

GUEST EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION: VULNERABILITY AND INQUIRING INTO RELATIONALITY

ABSTRACT

This introduction provides an analytical background for the notion of vulnerability as it is currently perceived mainly in social sciences, ethics, philosophy, queer studies and governmentality. Used both as descriptive and normative term, vulnerability, along with resilience and policy management, has acquired political dimensions, which are distant from those given by the philosophers Hannah Arendt and Emmanuel Levinas. In present day social and political discussions vulnerability has gained enormous popularity and seems to be a genuine “sticky concept”, an adhesive cluster of heterogeneous conceptual elements.

Keywords: vulnerability, resilience, governmentality, intersectionality, racism, queer, vulnerable agency, sticky concept

INTRODUCTION¹

Vulnerability is about the porousness of boundaries.² This is the argument that runs through this special issue. Nature, minds, humans, nonhumans, and the earth are open and exposed to the environment and towards other beings, nonbeings and systems. In addition to vulnerability, other concepts like precariousness, fragility, risk, and resilience are also taken up in the discussions (Butler 2009; Fineman 2008; Sen 1982; Douglas 1966; Evans and Reid 2015; Brunila and Rossi 2018). The concept of resilience has outlined over the past two decades the conceptual background that makes comprehensible the important cluster of their mutual relationships.

Vulnerability as a notion is neutral but it is applied in descriptive and normative ways. It has multiple meanings that vary in shifting contexts. However, in scientific, political, and public discussions, vulnerability has mostly taken on a ‘dark’ character, as the anthropologist Sherry Ortner (2016) puts it, because what is often emphasized is the openness to danger, disaster, suffering, and social control, or, with weakness or lack of agency. However, the core of the argument in this special issue deviates from this: being exposed signifies a contingent possibility of openness towards the world.³ Vulnerability also includes the ability to become animated and affected, to be able to bring things together and to mobilize.⁴ Vulnerability allows contagion; vulnerability touches. This special issue emphasizes

vulnerability as relational, as the capacity and necessity to relate to, and to be conditioned by and dependent on known and unknown others. Relationality is also about processes, which consent to mediation between vulnerability as a universal, and as a specific condition shaped by its social, political, and cultural contexts.⁵ The twin concept of precariousness often overlaps with vulnerability in anthropological discussions. As Tsing (2015: 29) puts it, we need to acknowledge our vulnerability to others: 'In order to survive, we need help and help is always in the service of another, with or without intent'. In this ontological meaning, relationality opens up a view on vulnerability as its very condition.

Along with resilience, a notion that is 'equivalent but opposite' to vulnerability, as Adger (2000) puts it, interest in vulnerability as a topic has increased tremendously over the last few decades, in the domains of the environment, climate, and information technology research in addition to risk, catastrophe and disaster research and their prevention practices. Vulnerability has become a commonplace in several political and social accounts, in scientific and public discussions notably in ecological, environmental, ethical, health, educational and social policy, legal politics and policies, in immigration and refugee issues and in global debates concerning violence and exclusion, along with resilience in crisis management.

A search on vulnerability solely in English social science databases gives a result of more than 189,484 entries, an increase of almost 80 % from the early 1990s. The search on resilience gives 980,565⁶ entries just in the social science databases alone. Anthropologists have been interested in the ways in which various kinds of vulnerabilities are performed and produced as sets of material conditions and discourses, about 'what vulnerability is and what it does', as the research program 'Engaging vulnerability'⁷ puts

it. Yet, vulnerability is a truly 'sticky concept', a cluster of heterogeneous conceptual elements like an adhesive tape (Masschelein 2011: 13; see also Ahmed 2014: 91). Stickiness is about the quality of the notion that along its travel across the disciplines attracts new associations and variations which, according to Masschelein (2011) are not always motivated by conscious or deliberative moves. In addition to embedded affectivity this ensures the dynamism of the concept. Due to the multiplicity of meanings, vulnerability is an extremely powerful notion.

At least five themes of vulnerability relevant for current anthropological debates can be listed. *First*, the Anthropocene, climate change⁸ and rearmament; *second*, livable lives, global violence, contentious politics, and resistance; *third*, governmentality, classification, and control; *fourth*, subjectivity and agency and *fifth*, what is called the 'debate on the end of the world' (see e.g. Tsing, *ibid.*) Vulnerability as a theme runs through all of them.

By focusing especially on the third and fourth themes listed above, this special issue examines relationality as how and why vulnerability matters. The aim of this issue is to discuss vulnerability in a dialogue between researchers in anthropology, philosophy, ethics, and social policy and give the philosophical and ethnographic approaches a space to talk to each other. The power of anthropological research is to study its objects in subtle and dense contexts and to bring detailed explorations to abstract philosophical theorizing. The contributors of this special issue ask questions about what is vulnerability. What does it do? How is it described and what kinds of contribution do the various descriptions provide to help us understand this virtual *Zeitgeist* we live by (Brown, Ecclestone and Emmel 2017)? How is vulnerability used for the purposes of power? In what ways does the notion both hide and lay bare the core cultural values

of autonomy, dependency, and power? In what ways does it work as a cultural critique? By asking questions such as these, the authors of this issue want to challenge and heighten the significance of vulnerability both as an interdisciplinary research area and as a significant aspect of anthropology.⁹

The current debates on vulnerability contain a myriad controversial definitions and understandings. As a sticky concept vulnerability may refer to a universal condition but also to a phenomenon, policy imperative, psychoemotional trait, or to an experience at an individual, intersubjective, or a population level, and to a political ontology. Besides being a focus of concern in a variety of separate academic domains, vulnerability is also an interdisciplinary notion, a true boundary concept (Gieryn 1983: 792) in the meaning of negotiations between ‘demarcations of disciplines, specialties, or theoretical orientations between and across several boundaries within science’. My aim in this introduction is to track vulnerability through the relevant literature that touches upon the questions presented above and, by doing so, give a background to the authors’ approaches.

