# The Governance of Vulnerability:

# Regulation, support and social divisions in action

## Abstract

Diverse narratives and practices concerned with ‘vulnerability’ increasingly inform how a range of social issues are understood and addressed, yet the subtle creep of the notion into various governance arenas has tended to slip by unnoticed. This paper explores the role of vulnerability in responding to longstanding and on-going dilemmas about social precariousness and harm. Drawing on in-depth qualitative research into how vulnerability was operationalised in services for ‘vulnerable’ young people in an English city, prominent narratives of vulnerability are traced, which operate in relation to a variety of often-dissonant service user responses. The paper shows the governance of vulnerability as a dynamic process; informed by policy developments and wider beliefs about the behaviours of ‘problem’ populations, interpreted and modified by interactions between practitioners and young people, and in turn shaping lived experiences of vulnerability. Patterns in this process illuminate how vulnerability narratives reshape long-running tensions at the heart of social welfare interventions between a drive to provide services that might mitigate social precariousness and an impetus towards regulating behaviour. The paper argues that although gesturing to inclusivity, the governance of vulnerability elaborates power dynamics and social divisions in new ways. Resulting outcomes are evidently varied and fluid, holding the promise of further social change.

## Introduction

Somewhat by stealth, the concept of vulnerability has crept into a raft of contemporary welfare and criminal justice policies and practices. The notion now occupies a relatively uncharted position in long-running debates about who requires or ‘deserves’ support. Where an individual or group is deemed ‘vulnerable’ this carries powerful normative undertones about constrained human agency, potential or actual injustice and a legitimation of resources being deployed. A vulnerability zeitgeist or ‘spirit of the time’ has been traced in contemporary welfare and disciplinary arrangements (Brown, 2014 and 2015), which now informs a range of interventions and approaches to social problems, both in the UK and internationally. As prominent examples, ‘vulnerable’ people are legally entitled to ‘priority need’ in English social housing allocations (Carr and Hunter, 2008), vulnerable victims of crime are seen as requiring special responses in the UK criminal justice system (see Hall, 2009; Roulstone et al, 2011), ‘vulnerable adults’ have designated ‘protections’ under British law (Dunn et al, 2008; Clough, 2015) and vulnerable migrants and refugees are increasingly prioritised within international immigration processes (Peroni and Timmer, 2013).

The rise of vulnerability in policy discourses and frameworks would appear to be a relatively recent development. Charting references to ‘vulnerability’ in books over time reveals the use of the term has been increasing significantly since the 1950s[[1]](#footnote-1). The word surfaced infrequently in UK statutory instruments until the twenty-first century, but use on the statue books has grown steadily, especially since the mid-2000s until 2012. As a means of understanding and addressing social problems, although usually vague in meaning, the concept of vulnerability now stretches into so many governance areas it is difficult to keep track, permeating policy matters ranging from violence against women to volcanoes (see Brown, 2015 for a detailed exploration). Little is known about how these developments play out on the ground at the points at which interventions are delivered and received.

This paper traces the dynamic and fluid role which the governance of vulnerability plays in responding to longstanding dilemmas about social precariousness[[2]](#footnote-2) and harm. Drawing on in-depth qualitative research into how vulnerability was operationalised in services for ‘vulnerable’ young people in an English city, various practitioner accounts of vulnerability are examined alongside their interplay with service user responses. The paper develops the idea of ‘vulnerability narratives’, or the stories people tell (and which social scientists investigate, see Bevir, 2013; 8) about what vulnerability is and how it should be addressed. It explores a variety of different and competing vulnerability narratives, which are shifting and developing through interactions and policy frameworks, and which in turn shape the social storylines of supposedly ‘vulnerable’ people and lived experiences of vulnerability. For the purposes of the paper, ‘vulnerability’ is used in two ways. Firstly, to refer to a policy or practice category, drawn upon (albeit usually imprecisely) in law, guidance or interventions, to describe or define situations which might involve people being subject to actual or potential harm. Secondly, as a means of describing people’s ‘lived experiences’ of social insecurity or harm, which are carved out by biological and bodily frailties, social inequalities and institutional forces which persist over time, and which are shaped by the choices, views and experiences of individual social actors.

The paper draws on ideas found in governance theories which seek to bring together institutions and practices with meanings and discourses in an account of power as diffused (see Foucault, 1980; Rose, 1999; Bevir, 2013). Bevir’s (2013) ‘decentered’ theory of governance offered an orientation for the paper, with a diversity of governing practices considered, attention given to how these might develop over time, and appreciation of the contingent nature of laws and rules which shape people’s lives. A view of power was taken that people are always creating and recreating social practices through their beliefs and activities as well as their individual and collective stories, with governance seen as a plural process or as a ‘bundle of exchanges dispersed everywhere’ (Sharp et al, 2000: 19). Social practices are seen as having semiotic elements which are one important factor in the process of change, and which attention to ‘discourse’ can illuminate (see Fairclough, 2003)[[3]](#footnote-3).

