

Naming Vulnerability: A Diaconal Dilemma of Designation

Abstract:

Naming is a way of exercising power. The practice of designation in diaconia causes dilemmas. As a contribution to the self-critical examination of language use in diaconal studies and work, this article discusses the ever more common practice of designating some particular groups as “(the) vulnerable.” Such a designation may appeal to ethical and diaconal action, but it may also contribute to stigmatization and paternalism – and undermine the potential of solidarity and resistance inherent in focusing on the common condition of vulnerability. In its discussion of this dilemma, the article argues that diaconal practice should make shared vulnerability its normative basis and accordingly avoid the general designation of “(the) vulnerable groups.” Rather, it should apply alternative linguistic strategies.

Keywords:

vulnerability, precariousness, diaconia, designation, autonomy, agency, Robert Goodin, Judith Butler

Who we are, even our ability to survive, depends on
the language that sustains us.
Judith Butler (2016, 16).

1. Diaconia and the Power of Language

Designation is an act of force. Language exercises power and is governed and determined by it, as Michel Foucault famously discussed in his inauguration lecture as professor of the Collège de France on 2 December 1970: “L’ordre du discours” (Foucault, 2001). There, Foucault explores the double meaning of the word “order” as both “structure” and “command.” This “order,” issued in any expression or discourse about the world, is a crucial insight in diaconal work. Naming is never neutral. For instance, Patrick Dahlet showed how the seemingly positive re-naming of “*favelas*” to “*comunidades*” in a Brazilian context paves the way for increased control and security measures and targeted police action against the populations of such

areas (Dahlet, 2016). The issue is not just political, but rather deeply personal and existential: “Who we are, even our ability to survive, depends on the language that sustains us,” Judith Butler notes. She calls this a “linguistic vulnerability” (Butler, 2016, 16).

Diaconia can be understood as strategic action aimed at protecting and transforming lives and building a sustainable community, interpreted in light of Christian faith.¹ Such interpreted action must self-critically reflect on the power of its language and the use of force implied in naming. If any designation is an act of power, then even the presumably well-intended description of some particular people or groups as “(the) vulnerable” should be critically scrutinized. The question is not whether power is present in such designation; the question is to whose advantage that power works. What is implied when certain people or groups are termed “(the) vulnerable”?

In discussing this question, I part from the distinction between “us” and “them” as a challenge to all social work, including diaconia. Through an example from Eurodiaconia, I then show that the new tendency to designate certain groups as “the vulnerable” is becoming prevalent in the diaconal field. From recent interdisciplinary studies on vulnerability, I subsequently identify a duality in the conceptualization of human vulnerability to shed light on the dilemmas related to designating certain groups and people in this way. By reviewing arguments in favor of such naming, I discuss particularly the work of Robert Goodin. I then proceed with counterarguments and highlight four themes: agency, responsibility, self-naming, and relational autonomy. Here, I make use of recent contributions from feminist ethics and critical theory, such as – in particular – the work of Judith Butler. In the final section, I draw conclusions for the field of diaconal practice and research. Human vulnerability should be understood as shared but differentiated. Designating particular groups as “(the) vulnerable” undermines rather than supports a nuanced understanding. Hence, I recommend that diaconal actors should avoid such designations altogether.

2. The Vulnerable: “Us” or “Them”?

A problematic dichotomy haunting all social work that aims to establish mutual and dignified relations lies in the distinction between the helpers and those being helped, between benefactors and beneficiaries. We find many versions thereof, and they keep changing over time. The problem is that the asymmetric relationship

¹ I present reasons for this hermeneutical emphasis in the definition of diaconia in (Stålsett, 2019; 2021.)

between these two entities may be construed – whether tacitly or overtly – in ways that play into schemes of superiority and subordination. Almost any academic, political, activist, or bureaucratic discourse risks reflecting this dichotomy, with its underlying structure of “us” and “them.” The question I raise here is whether, and in case how, calling certain groups vulnerable, or even “*the vulnerable*,” serves to reinforce this dichotomy.

