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**Identity Politics, the Ethos of Vulnerability, and Education**

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**Abstract**

*In this article, identity politics is understood as a form of politics stressing collective but malleable group identities as the basis of political action. This notion of identity politics also allows thinking of identity as intersectional. The focus of this paper, and a problem related to identity politics, is that when discussed in the context of the neoliberal order, identity politics has a tendency to become harnessed by the ethos of vulnerability. Some implications of the ‘vulnerabilisation’ are considered in the field of education, which is a field currently thoroughly affected by neoliberalism. Therefore, it is also important to look closer at the relationship between identity politics and the ethos of vulnerability. In addition, we re-consider poststructuralist thinking as a theoretical and political approach to see what it can offer in terms of re-thinking identity politics and in analyzing the ethos of vulnerability. When categories of vulnerability keep expanding into various psycho-emotional vulnerabilities defining subjects that can be known and spoken about, it is crucial to ask whether we regard these changes as educationally and politically progressive. The article discusses some problematic policies in educational environments and the phenomenon of trigger warnings.*

**Key words: Identity politics, feminism, neoliberalism, vulnerability, poststructuralism, education**

## Introduction

The notions of identity and identity politics have undergone a sea change within theoretical discussions since the last two decades of the 20th century and during the first decades of the 21st. Initially used as a political, analytical and rhetorical tool by feminists, gay and lesbian activists, and activists of color, the concept of identity has since been subjected to intensive scrutiny and critique. Alongside the fight for women's and minority rights, there has been a discursive explosion around the concept of identity and at the same time, it has been subjected to critical examination (Brown, 1995; Hall, 2000; Lloyd, 2005; Alcoff et al., 2006; Lloyd, 2007; Rossi 2015). Despite postmodern and poststructuralist efforts to reconceptualize identity as something constructed, temporally mutable and contextual, some thinkers have been adamant about it being always fixed and fixing, foundational, violent and exclusive (Brown, 1995; Butler, 1990; Davies, 1998; Sedgwick, 1993). Some criticism raised about identity politics has been related to the ways identities have been considered as deterministic (Lloyd, 2005), or desire for recognition has been understood as 'breeding politics of recrimination and rancor,' and as a 'tendency to reproach power rather than aspire to it' (Brown 1995, p. 55). However, it is arguable that neither identities nor identity politics are in themselves positive or negative, but they are politically relevant, and a 'nodal point by which political structures are played out, mobilized, reinforced, and sometimes challenged' (Alcoff and Mohanty, 2006, p. 7).

In this article, identity politics is understood, both theoretically and pragmatically, as a form of politics stressing collective group identities as the basis of political action. These groups—for example ethnic minorities, religious groups, feminists, lesbian women and gay men, trans people, disability groups and working-class people—aim for social recognition of their life challenges. This kind of identity politics, emphasizing shared group identity and we-ness, could be considered as counter-politics to the politics of neoliberal individualism. It can also be considered to present defense of the weak against the dominance of the powerful. Furthermore, since human groups change historically, and since all identities are intersectional, not based on one single aspect (Collins and Bilge, 2016), dynamic theorizing of group identities should take this malleability and multifacetedness into account. The notion of intersectionality and social and historical constructedness of both personal and group identities, as well as the notion of non-fixity and non-

monolithic nature of identities, offer a useful prism for theorizing education as a decisive factor in this construction process.

The focus of this article is the notion that in the neoliberal order, certain forms of identity politics have a tendency to enforce the ethos of vulnerability, and this happens more and more in the field of education.<sup>1</sup> This kind of politics of vulnerability, while focusing on the self and on specific cultural and ideological identity groups, makes their claims on rights, status, and privilege on the basis of a victimized identity.<sup>2</sup> McLaughlin (2012) has argued that political claims are increasingly being made on the basis of experienced trauma and inherent vulnerability, while the previous political demand for recognition has resulted in therapeutic solutions. As such, in the current period the demand for recognition seems not only to take on a specific psychological form but it is also framed by a therapeutic discourse of always-already assumed vulnerability (McLaughlin, 2012). In such contexts of education as university campuses, the issue of vulnerability and victimhood as the basis of identity politics has gained momentum in recent years, for instance in terms of the so-called trigger warnings (i.e., alerts for potentially distressing material), which we will discuss later in this paper.

