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Child, Parent and Worker Vulnerabilities in Unregulated Childcare

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In this article, we seek to develop a framework of childcare vulnerabilities experienced by children, parents and providers engaged in the formal, unregulated childcare market. Informed by vulnerability theorists who examine care work within the context of dependency and power relations, we explore the extent to which notions of vulnerability have been considered in childcare research. Five types of vulnerability from the literature – physical, emotional, economic, legal and racial – are mapped onto the experiences of children, parents and providers. We conceptualise an understanding of vulnerability as it relates to unregulated childcare, showing how vulnerability in this sector is compound, interrelated and structural, creating specific challenges.

Keywords: Childcare, childcare workers, nannies, unregulated labour market, vulnerability.

Introduction

This study extends work from the themed section of *Social Policy and Society* concerning vulnerability and social justice, by applying these ideas to a particular substantive focus: childcare. In this vein, we identify the issue's articles of relevance to childcare (Brown *et al.*, 2017; Caraher and Reuter, 2017), and conduct an analysis that focuses on *unregulated* care.

While there has been an examination of the 'trade-offs' and risks for parents of using unregulated care that is *informal* (i.e. unpaid, often by relatives) (Colen and Breitkreuz, 2019), in this article we focus on unregulated *formal* care (i.e. paid, provided by people unrelated to the child through friendship or kin) (Breitkreuz and Colen, 2018). It is in the context of paid, contractual caring relationships that the mitigation of vulnerabilities takes on specific meaning, including legal ramifications, particularly for migrant carers (see, for example, Berg, 2015). We deliberately use the term 'childcare' rather than 'early childhood education and care', which is used widely in international formal childcare literature (see, e.g. OECD, 2019). This is because we do not seek to foreground the pedagogical work of carers but, rather, focus on the intimate interactions that occur between children, parents and providers in the context of caring relations.

Drawing from literature on vulnerability and literature on childcare, we identify and discuss five kinds of vulnerability: physical; emotional; economic; legal; and racial. By foregrounding vulnerabilities that lie in the interactions between children, parents and providers in the context of formal, unregulated care, we acknowledge feminist traditions that position childcare as a gendered practice. Within such accounts, mothers and childcare providers alike are constructed as being constrained by materialist discourses that limit their childcare and employment possibilities (Sutherland, 2010; Cook *et al*., 2013; Horne and Breitkreuz, 2018). This is, once again, particularly relevant for migrant care workers (Hochschild, 2002; Lutz, 2015; Cook *et al*., 2016; Jokela, 2018), as women comprise 73.4 per cent of the 11.5 million migrant domestic workers, globally (International Labour Organisation, 2015: xiii).

Within this remit, we look at both unregulated home-based childcare provided in the worker's home and care provided in the child's home by nannies and au pairs. While Ang and colleagues (2017) provided a systematic review of the nature of home-based non-parental childcare, the characteristics of effective home-based non-parental care and children's experiences of home-based care, this article take a more conceptual approach. We develop an account of vulnerability as it applies to children, parents and providers engaged in paid, yet unregulated, care. However, in doing so, we do not analyse the quality, parental demand for or pedagogy of formal, unregulated childcare, and we do not seek to compare unregulated childcare across countries. Doing so would require detailed descriptions of the particulars of each context which are beyond this article's capacity. Rather, we identify how and to what extent vulnerabilities are experienced by children, parents and providers within unregulated, formal childcare. From these accounts, we develop an understanding of vulnerability that is located in the 'socio-material realities and the structures that underpin them' (Brown *et al*., 2017).

We begin our analysis by providing an overview of the breadth and complexity of childcare regulatory environments, identifying the lack of oversight of formal, unregulated care in most contexts. We then set out definitions of vulnerability and describe contemporary research in this field. We ask how and to what extent notions of vulnerability have been explored in childcare research. Five main types of vulnerability discerned from the literature – physical, emotional, economic, legal and racial – are then mapped onto the needs and experiences of children, parents and providers. Our article concludes by drawing upon these vulnerability types to conceptualise an understanding of vulnerability as it relates to unregulated, formal childcare. In particular, we identify the different levels of vulnerability that can be experienced by a single party, interrelationships between the parties and how their interrelated vulnerabilities are structured by gendered relations of power.