The paper begins with an overview of literature which can help elucidate the ‘vulnerable’ citizen. It then moves on to discuss findings from the empirical research, after a brief outline of research methods. The role played by vulnerability in shifting practitioner discourses and practices of care and control is considered, with ‘vulnerable’ young people’s perspectives then explored. How different vulnerability narratives operate against a backdrop of wider beliefs and traditions about the ‘choices’ and behaviours of ‘problem’ populations is a particular focus. The paper concludes that vulnerability-based governance processes reconfigure long-running tensions at the heart of welfare interventions between the provision of services that mitigate social precariousness and harm, and an impetus towards regulating the behaviours of those who are deemed ‘problematic’. Wide-ranging and differential outcomes appear to result, which are evidently dynamic and developing, holding the promise of further social change.

## Elucidating the vulnerable citizen

There is a rich literature on how socially precarious or ‘marginalised’ citizens are both regulated and assisted through welfare and disciplinary systems. It is well established that ‘supportive’ provision and its delivery has long been linked with preoccupations and concerns with ‘problem’ behaviour (Levitas, 1998; Young, 1999), from poorhouses and workhouses (Squires, 1990; Fletcher, 2015), to social work interventions (Wootton, 1959; Donzelot; 1979), homelessness initiatives (see Kinsella, 2011, this journal), welfare provision (Dwyer, 1998; Dwyer and Wright, 2014) and programmes for ‘troubled’ families (Burney, 2005; Rodger, 2008; Welshman, 2013). Similarly, more explicitly controlling interventions delivered via the modern criminal justice system have elements of support and protection woven into them, especially perhaps in the case of youth justice (Muncie, 2006; Phoenix, 2008; Phoenix 2009). Contemporary governance mechanisms which elevate notions of ‘empowerment’ have also been as connected with similar processes (Clark, 2005; Adamson, 2010 this journal; Wright, 2014), with care and social control now increasingly intricately enmeshed in systems of governance (see Garland, 2002; Rodger, 2008; Wacquant, 2009). Against this backdrop, that certain citizens are ‘vulnerable’ and require special support and protections has become a commonplace idea in politics, policies, practices and discourses.

Generally speaking, the political left tend to draw on the idea of the vulnerable citizen to argue for state intervention where people are in the hands of social structures which cause morally unacceptable social harms. The Right tend to utilise it to highlight how people are sometimes ‘unable’ to act responsibly, and as a way of making exceptions for those who face misfortunes (which require cure) within a market-orientated social system. In both of these stories or accounts of vulnerability, appendages or exceptions to ‘rational actor’ models of human agency are in operation. To invoke ‘vulnerability’ is to question how far an individual’s agency is constrained by their circumstances, personally, socially and/or structurally, therefore indicating a (sometimes pressing) ethical duty for other individuals or the state to act (Brown, 2011). Conceptualisations of the vulnerable citizen commonly appear where people in difficulty are transgressive or criminal, to imply diminished agency and therefore a requirement to treat those in question more sympathetically.

In understanding why the motif of vulnerability has taken root and flourished in contemporary social policy and society at this time, there would appear to be a number of salient factors. The rise of social science as a technique for tracing patterns within populations has stimulated the development of interventions designed to address ‘negative’ patterns, whereby certain groups become objects of knowledge and targets for concern (Bevir, 2013). The growing influence of developmental psychology through the twentieth century, in particular, extended scientific credence to modes of understanding focussed on how adverse influences disrupt ‘normal’ progression into adulthood and beyond (cf Brotherton and Cronin, 2013), migrating into policy to justify a range of enhanced interventions. Post-modern understandings about the social construction of social problems have to some degree problematised norm-based pathologies, potentially creating drivers for more subtle regulatory frameworks. Ecclestone and Brunila (2015; 2) argue that rise of the vulnerable subject in policy connects with increasing pessimism about enduring social and educational inequalities which have produced a ‘therapeutic turn’ in social policy, expanding significantly through vulnerability discourses and driving forward ‘self-governance’ in new and covert ways (also see Ecclestone and Goodley, 2014).

