talked about police officers calling her a 'slag' at age 15 (Brown, 2019: 630); a class and gender-based slur powerfully mobilised to tarnish that all-important virtue for girls—chastity. Working with Katie Ellis and Kate Smith (Brown et al., 2020: 15) we explored intersectional implications of vulnerability governance across policy contexts relating to child sexual exploitation and social work as well as asylum and migration, highlighting

that, as Butler (2016: 2) says, there is something both 'risky and true' about claiming that women and other socially disadvantaged groups are especially vulnerable. Lived experiences of vulnerability can otherwise be overlooked and marginalised, but prominent accounts of vulnerability may also further turn to paternalistic political and social institutions that intensify disempowerment and stifle collective political solutions, entrenching oppression and domination rather than resisting or subverting it.

The Black Lives Matter movement and campaigns such as #SayHerName have powerfully demonstrated how vulnerability is unevenly distributed and recognised in racialised ways. Yet mainstream accounts of violence against women and girls are characterised by a systematic privileging of White women's vulnerability. Powerful historically rooted racial tropes of Black women as deviant and impure means the particular injustices they are exposed to are sidelined; whilst Brown women are commonly portrayed as wounded and rarely allowed to speak (Phipps, 2020). Such dynamics raise the question of whether vulnerability is a concept that is mobilised commonly in ways that intensify rather than challenge systemic racialised injustice (Koch et al., 2024). In her intersectional feminist philosophy work, Erinn Gilson (2021: 100) draws on Oliviero's (2018) distinction between reactionary and progressive assertions of vulnerability. Reactive assertions involve 'reflexes' which are commonsense and instinctual, tending toward 'reactionary outcomes' and obscuring the structural, institutional, and historical dimensions of how vulnerability is produced. Drawing on Michel's (2016) notion of 'enunciated vulnerability' rooted in critical race studies, Gilson (2021: 94) notes how in reactionary vulnerability, making vulnerability visible is a tool of surveillance and control, deepening harm. Empirical research on vulnerability, care and control lays bare the realities of how vulnerability narratives further entrench appraisal of who is and is not deserving along long-entrenched intersectional axes of oppression. Appraising the aggregate is challenging and I return to this in the closing section after touching on the issue of agency and the importance of lived experiences in making sense of this in contexts of vulnerability.

4.3 Human Agency and Vulnerability: Possibilities of the Phoenix

The child sexual exploitation (CSE) research study especially focussed on the issue of human agency in situations deemed exploitative and coercive by authorities, exploring this from young people's perspectives through co-produced research. To speak of agency within the context of CSE is fraught with difficulty and complexity. Although seldom acknowledged in policy, relationships with abusers connect with young people's desires, and complex perceptions of risks and rewards (Brown, 2019). This is underplayed in policy for good reason; acknowledgment risks further cementing victim blaming and acute harm. Yet denial of agency in contexts of vulnerability also carries risks. A focus on lived experience of vulnerability in contexts of CSE showed how desire and meaning in sexual relationships also existed alongside consciousness of abuse and exploitation, in ways that grooming narratives

seemed to deny. Liberty (17), for example, did not like to say the word 'grooming,' she preferred the 'g-word,' indicating discomfort with professional narratives.

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. Phoenix (23) described being 'manipulative' as a teen: 'you've got to go out and do that. It's how you fight'; she relayed how this meant she was judged by professionals as 'unstable,' conveyed powerfully in this account of expulsion from a session with a male therapist:

> I threatened him and I told him, 'You ask me the same question again, I'll pick the chair up, launch it at you and then I'll throw it outside. I really don't mind.' I was escorted off the premises. Yes, I was mentally unstable apparently, not the fact that I had PTSD. (from Brown, 2019: 633)

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. Thus, 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.