Background

Over a decade ago, UNICEF (2008) flagged the importance of non-parental care to children's futures, noting that the wisdom of each country's responses, in the form of childcare policies and regulation, would determine whether non-parental childcare fostered or hampered children's wellbeing. While most children across OECD countries spend a significant amount of time in non-parental care, the quality of care – and thus whether it enhances or detracts from children's wellbeing and development – is variable. Some countries, particularly Nordic and continental European, have focused on meeting

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childcare demand through state-provided, regulated care. Other countries have provided some measure of licencing for home-based childcare services, for example the UK and Japan (Ang and Tabu, 2018). Still others have taken a marketised approach, where demand-side subsidies take precedence over supply-side measures (Brennan, 2014; Van Lacker and Ghysels, 2016; Jokela, 2018).

Within marketised systems, parents are seemingly 'free to choose' between regulated and unregulated providers. However, Canadian research, for example, shows that demand exceeds the supply of regulated childcare places (Friendly *et al*., 2018), and parents often have no option but to rely on the unregulated market (Beaujot *et al*., 2013). This has led some researchers and policymakers in Australia and Canada to question whether unregulated care is parents' preferred option, or whether it exists in lieu of regulated care spaces (Beaujot *et al*., 2013; Australian Productivity Commission, 2015; Brady and Perales, 2016).

Countries that offer regulated care manage the sector through a range of mechanisms, including quality standards such as educator training, employment and workplace regulations, and contractual requirements made between 'consumers' – in this case parents and providers. These regulations exist to protect children, parents and providers in each setting, contributing to whether non-parental childcare advances not only the wellbeing of children, as asked by UNICEF (2008), but also contributes positively to the lives of families and those engaged as providers. We posit that such regulation exists to mitigate the vulnerabilities that children, parents and providers may be exposed to in the receipt, management and delivery of care, respectively, given that care is an intimate practice imbued with emotion and experienced within unequal relations of power (Kittay, 1999). However, when non-parental childcare is provided in an unregulated environment, we contend that these vulnerabilities do not cease to exist. Rather, the vulnerabilities faced by children, parents and providers are individualised, to be managed by each party.

Defining formal, unregulated care

Informal/formal care and regulated/unregulated care are contested binaries. Land (2002), for example, critiques the strong distinction between formal and informal care in UK policymaking by pointing to the long history of working-class mothers paying family and friends for childcare. In a recent European cross-country analysis, Cebrián *et al*. (2019: 67) define informal care as 'mostly freely provided' but also include 'professional childminders' in this category, despite childminders being regulated in some contexts. In this article, we draw on the work of Breitkreuz and Colen (2018) and the typology employed by Ang and colleagues (2017). We define unregulated care as 'any nonparental child care arrangement that occurs without government oversight, licensing, standards, and monitoring with respect to the care setting, the care/group size, and the qualifications and qualities of the caregivers' (Breitkreuz and Colen, 2018: 4069). We also differentiate informal, unregulated and unpaid care provided by family (such as grandparents) from formal, unregulated care that is paid for.

Whether paid care occurs in someone else's house, or within the family home, it is this procurement from providers who have no relational attachment to the family, and the exchange of money for the 'service' provided, that mark this formal, unregulated care as a special kind of exchange. Zelizer's (1997) work on the social meaning of money suggests

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that exchanges of care for money are not gifts or expressions of love, as may be the case in informal, unregulated care provided by family and friends. Rather, they fall within the remit of contracts – regardless of their formality – whereby there are implicit agreements of what each party will do or how they will behave. We contend that when one party fails to meet these contractual expectations, vulnerabilities are created for the other parties.

Conceptualising childcare vulnerability

In this analysis, formal, unregulated care is examined in the context of two different fields of literature. We draw on these two literatures, as neither on its own provides a comprehensive account of the types of vulnerabilities that exist within formal, unregulated childcare, who these vulnerabilities are experienced by, and how these vulnerabilities are structured.

First, we examine a small body of research which discusses the vulnerabilities inherent within caring situations (Kittay, 1999; Standing, 2011; Dodds, 2013; Caraher and Reuter, 2017), which we refer to as 'vulnerability research'. This work foregrounds conceptualisations of vulnerability, placing the specific, potentially vulnerable, groups of people – children, parents or carers – as a secondary focus. Our purpose in reviewing this literature is to explicate the concept of vulnerability.