In heavily marketised political systems, where the state might be perceived to have limited control over assuring social security for citizens, targeting individual behaviour becomes a central strand of power, but alongside ideas that actors should be ‘free’ to behave as they wish. In this context, intensified social control becomes a means of ensuring that people comply with behaviours required for security and economic growth (see Harvey, 2005; Wacquant, 2009). Harrison (with Davis, 2014: 25-26) details a ‘new behaviourism’ targeted at the least well off in society, with politicians and professionals exercising ‘powerful supervisory, surveillance or therapeutic emphases where behaviour and lifestyles are at issue’. Accounting for agendas such as ‘nudge’, behavioural economics and ‘choice architecture’, Jones et al (2013; 174) note how the least well-off and the least well-educated groups might be assumed in policy to possess differing capacities to make decisions and behave ‘appropriately’, meaning that behaviourist interventions are therefore be most burdensome for the most disadvantaged individuals. ‘Vulnerable’ citizens are often a focus for such measures (Harrison and Sanders, 2006; Van Loon, 2008; Carline 2009; Munro, 2013).

To be ‘vulnerable’ within a political system which celebrates independence and ‘active’ citizenship is layered with contradictory connotations. The vulnerable citizen is in certain respects the antithesis of proper citizenship (see McLeod, 2012), frail, dependent, lacking entrepreneurship; a problem to be addressed (Wiles, 2011). Rose (1996, 158) argues that ‘advanced’ liberalism requires that subjects ‘enterprise themselves’. ‘Vulnerable’ subjects would seem amongst those who might struggle to fulfil such requirements. Yet in other ways, vulnerable people are also (in theory at least), those who might ‘legitimately’ be considered inactive or dependent on the state, opening avenues for enhanced ‘support’, often by therapeutic means. In a broad range of arenas, stories of vulnerability now trigger or legitimate enhanced state power on the basis that certain citizens might not understand or be in a position to act in the way that ‘best’ protects their health or welfare. In other words, the governance of vulnerability might be seen to open doors for social control in the name of protection (cf Phoenix, 2002).

Explaining and understanding human agency where people face substantial precariousness or social difficulty remains a contested matter. For scholars such as Giddens (1989), all citizens have a (sometimes deeply buried) consciousness of what they are doing and why, and are able to give a reasoned or ‘reflexive’ account of this even in the most difficult circumstances. Others have argued that human urges or ‘choices’ are impulsive, simultaneously conflicting and deeply imbued with ambiguity (Bauman, 1993). Hoggett (2001) has noted that accounts of agency in social policy scholarship often risk a false dichotomy between emphasising a system as to blame for people’s problems and dilemmas, or responsibility being attributed solely to individual failings, positions which vulnerability narratives often seem to map on to. He warns against a ‘lop-sided’ model of agency which is insufficiently sensitive to the ‘tragic’ and contradictory aspects of human experiences. Offering a social-psychological or ‘situated’ account of the constraints of human agency, Hoggett (2001; 53) urges that social policy academics face up to a confrontation with what he calls ‘negative emotional capacities’, and must avoid any smuggling of normative assumptions about agency as ‘good’ and absence of agency as ‘bad’.

An alternative theorisation of vulnerability has been proposed which seeks to subvert the potentially pernicious aspects of the ‘vulnerable subject’ as popularly narrated. ‘Universal vulnerability’ scholars argue that when vulnerability is viewed as an inevitable part of the human condition, it can offer a foundation for a fairer and more just society (Butler, 2004 and 2009; Turner, 2006; Fineman, 2008; Wallbank and Herring, 2013). The ‘vulnerability thesis’ holds that vulnerability is biological and permanent (humans have bodies which decay and die), whilst also connected to the personal, economic, social and cultural circumstances within which individuals find themselves at different points in their lives. This, it has been argued, offers a powerful counterweight to the ‘myth’ of the autonomous and independent subject at the centre of liberal and ‘neoliberal’ governance systems (Fineman and Grear, 2013; 2). Fineman’s work pioneering this theory (see 2008) develops the idea of a ‘responsive state’, driven by meeting the practical and ethical obligations involved in the always and inevitably messy realities of the life course of our vulnerable bodies, governing vulnerability as it is lived both universally and differentially.

