

## **Reconsidering vulnerability in higher education**

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### **Abstract**

Vulnerability appears to be increasing in the neoliberal and corporate authoritarian university. But few articles have explored vulnerability in depth in higher education. This paper thus provides a systematic understanding of vulnerability and considers its implications for academics. First, the author examines vulnerability as conceptualized within psychological and philosophical lenses. The author posits that vulnerability has positive potential and is not just a cause for concern. Next, the paper explores vulnerability in terms of relationality and affect in the context of different professional and social positions, and the rise of managerialism in diverse national and disciplinary environments. That vulnerability circulates through interrelations suggests that it is not a problem that can be ameliorated through giving academics more resources as individuals. Rather, vulnerability stems not from individual neediness or fragility, but from interactive operations and processes within communities. The essay concludes by considering the implications of reconceptualizing academic vulnerability alternatively as a positive learning disposition in higher education.

**Keywords:** vulnerability, higher education, neoliberalism, academic identity

## **Introduction**

There can be no doubt that the academic profession has changed dramatically in the last few decades. As Teichler, Arimoto, and Cummings (2013) note, such changes relate to academics' views of their tasks in teaching and research, their preferences, and their perceptions of their working environments and influence. Such changes can be seen the world over (Becher & Trowler, 2001; De Boer et al., 2007; Leisyte, 2016; Leisyte & Dee, 2012; Postiglione and Jung, 2017; Whitley, 2010). In relation, that academic environments have become more stressful and anxious spaces for academics has emerged as a new theme of research and policy literature (Enders & Teichler, 1997; Williams, 2008). Increased managerialism and accountability demands, accompanied by the rise and normalisation of non-permanent positions, are some key factors here (Chao & Postiglione, 2017, Macfarlane, 2017; Oleksiyenko, 2017). Collegial relationships can be undermined as a result, leading to heightened challenges in particular to scholars in vulnerable subject positions within academic networks and hierarchies.

In this climate of global transition from neoliberalism to corporate authoritarianism (Giroux, 2002; Tierney, 2004), many academics are more vulnerable than before. However, few studies have examined the nature of such vulnerability in detail, in relation to academics' power positions. This paper aims primarily at substantiating the nature of vulnerability in higher education. First, I discuss definitions and conceptualisations of vulnerability from psychology and philosophy, identifying at the outset epistemic vulnerability as a strength of individuals (Gilson, 2014), in contrast to the commonplace view of vulnerability (in higher education studies and elsewhere) as deficiency or weakness. Rather than being a matter of personal choice, I also elaborate on vulnerability in terms of relational processes, and advocate for a positive view of vulnerability in relation to social learning. Thus, vulnerability might be better

conceived not as something academic communities can simply get rid of—but as something which can be enhanced as circulating affect. The problem, in other words, is not vulnerability precisely, but how it is experienced differently across individuals in higher education—and differently across systems, universities and disciplines, as tensions between academic values and market values manifest in diverse ways across contexts.

By implication, challenges and risks in higher education related to vulnerability of academics cannot be resolved through individualistic prescriptions, such as giving some kind of a booster shot to each vulnerable person that removes their vulnerability. Instead, the circulation of positive forms of vulnerability—in particular, what is discussed here as epistemic vulnerability—should be enhanced at processual and relational levels. I thus explore possibilities for enhancing and reconceiving the academic profession in relation to vulnerability at the end of the article.

### **Vulnerability as strength and weakness**

There is a tendency to presume that vulnerability is necessarily a bad thing. This can be seen in discourse, for example, that describes ‘vulnerable populations’. The assumption is that to be vulnerable is to be susceptible to risks and challenges: to be vulnerable, for example, to underemployment, job stress, etc. In psychology, one is said to be vulnerable to depression or anxiety; in sociology, a student may be vulnerable to bullying or academic failure; some people may be vulnerable to cancer and diseases (Gilson, 2014). According to this view, vulnerability is weakness. One should therefore not be vulnerable, at least not ‘too vulnerable’, but aim to be relatively secure from risk or problems (Fineman, 2008). This negative, deficient view of vulnerability is found in literature on academics in higher education (Enders & Teichler, 1997; Williams, 2008).

