

Call for Papers: Special Issue of the *Zeitschrift für Soziologie (ZfS)* on:

Vulnerability and Society

Edited by Eddie Hartmann (Hamburg) and Frithjof Nungesser (Graz)

In recent years, numerous disciplines, particularly those close to sociology, have increasingly addressed the subject of “vulnerability” and related issues: from social philosophy and ethics (e.g., Liebsch 2018a/b, 2021), feminist and political theory (e.g., Butler 2016; Butler et al. 2016; Gilson 2014; Huth 2016), to geography and climate science (e.g., Rajan and Bhagat 2018), to history (e.g., Lignereux et al. 2020), law (e.g., Albertson Fineman 2017), and education (e.g., Aktaş 2020; Burghardt et al. 2017). The considerable attention devoted to the subject recently in various neighboring disciplines of sociology cannot be separated from a political climate that promises to sensitize us to all possible forms of vulnerability. Addressing vulnerability has become a highly controversial political issue that touches on our relationship to the self and to the world. Some examples of this are current debates on the rights of minorities, women, children, or animals (e.g., Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011: 61), urgent warnings concerning the collapse of vulnerable ecosystems (e.g., Kaufmann and Blum 2013), discussions about “vulnerable groups”, and conflicts between different vulnerabilities (physiological, psychological, legal, economic, etc.) in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Lindemann 2020: 101ff.), semantic revisions of racist terminology in children’s books (e.g., Marmer and Sow 2015; Nel 2017), or criticisms of the often involuntary or unauthorized processing of sensitive personal data in the course of digitalization (e.g., Mau 2017: 268). On the other hand, however, we also see criticism of, for instance, excessive sensitivity, “political sentimentality” (e.g., Bargetz 2017), or recent debates about “cancel culture” (e.g., Revers and Traunmüller 2020).

Sociology, conversely, struggles to develop its own research perspectives in response to the interdisciplinary discourse on vulnerability. Although sociology has become somewhat more attentive to the subject recently (K. Brown 2011; K. Brown et al. 2017; P. Brown 2022; Hentschel and Krasmann 2020; Nungesser 2019a, 2019b), probably partly as a result of

numerous crisis discourses, undeniable social tensions, and a growing social awareness of various forms of vulnerability, it has been unable to develop its own research perspectives following the interdisciplinary discourse on vulnerability. In particular, research with a more general sociological orientation has made virtually no serious attempt to date to make good use of the concept of vulnerability as a socio-analytical concept. One reason for this might be that the term has been used in a number of very different ways so far, sometimes unsystematically and often with explicitly normative aims, which may make it seem unsuitable for a sophisticated analysis of society (on the terminological vagueness, see K. Brown 2015: 3; Gilson 2014: 4; Mackenzie et al. 2014: 1). Not only is vulnerability a highly controversial concept in scientific discourse, however, but it has also become an important semantic topos of conflict-ridden interpretive practices in various social fields. This is precisely what makes it such a pressing and instructive subject of both theoretical and empirical sociological research.

Against this background, the special issue of the *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* takes the doubly contentious character of vulnerability in research and society as its starting point. On the one hand, vulnerability as a social phenomenon is always bound to changing modes of perception and symbolic articulation of everyday experiences, which are inextricably linked to social conflicts of interpretation in which the meaning and recognition of specific experiences of violation and vulnerability are contested. Therefore, this special issue focuses first on the fundamental entanglement of bodily experience, the articulation of this experience, and the sociocultural repertoires of interpretation in order to remain open to the transformations and contentious nature of vulnerability phenomena in their empirical diversity. On the other hand, this perspective also implies that research itself cannot entirely escape the conflicts surrounding the social transformation and perception of vulnerability. But how can we theoretically conceive the subject of vulnerability as a *sociological* research question in light of this methodological entanglement and what empirical approaches can be used to address it?

The focus of this issue outlined above can be systematically developed using two analytical perspectives:

- (1) First, a diachronic perspective on *the social transformations of vulnerability* looks promising. This allows us to examine the classificatory shifts through which certain entities are perceived as vulnerable, while others may lose this status. The diachronic approach also brings to the fore the historical, cultural, and institutional circumstances in which specific forms of vulnerability are articulated and challenged, acquire specific empirical manifestations, and gain or lose significance.
- (2) The second main approach is to analyze *the politicization of vulnerability* in a way that conceptually and empirically captures the various conflict dynamics surrounding vulnerability phenomena. Key questions, debated in multiple social domains, include whose experiences or fears of vulnerability are perceived as important, whether they

appear legitimate at all (or, for example, oversensitive or presumptuous), and whether moral or political claims arise from these.

We invite proposals for theory-driven empirical as well as theoretical contributions that systematically draw on the research perspectives outlined. The special issue is open to very different theoretical and methodological approaches. Also, the interaction between the social transformation of vulnerability and the dynamics of its politicization can be studied on very different sociological levels. For instance, analyses of media reports, legislation and court decisions, or protest campaigns can shed light on the perception, recognition, and contentiousness of vulnerability claims in public and political arenas. It can also be examined how organizations deal with perceptions of vulnerability in society or how they participate in structuring vulnerabilities—for example, through discriminatory structures or awareness concepts. Finally, the question of how individual experiences and articulations of vulnerability are facilitated, prompted, or restrained by cultural and institutional changes and social conflicts also appears to be key.

We invite proposals for papers in the form of detailed **abstracts** (one to two pages) to be sent by the deadline of **April 24, 2023**. In a first review step, the abstracts will be checked to determine how well suited they are for the special issue. Authors of selected contributions will then be asked to submit their manuscripts directly to the guest editors by October 31, 2023. The contributions will then undergo the usual double-blind peer review of the *ZfS*. The publication of the special issue is planned for 2024.

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