Social Policy & Society (2017) 16:3, 443–456
© Cambridge University Press 2017 doi:10.1017/S1474746417000082

Changing the Subject of Education? A Critical Evaluation of 'Vulnerability Creep' and its Implications

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Vulnerability has become a ubiquitous description in policy and everyday educational settings as well as a foundation for a progressive politics, inside and outside education. Increasingly embedded in apocalyptic discourses about mental health, a psycho-emotional interpretation of vulnerability has elevated its status as a powerful and highly normative cultural metaphor. The article uses a critical realist approach to explore wider developments in 'therapeutic culture' that frame the rise of what I call 'vulnerability creep' in the education system. Drawing together examples of vulnerability creep in English universities, I argue that the Prevent counter-terrorism strategy is a stark illumination of dangers that arise when educational goals and practices are rooted in images of psycho-emotionally vulnerable human subjects. The phenomena explored in the article raise important social science questions that require further empirical and theoretical study.

Key words: Critical realism, mental health, subjectivity.

Introduction

While vulnerability is often a 'taken for granted' or normative idea in policy and practice, it is a highly malleable and opaque concept characterised by plural, diverse meanings and constructed in relation to a wide range of equally diverse factors. As the review article for this themed section notes, understandings and uses of vulnerability are not only contested within and outside different disciplines, policy and practice contexts but also reflect explicit and implicit normative expectations of their human subjects (Brown *et al*., this issue).

Drawing together seemingly disparate examples of the ways in which vulnerability is increasingly invoked in education policy, everyday life and ideas about what constitutes a progressive politics, the article relates the emergence of horizontal and vertical 'concept creep' across the disciplines of developmental, cognitive and social psychology (Haslam, 2016) to some overt and subtle manifestations of this phenomenon in English universities. Acknowledging the need for more systematic and wide-ranging data, it offers emerging examples of some ways in which these seem to be changing the goals and practices of higher education and accompanying expectations of both its human subjects and the curriculum subjects deemed appropriate. I argue that the Prevent counter-terrorism strategy is an especially stark illustration of particular educational and political dangers encouraged by these trends. I end by highlighting important areas for further research.

In attempting to disentangle some of the complex, disparate and random political and cultural phenomena that are, simultaneously, fuelling and responding to vulnerability creep, the article adopts a critical realist approach. This aims to illuminate iterations between social constructions, discourses and real life experiences associated with vulnerability creep, acknowledging that discourses are generative and can produce change. Unlike a Foucauldian reading, a critical realist understanding does not argue that discourses of vulnerability constitute reality and subjectivity. I return to this point in the article and again in the concluding section where I address the danger of characterising vulnerability creep over-simplistically as merely the outcome of changing social and discursive constructions.

Vulnerability creep in policy, everyday life and radical politics

The notion of vulnerability has come and gone as a policy concern over the past sixty years but as the review article for this volume notes, has never been as prominent or as expansive as it is now (Brown *et al.*, this issue). As Brown *et al.* also note, the growing focus on vulnerability in social science research is rooted, at least in part, in well-known analyses of risks and threats arising from modernisation processes (particularly those associated with globalisation) that aimed to explain the growing preoccupation with risk in everyday life and politics (e.g. Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1998). Over the past twenty years or so, academic, political and public discourses have increasingly presented vulnerability and risk as imperatives for building communal and individual resilience (Furedi, 2008; Chandler, 2014).