Yet from a philosophical view, occasions arise where vulnerability is not strictly negative. Particularly in education, one can conceive of contexts where vulnerability has value. Gilson (2014) champions ‘epistemic vulnerability’ as (firstly) an openness ‘to not knowing’, which she casts as ‘the precondition of learning’ (p. 308). As she goes on (2014, p. 309):

Second, it is an openness to being wrong and venturing one’s ideas, beliefs, and feelings nonetheless... Third, epistemic vulnerability entails the ability to put oneself in and learn from situations in which one is the unknowing, foreign, and perhaps uncomfortable party.

As Gilson highlights here, there is something positive about vulnerability from the view of individual and social learning: Vulnerability enables learning. It entails an openness to being proven wrong, or having one’s views challenged. If one’s beliefs or perspectives are ‘invulnerable,’ he or she cannot learn or grow. This has important implications for education and for reforming systems and enhancing environments. Learners and stakeholders who seek positive change at individual or community levels should possess and even develop vulnerability, to be open to new and creative pathways for improvement.

Gilson’s views here are echoed by others discussing higher education from pedagogical and sociological views. Meyer and Land (2003) discuss how ‘transformative learning’ in higher education is often ‘troublesome for students’; it may entail an uncomfortable emotional state. In relation, it has been noted how academics across fields tend to erroneously hold on to and defend their prevailing beliefs in new situations, as a way to evade a sense of uncertainty or newness in facing novel problems. Matsuoka (2017) argues for ‘embracing vulnerability’, by acknowledging her challenges as a feminist early career researcher, seeing these as venues for personal and professional growth and development, rather than merely as obstacles.

Of course, such alternative accounts do not prove or frame vulnerability as always a good thing. There are worthwhile rationales to avoid, prevent, and decrease vulnerability. That people are vulnerable to violence, harm, and forms of oppression are reasons to strive toward less or lack of vulnerability. In Cole's (2016) critique of Gilman's and other work on vulnerability, she argues that a focus on the benefits of vulnerability obscures the differences among various forms of vulnerabilities, and grievances over injustices exacerbating harmful vulnerabilities. She notes that a positive view of vulnerability may work in harmony with neoliberal orientations which cast vulnerability as a personal issue, rather than in terms of systemic (institutional) failures.

For the purposes of this paper, I would suggest it is helpful to understand vulnerability as having both benign and malignant aspects, and as sometimes good and sometimes bad in relation to considerations of social justice. Having more vulnerability than others to oppression and harm is clearly a bad thing. Yet as Gilson (2014) points out, vulnerability is a part of the human experience that is not helpfully seen as always bad *a priori*. Epistemic vulnerability can be healthy and helpful to individuals and communities as a condition for learning and growth, when it exists in a balance with its potentially 'troublesome' emotional aspects (Meyer & Land, 2003).

Normalizing a place for vulnerability in higher education can be done to decrease harms rather than increase harms, depending on the circulation and distribution of vulnerability: that is, *who* in the group is more and less vulnerable, and in what respects. As Gilson notes, epistemic vulnerability, 'is more appropriately demanded of those who are relatively privileged precisely because they have likely not already found themselves in situations in which they are the unknowing, uncomfortable, and nondominant party' (2014, p. 311). When some perspectives and experiences are normalized while others are not, those with minority views are vulnerable to

misrecognition of their concerns. Yet when those with normalized views develop vulnerability, they can learn from others so that social justice can be enhanced. Thus, some have responsibilities to develop good forms of vulnerability in relation to others. Moreover, that vulnerability should be explored rather than evaded in communities is a significant implication here, because without acknowledging the inevitability of vulnerability, and its relational quality—discussed in the next section—it tends to be seen merely as a bad thing that individuals face.