In order to understand this ‘shift’ in the use of identity politics from a tool for minority rights to a tool for neoliberal order, it should be looked at from a wider perspective, including the neoliberal framing. In education, Davies (2005) has argued that the neoliberal discourse has shifted governments and their subjects towards thinking of survival as an individual responsibility. This is a crucial element of the neoliberal order—the removal of dependence on the social fabric combined with the dream of wealth and possessions for each individual who ‘gets it right’ (Berlant, 2011). According to Davies (2005), vulnerability is ideologically closely tied to individual responsibility—workers who ‘fail’ 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 by those with economic power—and competitive. The notion of social responsibility is transformed into an individual’s responsibility for their<sup>3</sup> survival. This process is thus constructed not as moral,

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<sup>1</sup> Wendy Brown has eloquently theorized on the ways *liberal* discourse recolonizes political identity as political interest, and how disciplinary power converts interest into normativized social identity manageable by regulatory regimes (1995, p. 59). We argue that same kind of re-colonization continues in and by the neoliberal discourse.

<sup>2</sup> Brown also writes about "the wounded character of politicized identity's desire within the context of the United States." (1995, p. 55.)

<sup>3</sup> The pronoun ‘they’ is here used to refer to people not identifying with gender normativity. See e.g. [http://feministing.com/2015/02/03/how-using-they-as-a-singular-pronoun-can-change-the-world/#.VNJazru\\_FYB.facebook](http://feministing.com/2015/02/03/how-using-they-as-a-singular-pronoun-can-change-the-world/#.VNJazru_FYB.facebook) (read 2.4.2017)

but as economic survival (Davies, 2005, p. 9). In the neoliberal frame, education may be seen primarily as a production process of disposable, and therefore both competitive and vulnerable, subjects.

The ethos of vulnerability has come to play an increasingly decisive role in shaping educational policies and practices related to the whole educational system (e.g., Brunila et al., 2017; Brunila, Ikävalko, Kurki, Mertanen, & Mikkola, 2016; Ecclestone & Goodley, 2014). Therefore, it is also important to look closer at the relationship between identity politics, the ethos of vulnerability and the notion of the human subject in the field of education. By taking up some of the implications of the ethos of vulnerability in education later in this paper, we want to argue for a wider analysis of the ethos of vulnerability and how it is operationalized in education.

### **Identity politics and the ethos of vulnerability**

It is important to acknowledge that identity politics come with different flavors. It is also important to see that by utilizing different forms of identity politics as their tools, various social movements have managed to raise both the self-awareness of certain groups, and the privileged peoples' awareness of others living in disenfranchised situations. For example, identity politics related to feminists, working-class, sexual and gender minorities, disabilities, and racialized or ethnicized groups have all brought important differences to the fore. They have all widened the scope of human subjectivity—or what is intelligible as being human (Butler, 2009).

Recently, however, it seems that identity politics often tend turn into questions of vulnerability. In a way, this is nothing new. In Western societies, there is a long history of deploying the concept of vulnerability in the management, classification and categorisation of various groups of people such as sex workers, asylum seekers, refugees, as well as disabled and homeless people (Brown, 2011). Related to education, extensive investments have been made in every European country to reintegrate young people considered 'vulnerable' into educational systems and work (Brown, 2011; Brunila et al., 2017). In these cases, it is crucial to note that 'vulnerability' is defined not by young people themselves, but by those managing, categorizing and classifying the aforementioned groups from the outside, for instance by ministries and education officials.

A critical examination of the neoliberal operationalization of the concept suggests that the ethos of vulnerability in social policy is strongly related to bureaucratic condescension, selective systems of

welfare, paternalism and social control (Brown, 2014). Furedi (2004) has argued that the popularity of the notion of vulnerability in Western societies has fostered ‘a culture of fear,’ where the fear of risk of falling into one of the categories of ‘the vulnerable others’ has become central to for instance media discourses and thus many peoples’ experiences of everyday life. It is therefore arguable that instead of supporting marginalized groups to speak up for themselves (e.g. Marcano, 2009), the notion of identity politics in the service of the neoliberal ethos of vulnerability has become a tool for silencing people considered as others by decision- and policymakers. Or, as Brown (1995, p. 66) has put it, persons are reduced to observable social attributes, and while becoming describable by these attributes, they also become regulated through them. Furthermore, it has been asked whether identity politics will enhance competition between different groups, when the demands by some groups could be considered more legitimate than others. Again, in neoliberal politics and practices, the agency and power to define the level of legitimization has been given to the subjects imposing identities on others, not to those ‘others’ themselves.