Under Labour governments between 1998 and 2010, these imperatives have underpinned a shift from policy definitions of vulnerability as arising from some form of impaired agency caused largely by social and economic conditions to much wider understandings and uses (see McLaughlin, 2011; Brown, 2015). Successive legislation has drawn many more people of all ages deemed to have impaired agency, and therefore to be in need of support, into official criteria. Labour's landmark welfare policy document in 2003, *Every Child Matters* (ECM) embedded vulnerability with notions of 'safeguarding' and 'child protection', thereby extending its reach across education, family welfare and the care of young people outside families (Brown, 2015). These trends have continued under a Conservative-led coalition government (2010–15) and a Conservative government from 2015, changing not only what is deemed to comprise impaired agency and its causes, but also what types of support and intervention are needed. A significant factor has been the way in which ECM has widened the remit and purposes of state-funded education into welfare and family arenas, signified by the renaming of the Department of Education and Skills to Children, Families and Schools between 2007 and 2010, and related official expansions of impaired agency and associated ideas about appropriate support and intervention. For example, the Office for Standards in Education elides categories of 'disadvantaged' and 'vulnerable' to encompass migrant children, those with special educational needs and pupils who are disengaged or simply not meeting their targets (OfSTED, 2012). Here ideas about what comprises support and safeguarding encompass new ideas about what constitute educational risks and threats. This widens vulnerability almost infinitely to children 'whose needs, dispositions, aptitudes or circumstances require particularly perceptive and expert teaching and, in some cases, additional support' (p. 6).

Similarly diffused meanings permeate a recent evaluation of interventions for vulnerable children as part of a five-yearly review of primary education (Jopling and Vincent, 2015). Recognising the problem of defining vulnerability, the report offers a comprehensive review of numerous policy texts to list the many factors and characteristics now deemed to lead to vulnerability in children. Their 'needs-based construction of vulnerability' acknowledges complex intrisic and extrinsic factors and 'has parallels with . . . "more fluid constructions of diversity"' (Jopling and Vincent, 2015: 15). Referring to children with 'tendencies to vulnerability' or 'multiple vulnerabilities', the authors argue that diverse intervention, ranging from SureStart to local anti-bullying initiatives, 'may be necessary whenever difficulties arise in the lives of children and young people and needs to occur as soon as problems arise' (ibid.)

An expansion of official meanings parallels the ways in which newspaper articles, television programmes and everyday conversations routinely use vulnerability to describe individuals and groups who need sympathy, help, support or intervention. Again, wider notions of impaired agency, risk and harm are implicated in typical depictions such as: the unemployed as vulnerable to depression; women to everyday sexism; immigrants to trafficking; teenage girls to body-image issues; and teenage boys to being warped by pornography or as especially susceptible to suicide. Politicians also use vulnerability in similarly casual and expansive ways. For example, in the 2015 British general election, then-Labour leader Ed Miliband and members of Parliament accused payday loan providers and bookmakers of targeting 'vulnerable people in deprived areas', while former Conservative government culture secretary Maria Miller pledged to save 'children and the vulnerable' from gambling adverts.

Further expansions come from a wider cultural move to regard authentic personhood as rooted in a celebration of emotional openness about one's vulnerability. For example, at the British Association for Film and Television annual awards ceremony in February 2015, one actor thanked fellow actors for 'showing us your vulnerability' (BAFTA, *2015*). In an interview for the popular British men's magazine *GQ*, the director of 'Wolf Hall', a highly acclaimed historical British television drama in 2015, described its leading actor, Mark Rylance:

> Why is he different from other actors? He's quite uniquely vulnerable. He's very open to the vibrations and emotions around him. He's very quick to laugh. He's quick to take offence. There's very little in the way of mask or suit of armour around him. It's as if he's on 'receive' the whole time, rather than 'send'. (Caesar, 2016)

In this vein, understandings of universal vulnerability as an existential state of precariousness in the face of certain death and likely illness now encompass authentic personhood. For example, Brene Brown's popular talk on vulnerability for the website TED is the most downloaded in the TED series, arguing that we are all innately and structurally vulnerable, and that we should take pride in understanding and revealing our vulnerability and empathise with others. The potent cultural resonance of this presentation has led to its widespread use in public and private sector leadership and management programmes (Brown, 2011).