### **Vulnerability as circulating affect**

In contrast with a neoliberal or positive psychology orientation, research on affect identifies how emotional experience does not only occur ‘within’ a person internally, but occurs in meaningful ways ‘across’ people (and other entities), relationally. Ahmed’s work (2004, 2010) is informative here. Taking a common psychological example, Ahmed notes that fear is not a mere physiological response to seeing a bear. Instead, fear occurs out of a particular relation of person and bear. For instance, one is less likely to be afraid of a bear at a zoo, than in his or her campsite. In contrast, a bear might elicit joy at a zoo, because the relationship of the bear to a person impacts his or her feelings. Thus, it is not ‘natural’ to fear bears, but such fear, and other emotional states, occur out of particular sets of relations.

Ahmed uses this lens to deconstruct the way that affect is not simply natural, but socially *cultivated* (2004). She examines happiness (2010) from this lens: For positive psychologists and in neoliberal work environments, happiness is held as human emotional capital that individuals possess and cultivate (Ahmed, 2010; Jackson & Bingham, 2018b). Ehenreich (2009) similarly notes how optimism and positivity are promoted in the context of corporate restructuring and layoffs to make individuals being fired feel accountable, making the problem of mass unemployment seem not political or

economic, but about failure to have a positive attitude. Yet an affective view recognises that feelings are related to the social world outside of the individual's sphere of control. From this latter view, to focus on the individual is to avoid examining relationships, institutions, communities, and structural factors which impact people in different, often unequal and unjust, ways.

In education, a critical view of emotional intelligence therefore retains a place for relationships, institutions, and structures, rather than obscuring these in favour of more simplistic approaches. For example, critical work on meritocracy, positive feelings, and happiness in education recognizes that it may be unequal or unjust to treat all students like they are the same, and should express the same feelings, when diverse students may experience academic challenges that are worth serious consideration, and when educational and other social arrangements do not necessarily benefit all equally (Cigman, 2012; Jackson & Bingham, 2018a; 2018b).

Applying the lens of affect in thinking about vulnerability helps to keep relationships and subjective positions of individuals within communities and organisations in mind, rather than seeing all members of an academic community as equivalent individuals. In other words, it enables recognition that vulnerability in higher education is not just a matter of personal failing or personal risk, but indicates a kind of subject position in the context of interpersonal and institutional relations, which a community can foster, or ameliorate, through its processes and operations. Focusing in on some particular subject positions in higher education can help clarify how vulnerability is not merely an individual but a social and relational aspect of personal experience, reminding that not all academics are equally vulnerable, but that identities and practices shape vulnerabilities and impact people in different ways.

## **Vulnerable relations**

As mentioned above, vulnerability is clearly tied in to particular circumstances and identities in higher education. Among the most vulnerable academics are non-tenured adjunct and pre-tenure staff. The vulnerability of these groups is not incidental or 'natural'; it is not an *a priori* characteristic of this subset of academics. The vulnerability in this case is directly related to, and based in, their lack of job security within higher education institutions. It is based in relations rather than individual dispositions. Research indicates how the rise in non-tenure track positions is related to financial constraints and pressures for economic flexibility in higher education institutions, and the trend is not necessarily complementary to values in research or teaching, such as academic freedom (American Association of University Professors, 1993). Additionally, it has been observed how such academics are voiceless in university governance, with no rights to add input into improving systems, for their own security or for that of the community generally (AAUP, 1993; Atkinson, 2014).