In what follows, in order to give a general background for the contributing articles, I outline an itinerary of the notion through some of its history as well as the paths across the relevant scholarly disciplines pertinent for the understanding of the notion as a *dispositive*.¹⁰ Moreover, by asking what vulnerability does, I sketch out the use of vulnerability in current governmentality and policy making.

ABOUT HISTORICAL ORIGINS

The concept of vulnerability stems from two main intellectual roots. The first springs from philosophical ontological discussions, notably from the works of Hannah Arendt (1958) and Emmanuel Levinas (1969 [1961]; 2003

[1972]) in which vulnerability as *vulnus*,¹¹ a wound, is understood as a human universal, as inherent in life. According to Arendt,¹² what is unique to the human condition is vulnerability. As exposed to plurality and unpredictability, vulnerability comprises the condition of action and thinking.¹³

Because the actor always moves among and in relation to other acting beings, he is never merely a “doer” but always and at the same time a sufferer. To do and to suffer are like opposite sides of the same coin, and the story that an act starts is composed of its consequent deeds and sufferings. These consequences are boundless, because action, though it may proceed from nowhere, so to speak, acts into a medium where every reaction becomes a chain reaction and where every process is the cause of new processes. (Arendt 1958: 190)

Levinas’s approach to vulnerability originates from a different perspective. Constituting the ground of his ethics, vulnerability is a call; it is shared in proximity to the other’s face. Levinas finds there the source of responsibility that is asymmetrical and ‘extends to responsibility for the other’s responsibility’ (Levinas 2003 [1972]: 25). Both Arendt’s and Levinas’s understanding of vulnerability is grounded on relationality. As Robert Bernasconi concludes his article, ‘To that extent my vulnerability is the site of relationality because its basis lies in the other’s vulnerability, in her pain’. Elisa Aaltola in her article adds the Levinasian idea of shared vulnerability to the discussion of relationality and Simone Weil’s ways of thinking about vulnerability as communality between all individuals. Vulnerability enhances attentiveness, which for Weil means openness to the other and to love. In order to be affected by other beings,

one must actively open up to others, taking the risk of embracing one's lack of control, which in turn holds the promise of being transformed by new encounters. Vulnerability refers both to the human condition and to affectability—one's openness to the world. Later philosophers such as Judith Butler (2009) have elaborated these thoughts towards a social and political condition in our lives (see Karhu 2017: 74).

The second root of vulnerability originates from the sciences, notably ecology, geography, and later the studies of risk, disaster, natural hazards, and the insecurity of technological systems (see Burton et. al 1978; Bankoff 2007). Together with adaptation and balance, vulnerability has been used as a core concept in the systems theoretical approaches to the study of multiple systems. From the early works of Blaikie et al. (1994) vulnerability was considered in the cross-illumination of social, political, natural, and economic factors in the study of people at risk. In these debates, the impact of poverty and famine was important both in cultural geography and development studies (Chambers 1989; Sen 1982). Later, vulnerability, adaptation and resilience fleshed out a tripartite conceptual content to describe the effects of ecological and ensuing social changes as well as the development of strategies to reduce the impact of risk and harm. Adaptation and vulnerability as individual strategies and traits, respectively, and were made use of in the research in development psychology and stress research and later in health prevention research (e.g. Antonovski 1979).

For the social sciences, vulnerability became an important notion through Amartya Sen's (1982) works on famine and poverty in the field of development studies.¹⁴ Sen's definition of vulnerability comprises a double, a characteristic that runs through 'the social life' of the notion: vulnerability is about being exposed and about relations, it includes both the structural natural, social, and political side and 'the internal

side of being at risk with deficient means to cope with deficiently functioning social institutions' (see e.g. Watts and Bohl 1999). For humans and nonhumans who are dependent on others to survive and in need of some basic provision, society, cultures, and communities are ways of handling threats and risks. Later, the growing discussions of climate change, nuclear rearmament, and more generally the Anthropocene have increased concerns about the vulnerability of the cosmos. Both human and non-human beings are being threatened and new ways to deal with this threat are needed. In addition to research, public and popular media, as well as social and political institutions, organizations, and movements need to be involved.

VULNERABILITY AND THE EMPIRICAL

Vulnerability has been widely used, both descriptively and normatively, for social and political classification of populations, and can also be comprehended as a quality, status, or identity (Virokannas, Liuski and Kuronen 2018). The sociologist of health, Graham Scambler (2019), lists seven different types or qualities of vulnerability, which in his opinion have a social impact that is tantamount to harm on health at the levels of structure, culture, or agency. His analysis reflects a more general empirical understanding of vulnerability¹⁵ as something threatening or negative, as 'a typology that is useful for the sociological explanations of vulnerability-induced health disadvantage' (Scambler 2019: 1). Scambler's analysis represents the general understanding of vulnerability as negative, a view that is quite common in health and risk research. It is a common tool of governance and is currently a frequently applied vehicle for classification of people 'at risk'. I will return to this theme in

more detail in the section ‘Vulnerability does’. However, such classifications of vulnerability have been intensely criticized by social and political scientists (Brown 2011; Bledsoe 2012; Brown, Ecclestone and Emmel 2017). Vulnerability as a condition is not neutral but is politically mediated and consequently not suitable for classificatory purposes. According to Brown (2011: 314), rather than being an innocent concept, the notion of vulnerability is ‘loaded with political, moral, and practical implications’. Classifications can be a threat to social justice, especially to people and groups who are classified without their emic contribution.

Brown identifies three main objections to the use of ‘vulnerability’ as a classificatory term: firstly, it is paternalistic and offensive; secondly, it is closely aligned to technologies of social control; and lastly, labeling individuals or groups as ‘vulnerable’ is exclusionary and potentially stigmatizing. Tiia Sudenkaarne in this special issue illuminates the stigmatizing situation in ethics as challenged in queer people’s narratives. Kristiina Brunila demonstrates how in sociology and philosophy studies in education, vulnerability has been studied as a policy imperative that turns the notion into a psychoemotional and individualized problem and she shows how categorization as vulnerable has effects on those to whom it is ascribed (Brunila and Rossi 2018; Brunila et al in this special issue). In his intersectional analysis on racism in South Africa in this issue, Robert Bernasconi describes how such categorization may overlook the very real vulnerability of some others, who are thus put at even greater risk and deprived of access to essential resources.