Previous research in education has shown that applying the policy categories of vulnerability to worsening structural risks tends to expand into a more diffuse spectrum of psycho-emotional vulnerabilities seen to arise from commonplace, mundane, serious and traumatic experiences alike (Brunila et al., 2017; Ecclestone et Brunila, 2015). This way, more and more people are drawn into the sphere of an expanded agenda of psycho-emotional risks that no longer targets just specific groups but, increasingly, anyone. This is how the current ethos of vulnerability works: by enabling the formation of a compelling strand of regulative and productive power that permeates policies and practices, encompassing subjects that can be known and spoken about. Normalizing and individualising problems, policies and practices inadvertently undermine and limit the human subjectivity. If the students are not not considered proper subjects, they become objects of power within the realm of vulnerability. It is also crucial to acknowledge that universalizing problem solutions favored in psycho-emotional interventions and behavioural training can be quite useless when the problems being tackled are gendered, racialized and classed (Allan & Harwood, 2016).

### **Limits of human subjectivity in the neoliberal order**

Critical discussion on the neoliberal order has also been vivid (Chandler & Reid, 2016; Floyd, 2009; Harvey, 2007) in terms of the notion of human subjectivity that has often been referred to as ‘homo economicus’, an economic and competitive human subject at the basis of politics. According to Lemke (2001)

[T]he key feature of the neo-liberal rationality is the congruence it endeavors to achieve between a responsible and moral individual and an economic-rational actor. It aspires to construct prudent subjects whose moral quality is based on the fact that they rationally assess the costs and benefits of a certain sort as opposed to other alternative acts. (Lemke, 2001, p. 201).

In the neoliberal order, the ideal human ‘homo economicus’ or individual entrepreneur (Brown, 2005; Oksala, 2015) upholds the Cartesian view of the subject and knowledge, i.e., the binary opposition between the mind and the body, and the first dominating the latter. In this order of things, ‘woman’ and ‘black’ are also ‘marks’ in contrast to the unmarked terms of ‘men’ and ‘white’ (Hall, 2000). Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the neoliberal order does not address ethical questions related to differences such as gender, ethnicity or color, class, religion or sexuality. Neoliberalism as an ideology remains nearly completely silent in terms of differences in conditions of human opportunities. This silence demonstrates the limits in thinking of the situational and the relational understanding that human subjects are not ‘free,’ but become subjects conditioned by limits or opportunities defined intersectionally by age, ethnicity, class, gender, ability, sexuality or mental health, for instance (Collins & Bilge 2016). There are also various social prejudices and cultural norms that may restrict people’s choices. By refusing to discuss these cultural and societal aspects and power relations, the neoliberal order ends up re-producing the problem of structural inequality. The inability of this order—cherishing the idea of capitalism—to tackle the ethical questions and power relations related to the human subjectivity produces *a particular kind of identity politics* privileging white, wealthy, competitive, heterosexual western subjects. The neoliberal view of the human is based on a normative grounding, which limits the meaning of humanity by presenting a certain form of ethics as a universal model for any kind of freedom.

This neoliberal version of identity politics tends to strengthen the ethos of vulnerability instead of overcoming it. By interpreting individuals’ problems through expected and appropriate modes of being and knowing, the ethos of vulnerability tends to encourage its proponents to locate problems in the self rather than in society. This way the neoliberal identity politics operates by aiming to ‘autonomize’ and ‘make accountable’ the self without shattering its formally autonomous character. This discourse of autonomization and accountability connects political rhetoric to the self-steering capacities of the subjects themselves, creating the idea of normative individuals who are mentally and emotionally healthy, adaptable, autonomous, self-responsible, flexible and self-centered. At the same time, they are resilient enough to take responsibility for the emotional damage that neoliberalism causes (Brunila & Siivonen, 2016). Problematizing the attempts to fix human subjectivity and identity politics in a neoliberal way has potential to expand the opportunities to

examine and critique situations and circumstances that can be discriminating, hierarchical, and authoritarian.

