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Article:
Emmel, ND orcid.org/0000-0002-2154-5814 (2017) Empowerment in the relational longitudinal space of vulnerability. Social Policy and Society, 16 (3). pp. 457-467. ISSN 1474-7464

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746417000021

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Empowerment in the relational longitudinal space of vulnerability

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Abstract

The term vulnerability has little theoretical purchase in social policy. It is used widely as a short-hand phrase to describe deficit. As such it provides only limited value and has little regard for the wider structures of society that might ameliorate, sustain, or exacerbate vulnerability. There is, however, a critical literature that seeks to understand the social, economic and political relationships that produce vulnerability and its potential opposite, flourishing. This paper draws on this theoretical literature, focussing particularly on relational accounts of autonomy, capabilities and functioning, and the role of societal institutions. Using cases drawn from empirical research investigating how grandparents care for their grandchildren in relationships characterised by rescue and repair, this paper refines a relational model of the longitudinal space of vulnerability. It extends explanation of three dimensions of the model: basic needs, the capacity to be, and access to service providers and elaborates how these dimensions inter-relate, through an investigation of empowerment.

Introduction

Vulnerability has become a common place term in social policy. Formal policy interventions describe individuals as vulnerable because they possess a measurable deficit and require treatment (Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act, 2006; Protection of Freedoms Act, 2012; Fineman, 2008). These formal definitions of vulnerability are supported through the widespread colloquial use of the term across policy and among service providers to describe individuals who are at risk of physical or mental harm, frequently because of ill-defined personal short-comings (Ecclestone and Lewis, 2014; Ferudi, 2004). This discrimination-based account has little regard for the wider structures of society that might ameliorate, sustain, or exacerbate vulnerability.

Critiques of this individualistic and rational use of the term have sought to bring political economy back into an understanding of vulnerability. The vulnerable subject is positioned in relation to economic liberalism and increasingly selective state welfare provision (Brown, 2014; 2015). Similarly, McLaughlin (2012) notes the increasing emphasis on individual vulnerable identities at the expense of collective accounts, neglecting political, social, and economic factors that shape experience in relation to societal structures. Contemporary characterisations purposefully ignore how vulnerability is produced and reproduced in society, emphasising, as Brown et al. (this volume) elaborate, an account of vulnerability imbued with normative assumptions about deservingness, deviance, and deficit.

This paper foregrounds a different approach starting with typologies of vulnerability developed by vulnerability theorists, which have sought to address this deficit orientated account through an emphasis on the social, political, and economic dimensions of

vulnerabilities. One way in which the relational account is presented is to contrast universal vulnerability, as a forever imminent experience pertaining to the body that may affect us all at different times across the life-course, with particular vulnerabilities that have their genesis 'in the interruption or destruction of social relationships' (Fineman, 2010:268). In presenting this typology, Fineman (2010; 2008) concerns herself with the individual's position relative to institutional relationships, which, she contends, cushion individuals from vulnerability through providing physical, human, social, ecological, environmental, and existential assets. The role of these social and legal intuitions is to subsidise, assist, and support individuals to accumulate and maintain the assets needed to be autonomous. To address vulnerability the state should not tolerate a system that privileges one group over another. Fineman proposes a benign state with responsive structures within which citizens choose from a range of options to address vulnerabilities in their lives. Autonomy and vulnerability are therefore theorised as oppositional terms.

This paper draws on a different relational approach, which treats autonomy as an intrinsic property of vulnerability (Mackenzie, 2014). Framed by capability theory (Dréze and Sen, 1995; Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011), this relational approach to vulnerability is concerned to understand how an individual's innate and learned capacities affect opportunities to achieve valuable functioning in relation to social, political, and economic conditions in which political and legal institutions may enable or constrain an individual's freedoms and entitlements. In this relational capabilities approach autonomy, as an evaluative effort by individuals to address their vulnerabilities (Sayer, 2011), is not considered as being in opposition to vulnerability. The capabilities approach to explaining vulnerability seeks to account for an individual's agency and how this might be exercised within legal and social

structures. This paper adopts Fineman's classification of inherent and situational vulnerabilities. But adds a sub-set to situational vulnerabilities or pathogenic vulnerabilities (Mackenzie, 2014), which are morally unacceptable and, drawing on Goodin (1985), have not as yet been eliminated. Explanations for their elimination lie in an elaboration of the relationships between agency and structure. In this paper the opposite of vulnerability is taken to be flourishing, which following Sayer (2011) and Rawls (1971:433) consists partly of 'an account of what things are good for human beings taking them as they are' achieved through their evaluative effort.

