

# Unsettling vulnerability: Queer and feminist interventions

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## Abstract

In this Special Issue we invited an international audience to address the aim to unsettle notions of vulnerability and question the research practices associated with its use in the psychology discipline. The seven articles<sup>1</sup> expose the paradoxes of vulnerability by starting from experience in different countries, such as: India, Chile, South Africa, Finland, and the USA. They do so by critically interrogating the notion of vulnerability, often cutting across intersectionalities such as: institutional constructions of vulnerability, populations identified as “vulnerable”, researcher’s own vulnerabilities, and the lived experience of “vulnerability”. The papers are presented in this editorial through a cohesive narrative, which highlights topic and contextual specificities of each as well as commonalities and intersections across them. By encouraging new practices for how feminist and queer researchers view, read, and interpret experience in psychological research and activism, this special issue aims to inspire different understandings of vulnerability, that reflect discourses and experiences that promote agency, resistance, solidarity, and transformative social change through transnational collaboration and connection.

## Keywords

critical, feminism, psychology, queer, transnational, vulnerability

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Vulnerability is a widely used concept, label, and category in the social sciences, particularly in psychology, public health, mental health, social work, policy making, and care related services and professions (Virokannas et al., 2020). However, as Honkasalo (2019) puts it, vulnerability can be a sticky concept that conveys “negative” undesirable traits or positionality, especially when used in opposition to its “positive” counterpart: resilience. Critical research is not new to questioning the notion of vulnerability (see Brown et al., 2017; Butler et al., 2016; Fineman, 2019; Mackenzie et al., 2014) and its role in shaping research (i.e., Johnson & Martínez Guzmán, 2013; Macleod et al., 2018; Reddy & Amer, 2023). However, what is required is a critical interrogation of “vulnerability” as an institutional instrument that entrenches normative discourses of *who* is vulnerable and from *what*, and how it limits the ability of research to be genuinely disruptive and transformative. In this Special Issue (SI), we bring to light the way in which researchers have stumbled on (against or through) vulnerabilities when “doing research” in a range of geopolitical contexts with different research cohorts. We are mindful that vulnerability is a variegated term and, therefore, when we refer to “vulnerability,” we are in fact referring to “vulnerabilities,” and it is these and their complex relationships to self, others, place, race, history, and culture that can be unsettled and transformed in the process of doing feminist and queer psychological research.

Critical psychological research, in branches such as community psychology (Walker et al., 2022) or in topic areas such as gender and sexuality (Johnson & Martínez Guzmán, 2013), has a long-standing tradition of attending to concerns with representation and materiality, while promoting social action to improve lived experiences and challenge inequalities. Queer and feminist methodologies also pay close attention to the values and ideological assumptions associated with knowledge production and social action. This includes illuminating power relations; the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which phenomena are studied; and the relationship between knowledge production and social change. Yet, these theoretical and methodological lenses used can result in both intended and unintended consequences for lived experience and social transformation (Brown, 2011). For instance, in participatory action research (PAR) the intended consequence is to create social change while creating new knowledge. However, PAR projects often have the unintended consequence of reinstating a normative representation of the group for whom they aim to create change, by starting from the position of (re)defining them as vulnerable or marginalised and in need of social change (Johnson & Martínez Guzmán, 2013). Queer, or rather perspectives that seek to *queer* knowledge production, bring an additional imperative to act as an intervention by unsettling these types of normative assumptions and disrupting conventional expectations about how categories such as “vulnerability” are addressed, and their place in research on gender and sexuality. Framing the “unsettling of vulnerability” in terms of queer and feminist interventions calls first for the interrogation of heteronormative assumptions found in all knowledge, to challenge “what these interpretations do.” Secondly, it calls for regenerative readings and practices that offer alternative, antinormative, and more hopeful possibilities for experience (Johnson, 2015).

In this SI, we invited an international audience to address the aim to unsettle notions of vulnerability and question the research practices associated with its use in the field. Far from dismissing the importance of ethical approaches to research, here we ask: What does it mean to set up categories of vulnerability when doing research with people *we*, as feminist and queer researchers, deem vulnerable? What is left out of *their* lived experience accounts when researchers do not ask certain questions? What orientations (Ahmed, 2006) towards vulnerability do we as researchers bring into our research, and how do these affect the knowledge we produce, the stories participants are able to tell researchers about their lives, and their relationships? By *Unsettling Vulnerabilities*, contributors are asked to challenge the dichotomic categories of vulnerability as intrinsically good or bad, right or wrong, enriching or risky. The aim is to transcend this binary dilemma by becoming aware of “how things are,” “how they came to be,” and by generating new perspectives on the multifaceted realities of being vulnerable as a population, participant, researcher, and sometimes all at once.