## **Some implications of the ethos of vulnerability in education**

### ***Youth education in the time of crises***

A considerable number of critical scholars in the field of education argue that we are experiencing a crisis in education, one that is taking place within the larger crisis of capitalism or neoliberalism (Ball and Youdell, 2008; Biesta, 2013; Davies, 2005; Furedi, 2009; Lundahl, Erixon Arreman, Holm, & Lundström, 2013; Peters, 2011). Simultaneously, we seem to be experiencing another crisis in education, one of mental health and well-being. Accordingly, young people and young adults are especially conceptualized as ‘vulnerable,’ or ‘at risk’—in particular those whose transitions to education and work do not go smoothly (Brown, 2014; Brunila et al., 2016, 2017; Ecclestone & Brunila, 2015; Fawcett, 2009; Fionda, 2005).

In youth education and training, the ethos of vulnerability is rarely critically debated although it has not limited its focus on young people living outside of the realms of education and work. Instead it has tended to predispose *all* young people to developing dysfunctions at some point in their lives (Brunila et al., 2017; Wright & McLeod, 2015). It follows that interventions, and early interventions in particular, increasingly impinge on all young people. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that in youth policies and educational practices, vulnerability has been attached to a vast variety of characteristics such as having low self-esteem or a fragile self-image, and being antisocial, mentally unstable, impulsive, needy, anxious or resentful (Brunila et al., 2016; Wright & McLeod, 2015). This has further strengthened interpreting societal problems as individual psycho-emotional deficiencies, not structural problems to be solved by changing policies. Consequently, various labels of vulnerability are offered to describe young people.

Furthermore, education has started to focus more on enabling and supporting people, especially in becoming more accountable for their contributions to the labor market by acquitting them with proper emotional skills (Brunila & Siivonen, 2016). Various cross-sectoral policies, initiatives and programs have become the primary means of preventing disaffection and alleviating the worst effects of the presumed deficiencies. Typical initiatives have included programs for individually-oriented emotional education and emotional pedagogy, happiness and well-being, anger management and behavioral training, mindfulness lessons, as well as peer mentoring and life-

coaching as part of the whole-institution support systems (Brunila et al., 2016; Dahlstedt, Fejes & Schonning, 2011; Irisdottir & Olsen, 2016; Kurki & Brunila, 2014). This type of orientation tends to turn out to be repressive when problems experienced by young people are considered as challenges for individuals instead of policies and practices producing gendered, racialized and classed subjectivities.

Similarly, in addition to its traditional basic task of providing knowledge or information, education seems to be geared towards adding 'skills training', offering opportunities to learn how to be responsible for individual choices and responsibilities, and how to be constantly developing and to become trainable for the education and labor markets (Ecclestone & Brunila 2015; McLeod, 2012). Increasingly, policy and professional discourses insist that children, youths and adults alike must develop competencies of resilience, self-discipline and continuous self-development (e.g. Bottrell, 2009; Kurki et al., in press). In a research focusing on the ethos of vulnerability as a policy imperative, educational sociologist Brunila and her colleagues Ikävalko, Kurki, Mertanen and Mikkola, argued that according to the ethos of vulnerability, resiliency becomes an ideal skill whereby learning is connected with one's own choices and responsibilities. Becoming developmental and trainable is considered as being skilled in the right way. According to Brunila and her colleagues, this ideal resilience is connected with the illusion of individual autonomy, which is created as a consequence of 'autonomizing' the self and making it accountable (Brunila et al., 2016). In education, the shift of responsibility from the society to the individual has indeed increased the vulnerability of the subjects. As categories of vulnerability keep expanding into various kinds of psycho-emotional vulnerabilities, it is crucial to ask whether we regard these changes as educationally and politically progressive.

### ***Education and the culture of trigger warnings***

'Something strange is happening at America's colleges and universities. A movement is arising, undirected and driven largely by students, to scrub campuses clean of words, ideas, and subjects that might cause discomfort or give offense,' wrote Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt in the education issue of *The Atlantic* in September 2015. They were referring to the phenomenon of so-called 'trigger warning': alerts that university professors are supposed to issue if they anticipate that anything in their course might cause strong emotional responses in the students. The general idea is to avoid the possibility that course material might trigger a recurrence of past trauma. (Lukianoff and Haid, 2015.) In this article, we use the phenomenon of trigger warnings and the discussion on



and around them, as one example of the problems posed by the entanglement of the notion of vulnerability and identity politics.