Through empirical investigation this paper seeks to provide insight into these agential relationships of vulnerability. Drawing on case studies this paper examines how grandparents interact with social care and legal systems in their effort to provide care for their grandchildren. Their relationships with their grandchildren may be characterised as more about 'rescue and repair' (Hughes and Emmel, 2008) than leisure and pleasure grand parenting (Mason *et al.*, 2007). These cases provide insight into how these interactions make the grandparents and their grandchildren vulnerable and occasionally ameliorate their vulnerabilities so they may flourish. The aim of this paper is to refine a relational model of vulnerability, which has been developed through several iterations (Emmel and Hughes, 2010; 2014),

Methodologically, this paper applies a (critical) realist approach to explanations of vulnerability (Harré, 1986; Bhaskar, 2008). This recognises that social processes, like a relational understanding of vulnerability and the ways in which agency is exercised, cannot be measured. Certain features may be observed and recorded, but many of the generative mechanisms that shape the regularities and outcomes of vulnerability are less amenable to

measurement and are based on a variety of sorts of indirect evidence (Maxwell, 2012). Explanations of the real-life experience of vulnerability include a bundle of the empirical experiences and claims for the causal generative mechanisms that shape these in particular contexts for particular individuals and groups (Pawson and Tilley, 1997). A realist social science contends that adequate yet fallible causal accounts of social processes, like vulnerability and flourishing, can be produced to extend knowledge (Bhaskar, 2008). This paper draws on purposefully and theoretically chosen cases (Emmel, 2013), described below, to refine a causal model of relational vulnerability located in a model directed theoretically by a capabilities approach.

Refining a relational model of vulnerability

One such causal relational model that provides an explanation of the social differentiation in cause and outcome of vulnerability (Adger, 2006) has been developed by Watts and Bohle (1993) and Bohle et al (1994) in their investigation of who are most vulnerable from famine and climate change. These cases, drawn from development and environmental studies, elaborate upon Robert Chambers' (1989:1) definition of vulnerability as:

> …the exposure to contingencies and stress, and difficulty coping with them. Vulnerability thus has two sides: an external side of risks, shocks and stress to which an individual or household is subject: and an internal side which is defencelessness, meaning a lack of means to cope without damaging loss (Chambers, 1989:1)

Developing this definition, with its concern to account for both the structural dimensions of vulnerability as well as peoples' ability to respond, Bohle et al. (1994:38) suggest three basic coordinates of vulnerability 1) the risk of exposure to external crisis; 2) the risk of

inadequate capacities of individuals to cope with this external stress and shock, including effective and timely external interventions; and 3) the risk of severe consequences including slow and limited recovery. Their proposed model to capture the complexity of these dimensions of vulnerability is 'a multi-layered and multidimensional social space defined by determinate political, economic and institutional capabilities of people in specific places at specific times' (Bohle et al., 1994:39).