The celebration of universal vulnerability is also integral to a liberal Left social agenda that challenges pathologised appropriations of vulnerability which suggest that structural and material problems are individual outcomes of psychological weakness, impaired agency and lack of 'resilience'. Here a progressive politics aims to recast vulnerability as an attribute of an understanding, empathetic citizenship, integral to the 'fragile and contingent nature of personhood' and a 'universal' ontological dimension of human experience and identity where we are all 'potentially vulnerable' (Beckett, quoted by

McLeod, 2012: 22). In this scenario, acceptance of vulnerability enables everyone to claim their right to 'be protected from the effects of potential vulnerabilities [whilst] defending the rights of others to receive support in the light of their actual vulnerability' (Beckett, ibid.).

Other scholars reject the normalising, unrealistic aspirations of global capitalist materialism and connect vulnerability to 'precarity' as way of challenging the precarious nature of life in the twenty-first century (e.g. Paur, 2012). Citing Lauren Berlant's argument that we should not dismiss the increased vulnerability of global citizens as just a tragic consequence of capitalism, Dan Goodley argues for closer examination of the ways in which we are interdependent, and therefore need support, alliances and connections. For him, using notions of 'precarity' aligned to vulnerability help to explain the existential problem that life has no guarantees whilst exposing an increasing intensification of life and the indiscriminate nature of the vagaries and inequities of global capitalism. It is therefore 'a rallying call for political action' (Goodley, in Ecclestone and Goodley, 2015: 178).

This approach juxtaposes authentic personhood rooted in collective emotional openness about vulnerability with the oppressively self-interested, individualistic neo-liberal subject of late capitalism. For Kirsty Liddiard, this enables a powerful politicised attack on the myriad disadvantaged groups we position as 'Other', a position rooted in images of the archetypal liberal and neo-liberal citizen:

> Because our culture uses vulnerability to justify cultural abjection and social exclusion . . . it is difficult for us to be or claim vulnerability; so we actively disassociate with becoming a vulnerable subject (ableism in a nutshell!) . . . I want to question the ways in which collectively claiming vulnerability might be *different*. (Liddiard in Ecclestone *et al.*, 2015: 3, original emphasis).

All the examples in this section suggest that vulnerability has become 'a cultural metaphor, a resource drawn upon by a range of parties to characterize individuals and groups and to describe an increasingly diverse array of human experience' (Frawley, 2014: 11). I return to manifestations of vulnerability as a resource in the section on developments in universities, but first turning to an examination of some of the ways in which particular concepts become academically and culturally appealing and, in turn, influential.

Psychological concept creep

In very similar ways to the expansion and growing appeal of vulnerability, a process of 'concept creep' is emerging in the disciplines of developmental, clinical and social psychology (Haslam, 2016). In this process, many of the concepts that these subject areas employ to make sense of experience and behaviour have extended their boundaries and dilated their meanings to encroach on phenomena that would once have been seen as unremarkable.

Analysing these trends, Nick Haslam (2016: 3) explores the ways in which constructs such as trauma, abuse, bullying, addiction, prejudice and mental disorder expand vertically. Here a concept's meaning becomes 'less stringent, extending to quantitatively milder variants of the phenomenon to which it originally referred'. In an iterative process, new diagnostic criteria encompass less severe and debilitating clinical phenomena than previously, while the threshold for identifying a phenomenon lowers and the criteria for defining it relax. Seen in this light, the vertical creep of vulnerability is reflected by the loosening of official criteria to define and respond to impaired agency. The underlying risks and harms also expand vertically.

At the same time, according to Haslam, concept creep takes horizontal forms, extending a concept to a qualitatively new class of phenomena or applying it in a new context. Here much milder experiences and responses come under its rubric. Drawing on key studies of bullying, abuse and trauma, Haslam argues that shifts in diagnostic criteria loosen former criteria and associated measures of the key features deemed to characterise particular constructs. In the cases of bullying and abuse, traditional measurable features include repetitiveness and intent, while in trauma, bullying and abuse, they include manifestations of serious negative effects. Shifts in criteria and psychological measures widen what is seen as abusive, bullying or traumatic experiences and behavior, widening to include unintentional or intentional neglect to treat someone in a particular way as indicators of all three types of experience A creep between abuse and bullying is also evident, casting unintentional psychological neglect to be as abusive or bullying as overt, intentional behaviour. In a similar vein, indirect memories and/or future fears of experience become as traumatic as actual experiences, while trauma can be 'triggered' by thoughts or experiences that may or may not be directly related to the original trauma (Haslam, 2016). According to Haslam, one outcome is to encompass a much more diverse range of everyday interactions, relationships and experiences than previously. A corresponding shift is that measures and diagnoses increasingly privilege self-perceptions of whether something should be categorised as bullying, abusive or traumatic, and of what constitutes harm and impact (Haslam, 2016).