For several political thinkers, vulnerability is ‘made’ in regimes of power and consequently, differently distributed among humans (Butler 2009; Ferrarese 2009). Vulnerability as a descriptive term, or as a ‘type’, as Scambler (2019) puts it, is

applied to persons considered dependent, fragile, or threatened for one reason or another. It is also applied to surroundings that are considered precarious; and to persons classified as deviant, poor, and excluded, in other words to ‘others’. In this context, several anthropologists have highlighted the lack of an emic dimension to the concept and its consequences.

ETHICAL APPROACHES AND RELATIONALITY

The moral and legal philosopher Martha Albertson Fineman, founder of the Vulnerability and the Human Condition Initiative,¹⁶ considers vulnerability to be at the core of the legal subject. Significantly, she emphasizes cultural values when defining vulnerability (see also Cooke 2017). According to Fineman, ‘vulnerability is inherent in life but autonomy is not. The interpretation of vulnerability as a weakness is cultural and autonomy is a product of social policy’ (Fineman 2008: 23). She also argues that what is understood as a ‘vulnerable subject’ must replace the autonomous and independent subject asserted in the liberal tradition (Fineman 2008: 1–2). To richly theorize the concept of vulnerability is to develop a more complex subject around which to build social policy and law.

In moral theory and ethics, vulnerability has raised challenges regarding this very question. In this special issue, Susanne Uusitalo and Tiia Sudenkaarne discuss this tension from the perspectives of addiction and queer ethics and practice, respectively.

Another prominent critical discussion of autonomous, sovereign, and rational agency was launched by Alistair MacIntyre (1999). From the perspective of human rights, Bryan Turner (2006) also questions the notion of autonomous agency from the viewpoint of dependence and

relationality, both of which he understands as dimensions of vulnerability. They comprise a necessary condition for agency that is possible not in solitude but by means of others, pivoting on the web of relations. Vulnerability as relational refers both to the constitution of agency and to human affectability. Following these precepts, MacIntyre makes relationality the basis of any ethical theory (see Aaltola on Simone Weil in this issue).

VULNERABILITY, RELATIONALITY, AND POLITICS

In addition to the ethical approaches to vulnerability, several political thinkers especially in feminist philosophy and political theory emphasize vulnerability as more than ‘a good sentiment’, as Estelle Ferrarese (2016: 149) puts it. For these debates, the concern of the possibility of a vulnerable political subject is at stake. Despite of criticism, Ferrarese considers possibilities for the use of the notion and suggests vulnerability as a category with which to undo the world as it is. How vulnerability is embedded in a web of political relations is mostly neglected in social debates. Instead of an object of pity or perhaps a target of solely empathy, she considers vulnerability a mutual presupposition of autonomy for political theory. Ferrarese points to a critique of the core values in the ways of thinking of the actor and agency as lacking the body, something unbound and solipsist. These critical ways of thinking are further developed in the discussions put forward by Erinn Gilson (2014). Taika Bottner in this special issues makes use of these ideas for the study of agency of chronically ill persons with dementia.

For thinkers such as Judith Butler, vulnerability as a political concept is a social and political condition of life. Far from being merely

existential, she understands vulnerability to be differentially distributed globally through political regimes and politics. Besides vulnerability, Butler uses the concept of precarity to theorize the ways vulnerability is unevenly distributed across populations and to describe the social and political conditions under which lives become unlivable (2009: 25–26). What, in other words, does vulnerability in the form of violence, war, failing networks, poverty, imprisonment, starvation, exposure to illness, infirmity, and death do to the people who are directly affected? Butler’s thoughts have inspired several scholars who work with studies of violence. Satu Venäläinen’s article in this issue discusses women imprisoned for violent crimes. She describes how a relevant part of the culturally circulating understandings about gender and violence reflects on ways women who have committed violent crimes are perceived and related to, and how their self-perceptions and social orientations become shaped. This results in othering discourses about women convicted of violent crimes as inhumanly deviant, which particularly in the Finnish context entwines with notions about ‘strong Finnish women’ that are effective both in denying women’s vulnerability in relation to violence and in constituting positions of victims as shameful. The dynamics of othering are linked to the trouble with vulnerability in Western thought due to the ways in which its recognition goes against liberal-humanist valuation of autonomy and agency.

Considering vulnerability as a political concept, at least two avenues of thoughts are opened up. First, what does it mean to understand vulnerability politically, in terms of power, resistance, and agency? Butler (2016: 22–24) herself highlights vulnerability in relation to resistance and contentious politics. In feminist theories, vulnerability is opposed mainly because it is considered to be dependency and victimhood, the antitheses of agency—because

agency in e.g. feminist literature is considered to be incompatible with vulnerability (Martinez 2018; Mahmood 2005). In politics, people want to be regarded as agentic, as those who are acting but are not acted upon. However, vulnerability is an important part of the very meaning of political resistance; it is an embodied enactment. Second, Butler points out that vulnerability and resistance are not solely existential conditions of the body but aspects in a set of relations connecting the body to contentious politics, constituted by other bodies, processes, and political structures (Butler, Gambetti and Sabsay 2016; see Laszczkowski 2017). Seen from this perspective, vulnerability as relational pierces through the body and also through the social and political conditions of life.

During the last couple of decades, vulnerability as a political notion has raised intense discussions. Papers on this theme were also presented in the seminar ‘How does vulnerability matter?’ that this special issue is based on. Some authors argue that vulnerability animates political critique and is, on many occasions, a powerful vehicle of social and political change. Tiia Sudenkaarne, for example, refers to queer activism in her article. Several current political reflections on vulnerability touch upon what vulnerability *does* in terms of power, resistance, and agency. Some, like Butler (2004) and Laszczkowski (2017, also 2019), are interested in what Butler calls the contentious politics of everyday life, a term that has implications for everyday life and the ways that people might live in a radically restructured world. New questions are brought to the discussions, such as what does the affective power of vulnerability consist of? What is the power of political language of vulnerability that is so powerfully capable of touch, to contaminate and to mobilize acts (see Gilson 2018: 3)?