The question needs critical scrutiny because in diaconal work today it has become common to speak of “the vulnerable groups.” The European network *Eurodiaconia* connects churches and Christian NGOs providing social and healthcare services and promoting social justice. Based in Brussels, its members are organized in 52 diaconal organizations in 32 countries.² Hence, its way of describing diaconal work may seem to be representative of the sector. In a recent report, it is noteworthy how it makes general use of the designation “vulnerable groups” in its advocacy. Eurodiaconia sets out to “... reflect on the impact of Covid-19 on some of the most vulnerable groups affected by it (e.g., the homeless, children, Roma, or refugees) from the perspective of our members and how they continue to support them in the best way possible” (Mildred, 2020, 15).³ Other groups are also included among those named vulnerable: older people, people living with debt, (undocumented) migrants, asylum-seekers, people with disabilities, people experiencing mental health issues, and “others” (Mildred, 2020, 13). The report’s central section is entitled “Impact on the Vulnerable” (Mildred, 2020, 25). One of the recommendations is that “The EU must ensure that the EU recovery plan benefits the poor and vulnerable” (Mildred, 2020, 40).

This seems to be a trend. Groups formerly called the “needy” or “weak groups in society” are now often designated “(the) vulnerable.”⁴ Such naming is well-intended and may be preferable compared to some of the alternatives just mentioned. Furthermore, this description is undoubtedly correct: No one would deny that groups such as the ones mentioned by Eurodiaconia are vulnerable. Moreover, in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, describing some particular groups as at greater risk of becoming fatefully ill were they to contract the virus was important to legitimating particular measures and priorities. Even so, we must ask whether using the term

2 See <https://www.eurodiaconia.org>, accessed 10 June 2021.

3 See <https://www.eurodiaconia.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/202009-Impact-of-COVID-19-on-Diaconal-Services.pdf#page=25&zoom=>, accessed 9 June 2021.

4 See e.g., (Hugman, Pittaway, & Bartolomei, 2011), and <https://www.eqavet.eu/eu-quality-assurance/glossary/vulnerable-group>, where the EU defines “vulnerable groups” as “Groups that experience a higher risk of poverty and social exclusion than the general population. Ethnic minorities, migrants, disabled people, the homeless, those struggling with substance abuse, isolated elderly people and children all often face difficulties that can lead to further social exclusion, such as low levels of education and unemployment or underemployment.” Accessed 9 June 2021.

“vulnerable” in this way might unintentionally become a subtle form of othering or exclusion. Although useful for calling attention to something and demanding action, it may still fuel the stereotyped and stigmatizing dichotomy between the helpers and the helped, between “us” and “the others.” This dilemma can be traced back to a duality in the concept of vulnerability.

3. Identifying Two Dimensions of Human Vulnerability

Vulnerability has become the focus of renewed analyses in various scientific disciplines. Beyond spectacularly popular TED talks⁵ and commercial self-help literature on the topic, researchers within such diverse fields as ethics, phenomenology, psychology, political theory, law, and theology have published innovative research on the theme (see, among others, Mackenzie, Rogers, & Dodds, 2014; Springhart & Thomas: 2017; Bedford & Herring, 2020). In their compilation *Vulnerability. New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy* (2014), Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers, and Susan Dodds identified two kinds of responses to the question: “What is vulnerability?” (Mackenzie et al., 2014, 4-7.) The first one is directly related to the root of the word vulnerability, the Latin *vulnus* or “wound.” “To be vulnerable is to be fragile, to be susceptible to wounding and to suffering; this susceptibility is an ontological condition of our humanity ...” (2014, 4.) The cause of this fragility is our human embodiment, and yet we are vulnerable not only to *physical* harm; we are dependent on others for our life and well-being in many ways, including the social and psychological dimensions of human experience. Vulnerability and dependency are thus interrelated.

The other approach lies in focusing on the fact that *some* people or groups are more vulnerable than others. Seeing vulnerability as contingent upon context, life circumstances, and situations, this approach highlights “inequalities of power, dependency, capacity or need that render some agents vulnerable to harm and exploitation by others” (Mackenzie et al., 2014, 6). Mackenzie et al. add further nuance to the distinction between these two approaches in a taxonomy of vulnerability, according to which the primary sources for vulnerability are seen to be either as (1) inherent, (2) situational, or (3) pathogenic⁶, while its states are either (1) dispositional (potential) or (2) occurrent (actual) (2014, 7ff.). In the same volume, Wendy Rogers notes that, in the European Commission’s ethical principles

5 See, for example, the TED talk by the psychologist Brené Brown with close to 50 million views https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_the_power_of_vulnerability/transcript, cf. Brown, 2015.

6 Pathogenic vulnerabilities “... may be generated by a variety of sources, including morally dysfunctional or abusive interpersonal and social relationships and socio-political oppression or injustice” (Mackenzie et al., 2014, 9).

for bioethical research, “once again two concepts of vulnerability are at work: the idea of universal ontological vulnerability, and the idea of the especially vulnerable, those whose autonomy or dignity or integrity are capable of being threatened, who need extra care and protection” (Rogers, 2014, 75).