The paper from the CSE study advances an empirically-grounded account of vulnerability more sensitive to the lived realities of victimhood for sexually exploited young people, hopefully showing possibilities for wider vulnerability theory development (Brown, 2019). The paper and accompanying co-produced animation and booklets made with young people with experience of CSE show how vulnerability is shaped through individual factors (often but not always family-related), situational dynamics (relationships and places, including control and abuse by predatory people) and structural factors such as gender, age, race and ethnicity, as well as material dimensions. Take as one example Liberty's story of 'moving on' from child sexual exploitation:

> he gets my cigs and my money [sighs] and he used to buy [daughter] stuff, to give to me to give to her. I don't know how to explain it. Sometimes he gives me my bus fare for college and then sometimes he gives me money for food or clothes, stuff that I need, stuff like that. I know what I'm doing is wrong because I just know anyway, it's wrong to go and see him but I keep going just for my cigs and my money. (Liberty, aged 17)

Borrowing from the vulnerability ideas of Emmel and Hughes (2014) and the youth studies concept of 'critical moments' (Thompson et al., 2002: 339) in the CSE paper, I argue that vulnerability involves individual, relational, and structural dynamics connected by human agency through time. In youth research, 'critical moments' refer to significant events with important consequences for lives and identities

(Thompson et al., 2002: 339), which combine biographical moments, structuring processes and relationships; centering 'linked lives' where people, places and institutions are inextricably connected. In CSE journeys critical moments included family abuse, rapes, bereavements, childbirth, relationship developments (friends/family/abusive older male), involvement in (as well as exclusion from) education/work, and instances of being 'failed' or well-supported by services. In this study as in others, we see how critical moments cluster into 'spirals' which have cumulative effects on choice and agency in contexts of vulnerability (Holland & Thompson, 2009: 458; also see Mackenzie et al., 2014), which services could better understand, orientate, and plan resources around in responding to vulnerability.

The young people's own conceptualisation of vulnerability is expressed in the resources they made as part of the project (and which accompany the academic paper); they called the resources *Breaking Through: Moving on from Child Sexual Exploitation*, with the image of the phoenix (a pseudonym chosen by one research participant) selected as the ending for the animation and the front cover of the print materials (Fig. 2). The phoenix is distinctive as a conceptualisation of vulnerability, a mythical creature symbolising change, renewal, adaptation, hope and strength in the face of adversity. This conception perhaps resonates with Elodie Boublil's (2024: Sect. 1) call for vulnerability to be an ethical compass and operative tool which can help us see possibilities of empowerment in a social environment ridden with insecurity, individualism, and economic crises. More generally, this work shows how through close and collaborative focus on lived experiences of vulnerability we see the ambiguity of vulnerability and also perhaps traces of the more plural conception that both Elodie Boublil (2024) and Erinn Gilson (2024) call for in this issue; vulnerability as both an ordinary and exceptional condition, always experienced differently by everyone but not with a sense that 'vulnerable people' are 'other'.

5 Future Developments in Vulnerability Studies

Vulnerability scholarship seems to be burgeoning. In the plenary of the conference at Graz which this collection is based on, Erinn Gilson noted that vulnerability is a powerful concept not just because it connects what it means to live, but what it means to live *now*. Writing this from the UK amidst a cost-of-living crisis, ongoing political turmoil, waves of local council bankruptcies, acute levels of child poverty and polarising industrial action in many sectors, this point has stayed with me. As vulnerability has taken deeper root in socio-economic and political structures, so too has it become a feature of the public imagination; a vehicle for bringing deep human needs and shared feelings into the public domain. In research, vulnerability is receiving more attention than ever before across different domains and disciplines, but there is still much to do to draw connections between these endeavours in order to support progressive vulnerability interventions.