One way of unsettling normative assumptions is to “find a new place to begin” (Johnson, 2015; Sedgwick, 2003). In this SI, the articles expose the paradoxes of vulnerability by starting from experience. Often, notions of vulnerability are used to protect subjects from harm or (further) oppression but, paradoxically, they can perpetuate it, perhaps under new forms, for example, by limiting people’s access to research (Johnson, 2007) or by encapsulating their narratives into categories that do not reflect the overabundance of their lived experience (Treharne et al., 2018). If the aim is liberation from oppression, as feminist researchers, we need to go beyond binary and oppositional interpretations (Johnson, 2015), and beyond the doctrine of vulnerability and the regimes of truth it produced (Foucault, 1994/2019; Van den Hoonaard, 2018), to a place where we can understand experience as both good and bad, vulnerable and resilient.

In *Unsettling Vulnerabilities*, the articles claim the contextually specific nature of vulnerability, and question the ontological, epistemological, methodological, ethical nature of understanding and the institutional use of vulnerability in policies, practices, and academic research. Moreover, they argue for awareness of and liberation from entangling narratives that effect counterproductive practices to social justice and wellbeing, such as further silencing or pathologising the voices and lived experiences of those who are already marginalised (for examples, see the articles in this SI). While not always stated explicitly, this investment in *Unsettling Vulnerabilities* is:

Inspired by Butler’s questioning of the inherent paternalism and the fixed political position of powerlessness attached to vulnerable groups in human rights and legal debates, a critique that resonates with a similar paternalistic stance within public health and research ethics. (Thapar-Björkert et al., 2023, this issue, p. 338; see also Butler, 2016)

Therefore, the articles in the SI draw on feminist and critical theory, and a shared commitment to the primacy of experience and praxis in queer, decolonial, and transnational ways of approaching the subject(s).

## **Vulnerability tales of I and others**

The first article on “Re (locating) Vulnerability in the Surrogacy Industry in India” highlights culturally contextualised practices and discourses of vulnerability that perpetuate injustice and inequalities (Thapar-Björkert et al., 2023, this issue). Namely, the authors bring to the reader’s attention the role of vulnerability in the narratives surrounding commercial surrogacy in India. For example, they show how the vulnerability of intended parents (IP) is used to undermine the rights of donors, particularly in the face of the racial, social, and economic privilege IP exert over donors. They also point out how surrogacy agents, who connect the different actors involved in a surrogacy process, are cogs in the machinery of perpetuating oppression and exploitation. Yet, becoming a surrogacy agent is an aspirational job for both ex-intended parents and ex-donors because of the financial incentives. The “intended parent who becomes an agent” (p. 335) and the “surrogate and egg donor becoming an agent” (p. 335) justify becoming an agent after a successful involvement by using two different social discourses, which are both based on significant power asymmetries and on a problematic use of the concepts of self-determination, help, and justice. They both describe their trajectories as a win-win tale, which does not transform the systemic roots of oppression, but rather reproduces a powerfully crafted and cohesive narrative of neoliberalism.

In the second and third articles, an art-based autoethnography in Finland and a self-reflective account of a research in South Africa, deeply question the extent of the researcher’s own vulnerabilities in the context of researching sexual violence. In “Am I Vulnerable? Researcher Positionality and Affect in Research on Gendered Vulnerabilities,” Venäläinen (2023, this issue) reflects on their onto-epistemological vulnerability in carrying out a project on “sexual harassment and young people,” by drawing on arts-based approaches and new materialist affect theory. The effect is to make the reader feel uncomfortable with the researcher’s vulnerabilities, therefore creating novel experiential knowledge through inspiring empathy. Ultimately, this forces a shift within critical approaches from the analysis of asymmetries to the experiences of connect-*edness*, via a shift from knowledge to experience.

In “Attending to Vulnerability in Sexual Violence Research” in South Africa, Helman (2023, this issue) reflects on the ways that womxn enact agency and resistance in sharing “their experiences of rape [which] are entangled in complex dynamics of shame–vulnerability–silence–agency” (p. 382). By exposing the researcher’s own vulnerabilities, this article sets out a clear and brave example of how researchers may fail to witness and attend to their participants’ lived experiences and voices. Both in Helman’s and Venäläinen’s articles, the researcher is deeply entangled in the project; however, as Venäläinen posits, and Helman shows, “On what ground to assume similarity and the license to know?” (p. 367). These “uncomfortable truths” disrupt the normative notion, and the pressures that come with it, of vulnerability as well as the researcher’s supposed invulnerability. (See also Huckaby, 2011, on researcher and researched relations of power and vulnerability; and Foucault, 1980, for a systemic overview of power and knowledge.) As both articles claim, critical engagements with vulnerability are needed to disrupt academic practices of vulnerability, even within qualitative and postqualitative methodologies.