For reasons of space, my interpretation of Haslam's analysis in this article has not engaged with debates and contrasting perspectives in the wider fields of research around the constructs summarised above. Notwithstanding the need to do this, an important challenge here is to explain why concept creep occurs and whether the effects are consistent 'across diverse concepts rather than explaining each change on its own terms' (Haslam, 2016: 2). Haslam's account touches on technological, social and cultural developments in psychology disciplines. For example, he argues that disciplinary interests generate vertical concept creep when certain studies gain a status as landmarks in academic research or professional practice. Similarly, certain technical guidance and diagnostic systems influence everyday professional practice and make their way into popular knowledge. Here, periodic revisions to the widely used, influential yet controversial American Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) identify new disorders and criteria for diagnosing them. The contested, sometimes acrimonious, debates that surround new DSM categories and criteria do not prevent horizontal and vertical expansion of disorders and diagnoses, nor counter their popularity in everyday discourses (Haslam, 2016).

Reflecting Giddens' concept of the 'double hermeneutic' (1976, 1984), these types of conceptual shift are not confined to academic and professional preoccupations in social and behavioural sciences. Since meanings of human beings are not fixed, 'the changes [people] undergo may influence social reality rather than merely mirroring it ... Because [human beings] form the basis of social judgments and policies, they are susceptible to 'looping effects' where people come to recognize themselves in professional characterizations and shape their behaviour and sense of self in response'

(Hacking quoted by Haslam, 2016: 2). As Giddens observes, social science concepts are not produced about an independently constituted subject matter that continues regardless of what these concepts are. Rather, the 'concepts and theories invented by social scientists circulate in and out of the social world they are coined to analyse' (Giddens, 1976: 20). The developments summarised here can be seen as exemplifying the double hermeneutic created by increasingly permeable boundaries between culturally accessible psychological and therapeutic knowledge, people's everyday constructions of the world and, in turn, their practices and responses to that world.

Seen in this light, Haslam's account illuminates a specific strand within trends already noted by sociologists and critical psychologists, namely the influence and resonance of therapeutic and psychological cultural narratives, ideas and practices that now permeate education and social institutions, workplaces, popular culture and everyday life in the UK and countries such as the United States and Australia (e.g. Nolan, 1998; Rose, 1999; Furedi, 2004; Ecclestone and Hayes, 2009; McLaughlin, 2011; Wright, 2011; Frawley, 2014; Davies, 2015). Framed and fuelled by therapeutic culture, horizontal and vertical vulnerability creep can therefore be seen as emerging through a symbiotic widening and loosening both of policy criteria and everyday uses. This is intensified by the double hermeneutic of cultural interest in people's psychological and emotional well-being, the extension of psychological and therapeutic expertise into workplaces, schools, colleges and universities, more diagnoses of emotional and behavioural syndromes and category disorders (e.g. Harwood and Allen, 2014) and, in turn, more social and individual awareness and increased demand.

These developments have become increasingly enmeshed with apocalyptic accounts of mental health promoted by trans-national and national bodies. Here, for example, the World Health Organisation constructs mental illness (and depression in particular) as a global epidemic and a leading cause of disability worldwide, estimating more than 350 million sufferers (WHO, 2012). An All Party Parliamentary Group for the English government states that 'Mental illnesses disable millions, disrupt and destroy lives, cause early deaths, lead to human rights abuses, [and] damage the economy . . . Mental illnesses are killer diseases. They need to take their place among the other killer diseases for investment and priority' (Thornicroft, cited in APPG, *2014*: 5). Citing the ubiquitous figure of one in four children have a mental health problem, Natasha Devon, the government's former children's mental health 'champion' or 'tzar', argues that this crisis is 'spiralling out of control' (Devon, 2016).