If vulnerability studies is taken broadly to mean work orientated explicitly around engaging with the concept of vulnerability (usually to support advancement of social justice), there seem three key interconnected areas which are especially important: (i) how vulnerability is *lived*; more exceptionally—homelessness, sex work, trauma

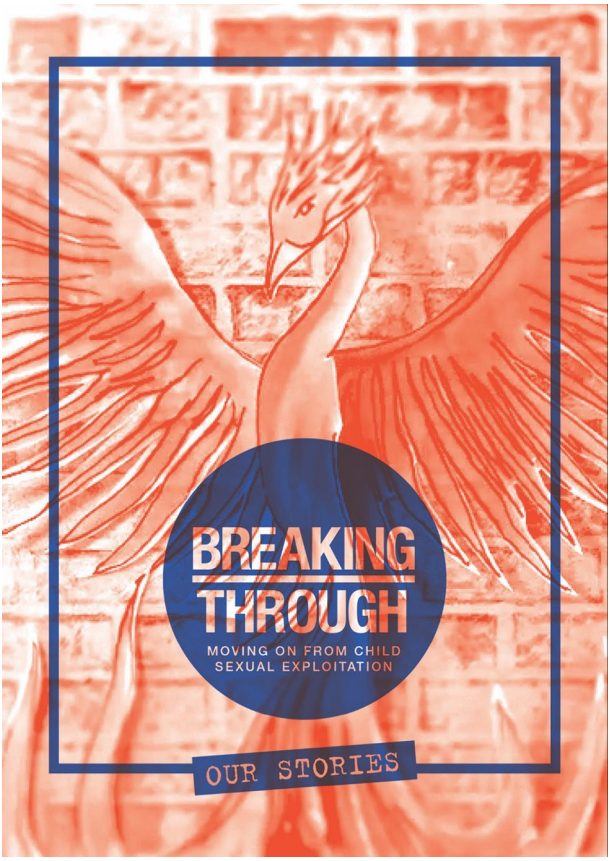

Fig. 2 The *Breaking Through* resource booklet front cover—featuring the phoenix

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). As vulnerability is subject to social, historical, economic and cultural continuities and changes in terms of how it is lived, governed and theorised, studying and integrating connections between these areas is a messy endeavour. Furthermore, as vulnerability studies potentially encompasses not only work explicitly oriented around the concept of vulnerability, but all work useful for understanding the condition of vulnerability (and policies which shape this), the scope of vulnerability research is expansive. If vulnerability studies now constitutes an academic area, the amorphous nature of the concept means this has characteristically fuzzy parameters.

As noted widely in the philosophy literature, vulnerability is a concept that has potential to span different disciplines due in part to its wide appeal and usage,

malleability and having not been overly 'claimed' by any one intellectual tradition, but perhaps still with enough concreteness to support interdisciplinary work (and work across the research/practice boundary) in meaningful ways. Interdisciplinary research on vulnerability would seem to hold promise at a time where human vulnerability has never been more of a concern, also offering frameworks for integration of environmental and human harms. However, 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. In an uncertain social world, the social 'rightness' of binaries around purity/danger, victim/offender, deserving/undeserving which operate through vulnerability narratives mean the concept can help maintain a semblance of order for action on injustice, but this 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.

As with social policy interventions, vulnerability interventions focussed on marginalised groups are entwined with the history of social science, arguably foregrounding techniques for tracing patterns of populations who are considered to pose social problems (see Sian, 2022), shot with the 'reforming impulse' of the applied disciplines. How we deal with the normative agenda in the doing of vulnerability research needs careful consideration, or vulnerability scholarship risks mirroring or reinforcing rather than challenging the harms of vulnerability politics. Further development of theoretically robust, inclusive and accessible approaches to vulnerability which support attention to the individual, relational and structural dimensions as well as the potential for empowerment and human agency would be immensely valuable for the challenges of applied vulnerability work. Plural approaches to vulnerability such as the kind that Erinn Gilson (2024) and Elodie Boublil (2024) advocate are so much needed in the design and delivery of vulnerability interventions. Whilst operationalising such approaches in policy and practice represents a significant challenge, focussing collective efforts in this direction might offer a means of taking us *away* from pathologising, dehumanising and flat views of 'risk factors,' designation of groups and denial of agency, *towards* provision which takes better account of what Erinn Gilson (2024) and Elodie Boublil (2024) name as the ambiguities and ambivalences of vulnerability, with welfare and disciplinary interventions responding to these in progressive rather than reactionary ways.