This focus on what people can be and do and 'an ability to achieve a given function should they choose it' (Sen, 1999; Sayer, 2011:234) informed elaboration of the dimensions of vulnerability theorised by Watts and Bohle (1993) and Bohle et al. (1994). The case considered in this paper is empirical research investigating experiences of vulnerability (and occasional flourishing) in longitudinal research conducted exclusively with a low-income community in the city in the North of England (Hughes and Emmel, 2008). In earlier reports from this qualitative longitudinal research, with my co-researcher Kahryn Hughes (Emmel and Hughes, 2010; 2014), we described a model of vulnerability as a four dimensional space (shaped like the Swiss chocolate confection, the Toblerone Bar). Our analysis of three sides of the triangle in plan represent three dimensions: i) material shortages in households, characterised by 'making do' with limited resources to meet basic everyday needs; ii) the capacity to address needs in the present and plan for the future; and iii) an uncertain reliance on welfare services acting to address crises when they happen (Emmel and Hughes, 2010:171). The fourth dimension, stretched longitudinally along a *w* axis, deals with time. Time is frequently implicated in accounts of vulnerability, references are made to 'episodic and shifting' (Fineman, 2010:265) and the 'frequent downward spiral' of vulnerability (Mackenzie, 2014:46) for instance. But these motifs are rarely theorised. In an earlier paper

we considered how chronological time and a social consciousness of time underwrites policies and practices and how practices at odds with these temporalities may exacerbate vulnerabilities (Emmel and Hughes, 2014). The social relations expressed in these temporal experiences are not directly considered in this paper. Instead, attention is focussed on elaborating the relationships between the three dimensions discussed in Emmel and Hughes (2010) bringing new evidence to bear to refine a theory of a relational space of vulnerability. Drawing on capability theory this paper extends understanding of the relationships between agency and social institutions, including social care, legal systems, and welfare provision.

This paper draws on two sources of data. A secondary analysis of qualitative longitudinal data with low-income grandparents supporting their grandchildren and ethnography of meetings to support grandparents in a third sector organisation. The secondary analysis is of data collected in Intergenerational Exchange, a part of the ESRC Qualitative Longitudinal Initiative, Timescapes (2016). The sample, methods, and the ethical implications of the methods used in Intergenerational Exchange have been described in detail elsewhere (Emmel and Hughes, 2010). For the purpose of the secondary analysis (Irwin and Winterton, 2011) in this paper a purposeful and theoretical sample (Emmel, 2013) of two sets of transcripts (four in-depth interviews conducted over two years) were retrieved from the Timescapes Archive, where the data from Intergenerational Exchange are held. These cases were purposefully chosen because they provide rich and detailed accounts of two key experiences. The first are interactions with public service providers (social workers, educational psychologists, lawyers and family court officials) in the process of gaining legal custody of grandchildren. The second are relationships developed during these custody

proceedings and afterwards with a third sector organisation with a specific remit to support grandparents and their families.

This third sector organisation was the site for further enquiry through a support programme specifically focussed on sharing information, knowledge, and skills with grandparents who were managing difficult relationships with their children and grandchildren. Ethnographic observations of three monthly meetings were undertaken. These provide detailed field-notes (written by the author) where participants agreed to notes being taken but did not wish the meetings, which often dealt with sensitive issues, to be recorded.

The three meetings were attended by between six and eight grandparents. Six individuals attended all three meetings (two couples and two widowed grandmothers) with a further couple attending the second two meetings. Two advice workers were also present at each meeting. All the grandparents were involved in direct care of their grandchildren—this ranged from established legal custody to one grandmother who described her grandchildren as 'just sleeping over'. A significant part of the conversation focussed on the grandparents' interactions with social care providers, legal systems, and access to welfare provision. These conversations are the focus of the field notes.

Important to the analysis in this paper and absent from our earlier data, with its focus on low-income families (Emmel and Hughes, 2010), are insights from grandparents with a range of socio-economic experiences. The two couples who attended all meetings described themselves as comfortably off, one couple were retired teachers while the other couple 'had been in business'. All the other grandparents lived exclusively on the state pension.

Verbal informed consent was sought with all participants in the meetings, continuing a practice adopted throughout our longitudinal research (Emmel et al., 2007) where written consent can be perceived as authoritarian. Anonymity was assured. The purpose of this research was explained as an opportunity to refine ideas about the nature of vulnerability, particularly through bringing new cases to bear in its interpretation and explanation.