Although there are differences across theorists taking this approach, generally speaking, the vulnerability thesis seeks to subvert the elevation of ‘active’ subjectivity, purposeful activity, and ‘positive capacity’ which dominant western philosophical traditions tend to converge around. Harrison (2008; 439) argues that whilst Marxists are inclined to view vulnerability as a symptom of lack of power to be overcome and superseded through the development of autonomy, economic liberal agendas position it as a deficit of entrepreneurship, meaning vulnerability is a ‘problem’ to be ‘solved’ according to either approach. Locating the vulnerable citizen at the centre of society, Harrison argues, involves celebrating ways of living and existing that are inactive, or ‘radical passivity’; acknowledging that life is about fatigue as well as activity, withdrawal well as engagement, and with these realities reflected in political systems. Yet for scholars concerned with the intensification of social control in the lives of the most disadvantaged citizens, using vulnerability as a starting point for a new relationship between state and citizen seems a risky strategy which might open avenues for state power to expand further, and in ways which could more deeply entrench already ingrained inequalities and injustices.

Exploring the rise of the governance of vulnerability illuminates how particular stories and subjectivities might operate through narrative and policy frameworks to ‘produce’ particular effects. In accounting for the realities of how such processes might play out, findings from empirical study into how vulnerability is lived and governed can provide a more dynamic account, and it is to this which the paper now turns.

## The vulnerability study

Findings in the forthcoming part of the article are drawn from fieldwork undertaken during 2010-11 for doctoral research which investigated the concept of vulnerability and its use in the care and control of young people. The qualitative empirical element of the research involved a case study in a large UK city (population around 750 000) which explored how vulnerability was operationalised in services for supposedly ‘vulnerable’ young people. Twenty five young people aged 12-18 were interviewed, with interviewees included on the basis that they were considered ‘vulnerable’ by their workers and that they had extended histories of receiving relatively intensive welfare and/or disciplinary interventions. Around half were male and half female, and a range of different ethnic groups were included in the sample, with seventeen participants being of White UK ethnic origin. Almost all of the young people lived in inner city social housing estates, with the exception of three young people who lived in private rented accommodation. Transgressive young people were deliberately incorporated into the sample; just over half of the young people had offending histories, criminal behaviours, close association with ASB and/or had been excluded from school.

Young people were accessed through six ‘gatekeeper’ agencies: a service for young carers, a locality-based ‘anti-social behaviour’ (ASB) project, a young people’s drugs service, a sexual exploitation support project, a private education provider for young people having difficulties at school, and a service for ‘vulnerable’ children (which supported homeless young people, ‘runaways’ and refugees/asylum-seekers). Unique insights into young people’s perspectives on their experiences and the governance of their lives were generated via life mapping activities, discussion of video vignettes and imagined future planning (see Brown, 2015). Most young people in the sample were familiar with notions of vulnerability, but in some instances the word ‘vulnerability’ was discussed in terms of various proxies such as ‘difficulties’ or ‘difficult lives’. Ethical considerations were of paramount concern in the design and implementation of the research (see Brown 2015 for more detail) and names that appear here are pseudonyms chosen by young people.

Fifteen semi-structured interviews were also undertaken with professionals or ‘key informants’ who were involved in the delivery of services for vulnerable young people in the city. The sample of key informants included five front-line workers, three commissioners and six managers who in some cases had commissioning and service user-facing duties. Interviewees worked across a range of settings, some providing interventions which were more ‘compulsory’ in nature (the Youth Offending Service [YOS], Social Care, and a Family Intervention Project [FIP] for example), while others worked for services which might be considered more ‘supportive’, such as voluntary sector youth projects. These interviews were complemented by informal data gathering through the researcher’s participation in various meetings, conversations and correspondence.

Data were analysed using ideas taken from ‘thematic network’ approaches (Attride-Stirling, 2001). For this paper, data were re-analysed specifically in relation to questions of how vulnerability might feature in a diversity of governing practices, with a particular interest in resistance and how this might occur within context of regulation and power (see Foucault, 1980). A standpoint known as the ‘new sociology of childhood’ also influenced the study (see Jenks, 1982), with attention given to the ways in which children and young people might be marginalised within socio-economic structures and processes whilst also playing a role as active agents within these systems.

## Findings: Regulation, support and social divisions in action

This section provides analysis of practitioners’ understandings of vulnerability and then moves on to consider insights from young people themselves. Synergies and tensions across the two groups are considered, with the empirical case study data highlighting the governance of vulnerability as a dynamic process, informed by policy developments and wider beliefs about social problems, and interpreted and modified by interactions between practitioners and young people.