In terms of economic liberal democracies, a focus on vulnerability is not a new development, even though the language of vulnerability has certainly become more prominent in recent decades (Brown, 2015), however, work tracing the rise of vulnerability within broader general developments in governance is scarce. This kind of work would certainly be helpful for those of us grappling with applied implications of vulnerability governance. Disability scholars in particular have been tracing the pathologising and progressive citizenship implications of vulnerability for decades (Beckett, 2006), struggles which need building on as vulnerability is taken up in other fields such as criminology and environment studies. The body of debate in critical legal and disability studies around 'positive obligations' in law is

one example of work which has much to offer (see O'Rourke, 2024). Given that classificatory concepts are a necessity in social policy, from applied perspectives one question which would benefit from deeper consideration is the distinctiveness of the work that vulnerability does in governance contexts, and how far this concept is a better/worse/different organising idea for acting against excluding impulses than others (risk, need, harm etc.). This is not to say that dynamics of vulnerability governance are caused by the concept of vulnerability, nor can they be 'corrected' by it, but appraisal about relative potential and risks in the current social conditions would seem valuable.

What kind of conception of vulnerability (and in what contexts) offers the most progressive mobilisations, and promoting more awareness and strategies to manage risks attached to these might be one small way that vulnerability scholarship could contribute practically to social change. There is much potential in the plural conception that both Elodie Boublil and Erinn Gilson advance in their work. In particular, taking vulnerability as both the ordinary and exceptional condition creates space to better attend to questions of stigma, marginalisation and discrimination that vulnerability governance is so often entangled with, opening up the potential for more ethical social policies that are necessarily based on targeted as well as universal provision. If a plural conception is needed, there would seem to benefit from more pluralism of perspectives and methods that can support closer integration of experiences and theory. The question Elodie Boublil (2018) asks—could there be a positive understanding of vulnerability?—is an important one for applied researchers to engage with more often. Intersectional implications of vulnerability governance also seem an area where further investigation is urgently needed, as illustrated vividly in Erinn Gilson's work (2024). This might be researched in particular domains through single disciplines to provide specific insights, but further interdisciplinary connections forged between issues building towards generalisation could support many avenues of work. For movement towards more egalitarian or inclusive policy and practice, vigilance on the normative elements of vulnerability and joining the dots across intersections and policy domains is vital.

Cultural understandings of vulnerability around the world vary widely, yet commonly in vulnerability studies within the social sciences we see Western economic liberal democratic traditions and understandings taken as the default framing. Vulnerability is not a popular framing worldwide and has taken root as a concept used in some societies much more than others. Recent edited collections have engaged with vulnerability across different policy contexts and places (see Addidle & Liddle, 2020; Asquith & Bartkowiak-Théron, 2021; Kuronen et al., 2021) but there is much work to be done in this respect. Writing about police responses to vulnerability in China, for example, Wu (2020) shows how in a collectivist authoritarian state like China, vulnerability is mainly related to working class communities from rural 'left-behind' areas; less stigmatised and understood more as cyclical and inevitable, with people's weakness seen as hard to overcome individually, but with vulnerability met with strong 'relational repression' from the police (and other institutions) where it poses challenges to the narrative of the 'successful' state. In terms of diversifying perspectives, starting points include building a more diverse field of scholars engaged in vulnerability scholarship; with roots that support growth

of integration across Global East, Global South and Global North perspectives, with more scholars of colour as well as scholars from minoritised backgrounds of different kinds shaping and leading the field, who develop their agendas and ideas in dialogue with communities who have a stake in vulnerability studies. Proactive pursuit of research that can support those with lived experiences of social marginality to contribute in safe and sustainable ways in this field is also key. Such diversity would support development of richer accounts of vulnerability better matched with the ambiguities of how it is lived and experienced, which might offer platforms for building shared agendas for social change which have never been more badly needed.

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