Vulnerability and being

The most frequently reported constraint cited by participants is an inability to exercise their agency. Difficulties in accessing basic needs and material deprivation can significantly curtail the range of possible ways of being (Doyal and Gough, 1991), where the notion of being does not capture mere existence of basic needs but the relations needed to acquire those needs. Geoff and Margaret, for instance, who care for three granddaughters, describe the significant impact their sudden arrival had on the household economy. Neither Geoff nor Margaret work. They are dependent on disability welfare payments. They reported how difficult it was to feed and clothe the children and themselves. Unreliability and inaccessibility of services is one dimension of the model of the longitudinal space of vulnerability (Emmel and Hughes, 2010). This is highlighted in Geoff and Margaret's case. They describe how the grandchildren were left with them by social workers late one night, having been removed from their mother, who was a long-term heroin addict. The social worker explained that social services would support Geoff and Margaret and would be in touch the next morning. For some reason their case was not followed up. This is not an unusual event and has been descried to us by the advice workers at the third-sector organisation as the 'midnight drop'. In this case, the midnight drop lead to a significant change in the household economy. Geoff and Margaret observe how it took many months

to access basic needs—an inability to put food on the table on occasions, buy and replace school uniforms, pay for leisure activities—were all cited by Geoff and Margaret as examples. In elaborating these experiences, Geoff goes beyond recounting a deficit of basic needs to emphasise how resources are accessed and the relations these are contingent upon. The absence of relationships with structures of support from social, welfare, and educational services are discussed in their enduring condition.

As Geoff observes:

> We've always had to fight for things in life, er, me wife being disabled. Erm, you've really gotta fight and sometimes you don't know which way to turn, you don't know who to go to, who to see, er, and to me it's frustrating, a lot of people get frustrated over it because we don't get it or it takes ages to get it. And you can understand why, because she's entitled to it. It's not as though you're asking for summat for nothing. I've worked all me life.

Geoff's account of their attempt to access welfare provision evidences a lack of agency, an inability to access the resources they need and to which they feel entitled. But Geoff's narrative is also one of both confrontation and frustration. And this is a frustration borne of a recognition that they do not, nor can they adequately exercise control over their lives. As Geoff notes 'we keep hitting a bloody brick wall', the impediments to accessing services are the social institutions that control resources.

Accounts of vulnerability that assume a causal link between poverty and vulnerability locate powerlessness and inability to engage meaningfully with societal institutions in their explanation. Fineman (2010:266) notes that vulnerable populations are frequently

characterised as ‘discriminated against, marginalized, and disenfranchised from mainstream society’. Yet, in this research individuals who would not be regarded as poor using any relative or actual measure of poverty also report the difficulties they have in accessing services. As one participant, Mark, a relatively affluent retired businessman observes:

> Not in our wildest dreams did we imagine we would end up sitting in a [social worker’s] office trying to make the case for custody of our grandchildren. It’s frustrating, they don’t understand, ahh, it’s hard to make them understand. There we were fighting for our grandchildren—their safety, well you know—and we knew we were entitled, but we didn’t know how to do it, how to tell them, how to explain, we failed …

This grandparent provides a similar account of relationships with service providers to Geoff. He thinks he and his wife are eligible to particular services, but experiences barriers of access. He attributes these barriers to being uncertain about how to negotiate for resources. In this case these grandparents were seeking to protect their grandchildren from a parent they considered dangerous. Mark invokes the word failure, reflecting his inability to master the situation, to control access to resources, and gain what he thinks he deserves from service providers in social care and welfare provision who exercise control over these resources.

These cases point to the role that the ability to assume control over resources plays in definitions of vulnerability. It emphasises how resources are mediated through institutions and how, when individuals are unable to lever access to these resources, however just they feel their case for access may be, this is expressed as frustration and failure. These cases

show ways of being and emphasise how being can only be understood in relation to what can be done in a given circumstance. To more adequately understand the capability to do (Sen, 1999) the nature of these relationships require elaboration.

