

## Re-moralising 'vulnerability'

Kate Brown\*  
University of Leeds

---

### Abstract

The idea that the 'most vulnerable' must be 'protected' has featured prominently in UK Coalition rhetoric aimed at legitimising reductions to state welfare provision. The same notion also influenced social policy across a number of arenas during the New Labour era. This approach seems to resonate with principles of social justice, and may at first appear to be beneficial to disadvantaged groups. Closer scrutiny reveals that singling out 'the vulnerable' for special care and attention is linked to a moralising agenda in social policy, helping to create and sustain binary oppositions about the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' within society. This paper will discuss some of the practical and theoretical implications of the utilisation of the concept of 'vulnerability' in contemporary social policy. The analysis questions how far a seemingly protective and therapeutic emphasis on vulnerability has more stigmatising and exclusive effects. It will be proposed that within certain policy contexts, the prioritisation of vulnerable groups can act a conceptual mechanism which emphasises personal accountability for the difficulties experienced by individuals, and is an approach at odds with rights-based approaches to citizenship.

Keywords: vulnerability, vulnerable, vulnerable adults, vulnerable children, social control.

---

### Introduction

Despite the ferocious and often polarised nature of the debate on the morality of welfare, a consensus seems to prevail over our ethical duty to give society's 'vulnerable' special protections. Since the New Labour era, we have seen increasing agreement in mainstream political contexts about the need for a more 'conditional' welfare contract between state and citizen, based on 'rights and responsibilities' (Dwyer, 2010; Wright, 2009; Deacon and Patrick, 2011). 'The vulnerable', however, remain somewhat of an anomaly in their fit with this agenda. Despite difficulties in defining what is meant by 'vulnerability' (Chambers, 1989; Appleton, 1999; Levine *et al.*, 2004), status as 'vulnerable' seems to enable individuals to transcend criticisms that they are to blame for their circumstances or problems (Goodin, 1985), with the concept functioning in ethics like a 'get out of jail free card' (Brown, 2011: 318).

Selected writers have noted that 'vulnerability' has come to play an increasingly prevalent role in shaping policies and interventions targeted at improving or intervening in the lives of those identified as 'in need' (Hasler, 2004; Beckett, 2006; Dunn *et al.*, 2008; Fawcett, 2009;). Yet the moral power and wider practical impact of notions of vulnerability in social policy are rarely explored. This is perhaps surprising given that 'the vulnerable' tend to be constructed in policy and social welfare practice as those who are less accountable for their circumstances or actions, and as those who have less 'agency' in the development of perceived difficulties in their lives.

This paper brings 'vulnerability' to centre stage in policy in order to reveal important assumptions and trends in the re-moralising of social welfare. It discusses key policy developments related to 'vulnerability' since 1997 and critically explores some of the implications of a focus on 'the vulnerable'. The paper begins with an overview of the rise of vulnerability ideas under New Labour, focusing on selected policy domains where it was particularly significant. Continuities and changes since the Coalition government came to power in May 2010 are then explored, with special attention given to the moral dimensions of a focus on vulnerability in an era of financial austerity and the 'Big Society'. Following this, the paper offers more general comment about the operation of the concept of 'vulnerability' in contemporary social policy, in relation to the themes of *state power*, *citizenship* and *resource distribution*. On first impressions, 'vulnerability' seems linked to a therapeutic and well-meaning approach to helping those 'less well off' in society. A more critical examination of the operationalisation of the concept suggests that although focusing on 'the vulnerable' is helpful for *some* people *some* of the time, this policy also has less benevolent effects related to bureaucratic condescension, selective systems of welfare, paternalism and social control.

### **'Vulnerability' in social policy under New Labour**

An emphasis on notions of vulnerability and vulnerable populations or groups was not something novel to New Labour. 'Vulnerability' was utilised as a welfare concept prior to 1997, particularly in nursing (Appleton, 1999) and the human sciences (Watts and Bohle, 1993; Bankoff *et al.*, 2004, see Schiller *et al.*, 2007: 5 for a useful summary). However, a review of the literature related to vulnerability suggests that this notion took on a new significance in social policy during the New Labour era. Its role was most notable within policy arenas related to disability, services for children and families, housing and also crime and disorder, which are selectively explored in more detail below.