These two ways of approaching human vulnerability appear in other studies, too. For example, in her ethical-theological treatment of the theme published in the compilation *Exploring Vulnerability*, Heike Springhart argues for an “anthropological realism.” She holds that such a realistic account of the human condition must include a revised understanding of vulnerability (2017, 13-33). Similar to MacKenzie et al., she distinguishes between ontological or *fundamental* vulnerability (i.e., as a shared human condition) and *situated* or contextual vulnerability, meaning “... vulnerability in different levels of realization, as there are social, cultural and environmental conditions that increase or lower vulnerability” (Springhart: 2017, 17-18). To Springhart, the two dimensions are not necessarily contradictory: “it is the *complementarity* of ontological and situated vulnerability that makes vulnerability a value of human life” (2017, 24, my emphasis).

4. Complementarity or Tension?

Becoming critically aware of these distinct ways of perceiving vulnerability is essential to diaconal work. One challenging question is how they relate to each other. Springhart’s harmonious approach, seeing the two approaches as simply complementary, runs the risk of glossing over the fact that there also is an inevitable tension between them. This tension emerges in a more complex and detailed manner in Judith Butler’s influential work on vulnerability or, as she also frames it, “precariousness” (Butler: 2006, 2010, 2020; cf., Butler & Athanasiou, 2013; Butler, Gambetti, & Sabsay, 2016).

It was the tragic events of 11 September 2001 that triggered Butler’s interest in this phenomenon (2006, xi; 2010, 24). How could the sudden, unprecedented, and intensified awareness of vulnerability in the aftermath of the attacks serve to a more critical understanding of the human predicament and its demands? To Butler, precariousness is the condition we all share as embodied humans. This condition is in itself ambiguous: It both sustains and endangers life. It is directly related to the body, and yet it is socially and politically produced and reproduced. “The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency,” she writes, “the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of all these as well” (2006, 26). In other words, Butler shows how a particular, contingent, and violent act of terror discloses the commonality of vulnerability in the human condition. She laments

that the post-9/11 opportunity for a new solidarity following from this experience of a shared human condition seemed to be quickly lost.

On the other hand, Butler is certainly aware that not everyone is a victim of violence. All do not equally share experiences of injustice, cruelty, suffering, or sorrow. Some lives are more endangered than others, and many people live under unbearable conditions. Butler calls this condition “precarity.” So, to her, while precariousness is the bodily condition all humans share (2006, 20), precarity is the concrete, particular instances of oppression, accidents, or violent acts that threaten to destroy some people’s well-being and life (Butler & Athanasiou, 2013, 20.) The two dimensions, in Butler’s account, are distinct but related: To “critically evaluate and oppose the conditions under which certain lives are more vulnerable than others,” we must, she writes, start from “an apprehension of a common human vulnerability” (2006, 30). The ethical call to take responsibility for alleviating the precarity of others emerges here from the sense of shared vulnerability: “From where might a principle emerge by which we vow to protect others from the kinds of violence we have suffered, if not from an apprehension of a common human vulnerability?” (2006, 30). Butler then argues that it is necessary to recognize vulnerability as a shared human condition to comprehend the vulnerable experiences of others as a call to solidarity and ethical action.

5. Identification and Protection

Still, the tension present in seeing vulnerability as common to all and yet unique and differentially distributed is not easily resolved. Wendy Rogers (2014) thinks the two dimensions of and approaches to vulnerability – the ontological and the circumstantial or the inherent and the contingent – have led to “something of a theoretical impasse.” Hence, she holds that they should be better distinguished as this could make it easier to “identify the vulnerable and respond to their needs in morally defensible ways” (Rogers, 2014, 83). In other words, in her judgment, if everyone were conceived as vulnerable, this might contribute to “invisibilizing” people who require immediate help.

The *Eurodiaconia* report seems to be following this line of reasoning, as we saw above. Vulnerability is the condition of some particular groups. One consistent rationale for this approach can be found in Robert Goodin’s book *Protecting the Vulnerable. A Reanalysis of Our Social Responsibilities* (1985). In his reflection on the ethical and political implications of vulnerability, Goodin holds that “(i)t is dependency and vulnerability rather than voluntary acts of will which give rise to these, our most fundamental moral duties” (1985, 34). Through his “vulnerability model,” Goodin argues that those who are most vulnerable to our actions and neglect are the ones to whom we are most responsible. Our task is always to protect

the vulnerable, that is, to be “forestalling the threatened harms” (1985, 110). Being responsible, according to Goodin, means being held accountable for our actions and choices (1985, 113). Thus, vulnerability, responsibility, and consequences are in Goodin’s approach intimately linked: “Vulnerability amounts to one person’s having the capacity to produce consequences that matter to another. Responsibility amounts to his (sic.) being accountable for those consequences of his actions and choices” (1985, 114).