HOW VULNERABILITY ENTERED ANTHROPOLOGY

Since its early history, vulnerability—understood in a general descriptive way as the condition of the poor or the excluded—has been vital for anthropological research. Durkheim (1951 [1897]) defines anomie as a result of insufficient social integration, and as an indicator of what he calls the moral constitution of society. Durkheim’s understanding of anomie has served as a kind of undercurrent for anthropological research on vulnerability as a social condition of the excluded. However, vulnerability as such has not been much theorized in the anthropological corpus (about this, see Robbins 2013; Ortner 2016). The other point in Durkheim’s definition relevant for anthropology is morality. Morality is something that has persisted in anthropological thinking and has modified the description of the ethnographer’s position, frequently defined as the advocate of the studied, marginalized, peoples with the task of letting their voices be heard. In general, vulnerability calls for benevolent acts and help. The role of the ethnographer is also described as vulnerable (e.g. Behar 1996). Delineating ‘the moral turn’ in anthropology, Fassin (2012: 3) makes the claim that the discipline is morally committed, at times explicitly: ‘Anthropologists, too, have often acted as moral agents. They have adopted moral views and defended moral causes’ (see also Farmer 2004).

GOOD BUT DARK?

Vulnerability has been linked with morality in a sense that is unique for Western anthropology compared with other social science disciplines. The link is interesting and worth being developed further. Today’s discussions of the ‘moral turn’ in anthropology—in contrast to

the ‘ethical turn’, launched by Kapferer and Gold (eds. 2018)—follows the tracks of ‘the suffering school’, prominent especially in US anthropology from the late 1980s, and launched by the collaborative work of Arthur Kleinman (1997), Veena Das, and Stanley Cavell. In their edited volume *Social Suffering* (1996: 3), they delineate their enterprise as ‘seeking to explore suffering as a social experience in a stream of enquiry’. They define suffering at three levels: first, as an intersubjective experience and second, as an umbrella category that ties together different kinds of human problems that create pain, distress, and other trials that people must undergo and endure (Kleinman 1997: 15). Third, suffering is also social, it has a social history and moral career. Morality, according to Kleinman, is a process of interaction that results from an inter-human experience of the Other’s suffering (ibid., 66). Defined in this way, social suffering is close to how Veena Das (1996; 2007) approaches the relationship between social suffering and vulnerability. Vulnerability is, however, only rarely thematized by authors and social suffering is not explicitly elaborated in relation to vulnerability in these discussions (see also Jackson 1998; 2011; 2013; Biehl 2005). In this special issue, Elisa Aaltola makes an important contribution by analyzing three Western cultural narratives of suffering, portraying vulnerability through them. It is precisely through vulnerability that suffering exists: ‘vulnerable creatures subject to forces beyond our control also renders us prone to pain and anguish’.

To conclude, in the anthropological enterprise, vulnerability has mainly been ‘good and dark’, a descriptive moral term for describing the quality of life and the condition of the poor and excluded¹⁷ (see Fassin 2012; Luhrmann 2016). Anthropologists, especially those who work with global aid programs, have been

reluctant to deal explicitly with ‘vulnerability’ because of its character as a policy concept that has little relevance *in local usage* or in discourse outside of aid industries (Payne 2012). This also clearly points to the Western governmentality underpinnings of vulnerability.

A relational approach to vulnerability and precarity that differs from the North American discussions above, originates from the post-war Italian anthropology influenced by Gramsci (de Martino 2015 [1959]; 2005 [1961]). Vulnerability may be provoked by illness, death, poverty, or other social or personal situations where ‘one’s ability to maintain cultural processes is threatened’ (de Martino 2015: 16). The risk of an existential dilemma touches upon the ways in which we are human beings. On the basis of his ethnographic research in southern Italy, de Martino considered human life precarious because in so many situations the individual may be in constant danger of losing his or her presence, *la presenza*, the ability to be an active agent in the world and in history. In his studies on *miseria* in southern Italy, de Martino focused his interest on human agency in vulnerable situations. Elements and contributing factors may be played out in several everyday situations that threaten one’s own agency, that is, one’s ability to act on the world rather than simply remaining a passive object of circumstances. Social interactions with the aim of protecting a person’s tenuous being in the world constitute a cultural core of human agency. Hence, agency is something which does not proceed in isolation, but takes place in a society, in a relational cultural context where there are already meaningful and intelligible modes of holding on to a world, having a grip on it within social interactions. Vulnerability and precarity, understood in this way, are about being open to something, but the nature of this something is only determined in concrete social circumstances.

In several of his works de Martino has thematized the relationship between the existential crisis of human beings in the social and political context of the precarious Italian South as ‘the crisis of presence’. As a historian of religion and an ethnographer, he has emphasized the role of religion as common social and cultural practices and acts. Studying the practices of religious rituals in the everyday, de Martino does not make a distinction between Catholicism, popular religion, or magic (see Gramsci 1973; especially Chapter III).¹⁸ In a world where one’s presence is not ultimately guaranteed, one is always in the process of constituting and maintaining oneself together with others within a delicate balance. Meanwhile the world itself is entangled with the ongoing drama into which people are thrown, consisting of illness, poverty, the threat of death, pain, and a sense of becoming overwhelmed. What is relevant for the relational way of thinking about vulnerability is that agency means the ability to fight for at least the minimal, namely *a grip on the world*. This grip is not something already there but is *made* and *re-made* continuously in intersubjective interactions with other people in the human world.