In the governance of welfare for adults who are seen to lack the capacity to protect themselves, the seminal *No Secrets* guidance had the idea of vulnerability and 'the protection of vulnerable adults' at its core (Department of Health, 2000). Initiated after a series of high profile cases of residential-home exploitation of older people, the guidance addresses older people and disabled people under the same banner of 'vulnerable adults'. This policy enshrined vulnerability as one of the key criteria in the assessment of adults 'qualifying' for various state interventions and safety procedures (Dunn *et al.*, 2008; Fawcett, 2009; Hollomotz, 2010). *Safeguarding Adults* (ADSS, 2005) revised the language used in policy-making, but the legacy of the idea of vulnerability endures in legislation and the *No Secrets* definition is still widely used in practice (Hollomotz, 2010). Alongside *No Secrets*, various other legal initiatives developed under New Labour which addressed the presumed vulnerabilities of disabled people. Having won the right to receive 'direct payments' in 1996, disabled people were entitled to arrange some of their own services and buy help they wanted. New Labour then altered initial plans for the direct payments scheme, with 'vulnerable'

disabled people deemed incapable of making these choices (Hasler, 2004). Extensions of the High Court's power to make declarations about interventions into the lives of 'vulnerable' instead of simply 'mentally incapacitated' adults were also granted in the first decade of the new millennium (cf Dunn *et al.*, 2008).

In the field of family life, New Labour's considerable interventions drew heavily on notions of children and young people's vulnerability. Special protections have been awarded to children on assumptions about their 'innate' vulnerability for some time (James and Prout, 1997; Mayall, 1994), but these ideas seemed to move from operating in informal spheres to also playing a role in more formal policy and processing mechanisms for those under the age of 18. 'Vulnerability' assumed an increasingly central role in the 'child protection' system and child welfare (Daniel, 2010; Mulcahy, 2004), with New Labour children's services blueprint document *Every Child Matters (ECM)* drawing on theoretical notions of all children as positioned in various places along a spectrum of vulnerability (Department for Education and Skills, 2003: 15). In this guidance, statutory 'child protection' interventions were deemed a response to the 'most vulnerable' children, with more general 'safeguarding' systems employed to protect and help children who were simply 'vulnerable'. The Common Assessment Framework (CAF) initiative, designed to standardise the assessment of children with 'additional needs', was also connected with this idea of positioning all children on a vulnerability spectrum. In Leeds, for example, Local Authority CAF models encouraged practitioners to position children on a 'windscreen' of vulnerability in order to determine how services respond to their circumstances (Children Leeds, 2011).

New Labour initiatives targeted resources at specific groups of children seen to be at elevated vulnerability because of their adverse circumstances. Introduced in 2003, The Vulnerable Children Grant (VCG) intended to improve access to education for 'vulnerable' children, and encouraged local authorities to develop their 'strategic approach' to dealing with this group (Kendall *et al.*, 2004a). This 'block funding' replaced previous 'ring fenced' sums for pre-defined groups of pupils (such as looked after children or Gypsy and Traveller children) and enabled local authorities to be more flexible about children and young people received additional educational support (Kendall *et al.*, 2004b: i). 'Targeted Youth Support' was also launched under New Labour in 2007, a multi-agency working initiative aimed at supporting 'vulnerable' young people to prevent them reaching the thresholds for statutory 'child protection' interventions (Department for Education and Skills, 2007).

Within Youth Justice policy and practice, the assessment of vulnerability came to play a role in determining interventions for young offenders. Alongside Youth Offending Team (YOT) interventions based on risk of re-offending, young people working with YOTs began to be assessed on the basis of their vulnerability (defined as the risk of them being harmed). The vulnerability status of a young person came to be deemed 'highly relevant' when determining 'a suitable response' to young people's actions, especially where a young person might face a custodial sentence (Youth Justice Board, 2006; Appendix 12: 7). The link between young people's (mis)behaviour and their perceived vulnerability status is a particularly interesting area and is considered in more detail later in the paper. In crime and disorder policy more generally, it has been argued that under New Labour there was a 'politics of vulnerability' evident in the approach to order maintenance, operating alongside a new exaggeration of crime (Waiton, 2008: 45). Waiton (2008: 48) suggests that New Labour's policy on 'Anti-Social Behaviour' was centred on an individualised sense of insecurity and the 'defence of the anxious and chronically vulnerable'. A focus on the vulnerability status of victims of crime has also been noted as particularly significant in the field of disability hate crime, with responses to incidents of hate crimes increasingly regarded

by police as requiring a different response in cases where victims were 'vulnerable' (Roulstone *et al.*, 2011).

In housing policy, New Labour's Supporting People programme was explicitly aimed at homeless 'vulnerable' individuals and families. Those using services attached to this funding stream were subject to certain conditionalities. 'Vulnerable' homeless people were expected to play an 'active' role in overcoming their difficulties by accepting offers of support and addressing problematic individual behaviour or lack of 'life skills'. Those who refused to accept such change-focussed interventions could find themselves excluded from certain services. 'Vulnerability' is also one of the three defined predicaments which trigger 'priority need' under the 1977 *Housing (Homeless Persons) Act*, making 'the vulnerable' amongst those classified as needing special 'fast tracking' through the social housing application process. The Act was updated during the New Labour era, most recently in 2002, and developments in this period continued to refine what did and did not 'count' as vulnerability into one of the key dividing lines in the provision of social housing resources.