So, in Goodin’s view, identifying the particularly vulnerable to protect them is crucial to ethics. It helps us make judgments about *whom* we should assist, *who* should assist them, and, to a certain degree, *what* we should do. “In short,” he says, “the argument for protecting the vulnerable is first and foremost an argument for aiding those in dire need” (Goodin, 1985, 111). According to this reasoning, a universal and ontological view of vulnerability is too broad. Referring to all the shared conditions of all human beings would be of little or no help when aiming to overcome particular threats to some specific human lives and their well-being. It would rather obscure than identify the groups or individuals that are in dire need of help.

Goodin is certainly right in underlining how people are vulnerable in context-specific ways. Particular needs and demands may be overlooked if all are considered to be equally vulnerable. In other words, particular vulnerabilities should be identified. This identification is essential to diaconal work. It must constantly recognize particular demands of different groups and people and prioritize in the face of limited time and financial resources. However, in the emphasis put on “our responsibilities” for identifying the vulnerabilities of others, Goodin’s approach may be seen as reproducing the divide between “us” and “them.” A clear-cut distinction between the vulnerable and those responsible for protecting them leads us directly back to the dichotomy addressed above.

6. Whose Agency?

As the example from Eurodiaconia shows, some groups are almost routinely listed as vulnerable, e.g., the poor, the migrants, and the Roma. At the same time, we saw in the report that the group designation “the vulnerable” was also diversified, making the label less precise: Persons with debt, mental illness, any kind of disability, and, more generally, children and elderly people are included among the particularly vulnerable. This observation echoes Rogers’ comments concerning an EU list regulating research in the field of bioethics:

(A)ccording to this list, not many potential research participants are *not* classified as vulnerable. This blanket approach to labelling vulnerable populations renders the notion of vulnerability otiose and therefore of limited use in responding to specific vulnerabilities (...) (T)he concept becomes so broad as to be meaningless, or at least useless in terms of mandating specific responses (...). (Rogers, 2014, 69)

Applying the designation “vulnerable” to many and diverse groups would seem to make it less, not more, concrete and operational. It does not describe exactly how this or that group is vulnerable and what response that vulnerability might demand. Rather, it only calls them out as candidates for care from others, from “us.”

This observation leads to a critical concern regarding the practice of naming specific people or groups as vulnerable, a concern related to agency. When we speak of some human beings or groups as particularly vulnerable, we direct attention to what they *lack*., The power asymmetry involved in such naming can make the situation even more problematic, by engendering passivity and low self-esteem. The state of dependency and fragility can be construed as destiny, as a sort of captivity from which one can only be saved by others. In other words, the designation may objectify people and undermine their agency and dignity. Mackenzie et al. (2014) thus rightly note that being defined as vulnerable “can engender a troubling sense of powerlessness, loss of control, or loss of agency” (2014, 9). And, as Richard Sennett points out in his analysis of respect in a world of inequality, “charity itself has the power to wound; pity can beget contempt; compassion can be intimately linked to inequality” (Sennett, 2003, 20).

7. Whose responsibility?

Robert Goodin’s vulnerability model focuses on *our* responsibilities. What is crucial to Goodin is that “others are depending upon us” (Goodin, 1985, 11). His model has the merit of showing that relationships of dependency and vulnerability are never symmetrical. No one is completely independent or invulnerable; people are always dependent and susceptible to harm in unique and contingent ways. Goodin also underlines the inescapable duty of the ethical subject. The responsibility for responding to the ethical demand emerging from the vulnerable other is indeed a foundation for moral action.⁷

However, the one-sided focus on “our responsibilities” in Goodin’s consequentialist approach paradoxically threatens to overlook or even conceal that the *other*

⁷ See, for example, different phenomenological approaches to ethics such as E. Lévinas (1972) and K. E. Logstrup (1997).

person is not just someone in need but also someone with unique capacities and resources for agency. Furthermore, whereas Goodin's focus on ethical responsibility is crucial, assigning vulnerability to certain groups may actually also contribute to *hiding* such responsibility. Presenting vulnerability as the primary reason for intervention when people are harassed, excluded, sick, or hurt, can easily make it appear as if all of these hardships was something natural or inevitable – or even their own fault. Indeed, it can become tantamount to blaming the victims. It makes it appear as if no one except their vulnerable selves is responsible for their suffering. Such framing⁸ obviously lies in the interest of those who are neglecting, harassing, or hurting others.