There has been ample debate both for and against trigger warnings in educational contexts, and both modes of reaction may be analyzed in the frame of the ethos of vulnerability. Educators resisting the use of trigger warnings may refer to over-protection of students, or cultivation of victimhood. Teachers speaking for the warnings, however, may see them as a tool for sensitivity training and thus as a way of strengthening the subjectivities of the students and their identity politics. Lukianoff and Haid<sup>4</sup> interestingly compare the accusations of political correctness imposed on academics in the 1980s and 1990s to the current situation of trigger warnings and the notion of ‘micro aggressions.’ It is their argument that the discourse of the 1980s and 90s tried to restrict hate speech aimed at marginalized groups—thus supporting their identity politics— and to widen the artistic, philosophical and historical canons and to make them more diverse, again participating in the identity-political struggles. We would argue that another way to put it is to understand these political moves as working for subjects looking for recognition. The political atmosphere of the present trigger warnings, according to Lukianoff and Haid, is different: ‘The current movement is largely about emotional well-being,’ they write (2015). They interpret the atmosphere demanding trigger warnings as ‘vindictive protectiveness,’ as a continuum of the protectiveness of American parents over their children since the 1980s, and as a reaction to the increased unsafety felt at schools since the 1999 Columbine school massacre—and to the brittle political polarization in the US (Lukianoff and Haid, 2015).

The main point of Lukianoff and Haid is, however, that the numbers of emotional crises and outright cases of mental illness among students has increased, and this has changed the way university staff and faculty interact with them. The writers do not talk about the ethos of vulnerability in so many words, but nevertheless they discuss the ways education could strengthen the subjectivities and identities of the students, and they end up recommending fostering the teaching of critical thinking and resisting what they call ‘emotional reasoning.’ They also refer to psychiatrist Sarah Roff’s article published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (2014) in which she resists the principle that discussing difficult aspects of history would be dangerous or damaging as such. This kind of reasoning, mixing discourse and physical danger, stresses the imagined vulnerability of students.

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<sup>4</sup> Lukianoff is a constitutional lawyer working as the CEO of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education and Haid is a social psychologist studying the American cultural wars.

Also, the queer theorist Jack Halberstam (2014) has taken up the issue of triggering and trigger warnings in his blog *Bully Bloggers*. Halberstam takes an autobiographical journey through the cultural feminism of the 1970s and 1980s, to the poststructuralist, intersectional 1990s, when, according to his interpretation, ‘books on neoliberalism, postmodernism, gender performativity and racial capital turned the focus away from the wounded self’ (Halberstam, 2014). He reminds his readers that, for feminists of color, identity politics have always played out differently compared to the identity politics of privileged white feminists, but he also states that the newly-emerged rhetoric of trauma and vulnerability ‘divides up politically allied subjects into hierarchies of woundedness’ (Halberstam, 2014). Instead of recognizing that neoliberalism works by individualizing structural exclusions, Halberstam claims that some people equate social activism with statements about individual harm and psychic pain. He wants us to argue for more situated claims to marginalization, trauma and violence, not to ‘huddle in small groups feeling erotically bonded through our self-righteousness’ (Halberstam 2014).

However, not all educators equate trigger warnings with infantilizing, de-subjectivizing, or objectifying students. Philosopher Kate Manne (2015) traces the practice of trigger warning to Internet communities using them for the benefit of their members suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. As a university teacher, she takes students’ potential traumas seriously and suggests, that ‘[w]ith appropriate warnings in place, vulnerable students may be able to employ effective anxiety management techniques.’ (Manne 2015) In addition, she thinks that students who do not need any warnings, might nevertheless become sensitive to the fact that some people around them might find some materials difficult to deal with. However, unlike Lukianoff and Haid, she does not think that the warnings, carefully used, would feed into a culture of victimhood. Quite the contrary, she calls for teachers’ judgment in order to take into account the students’ subjectivities. ‘It’s not about coddling anyone,’ she writes, ‘It’s about enabling everyone’s rational engagement.’ (Manne 2015.) We would add that teachers should take into account the multifacetedness and processual nature of the students’ subjectivities and identities.