#### Shifting discourse, shifting practice?

The notion of vulnerability has informed ideas about childhood for centuries (see for example Rousseau, 1792; Walker, 1962), but has increasingly been elaborated through explicit discourses of vulnerability (Daniel, 2010). Vulnerability was a widespread but amorphous notion in practice, approached in a range of ways, including as a classifier of particular identity groups, of shared social circumstances (parental domestic violence, mental health problems) and/or of problem behaviours (offending, drug use etc). Some interviewees drew distinctions about vulnerability being different from other classifications (especially ‘risk’) in that it offered a relatively 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.* (Clinical Psychologist)

Vulnerability narratives provided opportunities to configure (and re-configure) the ways in which individual social difficulty might be understood in relation to wider structural and social circumstances. Yet in the majority of interviews, it was notable that practitioners tended to configure vulnerability in more situational or individual terms:

*… if I was explaining the notion of vulnerability to somebody, it would probably be along the lines of how able are─ how they can keep themselves safe, how able is that person to keep their self safe* (Manager and practitioner, Family Intervention Project)

When talking about how assessments of vulnerability informed casework, ‘solutions’ to vulnerability tended to be focussed on service users themselves. Where practitioners outlined what they understood by vulnerability, poverty and material disadvantage was only mentioned by one of fifteen interviewees. This points to vulnerability narratives forming part of wider moves towards the elevation of understandings of social difficulty as individual deficit (Harrison and Sanders, 2014), circumstantial (see Brown, 2015), or ‘emotional’ in nature (see Ecclestone and Brunila, 2015).

Defining and managing vulnerability was illuminated as a process which was being further elaborated, with some evidence of momentum to bring more groups into the boundaries of vulnerability classifications (see also McLaughlin, 2012; Peroni and Timmer, 2014). Talking about sexual exploitation one practitioner explained the need to widen services:

*If we look at* [city] *as a whole I’d say that ethnic minorities are more vulnerable, because we know it’s happening* [sexual exploitation]*, it’s not like it only happens to Caucasian girls, it’s just about getting the support out there. So they might be more vulnerable because not enough people know about* [service] *or know about the support that’s available.* (Sexual exploitation support worker)

Vulnerability narratives could extend governance arrangements in unexpected directions, encompassing young people’s activities as well as demeanour. A senior YOS manager noted how his organisation’s ‘vulnerability management plans’ (see Phoenix, 2013) enabled capture of new areas of concern such as riding motorbikes unsafely:

*… not massive risk in terms of harm to other people, but without helmets, young people have died.  And* [before] *we probably have never made those assessments of vulnerability.*(Senior Manager, YOS)

How the notion operated evidently took a variety of forms depending on the particular practitioner’s theory of vulnerability, with wider interactions and operational frameworks informing and refining this. This might be judged to render the concept so broad as to be almost meaningless, or could alternatively be seen as enabling nuanced approaches to the complexities of practice.

Practitioners largely saw vulnerability narratives as part of wider ‘new’ and more progressive ways of working which also included closer multi-agency working and more effective child protection responses:

*…in the 60’s and 70’s I think it was, have they got a proper roof over their head, are they defective, you know, this sort of thing.* […] *I don’t think there was the nuancing that there is now* (Retired Commissioner, City Council Children’s Services).

Notably, ‘defectiveness’ is brought in as a comparator here, raising questions as to how far vulnerability narratives achieved the new ‘inclusivity’ it was generally associated with. There were some indications that vulnerability narratives represented shifting language rather than practice. The same informant went on, ‘*it’s probably a much more acceptable way of talking to parents to describe a child as vulnerable’*. One manager who was sceptical of the rise of the concept noted ‘I think it’s a new thing, I think [before] we’d have classed them as being just badly behaved’.

#### The dilemmas of empowering vulnerable young people

As has been documented in relation to ‘risk’ (Kemshall, 2002; Lupton, 1999), normative forces seemed to operate subtly through vulnerability narratives, playing a role in encouraging young people to present themselves in particular ways (see also Ecclestone and Brunilla, 2015; 11). The designation ‘vulnerable youth’ mobilised theories about preferred adult futures centring on what might be called an ‘entrepreneurial self’ (see Kelly, 2006; 25). That ‘vulnerable’ young people’s outlooks might not be inclined in the ‘correct’ direction was frequently intimated:

*a lot of the young people we work with are vulnerable in terms of they’ve got no support around them, they’ve got no idea of the bigger picture almost and they’re vulnerable to getting sucked into staying, not moving outside and knowing what opportunities are available to them, which means that they only speak to certain amount of people, and because there’re so many myths or things going on in the communities, that they think that that’s acceptable.* (Support worker, ASB project)

Vulnerability narratives implied deviation from an undefined standard of life or behaviour which was assumed preferable. Narration of vulnerability provided clues about various approaches which underpinned practitioners’ ethos and theory of work. One commissioner who was City Council lead for vulnerable groups, noted that tendencies to ‘save’ young people were to be resisted, but changing the behaviours of ‘vulnerable’ young people was important:

Commissioner: … *we know also things which work against vulnerability are: supportive families, relationships, communication, being well networked in the community, having aspiration, understanding what good looks like, genuine choice, we've always had this idea around making positive choices, but of course what you find particularly with young people is choice availability is critical.*

Kate: *What you are choosing from…*

Commissioner: *Yeah, what are you choosing from? What agency do you have. Agency is framed by what you know, what your community has done before, what you see as being available. And it's that great thing around if at the end of workshops with vulnerable kids, if you ask them ‘you get to choose what you want to do’, and if you leave it like that, even though you've done lots of stuff around healthy eating, they'll go, 'MACDONALDS!!'*[…] *A key issue in decreasing vulnerability is increasing the availability of positive choices.*

Here, supporting vulnerability and controlling transgression are ‘in frame’ together (see Dobson, 2015), with ideas about ‘nudging’ (see Thaler and Sunstein, 2009) infusing vulnerability narratives, with conformity to social norms arguably playing a key role in understandings.

In some respects it is central to the project of policy and governance to seek to shape people’s actions and lives ‘positively’, perhaps especially in relation to younger citizens. Of concern is that this process is framed by power imbalances and enhanced overtness of penal overtones (Fletcher, 2015), imposing particular standpoints which might be seen as perpetuating situations of inequality (see Flint, 2006; Harrison and Sanders, 2014). As Kelly (2006; 29) highlights, deficit-based intervention regimes which seek to transform subjects into more enterprising people might be considered worthwhile, but are problematic when narrowly imagined in line with capitalist systems of thought. It should be noted though that personal theories were not uniformly aligned with this. Perhaps reflecting her own childhood experiences, one older practitioner felt vulnerability gave rise to ‘molly-coddling’, where instead, young people needed the ‘skills to act for themselves’. Her narrative indicated a desire for particular behaviours, but these were encouraged though young people ‘having their say’ and their ‘opinion being listened to’ suggesting a different theory about how vulnerability should be addressed. She used direct challenge and humour in her work, focussing on how interventions might alter young people through an emphasis on rapport and relationships with staff.

Unresolved tensions lay at the heart of dynamics of vulnerability governance, between protection from or prevention of risks, encouraging ‘vulnerable’ young people to make different choices and also providing interventions young people indicated were most useful:

*We might see them as vulnerable but actually what’s important is their priorities, which is what I come up against a lot. So young people are saying, ‘My priority is football group’. When you think that actually Mum’s neglecting your basic needs, so how do you marry those two things when you think there’s an underlying vulnerability here but actually what the client wants is a football shirt to go to the PE lessons and Mum’s not putting any breakfast on the table because she’s gambling the money away. So how do you deal with those two conflicts?* (Practitioner, vulnerable children’s support service).

Vulnerability narratives seem to elide activation and support in new ways, downplaying normative aspects and repositioning these as ‘protective’ measures. Generally speaking, understandings of vulnerability reinforced individual deficit accounts of adversity rather than focussing on structural factors. To explore more fully how dominant cultural scripts about vulnerability might shape how services are received, ‘vulnerable’ young people’s social storylines and responses to vulnerability narratives are now considered.

#### Vulnerability narratives as received by ‘vulnerable’ young people

Most of the young people interviewed indicated that they were resistant to the idea that they were ‘vulnerable’. Research with older people has similarly detailed how recipients of care might vehemently resist categorisations of themselves as dependent, frail, or vulnerable (see Wiles, 2011). This reaction is hardly surprising given the negative ideas associated with insecure social positions in contemporary society. Anna, who was 12 and had come to the UK from Lithuania aged 9 and was living in a homeless hostel with her mother (who had been through a violent relationship and had worked in the sex industry), indicated that she preferred a positive narrative account of her life:

Kate: *What about if people said about you, Anna, that you’d had quite a lot of difficulties in your life. What would you think about that?*

Anna: *I’m just gonna be proud of myself ‘cos I work it out at things, and that’s finished and that’s it… I just look at the future.*

What Anna describes here might be deemed a ‘positive future orientation’, which was common amongst interviewees and has been identified as a ‘protective factor’ in young people’s lives (Herrenkohl et al, 2005).