Decisions about 'vulnerability' status in housing services have to some extent been guided by precedents in case law, from cases such as *Ortiz v Westminster City Council* (1993), where a woman was deemed ineligible for 'priority need' status because it was ruled that her previous alcohol and drug use did not amount to her classification as 'vulnerable'. Although offering some parameters for decision-making, these precedents left ample scope for the discretion of housing practitioners in judgments about whether a housing applicant should be deemed as 'vulnerable' or not (cf Lindstone, 1994; Niner, 1989: 96). This has resulted in 'vulnerability' being particularly important in terms of the more informal ways in which people are processed within the housing system (Cramer, 2005). Whilst it is generally recognised that moral judgements are a necessary part of the implementation of formal systems of welfare, the way in which official constructions of and attitudes towards vulnerability inform such value judgements are much less considered.

### **Continuity of policy, change of context: 'vulnerability' and the Coalition**

In terms of specific policy areas, notions of 'vulnerability' have tended to be used in similar ways under the Coalition as they were during the New Labour era. Within 'Anti-Social Behaviour' policy, the idea of selective interventions on the basis of vulnerability continues to thrive. Following the inquest into the death of Fiona Pilkington and her daughter in Leicestershire<sup>1</sup>, the protection of 'vulnerable' adults seems increasingly to be used as one of the justifications for the continuation of strong control mechanisms to deal with those seen as perpetrating 'Anti-Social Behaviour'. Obligations to 'vulnerable victims' (as opposed to victims generally) and those 'least able to protect themselves' seem to be taking on even further significance (see Home Office, 2011: 1). If a 'politics of vulnerability' (Waiton, 2008: 45) proliferated in crime and disorder policy under New Labour, initial indications suggest that this is unlikely to recede under the Coalition. The influence of the vulnerability rationale in the provision of children's services is still evident, with Michael Gove centring his defence of the new bursary scheme for 16-19 year olds in education on the premise that Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) will be replaced by a fund which 'targets' the 'most vulnerable' in full time education (Gove, 2011).

However, shifts in how notions of 'vulnerability' are drawn upon are detectable. Gove has quite tightly defined his 'most vulnerable' children as those in care, care leavers, and those on income support<sup>2</sup>, perhaps a narrower view of vulnerability than that informing New Labour's VCG (although the new funding is not necessarily a direct

descendant of the VCG). It is possible that we may be seeing narrowing of entitlement in relation to children's 'vulnerability' status under the Coalition. Indeed, tapering the parameters of what is officially defined as 'vulnerability' could be seen as astute political sense in the context of seeking to reduce public sector and welfare spending. The Department for Education (DfE) has announced that it will be 'streamlining funding for the most vulnerable children and families' in a new Early Intervention Grant, with the aim of ensuring local authorities have greater flexibility over allocating these resources (National Youth Agency, 2010: 3). There may be parallels within the housing sector. One of the outcomes of the Localism Bill (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2011) was that local authorities were granted powers to issue fixed-term tenancies as opposed to permanent ones. Authorities will continue to be obliged to ensure that social homes go to 'the most vulnerable in society' (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2011: 15), but how those who qualify for priority based on vulnerability will be affected by overall allocations of fixed-term tenancies is as yet unclear.

At this relatively early stage in the Coalition government's term, analysis of changes in the way the new government draws on notions of 'vulnerability' must remain tentative. Increasing rhetorical reliance on the concept is one notable trend. The vow to 'protect' the 'most vulnerable' has appeared frequently in most of the Coalition's major policy announcements related to the resourcing of public services. For example, pledges to afford special protections to the 'vulnerable' appeared a total of thirteen times in the Comprehensive Spending Review (HM Treasury, 2010). As spending cuts are made, drawing on notions of vulnerability offers a rhetorical means of reassuring the public that those who need and 'deserve' services the most will not be affected, thereby bolstering the moral and economic credentials of the government. Given the subjectivity involved in defining who counts as 'vulnerable', such undertakings may be difficult to hold a government to account to, so could be regarded as being relatively safe political promises.

Analysis of 'Big Society' ideas also indicates that how vulnerability is defined and conceptualised may come to play an increasingly prevalent role in social policy under the Coalition government. The 'Big Society' refers to a collection of governance ideas largely driven forward by Conservatives within the Coalition. Often criticised for being ill-defined and vague, the agenda seems to promise that instead of the supposedly heavy state control of public services under New Labour, there should be participation and activism from citizens, as well as a restoration of power to 'professionals' so that they are better able to exercise their judgement and expertise (Jordan, 2011). Central to the ethos of the 'Big Society' project seems to be the idea that those 'capable' and 'least vulnerable' should help those who are 'less able'. These ideas are of potentially of interest in relation to 'the vulnerable', as they seem to point towards a justification for policies and practice in terms of interdependence and the pooling of risks (or vulnerabilities) in communities.