Secondly, we examine research on formal, unregulated care, which we refer to as 'childcare research'. This literature does not typically employ the language of 'vulnerabilities', instead referring to 'danger', 'risk' or 'concerns' (Katz, 2006; Brennan *et al*., 2017; Aziz, 2018). However, the negativities that are discussed identify one or more parties in the care exchange as vulnerable. This literature does not interrogate the concept of 'vulnerability' but, rather, foregrounds the relational, intersectional and structural factors that render some childcare actors more vulnerable than others. For example, studies depict children (Knijn and Lewis, 2017), families with complex needs (Bigras *et al*., 2017), families in low-income or disadvantaged communities (Ang *et al*., 2017), and disadvantaged and developmentally delayed children (Corr and Carey, 2017) as vulnerable. In addition to identifying who may be vulnerable, this second set of literature sets out why some parties may be more exposed to particular types of vulnerability than others, and expands the range of vulnerabilities that these parties experience beyond those provided by the first field of literature.

In bringing these two fields of literature together, we develop an account of vulnerability as it applies to formal, unregulated childcare contexts. The types of vulnerability that we identify from the literature are: physical; emotional; economic; legal; and racial. Economic, emotional and racial vulnerabilities were drawn primarily from the vulnerability literature, whereas physical and legal vulnerabilities were discerned more from the empirical childcare research. However, neither literature nor type of vulnerability should be regarded as discrete or mutually exclusive. We now turn to describe each of these literatures in turn.

Vulnerability research

Although 'vulnerability' has not typically been used as a conceptual tool in childcare research, there is a growing body of literature on the concept of vulnerability across a range of disciplines. Brown *et al*. (2017: 497) identify the concept of vulnerability as 'one

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of the latest buzzwords gathering political and cultural momentum.' Of relevance to this article, ideas about *gendered* vulnerability are 'intensifying' around gendered social policies (Laperrière *et al*., 2019: 52). In an overview of how vulnerability is used within social science literature, Brown *et al*. (2017: 498-9) argue that the term 'tends to appear in three main forms across the various literatures: as a policy and practice mechanism . . . as a cultural trope or way of thinking about the problems of life . . . and as a more robust concept to facilitate social and political research and analysis.'

Within the literature, there are two main approaches to vulnerability: universal (Mackenzie *et al*., 2013) and critical realist (Brown *et al*., 2017). The first approach to vulnerability strives to normalise the experience of vulnerability as a 'shared, constitutive and connective feature' (Cole, 2016: 261) of the human condition. It 'stresses our common embodied humanity and equal susceptibility to suffering' (Mackenzie *et al*., 2013: 6), defining vulnerability as a shared human experience that renders one open to new possibilities, such as learning and love, as well as risk and harm (see, e.g., Turner, 2006; Gilson, 2011; Fineman and Grear, 2013; Grear, 2013). Of this universal conceptualisation, Cole (2016: 265) argues that it 'precludes us from clearly perceiving what differentiates our vulnerability from the vulnerability of others', further arguing that this conceptualisation of vulnerability 'has been rendered so broad as to obscure the needs of specific groups and individuals', which undermines 'its promise as a conceptual frame to understand and challenge systemic inequalities' (Cole, 2016: 267). This latter promise is captured in the second approach to vulnerability.

The second conceptualisation, which Brown *et al*. (2017) deem a critical realist social science account, views vulnerability within the context of 'the ways that inequalities of power, dependency, capacity, or need render some agents vulnerable to harm or exploitation by others' (Mackenzie *et al*., 2013: 6). This approach acknowledges the gender of caring work, and thus the gendered context of vulnerability. Per Brown *et al*.'s (2017: 504) definition, vulnerability is seen 'as a tool for understanding socio-material realities and the structures which underpin them.' This is the approach employed in our analysis.

We now turn to examine how theorists have conceptually discussed the vulnerabilities experienced by children, parents and care providers in care contexts, before turning to an examination of the empirical literature on childcare vulnerability.

Care within vulnerabilities research

Kittay's (1999) work highlights an emotional vulnerability existing between the dependent (who may be a child, an elderly person or a person with a disability) and the dependency worker (who may be paid or familial). She highlights that 'the charge must trust that the dependency worker will be responsible to and respectful of her vulnerability', while the dependency worker must trust the charge to not make excessive demands, and not to 'exploit the attachments that are formed through the work of care, nor to exploit the vulnerabilities that either result from the dependency work or that have resulted in the caregiver engaging in dependency work' (Kittay, 1999: 35). Kittay (1999: 43) also discusses the ways in which the dependency worker can be vulnerable to others. This can easily be applied to paid childcare workers, particularly nannies and au pairs who rely on the child's family for income and often also accommodation. Dodds (2013) draws on Kittay's work to further discuss the ways in which care creates emotional vulnerabilities. She contends that 'dependency is a specific form of vulnerability', and she, like Kittay

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(1999), notes that 'those who provide care for dependents', most often women, may also be vulnerable (Dodds, 2013: 182). Here, the gendered nature of care may normalise the vulnerability that women experience as carers. Women carers' vulnerability may instead be cast in terms of a 'gendered moral rationality', where it is culturally assumed, and expected, that mothers place the needs and interests of children ahead of their own (Duncan and Edwards, 1999). We posit that it is not only mothers, but female carers more broadly, that are positioned as those who ought to make sacrifices for the good of their wards, placing them in a state of vulnerability.