Whereas giving space to acknowledgement of personal difficulties was important in professional narratives of vulnerability, not all young people indicated they found this helpful. Indeed, that experiences of injustice exist as disturbances that might be incomprehensible and unspeakable has been documented elsewhere (Hoggett, 2001). Here, 18 year old Scott ─ who had already served two custodial sentences for violence and who had grown up in care after his mother threatened him with a knife ─ recalls disclosing being a victim of sexual abuse to his mother:

*She had a conversation with me one night. I don't know how it came out about that her dad did it to her. I don't know. It just came out and she went— She was pissed as well and I said something and she went, ‘You don't know what it's like’ and then I just told her. And then we just sat down and then she went, ‘You need to press charges.’ I said, ‘I don't want to’. I said, ‘I'm not going to stand up and court’ and she went, ‘No, you'll be in a video link thing and stuff like that’. I said, ‘I still don't want to’. I said, ‘I'd be embarrassed about saying something like that in court’. I don't know, it just proper got to me. Like before, I used to cry about it and now there's no emotions about it. It happened. Get over it. I know it sounds sour, but it happened. What can I do? Cry? Do you think crying is just going to stop it? It's like my life; if I could cry and just wipe all of this off right now, I wish I could. If I had a red button and I could just rewind back to a time and just start all over again and make sure my mum never touched a drink, make sure my mum never met my step-dad before he was on heroin – because it was him that got her on it – and then, I don't know, I think my life would've been a lot better.*

Scott’s words here echo other work (Murray, 2010; Wright, 2014) which has shown that responses to adversity are ‘active’ and ‘agentic’ rather than passive, and resistance to vulnerability identities could form part of this. That young people’s narratives of vulnerability gave more emphasis to agency than practitioners’ highlighted a dilemma for social policy and practice. Although commonly young provide might provide accounts of adversities which indicate a desire to avoid negative views of these, were practitioner and policy responses to corroborate this there would seem to be risks of normalising injustice. One of the tensions of vulnerability narratives in action seemed to be that they frame attention to a powerlessness that should not be ignored, but could at the same time also be received as stigmatising, arguably reinforcing that powerlessness further.

To complicate matters, there was a sense that young people’s approaches to vulnerability narratives were context-dependent and refined through particular relationships or interactions. It was fairly common for young people to indicate ambivalence in responses vulnerability classifications over the course of an interview. Fifteen year old Jess, for instance, talked about her sexual activity with older men, drug taking and going missing entailing dangerous situations, but seemed conflicted about her vulnerability:

Kate: *What if workers said going with men, being in a cars, that makes you vulnerable, what would you say back?*

Jess: *I’d just go ‘I’m not vulnerable’ and walk off or summat.*

Kate: *And what would you, internally what would you be thinking?*

Jess: *I’d be questioning myself. And then I’d start crying ‘cos I couldn’t decide between the two sides. One side of me ‘d be like ‘am I’? and the other side ‘d be like… I’d be questioning myself, but then I’d be reassuring myself.*

Scholarship on ‘identity’ has highlighted that this is something fluid, multiple and subject to continuous reassessment (Goffman, 1959; Giddens, 1991), contingent on the political, social, economic, ideological and interpersonal conditions of the situations in which people ﬁnd themselves (cf Hall, 1996; Hunter, 2003). For some young people, vulnerability narratives seemed to play a role in this on-going process. Sixteen year old Keith said that when his YOS worker told him that he was vulnerable due to his father beating him on a daily basis, he was ‘shocked’ because he ‘didn’t know’. For other young people too, being seen as vulnerable seemed to validate the seriousness of the difficulties they faced, and could shape how they responded to these, as 14 year old ‘2Pac’ explained:

*… being pointed as vulnerable give me the drive to get stronger* […] *It give me the drive, if I wasn’t seen as vulnerable I wouldn’t have gone to Taekwondo and I wouldn’t have got into martial arts. I wouldn’t have adapted some of the stuff I do today. But yeah, being vulnerable it was a bit of a wakeup call and I pulled myself together really.*

Rather than receiving vulnerability classifications in a particular way, data here shows ‘vulnerable’ receivers of services in an on-going and iterative process involving identity work and responses to support and control, leading to differential outcomes. Although activation was central to practitioner vulnerability narratives, young people responses did not map onto this neatly, which in turn had ramifications for their lived experiences of vulnerability.

## Conclusion: Governing vulnerability as a process

Like all governance philosophies, designing and delivering provision based on ‘vulnerability’ has normative implications, which then play out on a day to day basis through the delivery of interventions (see Bevir, 2013; 4). Stories about social harm told through vulnerability narratives take multiple forms, and discernable patterns in these indicate that they are reconfiguring and reworking understandings of social injustice and disadvantage in new ways. Persuasions and prescriptions which operate in policy frameworks and narratives centred on vulnerability illuminate how power is not just regulatory but ‘productive’ (cf Foucault, 1980), with forms of subjectivity and agency in flux and changeable (Bevir, 2013). The governance of vulnerability is a developing strand in this wider process, arguably furthering traditional stereotypes about ‘problem groups’ and reinforcing unequal subjectivities in superficially more palatable ways.