Thus, vulnerability in this case, which is emotional as well as socioeconomic (Atkinson, 2014), has been created as a relation developed in the job position. Although it is possible to imagine (and is recommended professionally, by such organizations as the American Psychological Association) that adjunct and pre-tenure faculty positions be only taken up by those who have outside access to financial security and other resources, in the real world these jobs are only desirable to those without secure financial or professional resources from elsewhere (AAUP, 1993). Furthermore, the bargaining table at most higher education institutions is set up to be undemocratic in relation to these academics. As Atkinson (2014) quotes an academic discussing the situation, 'Because of [adjuncts'] low status in the academic hierarchy, there's a lack of respect there...They often don't feel part of their departments, or the intellectual life of

the academic community.’ Vulnerability in this case is clearly tied into interpersonal relations structured by unequal rights and responsibilities granted to academics in the situation. If an academic is seen as temporary or expendable, he or she is less likely to have his or her concerns taken seriously. This set of relations creates felt vulnerability across impacted individuals.

Non-tenure track and non-tenured academics are disproportionately from disadvantaged social groups, including women, people of color, and people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, so the trend is more likely related to structural inequalities than to outcomes of ‘pure’ meritocracy (AAUP, 1993). In relation, ‘vulnerable’ populations, in higher education and elsewhere, are likely to be those groups who are disproportionately underrepresented in leadership positions. A reason to describe marginalized groups as vulnerable in this context is, again, not due to some ‘natural’ order, but because they have a more difficult time finding recognition by others in positions of power at the bargaining table.

One solution offered in this situation, in the case of women, has been that they should ‘lean in’ to work spaces, acting more assertive, confident, and self-promoting than women often do, to be more like men and assimilate into men-dominated cultures (Sandberg, 2013). The assumption here is that women have some natural, internal vulnerability. This view is reflected in initiatives to empower women by engaging them in interventions (Jackson, 2017). However, from a critical and relational view, it does not typically empower or enable women when they act more aggressive and assertive in the workplace (Jackson, 2017). They are not necessarily compared more favorably with men in this case, but are still judged according to gendered expectations (Leathwood, 2017). They may be seen as bossy or unpleasant. Similar analyses have been undertaken about other minority subject positions academic environments, that show that such

groups are not vulnerable due to cultural or internal deficiencies, but due to the prejudices and biases of dominant group members, and due to their inclusion within systems where their voices and perspectives are not well represented in management and decision making (Gardner, 2012; Mahlck, 2013).

Non-permanent (non-tenured/pre-tenure) and minority academics are two groups facing vulnerability in higher education due to particular subject positions. However, research in higher education shows that permanent staff are also increasingly vulnerable, as they can be made redundant in strongly managerial regimes, such as in the Netherlands (De Boer et al., 2007; Leisyte & Dee, 2012). Thus, vulnerability can also occur due to systems and processes that are rather less directly related to identity positions or professional status. Systems of managerialism and accountability, aligned with business/market values rather than academic/educational values, are seen to impact and increase the vulnerability of academics more generally, as they are increasingly judged in many systems around the world in relation to goals of institutional performance (Leisyte, 2016; Leisyte & Dee, 2012). In this case, vulnerability in higher education may be compared with that in other professions and workplaces witnessing a rise in neoliberal managerialism.

As Chao and Postiglione (2017) note, institutional performance requirements increasingly trickle down into annual assessment criteria for individual faculty continuation, reappointment, and promotion decisions, in ways that demoralize and increase the stress of all academics in some higher education institutions. Although academics see it as their duty to conduct research and teaching to further develop their fields, requirements to conduct research in order to enhance institutional competitiveness raise stress levels across staff in many cases (Oleksiyenko, 2017). Such stress decreases morale and increases likelihood to transfer across institutions.

Vulnerability here thus must not be seen as an individual characteristic, but as a community characteristic, as units are vulnerable to departures and low morale of individual academics, whose individual-level vulnerability may on the contrary be alleviated through obtaining a better position elsewhere. Managerialism can also be seen to exacerbate identity-related marginalization, due to the related tendency for power to be centralized to individuals from privileged class, gender, and racial and ethnic groups (Lumby, 2009).