The questioning of researchers’ and participants’ identities and their respective narratives raises a reflection about the boundaries of “I” and “others.” Whilst it is beyond the

scope of this editorial to provide a comprehensive (ontological) argument, it is worth noting the ongoing misconception in Western societies and science that “Self” and “I” are synonyms (Watts, 1957). The key to disentangling this is, as the articles in this SI attempt, to try to think outside of the (Western) box. As editors, we do not propose that we need a new theory or method, but rather new ways to experience, sense, and perceive what it means to be “I,” and a clearer understanding that no one can ever really give an accurate account of oneself (Butler, 2005). The common and normalised perception of “me” as knowable in terms of “my body” or “my identity” is a fraud and forces us into ego-thinking about “us and others,” “subjects and objects” as separate entities, therefore deceiving our senses (Watts, 1969). Instead, the Self, which can be experienced but not known in a cognitive sense, is the lived experience of self *as* other. At an individual, relational, and systemic level, a lack of awareness that self and others are essentially the same can prevent compassion, solidarity, equity, and instead favour exploitation, separation, and oppression. This points to the possibility for a new experiential way to *be with others* (or *be as others*), and therefore to *be with vulnerabilities* (or *be vulnerable as others*).

## **The personal is political, the political is psychological**

Pillay (2023, this issue), in the fourth article, draws on Anzaldúa’s (2012/1987) queer feminist theory of Borderlands to reframe their intersecting vulnerabilities in terms of advantageous potential, through a personal narrative that starts with “becoming visible.” Following a similar path to Helman (2023, this issue) and Venäläinen (2023, this issue), they reflect on their own experiences, in the latter case, the intersectional experience of becoming a queer, South African of Indian descent “academic-activist” while doing a PhD. They offer an intervention that stems from “heightened reflexivity” about the “vulnerable advantages” that exist because of, rather than in spite of, vulnerable disadvantages based on their race and sexuality. This enables them to reconfigure and celebrate “vulnerability” in terms of its political potential “for academic-activist solidarities, and its psychopolitical positioning within a decolonial and social justice agenda” (Pillay, this issue, 2023, p. 405).

The fifth article by Kaulino and Matus (2023, this issue) also engages with the practice of “making visible” by bringing to the forefront structural and institutional failures in the conceptual use and practical applications of vulnerability, and its role in exacerbating rights violations for children and adolescents in Chile. This process is similarly noted within a related account of vulnerability and trans women prisoners in Australia and the US by Brömdal et al. (2023, Vol 33, Issue 1). Kaulino and Matus (2023, this issue) propose that the institutional “appropriation of the concept of vulnerability” within a narrative of individual deficits, which is ascribed to children and adolescents in protection programmes in Chile, hides a much-required fairer assessment that would point to the structural failures of such systems. According to the authors, the institutional use of vulnerability reflects a widespread and ingrained tendency to individualise suffering, rather than exposing the systemic failures of the protection programmes. These programmes end up reproducing the violence and trauma already experienced, when they should be attempting to heal the children and adolescents caught up in them. Kaulino and Matus propose an alternative

theoretical framework that includes the concept of epistemological violence, the theory of recognition, and the feminist theory of institutional trauma to push “programs oriented to people with traumatic experiences ... beyond individual symptoms to identify and fight against the legacies of patriarchy, capitalism, and colonialism as forms of violence that structure the world” (p. 422). Adding to these *Vulnerability Tales*, the authors are explicit on how such processes are enabled by the impact of 3 decades of neoliberalist policies and discourses, whereby in order to strive for development, the “inequality gaps” have been semantically replaced by “vulnerable people.”