Here horizontal creep elides mental illness with much vaguer references to mental health problems or issues. Such elisions are now commonplace in policy reports, as well as in the media, on the state of children and young people's mental health (e.g. Horsley and Hollingworth, 2014). One of many typical examples appears in a magazine article about a popular musician who uses music to break taboos of therapy and mental illness, stating 'I'm 26 and I don't know any of my friends who haven't suffered from some sort of mental illness' (Woodhall, 2016). Writing in the Sunday Express, Prince William asserted that 'A fifth of children will have a mental-health issue by their 11th birthday. And, left unresolved, those mental-health issues can alter the course of a child's life forever' (*Sunday Express*, *2016*). Here popular assumptions that mental illness implies conditions such as clinical depression, schizophrenia and bi-polar disorder are not borne out by the figures of 20 per cent that is used in relation to the highly vague notion of 'mental health problems' and the even vaguer use of 'issues'. The same slippery elision appears in the widely reported claim by the National Union in 2015 that 85 per cent of students had a mental health problem (Smith, 2016).

Unsurprisingly, horizontal and vertical creep have created large numbers of generic/universal interventions, such as very diverse psychological and therapeutic traditions that aim to teach all children and young people dispositions and behaviours associated with emotional intelligence, self-esteem, character, grit and resilience (e.g. Ecclestone and Hayes, 2009; Ecclestone, 2013). These interventions and aims are increasingly appearing in workplaces (Davies, 2015). In parallel to the media examples above, universal interventions in secondary and primary schools also elide diluted categories of mental health problems, such as anxiety and stress, with more serious mental illnesses such as anorexia and the others cited above. Here there is frequent switching between the 'mental health problems' and 'mental illness' as well as an interchanging of these with generic depictions of vulnerability. For example, as I show below in the discussion of the government's *Prevent* programme that requires schools, colleges, universities and social care and youth organisations to detect 'vulnerability to radicalisation', *Prevent* presents vulnerability to low self-esteem/shyness/lack of confidence as indicators of 'mental health issues' and therefore vulnerability to the possibility of radicalisation. In another school-based example, a 'thinking skills' intervention for primary age children encourages practitioners to see children as 'vulnerable to experiencing uncomfortable feelings', a condition deemed to require the prescriptive teaching of thinking strategies and emotional 'skills' (see Ecclestone and Lewis, 2014).

Shifting and complicated policy and cultural developments outlined above both respond to create circular iterations between crisis discourses and claims that emotional skills and associated mindsets can be taught, learned and transferred between life situations (see Ecclestone, 2013). In turn, assumptions that skills and mindsets are integral to positive mental health promote the idea that very diverse forms of vulnerability are a precursor to mental health problems and, in turn, to extremist acts and views. I return to the latter proposition and its educational implications below and in the conclusion to highlight the danger of an over-discursive account of cultural and social phenomena that presents vulnerability creep as merely manifestations of a constructed social panic.

Developments in universities

Following my summary above of alarm about children and young people's mental health, and corresponding demands for educational settings to be key sites for implementing strategies and interventions, it is important to note the increasingly blurred boundaries between different parts of the education sector. Paralleling developments in broader culture as well as in schools, an increasingly psycho-emotional emphasis in debates and concerns about vulnerability is appearing in universities, fuelled by a rapid and significant rise over the past five years in students' presentations of a widening range of psychological and emotional problems. The Universities and Colleges' division of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BCAP) estimates that typical yearly demand (10 per cent of students) is increasing by 15 per cent annually (see also Percy, 2016). This has generated growing student and parental demand for more counselling, medical and learning support services and requests to change and sometimes remove assessment requirements on mental health grounds (e.g. Macaskill, 2012). In order to deal with demand, many universities now offer generic approaches such as positive motivation, resilience, mindfulness, mental toughness, anger/anxiety/stress management to augment the expansion of formal services. In a lucrative commercial market in such areas, universities play a key role as certification/accreditation bodies and purchasers (Ecclestone, 2017).