### **The implications of 'vulnerability' in policy and practice**

This discussion has so far illustrated the positioning of 'vulnerability' within political rhetoric and welfare practices since 1997. We now turn to the author's analysis of the implications of drawing on 'vulnerability' in these ways. Three distinct themes related to 're-moralising' seem particularly significant: i) *links between 'vulnerability', state power and professional 'discretion'* ii) *the relationship of 'vulnerability' to citizenship*, and iii) *the vulnerable as 'deserving' of resources*, which are now considered in turn.

### ***Vulnerability, state power and professional 'discretion'***

One of the most striking ways in which we see 'vulnerability' manifested in policy since 1997 is as tacit moral justification for stronger social control mechanisms. Often exceptions made on the basis of perceived 'vulnerability' status have a tendency to enhance the power of 'professionals' to make decisions on behalf of those they support. The 'power of professionals' here refers to the operation of welfare professionals within particular policy environments, rather than the actions of individuals alone. Daniel (2010) has argued that the construction of children as 'vulnerable' connects with a sense of them as the passive recipients of our concerns, which results in practitioners within the child protection system frequently over-riding the wishes of children. In relation to direct payments for disabled people, Hasler (2004) proposes that the conceptualising of this group as 'vulnerable' in 1997 acted to reinforce the power of disability 'professionals'; protecting them from the risks posed by allowing disabled people the power to control their own destiny, at the expense of disabled people's independence. Within the area of prostitution policy too, liberal feminist writers have argued that there has been an 'unethical mobilization of the vulnerability' of women who work in the sex industry on behalf of radical feminists and New Labour, through which the government was able to promote an 'unabated moral agenda' and harsher enforcement mechanisms in state responses to prostitution (Carline, 2011: 331). Scoular and O'Neill (2007) argue that the construction of sex workers as always and inevitably vulnerable is a governance technique which has reproduced binary and idealised notions of citizens, justifying stronger controls where women transgressed accepted behavioural norms.

Policy making on the basis of vulnerability seems to enable a broadening of the regulatory welfare net somewhat by stealth, due to the strong resonance with social justice that notions of 'protecting the vulnerable' engender. A more critical reading of government attention to 'vulnerability' might consider this trend in the context of a trend towards 'behaviourism', a term referring to the growing repertoire of therapeutic concepts and interventions by which people are monitored and reviewed as well as supported and assisted (Harrison, 2010). A seemingly therapeutic focus on vulnerability can be seen to shade into more 'moralising' mechanisms of state governance. Dunn *et al.*'s (2008: 241) legal analysis suggests that 'substitute decision-making' on the basis of adults' situational vulnerability could lead to actions that are 'potentially infinite in scope and application'. This rationale, the authors argue, could lead courts to take action such as prohibiting individuals from embarking on cohabitations with abusive partners if it was felt the 'vulnerable' person concerned lacked the ability to determine the course of action that was least risky for them.

Given the subjectivity involved in decision-making about who is vulnerable, 'vulnerability' has particular relevance at points in welfare and disciplinary systems where professionals exercise judgement, with pervasive practical effects on the receivers of services. Put simply, in increasingly selective welfare systems, people who conform to commonly held notions of how 'vulnerable' people behave may find their entitlement to be more secure. For example, researchers have noted a gendered approach to classifications of vulnerability in housing allocations, with women often benefiting from 'vulnerability' classifications due to their being more inclined to behave with deference and accept dependence (Cramer, 2005; Passaro, 1996). Fawcett (2009) and Warner (2008) cite the case of young black men in mental health service provision as an instance of 'vulnerability' ideas serving to exclude certain groups. Both authors argue that the positioning of young black men as a threat to community security has left this group excluded from notions of vulnerability and therefore omitted from appropriate services. It could be argued that where morality and fulfillment of certain moral obligations and responsibilities become more central to the allocation of

social welfare, inclusion or exclusion on the basis of performed 'vulnerability' may become exacerbated.

In classifying individuals as vulnerable, it would seem that there is also the implication that they need to be controlled. Warner (2008: 32) argues that 'vulnerability' is used in Social Care practice as a by-word indicating risk posed *by* certain individuals as well as *to* them, describing this as the 'vulnerability/dangerousness axis'. Elements of 'stigma' or labelling may in fact be involved in demarcations of the vulnerable, especially given that ideas about vulnerability are most often applied by those in more powerful positions to define those in less powerful ones. Conceptions of vulnerability also link to pervasive binaries through which the behaviour of individuals and groups are interpreted by state officials and support workers. Failure to see past binaries such as 'vulnerability' and 'transgression' can lead to ill-informed public policy which is unresponsive to the moral complexities underpinning the circumstances, behaviours and positioning of social welfare recipients. Youth Justice academics have argued that under New Labour a dichotomous sense of those under 18 emerged, where young people were seen either as 'vulnerable' and incomplete becoming-adults, or classified as dangerous and 'other' in the case of wrong-doing (Fionda, 1998; Such and Walker, 2005; Piper, 2008). It would seem that where they fail to conform to behaviours which match professional interpretations of 'vulnerability', individuals or groups may receive harsher penalties in the criminal justice system or a loss of entitlement to welfare.