It is important to note here that such managerialism is not a trend which manifests in the same way across all communities, within or across educational systems. The situation is different, firstly, across nation-state systems of higher education. As Whitley (2010) points out, this is partly due to differences across systems in relation to the influences over research priorities of the state, versus research funding foundations, local, national, and international scientific elites, and private parties (pp. 8-9; see also Leisyte & Dee, 2012). Studies focused on different national contexts reveal more about these contrasting conditions, as well as the level of diversity within countries (e.g., Chou & Postiglione, 2017; Clark, 1997; De Boer et al., 2007), giving rise to questions over the extent to which one can generalize the academic profession globally (Enders & Teichler, 1997; Williams, 2008; see also Leisyte, 2016).

As Becher and Trowler (2001) also point out, differences can be found across disciplines, related to their academic cultures, structural location in universities, local and globalized landscapes, disciplinary socialization traditions, and recognition by public and private funding groups. These differences also impact on individual and community vulnerability in higher education institutions in different ways. Thus, while this paper is oriented toward a theoretical account of vulnerability in academic relations, it is important to note that such relations manifest under the influence of departments

and fields, and institutional and national contexts. The implications of a relational account of vulnerability for enhancing academic experiences in higher education is discussed next.

### **Ameliorating and enhancing vulnerable relations in higher education**

As mentioned in this essay, vulnerability is not something that individuals can or should strive to completely avoid. From a holistic view, vulnerability is a normal part of being a person. Furthermore, there are cases where vulnerability can be seen not as a liability, but as something with potentially positive benefits despite its ‘troublesome’ dimensions. Epistemic vulnerability is needed to learn and be open-minded. If one is not open to being proven wrong and making new realisations, learning is not possible. For this reason, vulnerability is not simply a bad thing—but can be put to use by individuals and communities that aim to grow and improve.

That said, vulnerability does not impact all people in a community in an equal way. Like other affective dispositions, like happiness or optimism, vulnerability as conceptualized here is not merely a matter of personal choice, in contrast with a neoliberal orientation toward feelings which regard them as internal to individuals. Rather, vulnerabilities emerge through relational processes of people with each other, institutions, and other entities. This means that, regardless of whether one sees a case of vulnerability as beneficial or harmful—as an instance of positive learning openness, or as a sign of potential injustice or harm—it is not just an individual characteristic, but is better recognized as relational, communal, and even institutional.

An implication of this view is that it is not enough to conduct individual-level interventions to decrease harmful cases of vulnerability. Trying to decrease harmful vulnerability of women or minorities in higher education through enabling them to better regulate their feelings is not sufficient, because the cause of vulnerability does not

arise with them *a priori*. Instead, their vulnerability (as one example) stems from interrelations and unequal power dynamics. Likewise, non-tenure track and pre-tenure faculty are not intrinsically vulnerable as individuals, but vulnerable because of the way there are positioned and organised relative to other faculty. Boosting rationale in this context will not resolve the problem, which is communal and institutional. In contrast with psychological and neoliberal views, research shows that interventions on individuals will not make lasting change without institutional changes to the status quo (e.g., Jackson, 2017). Further, from a social justice orientation, asking for change within marginalized groups is akin to blaming victims for majority wrong-doing, when it is the system which needs to change, not merely the attitudes of its disadvantaged members (Ahmed, 2010).

Locating vulnerability not in particular identity populations or subject positions, but recognizing it as a feature of communities, enables a different outlook on what can be done to enhance the situation of vulnerability in higher education (Ecclestone & Goodley, 2016). If vulnerability is seen as a feature of relations, one can then query how vulnerability in academic relations can be improved. More specifically, one can examine how vulnerability operates and circulates through particular relations, and whether there are more equitable ways to distribute and circulate it. If vulnerability is not necessarily bad but problematic in its circulation and distribution, one strategy to enhance it yet ameliorate its negative impacts can involve its *redistribution*. For instance, some groups, such as non-tenure track, pre-tenure, and minority academics tend to have too much and harmful forms of vulnerability in relationships with others. Majority and relatively more empowered counterparts have less vulnerability. One might ask whether these latter groups might have insufficient vulnerability. This is not to say that resources that enhance productivity and well-being among these groups

should be taken away. Rather, it is to question, from a productive view of vulnerability, whether they may have less access to, or less encouragement to access and develop, epistemic vulnerability than others.