VULNERABILITY DOES

In biopolitics¹⁹ and neoliberal governmentality, vulnerability has been increasingly deployed in the classification and consequent management and control of people. Characteristic for the classification is that it is not carried out by ‘vulnerable’ people themselves but by the governmental institutions from the outside. Consequently, as a group people who are disabled, elderly, young, women, perhaps queer or unemployed—just to mention a few of the qualities that are made use of in the classification procedures—are considered vulnerable and, simultaneously, *observable* targets for societal

or political *regulation* and *control*. Within the current governmental politics of austerity, the notion of vulnerability in policy language appears to be connected to target funds. Consequently, such programs focus not only on the most vulnerable, who perhaps would be in need of protection, but also on people with new kinds of ‘psychosocial problems’, such as obesity, fatigue, sleep problems, or depression.

This kind of classification frequently accomplishes labeling and unwanted identity, such as victimhood and consequently, identity politics based on the definition from outside. Kristiina Brunila and Leena-Maija Rossi (2018; also Brunila et al. in this special issue) have argued that in terms of identity politics there is a tendency for it to become a part of the ethos of vulnerability in the neoliberal order. There is concern that in the neoliberal order, identity politics is focusing on the individualized and inherent self by referring to a specific psychological form and by a therapeutic discourse of assumed psychoemotional vulnerability. Consequently, the position from which people get heard is established by recognizing their psychoemotional vulnerabilities, injuries, and emotional problems. In recent social and political situations, people tend increasingly to claim rights, status, or privileges on the basis of victimized identity (see Koivunen, Kyrölä and Ryberg 2018). The claims are increasingly based on trauma or inherent vulnerability. The ethos of vulnerability plays an increasingly decisive role in shaping e.g. social and welfare, education, and policy health politics (Beddoe 2013; Brown 2011; Honkasalo 2017; see Brunila et al. in this special issue). Vulnerabilizing problems, policies, and practices inadvertently shape and limit subjectivity and agency (see Bottner in this special issue). This is why the authors argue that vulnerability needs a further analysis because neoliberal discourses work by disguising their real purposes, namely providing legitimation for shaping people to become more

governable and eventually more economically productive subjects.

Furthermore, Bronwyn Davies et. al. (2005) have argued that the neoliberal discourse shifts governments and their subjects towards thinking of survival as an individual responsibility. This is a crucial element of resilience in the neoliberal order and as a form of cruel optimism—the removal of dependence on the social fabric combined with the dream of wealth and possessions for each individual who ‘gets it right’ (see Berlant 2011). According to Davies et al. (2005), vulnerability is ideologically closely tied to individual responsibility, which again is the central tenet of neoliberal subjectivity; workers are disposable and there is no obligation on the part of the ‘social fabric’ to take care of the disposed. Therefore, the neoliberal subject becomes both vulnerable to disposability and rejection by those with economic power and thus, necessarily, competitive. The notion of social responsibility is transformed into the individual’s responsibility for one’s individual survival. This process is thus constructed not solely as moral, but as economic survival (Davies et al. 2005: 9).

The philosopher of science Ian Hacking, well known for his works on contemporary thought and reasoning, has been consistently curious about how science seeks to tame chance and its ways of creating ‘kinds of people that in a certain sense did not exist before’ (2006: 3). This is what he calls ‘making up people’. Hacking’s ideas are important in making sense of vulnerability, and his thoughts have been further elaborated especially in the literature of governmentality (Rose 2007).

Hacking argues that today’s understanding of causal processes in human affairs relies crucially on concepts of ‘human kinds’, which are a product of the modern social sciences, with their concern for classification, quantification, and intervention. Eating disorders, ADHD and

autism are examples of such recently established ‘human kinds’. Vulnerability and precariousness can be added to the list of these ‘kinds’. Hacking’s idea is that instead of being ‘natural kinds’, what happens with ‘kinds’ is that they become moving targets because our investigations interact with them, and consequently change them. And since they are changed, they are not quite the same ‘kind’ as before. The target has moved, and this is what he calls the ‘looping effect’.

What distinguishes human kinds from ‘natural kinds’, is that they include the results of the construction by the classificatory and scientific processes, i.e. the looping. As a result of coming into existence through the social scientists’ classifications, human kinds also change the people thus classified. Vulnerability is an example *par excellence* of ‘classification, quantification, and intervention’. People who were previously considered ‘at risk’, are changed as a population and some of the new groups, such as migrants and refugees, are not properly classified solely by being ‘at risk’. Risk as a technological term has gradually changed to vulnerability, and by that classificatory principle people are grouped together. Only rarely does academic research or policy making ask about the respondents’ own definitions of vulnerability. This in practice means e.g. that according to several EU documents²⁰ migrants are considered equally vulnerable by both practitioners and researchers in a variety of ways. They are vulnerable by being at risk in accessing services and resources, by being exposed to exploitation on migration routes, by facing political prosecution in their home countries, or through their specific bodily or psychological conditions.

Consequently, vulnerability as a tool of classification and consequent control and management of the population groups is effective compared with its predecessor, risk. In the following, I take an example of the change in

Finnish elderly care from elderly care institutions to informal care at home. It is mainly relatives who are in charge of informal home care, frequently without paid compensation. For governmental purposes, vulnerability as a concept is important because of its ethical connotations and ideological underpinnings, such as familism and individualism. In the previous large health care reform, which reduced psychiatric hospital care (Helen (ed.) 2011; Alanko 2017) in Finland, the arguments for elderly care at home were based on the very same persuasive ‘language of vulnerability’, such as home, intimacy, and family—even though it was well known that after years spent in hospital, or even before that, patients did not necessarily have any family.

One side of the benefits of the categorization by vulnerability is the persuasive vocabulary of softness and benevolence compared to the technical language of risk. The other side is economic, that of saving and cutting the public budget. The vulnerable are a proper target of political and economic actions. The justification of the governmental procedures is primarily economic, and vulnerability is economically productive. The classification of the elderly as vulnerable has brought about a change in Finnish elderly care and has led to the informal, home-based, and only partly paid care provided by relatives. The change is productive in terms of governmental savings. It is ironic to note that the sum total, 2.8 billion Euros for care of the elderly, is close to the sum that is to be cut in the current social and welfare reform (Kehusmaa 2014).²¹ As Hacking would put it, being classified as vulnerable a ‘wholly new kind of person came into being’. The elderly, classified as vulnerable, are not the same ‘kind of people’ as they were before. Similarly, the governmental budget, now 2.8 billion Euros lighter, is no longer the same health care budget.