As a foundation for a progressive politics, vulnerability encourages horizontal creep in long-running educational debates about social justice in education (see Ecclestone and Brunila, 2015). For example, some critical educators argue that going beyond depictions of vulnerability that 'Other' and pathologise students, particularly those from 'non-traditional' backgrounds, requires academics to have better insights into the ways in which inequalities are lived emotionally and psychologically, and, in turn, to consider how this shapes learning identities, approaches to learning and educational outcomes (e.g. Reay, 2005; Leathwood and Hey, 2009). In practical terms, educators following this line of argument call for more overt attention to non-traditional students' experiences of, and feelings about, assessment followed by adjustments to make feedback and assessment methods less daunting (e.g. Cramp *et al*., 2012).

Mirroring developments in American universities, there is an emerging trend for some student groups to invoke psycho-emotional vulnerability. Here for example, there are calls for topics in literature, history, law and politics, such as domestic violence, rape, suicide, sexuality or racism, either not be covered at all or to have trigger warnings attached to them (e.g. Hume, 2015; Lukianoff and Haidt, 2015; Lock, 2016; Williams and Hudson, 2016). An officially sanctioned precedent in schools is the response by the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA) (one of the three main awarding bodies in schools) to concerns about suicide amongst young people. In 2015, the AQA withdrew Emile Durkheim's 1867 seminal study of suicide from the Advanced level Sociology curriculum in case it causes distress to students (Selvarajah, 2015). There are also numerous recent examples of speakers and events banned or cancelled because of claims from students (and sometimes academics) that they might cause psycho-emotional harm for certain groups (e.g. Hume, 2015; Cohen, 2016).

In her response to critics of these developments in universities, Natasha Devon cited above, endorses the idea that words and ideas can cause emotional harm and calls for 'proper recognition' of universal vulnerability in schools, colleges and universities as a way of avoiding a mental health crisis:

> 'there is no shame in admitting that words have the power to wound – as Brené Brown noted in her TED talk of 2011, to show emotional vulnerability is actually a sign of strength. Teaching children to suck it up and soldier on, that emotional inauthenticity and swallowing your feelings is the key to success, is incredibly damaging – as our terrifyingly high childhood and adolescent self-harm and suicide rates will attest. (Devon, 2016)

Subtle, everyday manifestations of horizontal vulnerability creep are also evident. For example, anecdotal evidence amongst colleagues suggests that interactions between academics and students are being increasingly affected by concern about students' presentations of psycho-emotional vulnerability or by academics' own assumptions about vulnerability. Here two cultural orthodoxies are especially powerful, reflected in a prevailing assumption across the education system that 'negative emotions are barriers to learning' and must be 'addressed before learning can take place' and the corollary that people cannot deal with negative emotions and feelings without either intervention or vaguer notions of 'support' (see Rawdin, 2016). Similarly, numerous conversations with colleagues would suggest that horizontal vulnerability creep creates a growing unwillingness to risk causing distress by discussing difficult or challenging topics, being too critical in feedback on students' work, disagreeing with views expressed in lectures and seminars or overlooking expressions of stress and anxiety due to academic demands. Some of this anecdotal evidence also corroborates findings from a study at the University of Wolverhampton that shows an increase in students' 'emotional strategizing' that presses academics to reduce demands (Bartram, 2014).