Embracing vulnerability (Matsuoka, 2017) in this context should not imply simply admitting weakness, but understanding vulnerability as a positive learning disposition. It is to acknowledge that learning is not always a happy and comfortable affair, but may involve *liminality*, in the case that one is unsettled and made insecure, in order to grow and develop (Meyer & Land, 2003). In contrast with market values that emphasize certainty as always a good thing, an alternative academic value for learning and knowledge creation is that of *transformation* (Land et al., 2016). New knowledge is not possible without change and development. Epistemic vulnerability in this context is essential, so that one does not cling to previously held views in order to feel safe. When vulnerability is seen more critically—not as an individual weakness, but as various features of a community which are differentially distributed—epistemic vulnerability can be embraced as essential to enhancing knowledge production, the development of fields and disciplines, and community processes and practices.

Academic communities can therefore reframe epistemic vulnerability not as deficiency, but as a courageous and brave approach to difference and uncomfortable academic and other higher education politics (across junior versus senior, or minority versus majority): as virtuous behaviours and frameworks for academics working in communities to develop more open communicative and deliberative spaces. Seen thusly, empowered academics, including those with more secure and permanent positions and those in hybrid management roles, should learn on the job rather than see their role as that of just teaching others. By cultivating epistemic vulnerability, they can model and enhance positive vulnerability, while at the same decreasing vulnerabilities

of misrecognition and structural inequity of diverse voices and perspectives which enable generalisations of the increasingly vulnerable academic. Seeing vulnerability as a potentially good quality, the typical learning academic should then be reconceived as epistemically vulnerable across diverse professional contexts, from conducting research, to engaging in administrative and other institutional work.

## **Conclusion**

In higher education today, as in other professional contexts, vulnerability is emerging as a pressing concern for academics. As academics become financially vulnerable and increasingly accountable to outside stakeholders, it appears as if much of their vulnerability is passed down and spread across their organisations from the top-down. Many academics thus see themselves today as more vulnerable than in the past. They experience their work expectations shifting and changing, while their voices in their communities become less powerful. Significant populations of academics appear on the margins of decision making and control, such as untenured and adjunct academics and faculty from minority groups. These groups are vulnerable to work stress, as other academics are, which is an increasing cause for concern (Chao & Postiglione, 2017; Macfarlane, 2017; Oleksiyenko, 2017).

This essay has aimed to serve this special issue on vulnerability in higher education by giving a theoretically framed foundation for understanding the nature of vulnerability in individuals and social relations. It has argued, contrary to common-sense views from neoliberal and psychological framings, for a view of vulnerability that does not categorize it as human weakness or deficiency. On the contrary, vulnerability has a positive side, when it is used to be open minded and learn. As such, it can be seen as a positive educational disposition in some cases, rather than as a liability. Furthermore, vulnerability is not just an individual experience, but a relational one.

From an affective view, vulnerability circulates across people, within relations of people with each other and other entities.

In this case, the answer to the question of what to do about the problems of vulnerability is not met with individual interventions or booster shots. Recognizing vulnerability as social and relational, this article has observed on the contrary that decreasing unnecessary and harmful vulnerabilities is a matter of changing unjust sets of relations. This implies not intervening only on so-called vulnerable groups, but intervening on relations and on more situationally and socially advantaged academics. Epistemic vulnerability as a positive feature of human experience can be promoted and cultivated in this context among those in more privileged positions in higher education. No academic should be invulnerable to the views and experiences of others in the various processes and practices involved in developing and nurturing academic communities. Vulnerability cannot be removed, and it need not be, but it should be reconceived, redistributed, and rebranded in thoughtful and inclusive higher education workplaces, in demonstration of core academic values of inclusion, equity, and justice.

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