The way in which notions of 'vulnerability' have the potential to function as a subtle and informal mechanism for 'social control' has particular relevance for the 'Big Society' project being pursued by the current government. Jordan (2011) argues that 'Big Society' ideas are in part an attempt to 'restore' power to professionals who have supposedly been stripped of professional judgement by cumbersome and debilitating state power. A critique of the operationalisation of 'vulnerability' in social policy suggests that how professionals exercise discretionary power in systems of welfare is also closely linked to the pursuit of and maintenance of particular moral preferences and preoccupations. Combined with a continued emphasis on the protection of the vulnerable, in seeking to 'restore power' to professionals, the 'Big Society' agenda may well intensify moral and behavioural regulation of less well off sections of society. Those who behave in line with common conceptions of 'vulnerability' will be more likely to be accepted into some sort of 'moral community' than those who do not, with practical effects related to benefit reductions or harsher criminal punishment. Combined with the Big Society agenda, emphasis on vulnerability – paradoxically – may serve to further exclude certain groups and individuals who are amongst the most in need of welfare and state support.

### ***Vulnerability and citizenship***

How notions of vulnerability in social policy connect with and map onto notions of citizenship is particularly contested and complex. As the present author has argued elsewhere (Brown, 2011), due to its strong ethical connotations vulnerability can be seen to function in relation to citizenship models in two very different ways. Some writers see notions of 'the vulnerable' in policy as acting to single out certain groups as distinct and 'other', and as patronising and oppressive (Wishart, 2003; Hasler, 2004; Hollomotz, 2010). Due to its connotations of weakness, 'vulnerability' has received particularly notable criticism from those committed to the social model of disability. Wishart (2003: 20) argues that the use of the concept creates images of people with learning difficulties as deficient and as having a 'tragic quality', painting those with learning difficulties as inevitably at risk of sexual abuse because of their impairment(s). Furthermore, by identifying disabled people as 'vulnerable' in government policies

related to 'hate crime', Roulstone *et al.*, (2011) argue that disabled people are often denied the right to be taken seriously in the criminal justice system and that their entitlement to legal protections is diminished. The suggestion here seems to be that where the criminal justice system is preoccupied with a focus on supporting and protecting the 'vulnerable' victim, this negatively affects the apprehension and prosecution of 'perpetrators'.

Others argue (some with almost evangelical fervour) that 'vulnerability' is able to act as a conceptual vehicle for the achievement of equality, autonomy and freedom in society (Goodin, 1985; Turner, 2006; Fineman, 2008). From across the fields of ethics, philosophy and social policy 'vulnerability' has been conceptualised as a potentially transformative notion, able to offer a new model for relations between citizen and state. Often influenced by Rousseau, Kant, or Titmuss' theories of social justice and interdependence, the 'vulnerability thesis' writers contend that vulnerability is a powerful notion when seen as part of the personal, economic, social and cultural circumstances within which *all individuals* find themselves at different points in their lives. According to this view, 'vulnerability' is able to emphasise structural 'causes' of people's varying degrees of fragility and need, engendering a society-wide and blame-avoiding rationing of resources. It has been used as a basis for placing importance on the role of caring for dependents within society (Kittay, 1999; Dodds, 2007) and has been advanced as offering a route into a uniting citizenship model (Beckett, 2006).

In the UK, the dominance of the citizenship model utilised in economic liberalism has rendered attention to 'the vulnerable' in contemporary social policy firmly rooted in a 'paternalistic' welfare model. Notions of 'vulnerable groups' serve to underline the particular construction of individuals which is central to economic liberal models of citizenship; the citizen as 'capable adult', unbound by structural constraints, who needs 'activating' (Harrison, 2010). In this sense, conceptualising groups as 'vulnerable' focuses attention on the individual and *detracts attention from the structural forces* that disadvantage people (Wishart, 2008; Hollomotz, 2010), implicitly emphasising self regulation and 'responsibilisation'. The increased use of the idea of 'vulnerability' in social policy under New Labour and the Coalition could be seen to be part of the trend towards the characterisation of welfare as a 'gift' rather than a 'right'. Used within the paradigm of economic liberalism, government prioritisation of 'the vulnerable' refocuses public policies around personal accountability rather than rights and collective systems (cf Levy-Vroelent, 2010).