One consequence is that small, often unconscious, incidents of self-censorship, self-editing and hesitancy increasingly characterise how we teach, assess and tutor students. As Bill Durodie argues, schools are also experiencing a growing reluctance to discuss difficult, contentious topics or to make value judgments about students' views (Durodie, 2016). Finally, a logical outcome of the horizontal creep of small everyday acts into people's attributions of bullying and abuse that, according to Haslam, is evident in psychology (Haslam, 2016), is reflected in attributions of students' public attributions of vulnerability to even the expression of strong views as a form of 'micro-aggression', a trend that is appearing in American universities and beginning to appear here too (Haidt, 2015; Hume, 2015).

Changing the subject of education?

I have argued above that signs of a hesitant and tentative educational culture are emerging in universities, fuelled by, and linked inextricably to, developments in a therapeutic culture and other parts of the education system. Aiming here to avoid the syndrome of 'setting up a straw figure', I link these nascent developments to successive governments' statutory demands for university student representative bodies, support and academic staff to detect 'vulnerability to radicalisation' as a useful focus for illuminating some dangers that arise from the statutory demands (Home Office, 2011).

Prevent offers a powerful rhetoric of concern about the vulnerability and wellbeing of young people themselves, and that of the wider population they might threaten, if they become 'vulnerable to radicalization' permeates *Learning Together to Be Safe: A Toolkit to Contribute to the Prevention of Violent Extremism*, guidance first developed for schools, social and youth work organisations in 2008. It aims to provide 'psychological indicators' of vulnerability to radicalisation that include being driven by: 'a search for answers to questions about identity, faith and belonging ... the desire for "adventure" and excitement ... a desire to enhance the self esteem of the individual and promote their "street cred" ... identification with a charismatic individual and attraction to a group which can offer identity, social network and support' (DCSF, 2008: 17). A psycho-emotional interpretation of vulnerability underpins examples in the guidance of '*extremist narratives*' and possible '*psychological hooks*' that may increase an individual's susceptibility to extremist engagement. Mirroring developments outlined above, the ultimate horizontal creep is the catch-all category of 'relevant mental health issues', such as low self-esteem, introversion, lack of peer engagement and lack of confidence as a 'psychological hook'.

As O'Donnell observes, the idea in *Prevent* that 'vulnerability can and should be overcome, and that life can be normalised through fostering "resilience", in this case, to ideas of a particular kind [means that] vulnerability becomes a problematic characteristic that can be resolved through expert support and intervention' (O'Donnell, 2016: 59). As I have argued, this idea is already rooted much more widely in education policy and practice, and everyday life. This presents a number of educational and political dangers.

First, *Prevent*'s targeting of motivations typical of any young people who seek new ways of thinking about the world, perhaps with a view to changing it, and its references to normal personality characteristics such as low self-esteem, low confidence, shyness and introversion, casts the mental wellbeing of all young British Muslims as a source of concern, thereby rendering them as 'appropriate objects for state intervention and surveillance' (Coppock and McGovern, 2014: 242; see also Richards, 2011; Durodie, 2016).

Second, as the scholars cited here observe, meanings of 'radicalisation', 'extremism' and 'violent extremism' are highly uncertain and, of course, highly contested (see also O'Donnell, 2016). In a context where, as I have argued, crisis discourses of mental health and vulnerability permeate education policy and practice, simplistic claims that mental health issues indicate vulnerability to radicalisation are both a product and outcome of 'radicalisation creep', encompassing attitudes and views merely different to the mainstream or openly critical of the existing social order. The subsequent legitimisation of a narrowing of experiences, ideas and knowledge is worrying, not least because it encourages some universities to respond to *Prevent* by imposing onerous procedures that vet external speakers and their proposed topics. I would argue that this type of institutional response fits easily with, indeed builds upon, existing forms of self-imposed and external censoring already evident through bans, trigger warnings and concerns that some subject matter and pedagogic practices might make students feel vulnerable.