Vulnerability and doing

Lynn's case provides insight into the ways in which agency cannot be separated from a relational account in any understanding of vulnerability. To all intent and purpose Lynn meets the definition of vulnerability described in discrimination-based deficit accounts. She demonstrates an apparent lack of ability along intersections of gender and class. She is on disability benefit. At the time of the first interview she lived in social housing, which, by her own admission, was uninhabitable. Yet Lynn rejects the label of being vulnerable in a forthright way. An investigation of her case shows that this is not hubris but situated in practices that mediate, reduce, and militate against vulnerability through the ways Lynn exercises her agency. This understanding of agency cannot be divorced from the ways in which she relates to institutions or without references to the social settings in which she exhibits her self-confidence.

An insight into Lynn's agency is offered through understanding the way in which she took custody of her grandson Kyle when he was three years old. Before this Kyle lived with his mother who Lynn believed was abusing him. Lynn's son, who had a very brief relationship with Kyle's mother, was unable to care for his son. To gain custody of Kyle Lynn was involved in a protracted legal process through the family courts, which included interactions with welfare officers, psychologists, judges, and legal representatives. Throughout the first interview Lynn talks about how intimidating these interactions are. She describes the court

as ‘brown, big wooden doors, a very imposing building’, evoking this symbol to emphasise the power of the legal system as authority, she also reflects on the power of judges, solicitors, social workers, and educational psychologists who she perceives as trying to exclude her from the processes of gaining custody of Kyle. But she is quick to point out that she was not intimidated:

> Er, but I do see myself as somebody who I’m not frightened of authority and a lot of people are and I’m not. And I’m not frightened of keeping on and battling on when I mean many times I’ve felt, “I can’t take this anymore, I can’t go on with this” you know. And people get to that stage quite often you know.

In this first interview a reason Lynn gives for her lack of fear is her early experience working as a clerk in the local council, a role that included delivering documents to the courts. She also emphasises her later training as an early-years child care worker.

Later interviews returned to this theme, probing further to understand the configuration of experiences underlying Lynn’s confidence. Her early history is important. Lynn is relatively well educated, She left school with ‘qualifications’, allowing her to secure the job at the council and later as an accounts clerk in a large tailoring manufacturer in the city, a job she compared favourably with class mates who ‘ended up working on the shop floor’. In addition her father had been a ‘union man’ and shop steward for the National Union of Tailors and Garment Workers (NUTGW) in the same workplace. He was a community organiser too. All of these experiences Lynn identified as increasing her confidence. Beyond her immediate experiences, Lynn also drew on further resources, in particular a third-sector organisation that advised her on her legal rights, supporting her as she navigated through

the protracted child welfare and legal processes of gaining custody of her grandson. These resources of education, experience, institutions, and networks Lynn draws upon to increase her self confidence and mastery over her grandson's and her condition. Lynn's account focuses attention on the ability to engage. She contends that service delivery and legal systems she comes into contact with recognise that she has a mastery of her situation and respond accordingly. Lynn reports the example of a lawyer who approaches her after a hearing and tells her he is impressed by her 'self confidence, the way she speaks and her understanding her rights and Kyle's rights'.

Empowerment in the longitudinal space of vulnerability

These cases emphasise the ways in which taking control in relation to social and legal institutions must be included in understanding vulnerability and flourishing. For Wallerstein (1992:197), empowerment is 'a multi-level construct that involves people assuming control and mastery over their lives in their social, [economic] and political environments'. This reflects the capacities Lynn describes, which also appear to be absent in the experiences of other grandparents in this study.

Empowerment, as the opportunity and capability of individuals and groups to be included in economic, social, and political processes of capability. Dréze and Sen (1995), in their discussion of the vast differences in health and educational outcomes between the state of Uttar Pradesh in northern India with its very poor health outcomes, and Kerala in the south, with health outcomes similar to many European countries, emphasise the importance of well functioning public services in Kerala and the ill-functioning and frequently non-functioning services in Uttar Pradesh. They explain these differences within India as partly

being situated in historical, social, and political processes that have aided Kerala's transformation. They also note that the informed agency of women, 92.07% of women in Kerala are literate (Census of India, 2011), has played a crucial role in social action by a well educated public, who are vigilant in ensuring the adequate functioning of public services.

