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Introduction
Vulnerability and Social Justice

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At the same time as failures to adequately protect 'the most vulnerable' seem to have become a pervasive feature of the political landscape, policies which seek to address vulnerability have proliferated. Government actors, public officers, researchers, media commentators, charities and members of the public alike use vulnerability to articulate an array of personal and political troubles, yet alongside this seemingly shared narrative a multitude of ideologically inclined assumptions and agendas operate by stealth. How vulnerability is drawn upon to frame social issues reworks and reconfigures long-running contestations related to moral dimensions of the welfare subject, understandings of the 'self' and wider beliefs about human behaviour. At a time when the pressures of contemporary life increasingly find release through aggression against the socially marginalised (see Wacquant, 2009; Harrison and Sanders, 2014; Atkinson, 2015), vulnerability has become a key concept for social policy research. As I have argued elsewhere, the concept of vulnerability appears to be something of a zeitgeist or 'spirit of the time' (Brown, 2014a, 2014b, 2015), extending into and shaping responses to a vast array of policy matters.

In the UK for example, 'vulnerable' people have been legally entitled to 'priority need' in social housing allocations since the 1970s (Carr and Hunter, 2008), vulnerable victims of crime are treated differently in the UK criminal justice system (see Walkgate, 2011), exceptions are made for 'vulnerable adults' under British law (Dunn *et al.,* 2008) and groups such as vulnerable migrants and refugees are prioritised for special protections (Peroni and Timmer, 2013). Official and tacit designations of vulnerability also now pepper the UK's social welfare system (in England especially), arguably attributing primacy for hardship with the behaviours of individuals rather than structural or causal explanations (Fletcher *et al.,* 2016). Looking further afield, vulnerability is high on international strategic agendas. The United Nations (see UNDP, 2014: iv; UN, 2015: 7) has explicitly placed vulnerability at the heart of efforts to address major international development challenges, underlining how policy efforts should 'empower' vulnerable people. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) (see Aassve *et al*., 2013) the World Health Organisation (Wisener and Adams, 2002) and the World Bank (2005) have also all used vulnerability to frame initiatives on poverty and deprivation.

For some, such developments amount to a 'politics of pity' (Walkgate, 2011: 189) that supports radical forms of intervention, superficially disguising more oppressive forces operating through apparently therapeutic means (Harrison and Sanders, 2006). Others argue we have seen a spread of the idea of the human subject of social policy as 'vulnerable' (Ecclestone, 2016); with vulnerability becoming a kind of cultural metaphor

or trope that has important implications for ever-expansive government intervention (McLaughlin, 2012). The popularity of US psychologist and social work academic Brené Brown's work on 'the power of vulnerability' (see Brown, B., 2012) might be taken as indication of the widespread appeal of the notion. Her TED talk on vulnerability[1] – which calls on us all to have the 'courage to be imperfect' – is one of the most viewed of all time, watched over 25 million times to date and shared on social media all around the world.

Despite its policy and everyday relevance, there is not a well-developed and well-known literature on vulnerability in the social sciences, meaning theoretical assumptions and political inclinations which operate through vulnerability narratives can escape attention. There are, however, disparate pockets of scholarship which have sparked the beginnings of an interdisciplinary debate about the theoretical and practical relationship between vulnerability and social justice. Critiques of the normative dimensions of the notion have been gathering pace, commonly focused on concerns with social control (Furedi, 2008; McLaughlin, 2012; Ecclestone, 2016) and the use of vulnerability narratives in processes of exclusion and responsibilisation (see Brown, 2011, 2014a, 2015). Elsewhere, the well-established natural sciences vulnerability literature uses the concept to analyse varying levels of exposure to hazards and disasters and capacities to respond to these (see Chambers, 1989; Adger, 2006). Sociological researchers (see Hollomotz, 2009; Emmel and Hughes, 2014) have developed more social models of vulnerability to illuminate lived experiences of deprivation and disadvantage, bringing into view human agency, broader institutional factors and empowerment as key dimensions. There is also a burgeoning literature which seeks to posit a more 'radical' view of vulnerability, mainly located in the critical legal studies and ethics literatures (see Goodin, 1985; Fineman, 2008; Mackenzie *et al.,* 2014), sometimes referred to as 'vulnerability theory'. This latter approach proceeds from the starting point that we are all vulnerable by virtue of our human embodiment or corporality (we all have bodies which die and decay), and that the relationship between the state and the individual should be reconfigured accordingly (see also Butler, 2004; Fineman, 2014).