Standing (2011), whose work focuses broadly on the 'precariat' and economic vulnerability, draws attention to childcare workers as a key constituent. Describing a precariat existence as 'living in the present, without a secure identity or a sense of development achieved through work and lifestyle' (Standing, 2011: 16), he argues that certain groups 'have a relatively high probability of being in the precariat' (Standing, 2011: 59). Previous research on global care chains and domestic workers (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2002; Williams and Gavanas, 2008; Tomei, 2011; van Walsum, 2011; Suleman, 2015), particularly those working in unregulated environments, shows an alignment with the financial insecurity and dependencies of the precariat that mark financial vulnerability out as of prime importance to this analysis. Discussing paid childcare workers in Britain, Standing (2011: 103) states:

> ... in flexible labour markets with porous borders, wages are driven down to levels only migrants will willingly accept ... A more inegalitarian society, combined with a cheap migrant labour regime, enabled the affluent to benefit from low-cost nannies, cleaners and plumbers.

Standing's work, while not making the connections between vulnerabilities explicit, reveals intersectional webs of vulnerability that render some workers more vulnerable than others. In addition, Standing's work suggests that these vulnerabilities exist within particular legal, political and social contexts that create inegalitarian societies, migrant labour regimes, and migrants' willingness to accept wages (and conditions) considered unacceptable to more affluent citizens. Given the increasing flows of migrant care workers to meet the needs of affluent families (Michel and Peng, 2017), the compounding of vulnerabilities within unregulated childcare markets becomes of prime importance.

Relatedly, Caraher and Reuter (2017) also discuss economic vulnerability. While their article does not specifically discuss childcare workers, their work is included here because their emphasis on the 'vulnerability of the entrepreneurial self' can be applied to self-employed carers, who are largely absent from the research on vulnerability. Caraher and Reuter (2017: 480) contend that 'labour market conditions are a key dimension at risk of being overlooked in debates about vulnerability.' They argue that applying vulnerability to the issue of not just employment but also labour markets 'facilitates insights into how conditions in labour markets and relevant social policies interact with each other and determine a substantive share of an individual's vulnerability' (Caraher and Reuter, 2017: 486). This is highly relevant in considerations of how regulations or their absence in home-based care, and in nanny and au pair employment, make carers vulnerable.

Unlike the conceptual literature, the second field of literature draws attention to vulnerabilities existing within formal, unregulated childcare contexts. The following section summarises this research for each children, parents and providers.

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Vulnerabilities within childcare research

Children's vulnerabilities. Children's experiences are not foregrounded within research on formal, unregulated childcare. Ang *et al*.'s (2017: 265) systematic review found that only twenty-two out of 278 studies on 'homebased childminding' related directly to children's experiences. However, one strand of literature points to children's vulnerabilities in relation to nannies or live-in carers. A Canadian participant quoted by Breitkreuz and Colen (2018: 4079) recalls 'horror stories about nannies' and the need for nanny cams, which is consistent with Katz's US account (2006: 29), describing nanny cam sellers as invoking 'sensationalized accounts of children [being] putatively abused.' Indeed, Katz (2006: 30) notes that one seller in the US reported that 70 per cent of purchasers fire their nanny, usually due to witnessing 'benign neglect'. The diverse 'harms' of nannies are further explicated by participants in Aziz's (2018) study. Adult children (aged eighteen to twenty) in Malaysia who lived with their parents and domestic helpers, including nannies, were interviewed, with many reporting that they had 'no privacy' while three emphasised the domestic helper is 'a stranger and therefore, cannot be fully trusted' (Aziz, 2018: 735). The lack of training required of nannies has also been raised as problematic, with Brennan *et al*. (2017: 160) calling it a 'concern' that nannies in Australia need no early childhood qualifications.