As the cases in this paper have shown, agency, in which people act to bring about change relative to the adequate function of public services, is one part of a relational model of vulnerability. Accounts that focus on an evaluation of an individual's assets and their position relative to institutional relationships are insufficient. While it is right to recognise, as Fineman (2010) does, that state institutions can privilege some groups at the expense of others. It does not necessarily follow that the resolution to these relationships of disadvantage lies only in reform of these state institutions. This paper has shown that an explanation of vulnerability must include what people 'do' to accesses or fail to access resources and opportunities.

This orientation towards 'doing' thus shifts the focus from the top-down relationship between societal institutions and individual vulnerability, to vulnerability understood as relational and shaped, at least in part from the bottom-up through people's actions. The notion of empowerment provides explanation of these relationships between institutions that have the capacity to produce and maintain vulnerabilities and the mastery and control individuals may be able to exert to flourish in their lives. The achievement of flourishing suggests empowerment of individuals, which are rooted in historical, cultural, and social processes, like Lynn's childhood, education and training, and work experience, and social structures. 'At issue', as Hall and Lamont observe (2013:13) 'is the capacity of individuals or

groups to secure favourable outcomes under new circumstances and, if need be, by new means.'

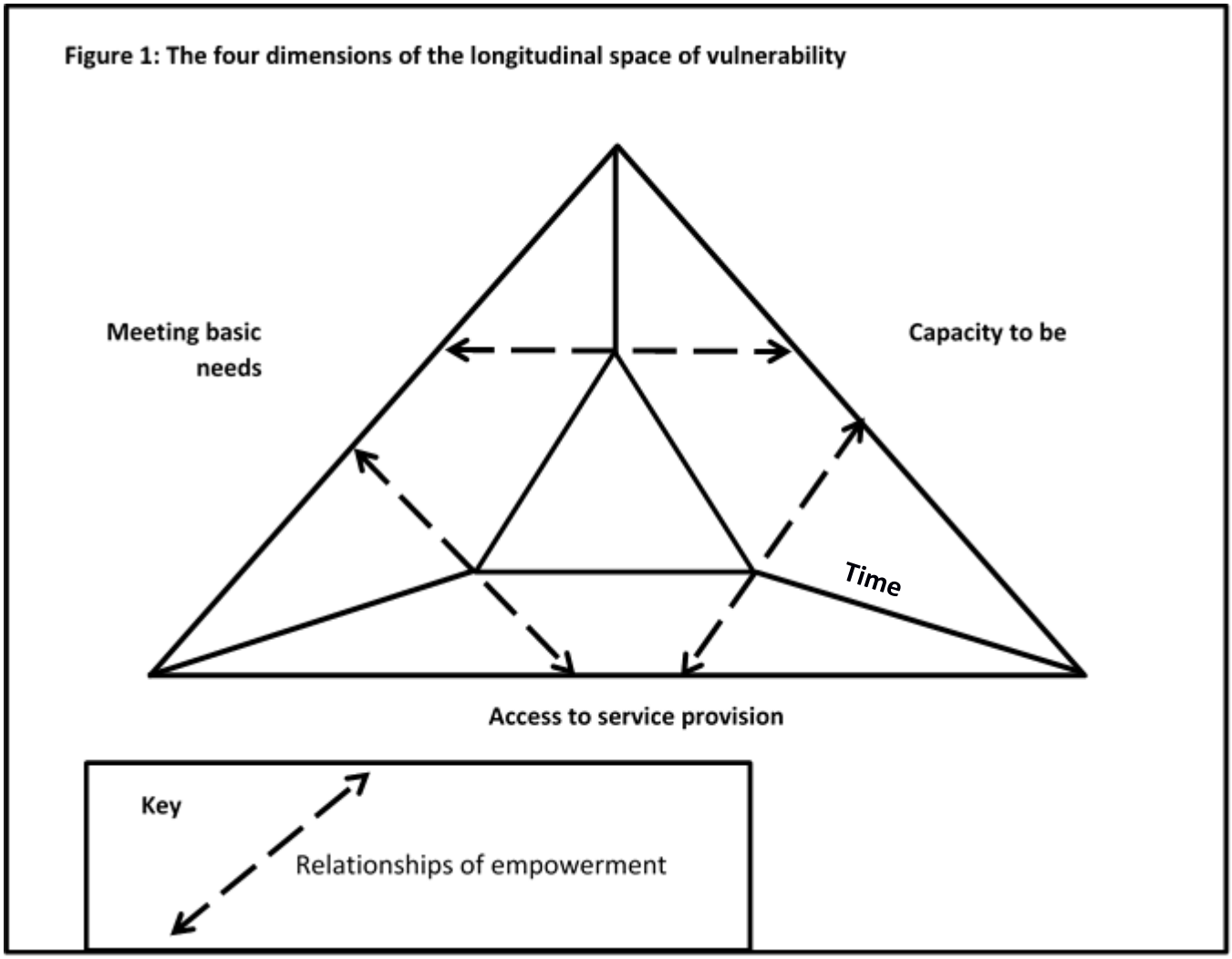

Figure 1, presents a new iteration of the longitudinal space of vulnerability (the Toblerone Model) developed from the relational causal model of vulnerability described earlier in this paper (Watts and Bohle, 1993; Bohle et al, 1994) and refined through the analysis in this paper. The first dimension is relabelled. In the earlier iterations (Emmel and Hughes, 2010;

2014) it emphasised ‘making do’, based exclusively on research conducted in a low-income community. Now labelled **meeting basic needs** (Doyal and Gough, 1991) this dimension extends explanation to recognise a broader consideration of services, goods and wants. These include intermediate basic needs like childhood security and safety. The relatively affluent grandparent, Mark’s attempts to secure the safety of his grandchildren is an example of this. Minimal needs continue to be recognised in this dimension, Geoff and Margaret’s struggle with deprivation emphasise this. These basic needs are universal and knowable. They are also, as this paper has emphasised, dynamic and evaluated by people (Rawls, 1971; Sayer, 2011). As Doyal and Gough (1991) emphasise a basic needs approach requires explanation of the capacity for action through agency and the ways in which this might be constrained or liberated.