In public discourse, policy-makers, media, community groups, and social workers frequently employ this problematic construct of vulnerable groups in which elderly people, and those with disabilities are most likely to be characterized as vulnerable and as a group that is constructed as in need of being spoken for. The relationship between people and risk is redefined in a new paradigm in which people deemed vulnerable are considered by professionals unable to manage the uncertainties of life (Furedi 2003). Help to vulnerable people includes the assumption of the lack of their capacity which provides the means by which to discipline and control them.

Vulnerability in the context of neoliberal governmentality is hardly comprehensible without its relationship to resilience, the ‘equivalent but opposite concept’. Originating from the same cluster as vulnerability but with a strong impact of development psychology, resilience is about the quality of the boundary but from the perspective of adaptability, strength and the ability to ‘bounce back’, to learn and develop (e.g. Garmezy 1971; Holling 1973; Joseph 2013). Resilience describes the capacity to survive and withstand but also to renew after a change or a catastrophe. All of the dimensions of resilience are considered important for the society’s adaptation to crises, mitigating disasters, and for governing the society that is supposed to face threats.²²

Societal and political trends put forward in the governmentality debates give some important perspectives to the question of what vulnerability does, or actually to the question of what vulnerability and resilience do. Resilience is fast becoming *the* organizing principle in contemporary political life, Tapio Juntunen and Ari-Elmeri Hyvönen (2014: 195 [italics in the original]) argue. According to them, the concern is about the detrimental effects that the meaning of resilience has on active citizenship and

democratic politics. Like several other notions that originate from natural sciences, resilience also carries with itself qualities that gain new meaning when applied to society. Resilience originates from notions such as adaptation and self-organizing properties which, as applied to society, do not recognize some of its most important notions, such as social change or power (Olsson et al. 2015: 5). The emphasis is on the adaptable and highly autonomous resilient subject and on the new social morphology where societies and life itself are defined by inescapable crises and catastrophes. Crises are regarded as unavoidable and, as such, a force that promotes thriving in society. Several political scientists have presented that resilience should be considered constructive and a promoter of societal strengthening. Brad Evans and Julian Reid (2015: 155–157) delineate a new ontology of vulnerability that is based on threat, endangerment, and insecurity. Violence and catastrophic events are considered necessary events in society, a vehicle for people to develop responsiveness to further catastrophes. Resilience appears as a form of immunization because what societies and citizens do is a process of internalizing catastrophic events, and this creates new epistemic communities that are more aware of their vulnerabilities. A shared sense of vulnerability forces people to become active participants in the de-politicization process of society. Although this scenario is debated (e.g. Schott 2013), it fits well with several critical views presented elsewhere in biopolitics and governmentality research.

VULNERABLE AGENCY

In the following, I will briefly discuss vulnerability as both a cultural critique of and a theoretical challenge to the notion of agency as it is applied in social sciences and most of all in anthropology. These debates, originating

from anthropological studies in illness and critical medical anthropology,²³ add some new perspectives to those in ethics and feminist studies already mentioned earlier. Illness provides an important contextual site for theorizing agency. The ill patient's agency *is* agency, as Annemarie Mol puts it (2008: 28) and, according to Fineman (2008), what is understood as a vulnerable subject, must be taken seriously as the core of the legal subject. In this special issue, Bottner in her analysis of people with dementia carefully demonstrates how detailed ethnographic studies are able to open up how a variety of forms of agency emerge from this specific cultural context.

For most authors in this special issue, vulnerability is a notion that challenges ways of defining agency as sovereign and rational, as a vehicle for autonomy and individual free choice. The universalizing assumptions of agency render people vulnerable because they shape a norm, which runs through legal and ethical theories and practices, as Uusitalo and Sudenkaarne highlight, as well as in the care of the elderly in Bottner's article. In addition, in health and welfare policy in most European countries, public services have already been becoming increasingly organized following consumerist principles, which emphasize service users' autonomous agency and their rights and abilities to make choices between different service providers. This 'agenda of choice' (Leppo and Perälä 2009; 2017), or 'freedom of choice' (National Institute for Health and Welfare 2019) as it is put also in the current Finnish health and social policy debates, is considered to benefit the state through more efficient and cheaper service provision and give citizens a more active role as 'agency consumers' of public services. There are, however, hidden moral and ethical problems embedded in discussions about patients as consumers and experts in health markets. The idea of patients' expertise is linked

to an idealized picture of the individual agency of an invulnerable consumer being in control of one's action and of vulnerable life situations as matters of rational choice. In addition, in these policy documents some people are considered to 'have' agency, others are not. The logic of the normative assumption is dichotomous: active agency is good, absence of agency is bad.

The spread of the idea of autonomous and sovereign individual agency is derived from a sociological tradition that has become tangled in the 'jargon of autonomy' (Sulkunen 2009). Through a dynamics of this jargon, mediated by medical efforts to cure and by 'the agenda of choice', society increasingly holds individuals responsible for their health (Rose 1996; Leppo and Perälä 2017). However, the agenda fails to explain how people actually live with illness (Leppo and Perälä 2017; 2009; Honkasalo 2008; 2009). In contemporary society and in present-day forms of governance, the patients' agency and their freedom of choice are enabled by social structures and everyday life as well as by webs of implementations in the form of medications, technological devices, and therapeutic and peer support practices.

