

International Conference
Vulnerability. Theories and Concepts in Philosophy and the Social Sciences
Organizers: Bernhard Geißler, Frithjof Nungesser, Sonja Rinofner-Kreidl and Antonia Schirgi
Location: University of Graz (Austria)
Date: October 20–22, 2022

In recent years, vulnerability has proven to be a promising field of research, a challenging concept, and a contested issue in public debates. As a *field of research*, vulnerability has gained increasing attention in various disciplines, not only but especially in philosophy and the social sciences. The research community has approached the topic of vulnerability from heterogeneous perspectives, which are, in part, built on different theoretical foundations and diverging methodologies. Despite a number of widely used theoretical references (such as phenomenology or feminist theories), attempts to systematize or integrate the diverse approaches to vulnerability are relatively sparse. An ambitious theoretical debate, however, seems necessary for the advancement of conceptual and empirical research on vulnerability.

Due to its internal complexities and its entanglements with other important concepts and phenomena, vulnerability has also turned out to be an intricate subject of research which entails numerous *conceptual challenges*. Firstly, there is the question of which *entities* can and should be conceived as vulnerable. Can only individuals, or even just human individuals, be considered vulnerable? How does their vulnerability differ from the vulnerability of other entities such as groups, institutions, or systems? Secondly, the *dimensions* of vulnerability need to be investigated. Is vulnerability basically or exclusively a bodily feature? What role do psychological, affective, linguistic, social, economic, cultural, identity-specific and/or other dimensions play? Thirdly, research on vulnerability needs to tackle the issue of *perspective*. Who decides and who has the right to decide on who is vulnerable to what and under which circumstances? Are researchers (or other authorities) epistemically privileged to ascribe vulnerability? Or, are the experiences of the individuals concerned the basic point of reference? Fourthly, the *socio-cultural embeddedness* of vulnerability gives rise to profound questions regarding, for example, the historical emergence or disappearance of certain vulnerabilities or the social conflicts surrounding the hierarchization of vulnerabilities. Fifthly, any conclusive understanding of the concept of vulnerability must consider its relation to *other pertinent notions*. On the one hand, this refers to kindred concepts such as fragility, sensibility, exposure, or risk. On the other hand, the conceptualization of vulnerability is closely associated with (seemingly) opposing notions such as agency, resilience, coping, and even ideas such as invulnerability.

The vocabulary of vulnerability has also increasingly diffused into *political and public debates*. In the last years, the coronavirus pandemic and the measures marshalled to prevent its spread have laid bare various entanglements, conflicts, and hierarchies of vulnerable entities and dimensions of vulnerability (e.g., health vs. economy; the vulnerability of children vs. the vulnerability of aged persons). There has also been a constant struggle over the definition and the adequate perspective on vulnerabilities (e.g., responsibility of the state vs. individual freedom). Similar issues can be observed concerning the ecological crisis, social inequalities, migration, or questions concerning old age and care. Vulnerabilities, their existence, justification, and hierarchization are more and more politicized in various forms (from hashtag activism to civil disobedience) and by diverse social movements, including Black Lives Matter and #MeToo, the Yellow Vests, and protests against Covid-19-restrictions. Thus, both as an analytical tool and a political topos, vulnerability forcefully makes itself felt as a key concept for the understanding of contemporary society.

The complexity of vulnerability requires a systematic and interdisciplinary approach. As vulnerability is a current and increasingly important topic in both research and society, we consider this to be a good moment to broaden and intensify the dialogue between philosophy and the social sciences on this subject. Against this background, we call for contributions from philosophy, the social sciences, and neighboring fields that engage with one or more of the following questions in a theoretically and conceptually ambitious way. While contributions may refer to a specific empirical case, they should take on the theoretical challenge of the conference.

1. What is vulnerability?
 - a. How broadly do we and should we define vulnerability and what dimensions does it encompass?
 - b. Is vulnerability an ineluctable aspect of being exposed to the world or is it a contingent feature of life and thus preventable? How is vulnerability related to neighboring concepts such as fragility, exposure, and sensibility or to (seemingly) opposing concepts such as agency, coping, and resilience?
 - c. Who decides what is to be considered as vulnerability, violation, or injury? The persons concerned, the respective socio-cultural context, or the researchers and other authorities?
2. Who is vulnerable?
 - a. Which entities (systems, groups, individuals) can be vulnerable? How are the vulnerabilities of different entities related? Can vulnerability be seen as a genuinely relational phenomenon?
 - b. Which conceptions of subjectivity are built into the various theories of vulnerability? What are the differences of human and non-human vulnerabilities?
3. In which ways is vulnerability conditioned by the socio-historical context? What is the cultural relevance of vulnerability?
 - a. Is/How is the phenomenon of vulnerability subject to cultural, social, or historical changes? How do social changes create new varieties of vulnerability? Do certain forms of vulnerability disappear in the course of history?
 - b. Is/How is our epistemic access to certain vulnerabilities shaped by cultural circumstances, taboos, or power relations?
 - c. How do we relate different vulnerabilities to each other? How do we evaluate the status of certain vulnerabilities regarding their social relevance? How do we fight over vulnerabilities and their perception (e.g., by politicizing emotions)?

Confirmed speakers: Elodie Boulil (University Paris Est-Créteil/ University of Cologne), Kate Brown (University of York), Patrick Brown (University of Amsterdam), Jagna Brudzińska (Polish Academy of Sciences/ University of Cologne), Thomas Fuchs (University of Heidelberg), Erinn Gilson (Merrimack College)

We invite submissions of abstracts (up to 500 words). Abstracts need to be prepared for anonymous review.

Please submit your abstract to vulnerability@uni-graz.at

Abstract submission deadline: May 1, 2022

Acceptance notification: June 1, 2022

For further information, please see vulnerability.uni-graz.at

This conference is organized in collaboration with the Cultural Sociology section of the German Sociological Association (DGS).