### **Re-reading poststructuralism for a new kind of discourse on identity politics**

The critique of the self-sustaining subject at the center of post-Cartesian Western metaphysics has been comprehensively advanced in poststructural theories and their critical approach to human subjectivity (e.g. Bordo, 2004; Derrida, 1981; Foucault, 1970; Hall, 2000; Lloyd, 2005). Michel

Foucault, whose ideas have been discussed widely in poststructural thinking, considered the meaning and value of ‘humanity’ as something that is open and shifting. According to him, instead of a theory of knowing, we should look for a theory of discursive practices. This does not mean abandonment of the subject but a reconceptualization—thinking about the subject in its displaced or decentered position (Foucault, 1970; see also Hall, 2000). It is crucial to understand this notion of subjectivity in order to see how the choices people make stem not so much from the individual, but from the condition of possibility. The discourses prescribe not only what is desirable, but also what is recognizable as an acceptable form of subjectivity (Butler, 2008). In education, thinking in discursive terms provides the opportunity to see how certain discursive constructions in relation to human subjectivity and identity are appropriated while others are discarded, relegated, and considered irrelevant or even threatening. Only then does it become possible to take up and engage in an alternative discourse with new ideas and values. We argue that this kind of critical approach, especially if applied in education, could create ruptures in power relations, at least locally, in a certain space and time. In comparison to the neoliberal ethos of vulnerability, this kind of poststructuralist thinking insists that people’s activities are not simplistically repressive or emancipatory. Instead, a discursive understanding illuminates agency as a subjectivity-in-process and as the effect and redeployment of power (e.g. Butler, 2008; Davies, 1998; Ecclestone & Brunila 2015; Foucault, 1970). In education, this understanding could help teachers to keep in mind that it is worth exploring language as a tool for constructing social and cultural reality through juxtaposition, categorization and hierarchies. This kind of approach means taking into consideration societal differences as produced through politics, culture and practices. The practice of critical reading and thinking in discursive terms can demonstrate the process of cultural and hierarchical construction of the opposing pairs, their mutual dependence and the construction of their meaning through a hierarchical difference.

In order to see identity politics, human subjectivity and education from a different perspective, we need to be aware of the discourses through which we are spoken about and speak about others and ourselves. It is therefore crucial to find fault lines and fractures in these discourses, analyze and deconstruct them, try to find new discourses and thus make new subject positions possible. In analyzing the relationship between the ethos of vulnerability and the different ideas on human subjectivity, we argue for re-considering a poststructural framing of identity politics (see also Rossi, 2015, p. 99) .

It seems that, because of the current popularity of the ethos of vulnerability in neoliberal discourses, neoliberalism has found a pervasive way to harness the subject for its own purposes in an attempt to promote the idea of the human subject as something essential and potential. The neoliberal order and the ethos of vulnerability are both tied to a notion of an autonomous self, which can discover itself through a fixed identity, by acknowledging its individual faults and deficiencies, getting rid of psychic and emotional vulnerabilities, and becoming a self-disciplinary agent, flexible when encountering challenges.

The illusion of individual autonomy is created as a consequence of ‘autonomizing’ the self and making it accountable. Human potential can be fulfilled when essential human needs are encountered and realized in the ‘right way’ (cf. Naskali, 2003). This means addressing human beings as if they were selves of a particular normative type, with individualized subjectivity, but endowed with similar hopes and dreams waiting to be recognized and fulfilled to their highest potential. As long as this kind of approach remains untouched, it is able to shape people to conform to it without using force or domination, but rather by enabling them to realize what is supposedly good. In this way, flexibility and self-responsibility or accountability mean limited opportunities to speak and to be heard, by ensuring that one implicitly learns to find mistakes in, and to blame, only oneself (Furedi, 2004).