The second dimension, drawing on capability theory (Sen, 1999), is relabelled as **capacity to be** reflecting the extension in this discussion to understand the opportunities and constraints individuals experience in exercising functions to address vulnerabilities or to flourish. Examples of the capacities discussed in this paper include the negative experiences of not having the knowledge or experiences to lever resources from service providers. But Lynn’s case also highlights the role education, family history, and networks play in developing capacities. None of these features are determined. Lynn’s case demonstrates that it is her relation with a third sector organisation that allows for the mobilisation of capacities to be to meet her basic needs, and through which she is able to attend to Kyle’s and her rights in the legal system.

Each of these dimensions of vulnerability cannot be divorced from the third dimension, **access to service providers**. In this paper, from research in the United Kingdom, this relation

to societal institutions is with public and third sector service providers. The role played by social care, legal systems, and welfare provision has been pivotal in explanations of vulnerability and flourishing throughout this paper. The concern here is not with an idealised account of society in which autonomy is defined as a desired state that allows all citizens to choose their mode of life and access to opportunities. But the cases in this paper highlight how inequalities persist and may often be exacerbated for individuals who are unable to develop relationships to connect the three dimensions of the longitudinal space of vulnerability elaborated. They are not able to act to bring about change to reduce vulnerabilities.

The dotted arrows in Figure 1 between the three dimensions of the longitudinal space of vulnerability represent the relationships that allow individuals to flourish as empowered and autonomous agents and have mastery to purposefully exercise control in their lives. They make explicit a relational account of vulnerability in which the attainment of basic needs, and the capacity to be, are intimately implicated with access to service provision in any explanation of vulnerability. An explanatory model that includes this understanding of empowerment also recognises that freedoms pursued will always be partial and constrained within social, economic, and political circumstance where the possibilities for flourishing and vulnerability are ever present.

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