In contexts such as illness, agency is far from being clear, rational, or individual. It emerges in and through interaction rather than being a given. Agency, hence, does not remain abstract but is enabled as real-life, worldly²⁴ action and engagement with given circumstances, whether getting out of bed, cooking a meal, seeking professional help, talking to a friend, fighting an addiction, taking prescribed medications, coming to terms with technological devices within one's body, or coping with stigma. In the context of illness and suffering, agency perhaps simply eludes from one's control, becomes merely enduring, something that seems 'passive' (Honkasalo 2013; Mahmood 2005). What is counted as agency is different in different physical and mental ailments,

as well as with regard to the availability of social and material resources. The link between agency and the myriad of worldly acts still remains unravelled in the bulk of anthropological research.

In ethnographic research, the abstract, rational and free-floating concept of agency does not capture the multiple modes and ambiguous conditions of agency that are heightened in the contexts, which people themselves define as vulnerable. How does one capture different modes of agency in life situations where sovereignty, autonomy or individuality quite simply are inappropriate terms? How does one develop alternative concepts for social and anthropological theory, ones that do not suffer from futile abstraction, yet still maintain analytical power? Vulnerability has the strength of mirroring the problems and shortcomings of individual agency in everyday life because for ethnographic analysis, vulnerability shapes a vital contextual site for its theorizing. This is how Desjarlais (1997: 204–205) puts it in his ethnography among homeless men in a shelter in Massachusetts. A variety of forms of agency emerge from this specific cultural context. Agency is not ontologically prior to context but arises from the social, political, and cultural dynamics of a specific time and place (see also Honkasalo 2008; 2009; Honkasalo and Tuominen 2014). These thoughts of vulnerability are important: they bring to the fore Arendt's idea of the actor, as both sufferer and doer in worldly space. Beginning from the conditions which enable agency would be a path to the multiplicity of agency in addition to a notion that solely emphasizes control or intentionality. In her recent work, Sharon Krause (2015), a researcher in political science, highlights the importance of recognizing the ways people are neither free-choicers nor sovereign as crucial conditions for agency and of analyses of the ways in which they are thwarted.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

How vulnerability matters is the theme of the special issue. As laid down by the authors, it matters in several ways.

Besides an existential human condition, vulnerability in neoliberal societies is related to something commonly considered negative: with weakness, dependency, suffering, or identity practices with concomitant social control. As a policy imperative, vulnerability has gained an instrumental meaning that is a pale and narrow version compared to its existential and ethical origins. A corresponding change has also come about with some other notions, such as welfare and well-being and more recently, with the arts.²⁵ Growing societal discussions highlight the meaning and importance of arts and artistic practices in an instrumental way, counted by their estimated well-being or health effects.

Yet, in this special issue, through the lens of relationality, vulnerability is captured as an opening up to something unexpected that matters in life (Lecourt 2002 [1998]). Vulnerability affects and effects and this is perhaps one reason for the enormous popularity of the notion; it forms the lever between suffering and flourishing, as Martha Nussbaum (2001) puts it, in both—or all—directions. Understood in this sense, vulnerability is about openness to something but the nature of this something is only determined in concrete social circumstances (Gilson 2018: 4). It is about processuality and, ethnographically speaking, what matters are *vulnerabilities* in a plural form.²⁶ One contribution of this special issue is to add to the discussions the potential of vulnerability to transform and be transformed in contextual interactions.

In this introduction, I have tracked some of the problems and possibilities caused by the stickiness of the notion along its travel through several intellectual and managerial deployments.

Beyond a pure notion but merely considered a *dispositif*,²⁷ vulnerability indicates the quality of boundaries ‘in a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, (...) regulatory decisions—the said as much as the unsaid’ (Foucault 1980: 194).

I think that much of the enigma of vulnerability can be illuminated as a *dispositif*, ‘a formation that has its major function at a given historical moment that of responding to an *urgent need* (emphasis in the original)’. In addition to the affective power of vulnerability, the other reason for its enormous popularity is precisely the urgent need to govern populations in an era of insecurity and threat.

In ethnographic research, the main problem with vulnerability consists of the multiplicity of meanings attached to the notion along its path from the natural sciences, philosophy, ethics, and politics to the studies of cultures, and to the inquiries into agency, violence, racism, and power as carried out in this special issue. As the concept of culture, vulnerability covers almost everything and due to its malleability, fits almost anything. This can be confusing and, unless carefully analyzed, vulnerability may cause many problems for concrete ethnographic research.

Yet, as several contributions on vulnerability argue, vulnerability matters as a challenge and a possibility. Juxtaposing the notions of process, practice, experience, identity, or the instigator of affect, vulnerability is able to surpass the possibilities provided by many other suggested notion.

More than most notions, vulnerability provides a possibility to study the subtle meanings and qualities of boundaries. In today’s social and political life, this is what is urgently needed. Resilience is one but problematic attempt to contribute to this; defense, protection or prevention are simply not enough in the present day global situation. Ethically, the emphasis on

the porousness of boundaries and how to protect them are perhaps more important than ever.