Mostly, vulnerability narratives were used by practitioners in ways which operated to downplay structural accounts of social problems and rehearse constructions of certain groups as representing a social problem, raising questions about how far they pathologise social disadvantage. Managing and addressing vulnerability appears often to be largely related to activating citizens away from ‘dependency’ and in the direction of more ‘entrepreneurial’ activities, suggesting increasingly narrow spheres of acceptability. Narrations of vulnerability illuminate patterns of co-ordination and discourse which cultivate spaces where ‘vulnerable’ individuals seem expected to navigate a tightrope between somewhat contradictory preoccupations about *lack of agency* and also *active* agency. A contouring of behaviour operates on the basis of ethical necessity, assumed to be in the ‘best interest’ of the person concerned. Although sometimes offering a means of naming and addressing injustices, the rise of vulnerability in contemporary governmentalities might also be seen as a part of differentiated practices of social control, enabling more intensified behavioural regulation of the less well placed whilst better off citizens are subjected to less impinging persuasions (see Wacquant, 2009; Harrison and Sanders, 2014).

Connecting diverse narratives of vulnerability across practitioners and young people highlights that vulnerability-based interventions are based on propositions and meanings which can be understood within the context of wider discourses and webs of belief about social problems, which are then reshaped by the negotiations and interactions of the deliverers and receivers of services (cf Bevir, 2013). The governance of vulnerability is therefore an evolving process, always imbued and affected by the possibly irreducible impact of consciousness of both the users and the receivers of interventions. Power dynamics are fundamental to such situations, with personal interactions situated in and structured by wider institutional factors and forces persisting over time. This dynamic, relational account of the governance of vulnerability highlights that people are constantly responding to and shaping this process, with overall patterns holding the promise of further social change.

Reconfiguring vulnerability as a universal human experience offers a potential means of subverting the elaboration of social divisions through vulnerability narratives. Questions about what obligations would spring from centring the variously constituted but universally experienced vulnerability of our bodies ─ and what it would look like to meet these obligations (Harrison, 2008; 583) ─ seem to invite new ways of approaching social justice. Vulnerability theory might be seen to offer an alternative to ‘productivist’ accounts which prioritise autonomy and purposive economic action as core components of existence, enabling moves beyond normative assumptions about human agency where ‘agency is good, and the absence of agency is bad’ (Hoggett, 2001: 43). Yet concerns remain about what placing the vulnerable citizen at the heart of democratic society might mean for the denigration of citizenship rights (see Ecclestone and Goodley, 2013) and the augmentation of regulatory mechanisms in a deeply unequal society. Despite the appeal of universal vulnerability approaches in theory, there seems a danger that the radical and progressive potential of vulnerability theory might be undermined when operationalised, perhaps especially in highly conditional welfare contexts where control and support increasingly dovetail and expand through various interventions (Dwyer and Wright, 2014).

A more cautious approach to the vulnerable subject might be to seek to modify vulnerability narratives in a direction where people deemed vulnerable are seen in less essentialising terms. Further attention to plurality, diversity and difference as well as ambiguities which characterise lived vulnerability would seem a starting point for addressing the ways in which the notion can be used to shape the choices of those who fail to conform to dominant views of how citizens should behave. Stories of vulnerability might take further account of ‘vulnerable’ subjects’ role in the construction of their lives and identities, with ‘vulnerable’ people presumed agentic just as other citizens are. Challenges remain about how to tell these more complex stories without over-responsibilisation of those concerned. Governance through vulnerability seems like it is set to continue for some time to come. Given this, vulnerable citizens might best be seen as creative agents with differential resources pursuing varying strategies of being, within frameworks which elevate particular types of ‘active’ agency and where state-directed containments bear down on those who have less power to resist them.

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1. This was done using ‘n-gram’ which counts the numbers of times a term is used in a selection of Google’s digitised books. See www.books.google.com/ngrams/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ‘Precaiousness’ and ‘precarious’ are terms used to refer to general insecure social positioning in relation to social norms, rather than as reference to a particular theory of economically-influenced or politically-induced insecurity developed by Butler (2009), Standing (2011) and others. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Understanding of ‘discourse’ was influenced by critical discourse analysis definitions provided by Fairclough (2003: 123-124) who sees discourse as the ‘rules’ which govern groups of statements or ‘bodies of texts’. Fairclough’s understandings of discourse are heavily influenced by Foucault (1972 and 1984), as are more general approaches to critical discourse analysis. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)