Parents' vulnerabilities. Parents' vulnerabilities in care research are primarily expressed in the form of emotional vulnerabilities that occur when handing their children over to other carers. For example, Katz (2006: 33) writes of 'the anxiety many employers [of nannies] feel about the safety of their children in these intimate strangers' hands', while Breitkreuz and Colen's (2018: 4079) interview subjects felt 'a sense of risk' when deciding to use unregulated care. Groves and Lui's (2012: 63) study on families hiring domestic helpers in Hong Kong found that mothers considered it 'less-than-optimal' childcare, causing them to feel responsible for supervising the helpers.

A second, gendered parental vulnerability was that mothers found themselves responsible for the welfare of the care-worker and their dependents (Groves and Lui, 2012: 67), increasing the mothers' workloads. Horne and Breitkreuz's (2018) article on motherhood and sacrifice also draws attention to the ways mothers make both work-related and personal sacrifices to arrange their children's care.

Providers' vulnerabilities. Forry and colleagues (2013: 902) flag that literature on the financial and job-related stress of home-based providers is 'sparse', even in regulated domains. However, there is some literature on the vulnerabilities of nannies and other live-in carers. It is important not to homogenise this group. As Enloe (2000: 180) argues, there is a 'hierarchy of respectability and security' amongst domestic workers, with professional nannies at the top, short-term au pairs in the middle, and 'maids', perceived as unskilled, at the bottom. These distinctions are often based on factors of race and class (Enloe, 2000). It has been contended that domestic workers are among the most exploited and vulnerable of all migrant workers (Momsen, 2003). At the extreme end, the literature reports violence (Momsen, 2003) and 'virtually slave-like working conditions' (Laliberté, 2017: 121).

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Brennan *et al*. (2017: 155) state that, in Australia, low rates of unionisation in the formal, regulated care sector has made it difficult to enforce labour standards, exacerbating workers' vulnerability. While these conditions exist for regulated care work, low standards are mirrored and exacerbated in unregulated environments. Indeed, low wages are cited as a particular vulnerability for unregulated care providers across many countries (Burke, 2015: xxi; Brennan *et al*., 2017: 153; Laliberté, 2017: 121). Employers (or potential employers) can view workers only for the benefit they deliver to the family, disregarding their rights (Brennan *et al*., 2017: 157). Katz (2006: 34-35) discusses this in relation to nanny cams and carers, quoting a mother who exclaimed, 'When it comes to my own child, I don't care about the nanny's rights' (cited from DM Katz, 1998). Here, the multiplicity of worker vulnerabilities are particularly evident, as both the carer's home and job – and potentially also their migrant working rights – may be lost if tensions with the employing family arise (Enloe, 2000).

Regulations in relation to migration and employment can also contribute to carers' vulnerability (Laliberté, 2017). In many countries, au pairing is not regulated as employment. Rather, au pairs are considered 'part of the family' in the UK (Anderson, 2009: 415) and as a 'cultural exchange' in Norway (Kristensen, 2017: 281). In both countries, au pairs must not receive salaries, but 'pocket money' (Anderson, 2009: 415; Kristensen, 2017: 281). In Australia, meanwhile, there is no specialist visa or even an official definition of au pairs (Berg, 2015). These legal and economic vulnerabilities may provide foil for the normalisation of economic abuse, or more subtle forms of othering, such as exclusion from the family unit of which they are a liminal part. In the Norwegian context, being an 'honorary' family member is hard to enforce; Kristensen (2017: 288) notes that au pairs are 'excluded from the most social parts of the home at times of the day when the rest of the family is experiencing togetherness.'

While this review of the childcare literature has identified the often 'unspoken grievances' (Burke, 2015: xxi) of children, parents and providers in unregulated care contexts, these studies do not use vulnerability as an overarching concept. These diverse accounts of vulnerability, although often systematic in focus, do little to advance best practice in unregulated care settings. To move this research forward, the following analysis combines the conceptual insights gleaned from the vulnerability literature and the examples discussed in the childcare literature to create a context-specific account of vulnerability within unregulated childcare.

Mapping vulnerabilities in formal, unregulated childcare

In this section, the two fields of literature discussed above are mapped onto a table of vulnerabilities present in formal, unregulated childcare for children, parents and providers (Table 1). For each actor, a discussion of their vulnerabilities in unregulated care contexts follows.