NOTES

- 1 This special issue on vulnerability is a result of a long interdisciplinary and intellectual collaboration. As the guest editor I want to warmly thank all the contributors as well as the eleven anonymous reviewers without whose work and continuous interactions this anthology would not have been possible. I also want to thank Mateusz Lasczkowski, Timo Kallinen and Ari-Elmeri Hyvönen for their deeply insightful comments as well as Mark Shackleton for his wise close-reading and never-ending encouragement. I want to thank the Finnish Anthropological Society for accepting this special issue to the Journal of the Finnish Anthropological Society. I also wish to express gratitude to Matti Eräsaari, the editor-in-chief in particular, for his generous help, advices and seemingly endless patience. Finally, this publication was made possible by the Academy of Finland, grant SA 259220.
- 2 There are many other definitions. In the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2018), vulnerability is defined as a quality or state. See also Zalta (ed.) 2019. Resilience also has many definitions.
- 3 About the double-edged character of the notion of risk, see e.g. Giddens: 'Yet risk is risk—the other side of danger is always opportunity. A lot of policy mistakes are being made at the moment' (2009: 10).
- 4 About affectivity and politics of emotion more generally, see e.g. Ahmed 2014.
- 5 See also Vulnerability and the Human Condition Initiative (n.d.).
- 6 March, 2019.
- 7 Engaging Vulnerability 2019.
- 8 See e.g. Crate, Susan and Mark Nuttall (eds) 2016. *Anthropology and Climate Change: From Actions to Transformations*. London: Routledge; Fiske, Shirley, Susan Crate, Carole Crumley, Kathleen Galvin, Heather Lazrus, George Luber, Lisa Lucero, Anthony Oliver-Smith, Ben Orlove, Sarah Strauss and Richard Wilk 2014. *Changing the Atmosphere. Anthropology and Climate Change: Final report of the AAA Global Climate Change Task Force*. Arlington: American Anthropological Association. <https://s3.amazonaws.com/rdcms-aaa/files/production/public/FileDownloads/pdfs/cmtes/commissions/upload/GCCTF-Changing-the-Atmosphere.pdf>. <accessed 23 May 2019>; Oliver-Smith, Anthony 2016. The Concepts of Adaptation, Vulnerability and Resilience in the Anthropology of Climate Change. In Helen Kopnina and Eleanor Shoreman-Ouimet (eds). *The Routledge Handbook of Environmental Anthropology*. London: Routledge.
- 9 'How does vulnerability matter?' A conference organized by the project 'Vulnerable lives', funded by the Academy of Finland 259220. This special issue is based on discussions and a sample of papers held at the conference. Robert Bernasconi's article is based on his plenary lecture at 'Vulnerabilities', a conference jointly organized by the Swedish Anthropological Association and the Finnish Society for Social Anthropology in Uppsala in 2018.
- 10 I make use of Foucault's concept following his description in *Power/Knowledge* (1980). See the concluding chapter of this introduction.
- 11 *Vulnus*, a wound (noun). *Vulnerare*, to wound (verb); in the passive form, to become or be wounded.
- 12 'Because the actor always moves among and in relation to other acting beings, he is never merely a 'doer' but always and at the same time a sufferer. To do and to suffer are like opposite sides of the same coin, and the story that an act starts is composed of its consequent deeds and sufferings. These consequences are boundless, because action, though it may proceed from nowhere, so to speak, acts into a medium where every reaction becomes a chain reaction and where every process is the cause of new processes. Since action acts upon beings who are capable of their own actions, reaction, apart from being a response, is always a new action that strikes out on its own and affects others. Thus action and reaction among men never move in a closed circle and can never be reliably confined to two partners. This boundlessness is characteristic not of political action alone, in the narrower sense of the word, as though the boundlessness of human interrelatedness were only the result of the boundless multitude of people involved, which could be escaped by resigning oneself to action within a limited, graspable framework of circumstances; the smallest act in the most

- limited circumstances bears the seed of the same boundlessness, because one deed, and sometimes one word, suffices to change every constellation' (Arendt 1958: 190).
- 13 Arendt concludes *Vita Activa* by stating (1958: 390): 'Unfortunately, and contrary to what is currently assumed about the proverbial ivory tower independence of thinkers, no other human capacity is so vulnerable, and it is in fact far easier to act under conditions of tyranny than it is to think'.
 - 14 According to Watts and Bohle (1993), the concept of vulnerability was adopted and developed further by development researchers and poverty analysts. From their point of view, the concept encompasses more than merely observing available resources, such as disposable income. It also examines in what ways external strains like storms, floods, and droughts make scarcity and distribution of resources a problem. In more abstract terms, vulnerability means being exposed to external stress factors that cannot be overcome with the help of the resources available.
 - 15 Also the SANT/FAS conference 'Vulnerabilities', Uppsala, Sweden 2018.
 - 16 Vulnerability and the Human Condition (n.d.).
 - 17 In addition, the field workers themselves describe their position as vulnerable (see e.g. Behar 1996).
 - 18 Italian folklore research is based on a tradition of its own. The roots are from the history of religion and phenomenological philosophy but also the Marxist, and notably Gramscian, way of interpreting folk life.
 - 19 Foucault (1988) also discusses biopolitics as the conceptual condition of racism and Nazism; Agamben (1998) pairs biopolitics with thanatopolitics—to him, the essence of sovereign power is the power to let live or let die. In this way how to classify the vulnerability of others is very central to power.
 - 20 See Médecins du Monde (n.d.). <https://mdmeuroblog.wordpress.com/>
 - 21 Kehusmaa, *ibid.* In Finland the homes of elderly people in need of medical assistance have become hybrids of a home and a sort of medical care unit. The relationship of such elderly people with their spouses has changed from being one of a family relationship to a dependence on care relationship. In this context, a 'new kind of person' is also one who belongs to the unpaid group of 'informal care provided by family and relatives' (Honkasalo 2017).
 - 22 The interest in resilience has increased remarkably after 9/11 and the launch of the war against terrorism.
 - 23 The research project 'Vulnerable agency' (SA 259220; see Honkasalo n.d.) has its ethnographical focus on the conditions of human agency—not as an independent and autonomous entity as it is defined in contemporary ethical, social, and health policies but as an actor, tied with and conditioned by a web of social, political, and existential circumstances. They connect ill people and their care-takers with social interactions, be they at home or at hospital. What is called agency, autonomy, and sovereignty is also conditioned by the clinical and policy decisions.
 - 24 instead of 'agency', Arendt (1958) uses of 'wordly action' (for a nuanced analysis, see Gambetti 2016).
 - 25 The vicissitudes of these notions need further research. The current instrumental use of the arts and artistic practices as a vehicle for health improvement and well-being has increased (see e.g. Sosiaali- ja terveystieteiden ministeriö 2015; Arts Council England 2014).
 - 26 About Vulnerabilities, see the Swedish Anthropological Association and Finnish Anthropological Society (2018) conference Vulnerabilities.
 - 27 I am grateful to Kristiina Brunila for our discussion about the concept of dispositive. I refer to Foucault's notion according to his thinking in *Power/Knowledge* (1980) and *Discipline and Punish* (1991 [1975]).

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