In order to dismantle the neoliberal order and the ethos of vulnerability, there is a need for an alternative perspective to the rigid notion of identity and subjectivity as essentialist, stable, individualized and coherent. To open up channels of discourse that allow us to create some distance from existing normative identities and identifications and their preset meanings and categories, it is crucial to recognize the fault lines of the power relations related to the ethos of vulnerability. To undermine the status of neoliberal notions of identities and identifications one must question the relations they construct between the subject, agency and politics. One way to get this process started is to begin to ask how discursive constructions related to the ethos of vulnerability take hold of the body and desire, and how certain discursive constructions are appropriated while others are discarded, relegated as irrelevant or even threatening (Petersen, 2008, p. 55).

Judith Butler and Bronwyn Davies’s accounts of the subject provide one way of understanding agency as a subject-in-process and as an effect of power (Butler, 1997; Davies, 1998). Butler has stated that the ‘the subject is neither a ground nor a product, but the permanent possibility of a certain resignifying process’ (Butler, 1992, p. 13; see also Davies, 2005, p. 1). If the ethos of

vulnerability is a regulated performative process of repetition taking place in discourses and bodily actions, it means that options exist to repeat it differently—for instance in the contexts of education. Indeed, according to Butler, it is the very *constitutivity* of the subject that enables her/him/them to act within these forms of power, which are not only regulating but are also productive. Because the capacity to act is not a possession, there is no need for a pre-existing subject in agency (Butler, 1997). For example, when involved in the discourse of vulnerability, one is both conditioned by and dependent on the prevailing norms (cf., Butler, 2008).

We find that it is crucial to find a way to talk about identity politics and human subjectivity as sites of constant negotiation and agency without a fixed or foundational notion of subject or identity, especially in training teachers and researchers of education. This task had already been taken up by many poststructural thinkers several decades ago, but it is a project still in progress (e.g. Brown 1995, p. 75). Working on the question of identity construction would allow educators to see that problems concerning the ethos of vulnerability are products of different practices, policies and power relations, and therefore, always negotiable and changeable. This would also have several implications. We should understand the alliance of the neoliberal order and the ethos of vulnerability, and look more closely at how they work and what their consequences are, both in classrooms and in society at large. Davies (2005) makes the point that:

It is in our own existence, the terms of our existence, that we need to begin the work, together, of decomposing those elements of our world that make us, and our students, vulnerable to the latest discourse and that inhibit conscience and limit consciousness. (p. 13)

In the realm of education, as Brown (1995) has suggested, we could also seek to supplant the fixing ‘language of ‘I am’’ with the language of ‘I want this for us’ (p. 75)—thus also shifting the focus from individualism towards a more communal notion of identity, and possible alliances in terms of identity politics. Furthermore, including the perspective of intersectionality in curricula, starting at the level of basic education, would help the students to understand the complexities of identities, relationalities, networks of power and categorizations.

Certain authors have approached vulnerability as an ontological condition with a transformative potential to promote social justice and human rights (Brown, 2011; Butler, 2009; Ecclestone & Goodley, 2014). Butler (2009), for instance, argues that the vulnerability of a subject is a question of ontological precariousness of life. For her, precarity refers to that political condition ‘in which

certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support more than others, and become differentially exposed to injury, violence and death' (Butler, 2015, p. 33). It starts to be expressed in actual social situations in which the vulnerability of a subject emerges, relating for instance to the instability of the labor market or changes in political governance. Unlike the neoliberal notion of vulnerability, imposed on certain categories of subjects from above through policies, this notion of vulnerability brings forth a context, or a structure of relations, or societal conditions, which may be changed through subversive politics.

By 'ontology,' Butler does not refer to fundamental structures of being that are distinct from any social and political organization. On the contrary, according to her, this kind of being is 'always given over to others, to social and political organisations that have developed historically in order to maximize precariousness for some and minimize precariousness for other'' (Butler, 2009, p. 2–3.) This understanding of being is linked to the idea that subjects are always constituted through norms, which in their reiteration, produce and shift the terms through which subjects are recognized. These normative but not over-determined conditions produce a historically contingent ontology. Our capacity to discern and name the 'being' of the subject is dependent on norms that generate that recognition (Butler 2009).

For Butler, interruptions or inadvertent convergences with other networks might produce subversive citations that disrupt the pre-ordained iterability of subjectivity (Butler, 1997, p. 135). This could be considered to be a way to resist, because in this poststructural discourse on precariousness, vulnerability and interdependency, these ideas are not meant to turn people inwards or to make them feel weak, unlike in the neoliberal discourse of the ethos of vulnerability (Kurki and Brunila, 2014). Quite the contrary, they can enable new forms of identity politics and new alliances.