Working through the table, children are vulnerable to physical and emotional harms because of neglectful or abusive providers. These may be experienced as physical harms or receiving lower-quality social and educational experiences than may have otherwise been required in regulated environments. This has been the primary focus of researchers and theorists concerned with the experiences of children in vulnerable situations in

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Table 1 A multi-actor account of vulnerabilities in the unregulated childcare sector

	Actor		
Vulnerability	Child	Parent	Worker
Physical	Abuse and neglect (Breitkreuz and Colen, 2018; Katz, 2006; Kittay, 1999)		Abuse and harm (Dodds, 2007; Laliberté, 2017; Momsen, 2003)
Emotional	Deprived of socialisation (Standing, 2011); Lower quality care (Forry *et al*., 2013); Lack of privacy (Aziz, 2018)	Guilt of failing children (Horne and Breitkreuz, 2018; Groves and Lui, 2012; Katz, 2006; Standing, 2011); Responsibility for carers and their dependents (Groves and Lui, 2012)	Guilt of harming or neglecting children (Kittay, 1999); Lack of privacy (Katz, 2006); Loneliness and isolation (Enloe, 2000; Kristensen, 2017); Job stresses (Forry *et al*., 2013)
Economic			Precarious and low-paid employment (Kittay, 1999; Enloe, 2000; Standing, 2011; Burke, 2015; Brennan *et al*., 2017; Laliberté, 2017)
Legal			Lack of rights (Enloe, 2000; Anderson, 2009; Berg, 2015; Brennan *et al*., 2017; Laliberté, 2017; Standing, 2011) Responsible for children (Kittay, 1999)
Racial			Poor treatment (Kittay, 1999; Enloe, 2000; Michel, 2016)

general, and in unregulated childcare in particular (Kittay, 1999; Katz, 2006). Aziz's (2018) empirical study of adult children raised concerns about their privacy, which are not often applied to dependent children whose very dependence curtails their right to private independence.

Our analysis reveals that parents have the fewest vulnerability concerns identified in the literature. This is commensurate with parents' relative position of privilege and power in this tripartite relationship. Here, parents' finances make the outsourcing of care possible (Magnuson and Waldfogel, 2016; Kornrich and Roberts, 2018). However, there are geographic, economic and policy differences that shape what form of outsourcing takes place across the income spectrum. Research has found that parents using unregulated care, such as nannies or childminders, may be either of lower (Childcare Aware of America, 2015) or higher (Roberts and Speight, 2017; Adamson and Brennan, 2017) socioeconomic status than parents using regulated care. Regardless, parents' relative

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financial power is typically greater than the unregulated care worker to whom care work is being outsourced (Macdonald, 2010; Cox, 2011).

There is little research that examines parents' experiences of unregulated care. In the studies examined, a discussion of vulnerability was typically limited to parents' emotional vulnerability. Parents may be held accountable for any harm that befalls their children in the hands of unregulated and unqualified carers. Managing the expectations of 'intensive mothering' (Hays, 1996) within the context of outsourced care is a concern for all mothers. However, Macdonald (2009) notes the competing demands of intensive motherhood and class, with high-paid professional mothers managing this tension by using less institutionalised, and often less regulated, forms of care in order to re-create the 'ideal of the ever-present, continually attentive, at-home mother' (Macdonald, 2009: 414). However, with this trade-off comes responsibility not only for mitigating children's vulnerabilities, but also on occasion for managing the carer's vulnerabilities (Groves and Lui, 2012). While parents' emotional vulnerability may be keenly felt, these concerns are of lower order than children's physical and developmental needs, again reflecting parents' position of relative privilege.

In contrast to the overarching finding that parents' vulnerabilities were confined largely to emotional concerns (Katz, 2006; Standing, 2011; Groves and Lui, 2012), we found the greatest number and diversity of vulnerabilities for women working in unregulated childcare, across a range of domains including physical, emotional, economic, legal and racial vulnerabilities, as described in Table 1. Here, both conceptual and empirical research described the vulnerabilities experienced by providers who, in some contexts, are disproportionately migrant workers with few legal rights (Standing, 2011; Berg, 2015; Laliberté, 2017). These studies demonstrated how migrant workers, in particular, could experience multiple vulnerabilities from a range of sources, which had flow-on effects for the children in their care and the parents who employed them. Following international migrant workforce trends (Michel and Peng, 2017), our analysis also foregrounds the experiences of the most vulnerable of unregulated, formal childcare workers, whose experiences of vulnerability are structured by migration and labour policies and relations of financial inequality. The complexity of these experiences, and the vulnerabilities they give rise to, led us to create a new conceptualisation of vulnerability, which we now turn to describe in more detail.

Conceptualising vulnerability in formal, unregulated childcare

Synthesising the two fields of literature and mapping them onto the three actors involved in formal, unregulated childcare leads to a new conceptualisation of vulnerability within this sector. Vulnerabilities are compound, interrelated and structural, and it is these characteristics that present challenges for policymakers.