Despite gesturing towards notions of mutuality, the idea of the 'Big Society' seems to be premised on these notions of the 'otherness' of 'the vulnerable'. We get the sense that responsibilities in the 'Big Society' are generated through a sense of sympathy for those 'less fortunate', reaffirming an even more potent paternalistic element to the way 'vulnerability' notions operate in social policy in the UK. According to the moral undertones in the 'Big Society', 'the vulnerable' citizen tends not seen as potential or actual contributors to shared public life, but instead as propped up by support given by others who are 'better off'. Understood in this way, the rights of 'the vulnerable' in the 'Big Society' could potentially be diminished by the low expectation of their 'responsibilities' and participation in public life. The agenda also involves reductions in the responsibilities of the state to accommodate 'the vulnerable', with this moral obligation moved from public duty to individual responsibility (cf Jordan, 2011). If combined with the behavioural conditionality which 'vulnerability' approaches to welfare can entail, this may serve to further exclude those who do not respond to welfare with gratitude and deference.



### ***'The vulnerable' as 'deserving' of resources***

Whilst calling groups or individuals 'vulnerable' may be stigmatising in some contexts, the policy of prioritising 'the vulnerable' can also have positive effects for some individuals and groups. Labelling groups as 'vulnerable' can circumvent (or at least attempt to circumvent) their being seen as to blame for their problems, acting as an appeal against the impulse to condemn them for their actions or lifestyles. It is as if 'the vulnerable' occupy the (increasingly rare) position of being without individual agency to control their life circumstances, so can transcend the usual conditionalities applied to resource allocation. This process can function as a moral lever to resources for some individuals or groups, by which their welfare entitlement is justified. Returning to the evaluation of the VGC, we find that stakeholders in children's services received the grant's focus on 'vulnerability' very positively, as it was seen as a notion that could help to overcome prejudice around certain identified groups (Kendall et al., 2004b).

Where 'vulnerability' is not taken as universal, but as something which differentiates people based on differences or deficiencies, it is a concept which overlaps with particularism and the rise of specific interest groups. In an era of financial austerity, this has important implications for the distribution of resources. Levy-Vroelent (2010) argues that the expansion of the 'designation of vulnerable groups' in European housing policy means that the treatment of these groups has become increasingly specialised, and that this has the result of placing persons and groups into competition for rare state resources, diverting attention from overall reductions in welfare. In the UK, Lindstone (1994) has argued that assessing vulnerability under the *Housing (Homeless Persons) Act* leaves ample scope for housing practitioners 'rationing by discretion' in order to ease pressure on scarce resources. The prioritisation of 'the vulnerable' might be seen as sensible financial decision-making in an age of limited welfare resources, but how this strategy gives rise to competing interests and competition for scarce resources should not go unnoticed.

### **Concluding comments: re-moralising 'vulnerability'**

'Vulnerability' is a powerful concept in social policy, and one with pervasive practical effects when 'operationalised'. This is largely due to its strong link with morality, notions of obligation, and ability to shift focus away from the extent to which people are seen as having themselves to blame for their circumstances. On first consideration, where notions of protecting 'the vulnerable' are used in social policy, these seem to resonate strongly with the pursuit of social justice and 'fair' systems of governance and welfare allocation. Ideas about 'vulnerability' help certain groups and individuals to access resources. By virtue of their vulnerability status, 'the vulnerable' are fully-fledged members of the 'moral community', and in some cases are privileged for social welfare, entitled to exceptions from punishments, and exempt from certain citizenship 'responsibilities' on this basis.

Further analysis suggests that these special exceptions and exemptions may come at a price. Labelling groups as vulnerable can be stigmatising, and this process can be seen as tied in with stronger state control and enhancement of professional power. Due to problems defining and interpreting the concept, organising welfare or disciplinary interventions on the basis of 'vulnerability' has the potential to emphasise certain moral preferences and preoccupations at both practitioner and policy-making level. This seems particularly pertinent in areas where the welfare system tends towards being reliant on discretionary rather than more formal processing mechanisms. A focus on 'vulnerability' gives tacit emphasis to the individual factors which contribute to difficult circumstances, rather than the structural forces which may

have influenced life chances and situations. It resonates with citizenship models utilised in contemporary economic liberalism, and paternalistic 'gift'-based systems of welfare.