Third, *Prevent* depicts people who lack any rational capacity for political views (however unpalatable those views might be), as easily influenced by ideas and incapable of discerning and making choices about those ideas. This can be seen as an especially stark outcome of vulnerability creep. Again, however, I would argue that universities are already susceptible to these expectations of a vulnerable subjectivity. For example, the ease with which *Prevent* sidelines the rational, autonomous, responsible, reasoning liberal humanist subject can be seen as an outcome of long-running, profound philosophical and political skepticism about this subject that has long permeated post-structuralist and post-humanist ideas about the subject (e.g. Malik, 2001; Heartfield, 2002; Ecclestone, 2017). As I aimed to show above, this skepticism is the foundation for appropriations of vulnerability as a springboard for a progressive politics and the related idea that some people are especially vulnerable to forms of knowledge deemed elitist, racist, sexist, hetereonormative or ableist. Arguably, then, skepticism about, and sometimes strong antipathy to, the liberal humanist subject and its neo-liberal counterpart is already prevalent in parts of the university curriculum. This undermines universities' ability to challenge *Prevent*'s blatant rejection of the rational, reasoning and cognitively resilient subject.

Seen in the light of this argument, *Prevent*'s official rhetoric of free speech and academic debate takes little account of educational foundations of genuine critical inquiry, reflection, dissent and what O'Donnell calls 'fearless speech' (2016: 66). I have argued that subtle and overt vulnerability creep erodes these features of higher education. Drawing on her experience of teaching philosophy to Irish Republican prisoners in the 1980s, O'Donnell argues that viewing 'education's role as an instrument to remedy society's problems' (O'Donnell, 2016: 63) enables *Prevent* to undermine social and educational commitment to the capacity and moral commitment of the rational, autonomous, thinking subject to debate and reason, however extreme, upsetting or contentious the topic. As I have argued, the pre-conditions for this open, critical and risky approach to ideas, namely teachers feeling able to speak freely and honestly, and students' commitment to 'creating the relational space' for working through difficult ideas, contesting and reflecting on them together (O'Donnell, 2016: 66), are already highly compromised.

Conclusions

I have aimed to show that as both description and explanation of experience, vulnerability has crept horizontally and vertically into policy, everyday life, and institutional life, especially in education. This has created vulnerability as a predominantly psycho-emotional concern rather than a structural and political one. Nevertheless, an ever-present danger in my argument is the risk of portraying these developments simplistically or uncaringly as merely the outcome or even imaginings of changing social and discursive constructions. Although further data are needed to present generalisable evidence of material manifestations and perceptions of vulnerability creep in universities, I would argue that examples in this article suggest that manifestations of vulnerability are, simultaneously, material and discursive, constructed and embodied. Seen in this critical realist light, an intertwining of vulnerability creep with fears about people's mental health is an outcome of complex, subtle iterations between four developments: economic, social and personal conditions that do make more people materially and psychologically vulnerable; crisis discourses that elide expanded cultural understandings of mental health problems with similarly expansive ones of vulnerability; the appropriation of universal vulnerability as a progressive politics; and the cultural appeal and availability of knowledge about our own and others' psychological states and the popularising of practices to change them.

In responses to these developments, university teaching and support staff, student bodies and institutional managers are increasingly having to make difficult navigations between taking problems seriously, trying to make sense of why vulnerability has such powerful cultural, everyday purchase and adapting their professional practices. For some, challenges to vulnerability creep make these navigations more difficult. These navigations create tensions for professionals' and students' values, beliefs and skills and institutional allocation of resources for 'support', 'safeguarding' and 'intervention', and raise questions about broader educational and civic relationships.

Despite lack of empirical study of developments explored in the article and some small pockets of resistance to them, vulnerability continues to have a powerful purchase in academic research, policy, wider therapeutic culture and everyday ideas and practices in universities. I have argued that although *Prevent* epitomises how vulnerability creep offers a diminished view of the human subject as inherently, universally vulnerable, in need of frequent psycho-emotional support and unable or unwilling to engage freely with knowledge, seemingly unrelated aspects of university life encourage such images. The danger is that these educational and social conditions enable governments to use vulnerability, perhaps in well-intentioned ways, to save or support citizens or perhaps consciously to repress freedom of ideas and knowledge.

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