According to Stuart Hall, resistance may be found in the attempt to rearticulate the relationship between subjects and discursive practices in which the question of identity recurs. Reclaiming of the term 'queer' by activists, theorists and LGBTQI identifying people is a good example of this kind of rearticulation. It has thoroughly changed the way queer now signifies in discursive practises. Or, if one prefers to stress the process of subjectification through discursive practices, and the politics of exclusion, which all such subjectification appears to entail, the question of identification always remains in process, never completed (Hall, 2000).

Accordingly, re-thought through poststructuralist thinking, the concept of identity in the identity politics could be considered not as essentialist, but as constructed across intersecting and antagonistic discourses, practices and positions, relational and positional, without signaling the stable core of the self. Precisely because identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse, we need to understand them as being produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices. One may also stress the processual ‘nature’ of identity by rather talking about *identifications* as ways of situationally attaching oneself to and/or distinguishing oneself from discourses, practices, positions and other subjects (Rossi, 2015).

Moreover, according to Hall (2000), identities are constructed within the play of specific modalities of power, and thus are more like products of the marking of difference and exclusion, than self-identical, naturally constituted unities. Above all, identities are constructed through, not outside, difference. This entails the radically disturbing recognition that it is only through the relation to the Other that the ‘positive’ meaning of any term—and thus its ‘identity’—can be constructed (Derrida, 1981). Therefore, identities can function as points of identification and attachment only because of their capacity to exclude, to leave out, to render ‘the outside.’ That is, the unity, the internal homogeneity, which the term identity in its conventional sense treats as foundational, is not natural, but a constructed form of closure. Every identity names its necessary ‘other,’ which it ‘lacks’ — even if that other is silenced and unspoken (Hall, 1992). However, there is no need to conceptualize the other through exact (Cartesian) opposition, either. It is possible to see one’s own position as a stranger in this relationship of otherness. It is just a matter of the point of view, or perspective of identification.

Thus, according to Hall, the ‘unified subject’ is constructed within the play of power and exclusion. It is not a result of a natural and inevitable primordial totality, but is an effect of the naturalized, over-determined process of ‘closure’ (Bhabha, 1994; Hall, 1992). Also Alcoff (2012) argues that a realistic form of identity politics is one that recognizes the dynamic, variable, and negotiated character of identity.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, we have argued that the neoliberal order, together with the ethos of vulnerability, produces a very definite version of identity politics. The main reason for this is the unelaborated idea of the human subjectivity within the neoliberal order, and neglecting to take into account

questions of differences, inequalities, hierarchies and ethics. As a counter-move against this account making subjects weak and interchangeable yet competitive, we have proposed an account of identity politics based on re-reading poststructural notions of identity and subjectivity.

What does this mean in the field of education? It is of the utmost importance within education to widen the debate about human subjectivity and the processes of identity and identification. This is pertinent especially now, when both neoliberalism and the ethos of vulnerability tend to shape the notion of human subjectivity in a similar way: by creating the illusion of individual autonomy as a consequence of the ‘autonomization’ and ‘accountability’ of the self. Thus, also in the field of education, strongly influenced by neoliberalism, the ethos of vulnerability tends to become more and more powerful. Consequently, the position from which people get heard is established by recognizing their vulnerabilities, injuries and emotional problems including low self-esteem and stress, and labeling and categorizing them according to these vulnerabilities. Vulnerabilizing problems, traumas, policies and practices inadvertently undermines subjectivity and resilience. Controversy around the phenomenon of trigger warnings is just one example of this tendency. In these neoliberal times, vulnerability needs further deconstruction because neoliberal discourses work by disguising their real purposes: providing legitimation through vulnerabilization for shaping people to become more governable and eventually more economically productive subjects. In terms of policies and their implementations, we should further explore the alliance of neoliberal order and ethos of vulnerability, and look more closely at how they work together and with what consequences. With the approach we have offered in this article, it is possible to consider in more detail the kinds of actions, within in the educational policies, curriculum and educational practices, that shape the notion of human subjectivity and identity politics, in order to avoid an even firmer societal division of people in education.

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