Whereas notions of vulnerability served to extend state power and control under New Labour, the Coalition government seems to be more inclined to draw on the concept to bolster the moral credibility of welfare cuts. Under both governments though, the governance of 'vulnerability' has been bound up with the morality of welfare, selective systems of entitlement and 'behaviourism'. Those who do not conform to commonly accepted understandings of vulnerability, such as those who do not accept welfare with deference and gratitude, have been less likely to benefit from policies influenced by a 'vulnerability rationale'. Under a government committed to the marketisation of public services and seeking a 'restoration' of professionals' freedom to make judgements, this trend may well be exacerbated. Implying a seemingly unquestionable moral consensus, focusing on 'the vulnerable' gives a façade of being a well-intentioned strategy in a 'just' society, behind which a number of more sinister re-moralising messages are able to operate by stealth. If, as Philip Blond (2011) has recently argued in *The New Statesman*, 'the future contours of British politics will be shaped by the return of morality', we may see this focus on vulnerability become increasingly influential in contemporary social policy. Given its relationship with a narrowing of entitlement and tendency to detract attention away from the state's role in addressing inequality and injustice in society, this trend should be treated with caution.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Fiona was disabled and had repeatedly reported incidents of 'hate crimes' committed against her and her daughter to the police.

<sup>2</sup> Young people on income support are teenage parents, teenagers living away from parents and young people whose parents have died.

## Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank Malcolm Harrison, Ruth Patrick and Teela Sanders for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

\* Correspondence address: Kate Brown, School of Sociology and Social Policy, University of Leeds, Leeds, LS2 9JT. Email: [k.e.brown@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:k.e.brown@leeds.ac.uk)

## Bibliography

- ADSS (Association of Directors of Social Services) (2005) *Safeguarding Adults: A National Framework of Standards for Good Practice and Outcomes in Adult Protection Work*. London: The Association of Directors of Social Services.
- Appleton, J. V. (1999) Assessing vulnerability in families, in: J. McIntosh (ed) *Research Issues in the Community*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Bankoff, G., Frerks, G. and Hilhorst, T. (eds.) (2004) *Mapping Vulnerability: Disasters, Development and People*. London: Earthscan.
- Beckett, A. (2006) *Citizenship and Vulnerability: Disability and Issues of Social and Political Engagement*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Blond, P. (2011) Dave Must Take the Red Tory Turn. *The New Statesman*, 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2011.
- Brown, K. (2011) 'Vulnerability': Handle with Care. *Journal of Ethics and Social Welfare*, 5, 3, 313-321.
- Carline, A. (2011) Criminal Justice, extreme pornography and prostitution: Protecting women or promoting morality? *Sexualities*, 14, 3, 312-333.
- Chambers, R. (1989) Vulnerability, Coping and Policy. *Institute of Development Studies (IDS) Bulletin*, 37, 4, 33-40.
- Children Leeds (2011) *Service Responses to Levels of Vulnerability and Risk of Harm* (diagram), www.leedsinitiative.org, accessed 5th December 2011.
- Cramer, H. (2005) Informal and Gendered Practices in a Homeless Person's Unit. *Housing Studies*, 20, 5, 737-751.
- Daniel, B. (2010) Concepts of Adversity, Risk, Vulnerability and Resilience: A Discussion in the Context of the 'Child Protection System'. *Social Policy and Society*, 9, 2, 231-241.
- Deacon, A. and Patrick, R. (2011) A new welfare settlement? The Coalition government and welfare-to-work, in: H. Bochel (ed) *The Conservative Party and Social Policy*. Bristol: The Policy Press: 161-179.
- Department for Communities and Local Government (2011) *A Plain English Guide to the Localism Bill*. London: Department for Communities and Local Government.
- Department for Education and Skills (2003) *Every Child Matters*. London: Cabinet Office.
- Department for Education and Skills (2007) *Targeted Youth Support: A Guide*. London: Cabinet Office.
- Department of Health (2000) *No Secrets: guidance on developing and implementing multi-agency policies and procedures to protect vulnerable adults from abuse*. London: Cabinet Office.
- Dodds, S. (2007) Depending on Care: Recognition of Vulnerability and the Social Construction of Care Provision. *Bioethics*; 21, 9, 500-510.
- Dwyer, P. (2010) *Understanding Social Citizenship: themes and perspectives for policy and practice*. Bristol: The Policy Press (Second Edition).
- Dunn, M., Clare, I. and Holland, A. (2008) To empower or protect? Constructing the 'vulnerable adult' in English law and public policy. *Legal Studies*, 28, 2, 234-253.
- Fawcett, B. (2009) Vulnerability: questioning the certainties in social work and health. *International Journal of Social Work*, 52, 473-484.
- Fineman, M. (2008) The Vulnerable Subject: Anchoring Equality in the Human Condition. *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism*, 20, 1.
- Fionda, J. (1998) Case commentary: The age of innocence? The concept of childhood in the punishment of young offenders (R v Secretary of State for the Home Department ex parte Venables and Thompson). *Child and Family Law Quarterly*, 10, 1, 77-87.
- Goodin, R. (1985) *Protecting the Vulnerable: A Re-analysis of our Social Responsibilities*. London: University of Chicago Press.
- Gove, M. (2011) Statement to the House of Commons, 28<sup>th</sup> March 2011, From Hansard House of Commons Debates.
- Harrison, M. (2010) The new behaviourism, the 'real third way' and housing futures: some ideas under development. *Paper for HSA Conference at York*, April 2010.
- Hasler, F. (2004) Disability, Care and Controlling Services, in: J. Swain, S. French, C. Barnes and C. Thomas (eds.) *Disabling Barriers - Enabling Environments*. London: Sage.
- Hollomotz, A. (2009) 'Beyond 'Vulnerability': An Ecological Model Approach to Conceptualizing Risk of Sexual Violence against People with Learning Difficulties. *British Journal of Social Work*, 39, 99-112.