Further attending to systemic issues, Brömdal et al. (2023, Vol 33, Issue 1) discuss how trans women incarcerated in male settings in Australia and the US attain to their gender identity, gender expression, and intimacy whilst coerced by cisnormative carceral policies and practices. Like the example of *Servicio Nacional de Menores* (SENAME) in Chile (see Kaulino & Matus, 2023, this issue), prisons operate as total institutions that effect systems that do not protect the “vulnerable” subjects they are given custody of. Brömdal et al. (2023) argue that “the concept of ‘citizenship’ of total institutions, designed to homogenize identity claims of individuals and limit choices in order to reproduce a socially acceptable citizenry, is inherently problematic” (p. 56). In fact, it appears that in “Navigating [their] intimate trans citizenship while incarcerated in Australia and the United States” (p. 42), trans women try to bridge the gap between the public and fixed aspect of intimate citizenship perceived as political, and the personal and performative aspect, perceived as intimate. Understandably, these two cannot be decoupled as the personal/psychological is political/collective, and vice versa (Arendt, 1958; Prilleltensky, 2008; Walker et al., 2022). Finally, the authors interpret trans women’s enactment of intimate citizenship as “authentic expressions of self-determination” (Brömdal et al., 2023, p. 57) and innovative and creative ways to enact resilience and exert grit to face and subvert the structural violence, injustices, and oppression perpetrated by the (identifiable) actors inhabiting the total institution in everyday life.

In the final article of this SI, a transnational account of challenges to the “ideology of vulnerability” is provided by activists from the Global Feminist Project (GFP). Savaş et al. (2023, this issue) outline several discourses highlighted by international feminist activists as fostering and perpetuating a colonialist, patriarchal, and capitalist vision of cultural, gender, and socioeconomic relationships. Many activists have denounced the ongoing (white) assumption of empowered subjects as supposedly aware and liberated and as “framing racialised black or brown ‘Third World’ girls/women as vulnerable victims” (Savaş et al., 2023, this issue, p. 432)—a dynamic perhaps most obviously encapsulated in the problematic phrase “giving voice.” Within this conceptualisation, most programmes and actions stem from a principle of “protection” rather than “participation.” It is worth noting that, similarly to Venäläinen (2023, this issue), protection is aligned with an analysis of asymmetries, whereas participation is mobilised to focus on the sharedness and connectedness of experiences. Another reflection within this framework is that NGOs are “motivated by charity rather than solidarity” with the twofold effect of “transferring the responsibility for baseline social welfare from the government to NGOs,” and failing to “identify the [systemic] root causes of poverty and injustice” (Savaş et al., 2023, this issue, p. 441). In this sense, the discourses of

vulnerability, protection, and charity serve a wider predatory neoliberal discourse that supports outdated colonialists and patriarchal stances disguised under a false pretence as new or novel, and in stark opposition to the goal of community empowerment, grass-root participation, and transnational solidarity.

Savaş et al. (2023) also point to the role of psychology as a discipline, and the psy professions, in medicalising and pathologising vulnerability (see Marecek & Lafrance, 2021, on the politics of psychological suffering). Echoing Kaulino and Matus's (2023) work on protection programmes in Chile, Savaş et al. claim that this is another manifestation of the neoliberal trend to fix a structural problem at the individual level. By pathologising the individuals who suffer instead of the macro system that produces the conditions of people's suffering, the neoliberal system is never challenged, disrupted, transformed. All changes are merely ameliorative, in that they tackle a small portion of the problem while leaving the structures of oppression unaltered, and those stuck within them labelled as "vulnerable."

## **Towards transnational queer feminist action**

This SI provides a critical interrogation of "vulnerability" as an institutional instrument that entrenches normative discourses of *who* is vulnerable and from *what*, limiting the ability of research to be genuinely disruptive and transformative. Drawing on critical feminist and queer frameworks, the articles collected in this SI examine the nexus of research, practice, and institutional gatekeeping, by exploring sites and acts of resistance against these normative pressures through both research and research-informed action.

By *Unsettling Vulnerabilities*, this issue gathers theoretical and evidence-based international work to challenge dominant assumptions and practices involved in doing academic research with populations ascribed as "vulnerable." The papers critically interrogate the notion of "vulnerability," often cutting across intersectionalities such as institutional constructions of vulnerability, populations identified as "vulnerable," researcher's own vulnerabilities, and the lived experience of "vulnerability." By encouraging new practices for how feminist and queer researchers view, read, and interpret experience (Moreno-Gabriel & Johnson, 2020) in feminist research and activism, we hope this SI inspires different understandings of vulnerability that reflect discourses and experiences that promote agency, resistance, solidarity, and transformative social change through transnational collaboration and connection.

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## Note

1. Please note, as addressed in the Publication Notice of this issue, that the article by Brömdal et al. (2023) "Navigating intimate trans citizenship while incarcerated in Australia and the United States" does not appear in this Special Issue. Please find it in *Feminism & Psychology*, Volume 33, Issue 1, p. 42–64. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353522110222>

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