Vulnerability as compound

Most obviously, our analysis identified that vulnerabilities are compound in that one actor may experience multiple vulnerabilities at once, stemming from different sources. The richest example of compound vulnerabilities concerns workers. Workers' vulnerabilities operate across levels and are socially recursive and reinforcing along classed, racialised and gendered lines – a point we examine further with respect to the structural nature of

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vulnerability. Interpersonal vulnerabilities may entail physical or emotional abuse, social exclusion from family life, and the stress and guilt associated with performing as a dedicated and capable employee (see Corr *et al*., 2017 for a discussion of 'performing' quality standards in regulated home-based care contexts).

In the formal care work relationships that were examined here, there is an expectation that parents will pay for the care they procure. However, when parents' payments are not forthcoming, research on regulated family day care, which operates on a similar sole-provider model (Davis *et al*., 2012), suggests that collecting payment directly from parents can be problematic for providers (Doherty *et al*., 2000). Providers experience the financial vulnerabilities that non-payment can produce or relational damage and future financial losses if payments are pursued too vigorously (see, for example, Bromer and Henly, 2009: 281 for a discussion of this concerning licensed home-based childcare providers).

Vulnerability as interrelated

A recurring, though implicit, theme in the research explored above is the 'interrelated vulnerabilities' experienced by children, parents and providers. That is, the vulnerabilities of one party create vulnerabilities for another. Research in this field assumes a dyadic relationship whereby the vulnerability is experienced by the worker as a result of the conditions imposed by the employer (i.e. the parent). But, in childcare, it is the obligation of the worker to care for the child that exposes and deepens workers' vulnerability to exploitation. In addition to the vulnerabilities created by low wages, few legal protections and a lack of social or other support, workers are obligated to accept additional vulnerabilities as a result of their obligation to 'care'. They cannot leave the child without care, and cannot provide substandard care. As such, they must do more or accept less, or can be deemed as failing to live up to their side of the contract (Zelizer, 1997).

Research discussing the risks and dangers for parents shows that parents are emotionally vulnerable because their children are vulnerable to insufficient or harmful care (Katz, 2006; Standing, 2011; Groves and Lui, 2012). Responsibility to supervise and/or minimise harm to children may contextualise parents' emotional vulnerability, but it may also explain why parents sometimes exploit the vulnerabilities of workers, by demanding more than the payment requires, and by stepping up their surveillance, to appease their own anxieties. In Katz's (2006: 29) discussion of nanny cams, for example, she states that the sellers 'are willing to prey on parental fears' of their children being abused, clearly linking parental vulnerability to their children's vulnerability. In addition, the vulnerability of the carer is also evident when using nanny cams, as the nanny's privacy is violated for the sake of the child's safety. Conversely, if mothers seek to minimise the vulnerabilities of the worker, then it takes emotional and financial resources to ensure the welfare of the care-worker and their dependents. But, if the mother cannot, will not, or does not expend the emotional and financial resources, then it is the worker whose welfare may be compromised.

The vulnerability of the child and the vulnerability of the carer may also be interrelated, but were not examined in the unregulated care literature. In regulated contexts, Forry *et al*. (2013: 901) found in home-based childcare in the US that 'providers' report of job demands was negatively associated with ratings of quality care and teaching.' Similarly, family day carers that were stressed are perceived to deliver lower-quality care to the children (Corr *et al*., 2017). In other words, the vulnerability of the worker (i.e. low

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wage and undertrained) and the vulnerability of the child in the care of an underpaid and undertrained carer may put both parties at risk. These insights from regulated care likely extrapolate to unregulated contexts. This interrelation is most starkly articulated by Burke (2015: xxi), herself a former nanny: '. . . the childcare industry is an outdated system based on depressed wages, unspoken grievances, and unfair demands. The consequences of this are dramatically visited upon our most vulnerable children.'

In regulated care environments, parents must typically enrol their children in set days of care. While changing days can be accommodated more easily within the formal, unregulated care market, the less rigid nature of these arrangements means that parents can withdraw, downsize or increase days or hours of care as needed, or change days without significant notice. Here, the expectation is that the worker will be available to the parent or forego the resultant income. The consequences of parents' need for flexibility are often borne by the worker. At the same time, formal, unregulated childcare may also entail risk for parents using this kind of childcare. If their childcare provider is unavailable due to illness or other unexpected circumstances, the individualised nature of these relations – and thus the risks they entail – means that the parent, usually the mother, must make alternate care arrangements, potentially disrupting her employment commitments.