- Home Office (2011) *More Effective Responses to Anti-social Behaviour*. London: Home Office.
- HM Treasury (2010) *Spending Review 2010*. London: The Stationary Office.
- James, A. and Prout, A. (1997) *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood*. London: Falmer.
- Jordan, B. (2011) Making Sense of the Big Society: Social Work and the Moral Order. *Journal of Social Work*, 6<sup>th</sup> May 2011 (article published online ahead of print).
- Kendall, S., Johnson, A., Gulliver, C., Martin, K. and Kinder, K. (2004a) *Evaluation of the Vulnerable Children Grant Part I*. National Foundation for Educational Research.
- Kendall, S., Johnson, A., Gulliver, C., Martin, K. and Kinder, K. (2004b) *Evaluation of the Vulnerable Children Grant. Part II*. National Foundation for Educational Research.
- Kittay, E. (1999) *Love's Labor: Essays on Women, Equality and Dependency*. New York: Routledge.
- Levine, C., Faden, R., Grady, C., Hammerschmidt, D., Eckenwiler, L. and Sugarman, J. (2004) The limitations of "vulnerability as a protection for human research participants. *The American Journal of Bioethics*, 4, 3, 44-49.
- Levy-Vroelent, C. (2010) Housing Vulnerable Groups: The Development of a New Public Action Sector. *International Journal of Housing Policy*, 10, 4, 443-456.
- Lindstone, P. (1994) Rationing housing to the homeless applicant. *Housing Studies*, 9, 4, 459-472.
- Mayall, B. (1994) *Children's Childhoods: Observed and Experienced*. London: The Falmer Press.
- Mulcahy, H. (2004) 'Vulnerable family' as understood by public health nurses. *Community Practitioner*, 77, 7, 257-360.
- National Youth Agency (2010) *Briefing on the Spending Review*. Accessed at [www.nya.org.uk](http://www.nya.org.uk) on 5<sup>th</sup> May 2011.
- Niner, P. (1989) *Homelessness in Nine Local Authorities: Case Studies of Policy and Practice*. London: HMSO.
- Passaro, J. (1996) *The Unequal Homeless: Men on the Streets, Women in their Place*. London: Routledge.
- Piper, C. (2008) *Investing in Children: Policy, Law and Practice in Context*. Devon: Willan Publishing.
- Roulstone, A., Thomas, P. and Balderson, S. (2011) Between hate and vulnerability: unpacking the British criminal justice system's construction of disablist hate crime. *Disability and Society*, 26, 3, 351-364.
- Schoular, J. and O'Neill, M. (2007) Regulating Prostitution: Social Inclusion, Responsibilization and the Politics of Prostitution Reform. *British Journal of Criminology*, 47, 764-778.
- Schiller, A., de Sherbinin, A., Hsieh, W-H. and Pulsipher, A. (2001) The Vulnerability of Global Cities to Climate Hazards. Paper presented at the Open Meeting of the Human Dimensions of Global Environmental Change Research Community, Rio de Janeiro, October 2001.
- Such, E. and Walker, R. (2005) Young citizens or policy objects? Children in the "rights and responsibilities" debate. *Journal of Social Policy*, 34, 1, 39-57.
- Turner, B. (2006) *Vulnerability and Human Rights*. Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Waiton, S. (2008) *The Politics of Anti-Social Behaviour: Amoral Panics*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Warner, J. (2008) Community Care, Risk and the Shifting Locus of Danger and Vulnerability in Mental Health in: A. Peterson and I. Wilkinson (eds.) *Health, Risk and Vulnerability*. London: Routledge.

- Watts, M J. and Bohle, H. G. (1993) The space of vulnerability: the causal structure of hunger and famine. *Progress in Human Geography*, 17, 1, 43-67.
- Wishart, G. (2003) The sexual abuse of people with learning difficulties: do we need a social approach model approach to vulnerability? *The Journal of Adult Protection*, 5, 3, 14-27.
- Wright, S. (2009) Welfare to Work, in: Millar, J. (ed). *Understanding Social Security, Issues for Policy and Practice (Second Edition)*. Bristol: The Policy Press: 193-212.
- Youth Justice Board (2006) *Asset*. London: Youth Justice Board.