Key strands of vulnerability scholarship and their utility for application to a variety of empirical social problems are showcased in this themed section of *Social Policy and Society*. The aim of the collection is to advance understandings of how vulnerability is lived, governed and studied, in order to encourage more critically informed use of the notion in policy, practice and research. Articles broadly map on to key traditions of vulnerability scholarship summarised above. My paper with Teela Sanders provides insights into the governance of vulnerability on the ground – specifically in relation to street sex work – bringing lived experiences of vulnerability together with policy narratives to critique the utility of the concept in practice. Kathryn Ecclestone's article on 'vulnerability creep' in British education highlights concerns with how notions of vulnerability are undermining how the human subject is understood, with social control extended subtly through ever-expanding framings of vulnerability. Moving beyond policy constructions, Nick Emmel's article takes experiences of different groups of grandparents to develop ideas about how vulnerability can effectively be modelled or theorised to provide textured understandings of deprivation which incorporate agency, entitlement and access to provision. Beverley Clough then draws on universal vulnerability theories to illustrate the complexities of disability and capacity within UK mental health law. Finally, Kevin Caraher and Enrico Reuter's article offers an approach for understanding

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vulnerability in relation to labour market developments, illustrating how the concept can be used to highlight changing forms of precariousness in well-established social policy arenas. A review article (Kate Brown, Kathryn Ecclestone and Nick Emmel) then follows, giving an overview of the wider terrain within which the articles are situated, and considering emerging challenges for vulnerability research. Finally, a list of useful sources is provided (Kate Brown and Helen Stinson).

The kaleidoscope of approaches to vulnerability reflected in this themed section inevitably raises questions about how to best define and understand the concept, with the collection offering a variety of contributions to debates on this. Some useful preliminary insights in relation to resolving the question of essence might be that vulnerability narratives or discourses constitute something different from lived experiences of vulnerability, or what might be thought of as *real* vulnerability, which robust theory can help us to investigate. Distinctions can usefully be made between social constructionist and realist takes on vulnerability, but these might also be seen as intimately connected in terms of the governance of citizens' lives. It can be useful to think of vulnerability as 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 or danger. It can also be a means of referring to or theorising people's 'lived experiences' of social insecurity or harm, carved out by biological and bodily frailties, social inequalities and institutional forces which persist over time, and which are also shaped by the choices, views and experiences of individual social actors (see Brown, forthcoming), which might be seen as particular to some groups or individuals, or as a universal feature of the human condition.

As highlighted in the review article, theories of vulnerability often draw on other concepts as anchor points. Fineman (2014: 113), for example, stresses how resilience is the 'antidote' to vulnerability – concerned with institutions and how these provide people with the means and ability to recover from harm or setbacks. Walkgate (2011) uses resilience alongside vulnerability to animate individuals' changing capacity to survive over time. Other theoretical contributions make 'risk' key for understandings, with Beck (2009: 178) arguing that risk and vulnerability are 'two sides of the same coin'. Vulnerability remains firmly foregrounded in this themed section, but articles illuminate relationships with other concepts including risk, resilience, empowerment and autonomy where these are relevant. As Wright Mills (1959: 34) advocates, the collection seeks to avoid abstraction that amounts to a 'game of concepts', focussing instead on efforts to define 'in a clear and orderly way' the empirical problems at hand, to guide our efforts to solve them.

One central theme centres on explorations of 'the vulnerable subject', which includes attention to the nature of the interplay between human agency and structural constraints. These are long-running and unresolved preoccupations in social policy and political debates. As I have argued elsewhere (see Brown, forthcoming), to be 'vulnerable' within a political system which celebrates independence and active citizenship is layered with contradictory connotations. Vulnerable people are in some respects the antithesis of 'proper' citizens (McLeod, 2012); those who struggle to meet the self-enterprising requirements of citizenship in 'advanced' liberal democracies (cf. Rose, 1996). Yet vulnerable citizens are also (in theory at least), those who might 'legitimately' be considered 'inactive' or 'dependent' on the state, representing possibilities for enhanced welfare and support. Contributions to debates on this here use the lens of vulnerability to further illuminate how institutional arrangements and support services might undermine

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and strengthen human agency. Concerns remain that as well as operating as a vehicle for assistance, vulnerability politics often trigger a narrowing of entitlement in favour of targeted interventions, reinforcing hierarchies of legitimacy and enhanced state power on the basis that certain citizens might not be in a position to act in the way that 'best' protects their interests. However, perhaps opportunities for a more progressive policy could be capitalised on through elucidating and approaching vulnerability in different ways. In a context of rising inequality, a sense of crisis about some people being 'left behind' in society, and diminished emphasis on how structural factors shape people's lives, now seems a pertinent time for exploring possibilities for framing these concerns in ways that might resist as well as resonate with the zeitgeist.

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Note

1 www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability

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