Clearly, interrelated vulnerabilities exist for all parties involved in formal, unregulated care. However, these vulnerabilities are individualised, particularly in contexts in which childcare is viewed as a private responsibility and formal, unregulated childcare use is common. Using a structural lens enables us to view these interrelated vulnerabilities, not as individualised problems to solve, but as a communal responsibility that can only be fully addressed by systemic modifications.

Vulnerabilities as structural

The research reviewed here identified the structural context of workers' vulnerabilities. Power differentials that exist between formal, unregulated childcare workers and their employers are structured by migration, labour market and financial inequities. The literature describes these power differentials as borne mostly by migrant workers, who are highly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. The vulnerabilities that migrant care workers experience are rooted in structural inequalities of race and also gender; the conflation of care work, 'women's work', caring, and subservience that entrench their vulnerabilities is something that feminists have frequently criticised (see for example Kittay, 1999; Duncan and Edwards, 1999). While Standing (2011) does not examine migrant care workers specifically, his insights locate the exploitation of 'low-cost nannies' within the structural context of porous borders, low wages and inegalitarianism. The structural context of migrant care-workers' vulnerabilities challenge some researchers' depiction of vulnerability as universal (Turner, 2006; Fineman and Grear, 2013; Grear, 2013). Rather, in line with the alternate, critical realist conceptualisation of vulnerability (Cole, 2016; Brown *et al*., 2017) our analysis foregrounds issues of race, class and gender as central to the social-material realities of formal, unregulated care workers' experiences.

Structural vulnerabilities exist as social norms and expectations, such as failure to recognise the social contribution of care work and the gendered social contract that sees poorer women take up this work, the substandard pay and conditions, and care-worker shortages that require the importation of highly vulnerable temporary migrant women. Together, these recursive relationships place poor women in situations where they could

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be vulnerable in other ways. For example, Enloe (2000: 190), discussing migrant domestic workers in Canada, highlights that when they were 'made vulnerable by immigration regulations', it consequently affected their negotiating power with employers.

With specific respect to migrant care workers, Kittay (1999: 46) notes, 'when dependency work is done by a specifiable social group, the vulnerability of the dependency worker will be a function not only of her individual situation, but also of the status of her social group.' Here, the often-racialised status of migrant care workers renders them susceptible to racial vulnerabilities (Michel, 2016) that exacerbate vulnerabilities in other domains. As Enloe (2000: 180) highlighted decades ago, domestic workers lacking 'racial advantage' may be more vulnerable to 'loneliness, economic exploitation, sexual harassment ... and perhaps deportation.'

Implications and conclusions

This analysis sought to develop a framework of childcare vulnerabilities experienced by children, parents and providers engaged in formal, unregulated childcare. To do so, a conceptual account of vulnerabilities was developed that was applicable to the three parties involved. We conceptualised vulnerability as it relates to unregulated childcare as compound, interrelated and structural, rather than as an individualised concern.

Our analysis reveals the interconnections and interdependencies of the human condition, which further complicates the already complex management of the outsourcing of care and the workforce required to make this possible. Because vulnerability in unregulated childcare is inherently compound and interrelated, this creates specific challenges for policymakers. Any attempts to improve the conditions of one party within unregulated childcare would need to ensure it does not worsen conditions for another. For example, well-meaning interventions to improve conditions for children should not exacerbate difficulties for workers. Future research on unregulated care could work to further understand such interrelated vulnerabilities. Researchers could illustrate the specific interpersonal, administrative and policy points at which workers are made vulnerable, and the ways in which legal vulnerabilities may expose workers and the children in their care to a range of other potential harms. Furthermore, research could explore the role that parents play in mitigating or exacerbating these risks.

Due to the very nature of unregulated care, it is not possible to suggest specific policies or service reforms to address the vulnerabilities identified here. However, there are interventions that could be implemented to address the structural vulnerabilities experienced by workers. As Michel and Peng (2017: 10) suggest, 'the combination of broader socioeconomic changes and neoliberal policy reforms in sending and receiving countries have altered the ways in which care is understood, provided and regulated.' Our conceptualisation of vulnerability in formal, unregulated childcare as compound, interrelated and structural suggests that current approaches to care provision need to be rethought. Mitigating vulnerabilities for children, their parents and caregivers will require a feminist ethics of care approach in a wide array of domains, including childcare and social policy more broadly (Mahon and Robinson, 2011). Only then will we develop the insights to understand, and adequately address, the needs of some of society's most vulnerable members.

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