At this point, it is relevant to recall one of the advantages of a rights-based approach in development work, as in diaconia: It helps to detect and address the “duty-bearers.”⁹ Concrete persons, institutions, and authorities carry the responsibility for protecting identifiable others so that their – or indeed, our – inherent human vulnerability is not violated. Struggles for justice need to identify and confront historical and political causes, structures, and power. Not even natural catastrophes or unexpected illnesses lie outside the sphere of political distribution of services and protection of rights. Merely pointing out the vulnerability of specific people or groups may smoothen or cover up this fact.

The status and general conception of disabled persons is a case in point. This is a group often considered vulnerable, as in Eurodiaconia's report. Importantly, critical disability studies underscore the fact that disabled people are not primarily nor necessarily in *greater need* of protection and support than others. Rather, they need *different* forms of support. Everyone is constantly in need of some sort of external support – whether instrumental or infrastructural – to, say, access the second and third floors of a building. Many people may use the stairs. A person who depends on a wheelchair needs an elevator. In other words, the human body's need for support is constant and universal, but also uniquely shaped. In the context of disability, J. L. Scully (2014) therefore argues for a *comprehensive* notion of ontological vulnerability. The vulnerabilities of disabled persons are not distinct from the ontological vulnerability of all human life. The line between “normal” and “special” vulnerability is not natural but politically and socially constructed:

The important point is that what counts as a permitted dependency (and therefore doesn't show up as exceptional vulnerability) is not “natural,” in the sense of simply following on

8 See Judith Butler's use of this term (2010, 8ff.).

9 “A human rights-based approach identifies rights holders and their entitlements and corresponding duty-bearers and their obligations.” <https://socialprotection-humanrights.org/introduction-to-a-rights-based-approach>, accessed on 9 June 2021.

from the fact of impairment, but is established and maintained through implicit decisions made by the people, usually not disabled, who have the power to do so. (Scully, 2014, 217)

This invites the acknowledgment of a *shared* vulnerability, shared, as Inger Marie Lid (2019; 2012) underlines, even between those who provide and those who receive care: “The institution, the social worker, and the health worker are all vulnerable” (Lid, 2019, 60). At stake here, then, is recognizing human equality in being vulnerable, amid often unjust and unacceptable differences in life quality.¹⁰

8. The Power and Freedom of Naming Oneself

A further argument against designating particular groups as vulnerable relates to a decisive form of freedom, the freedom of naming oneself and one’s world. The Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire (1972) famously emphasized this liberating power of (re)naming oneself and the world: “Human existence cannot be silent,” he said, in his classic *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, “... nor can it be nourished by false words, but only by true words, with which men [sic] transform the world.” For Freire,

... (t)o exist, humanly, is to *name* the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new *naming*. Men [sic] are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection (1972, 61).

Such naming of the world should never be the privilege of some few human beings, Freire insists. Speaking true words and acting accordingly in the transformation of the world is a right that belongs to all. Self-expression is an act of power, and a method of liberation. It is something that has to be shared. True speech must be dialogue. “Consequently, no one can say a true word alone – nor can he say it for another, in a prescriptive act which robs others of their words” (1972, 60-61). With this in mind, we should ask: Would the groups categorized as “the vulnerable” choose this as their primary self-designation?

To name oneself and one’s world is closely related to the importance of autonomy. It is customary to see autonomy as the opposite of relationality (see, e.g.,

10 In a recent interview, Butler was asked whether an emphasis on the vulnerable dignity of all, not just some particular group, would actually be similar to the harshly criticized call for “all lives matter” as an alternative to “Black lives matter.” Her response acknowledged the importance of the critique of and resistance to particular forms of oppression, while at the same time underscoring the radical equality and dignity for all. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Bnj7H7M_Ek. See also the interview from 2015: <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/01/12/whats-wrong-with-all-lives-matter>, accessed on 9 June 2021.

Bergmann, 2001). The emphasis in Kantian ethics on an autonomous subject has rightly been questioned in phenomenological and feminist approaches. These approaches highlight the intrinsic relationality of being and the good life. Upon closer inspection, however, the contrast between the two approaches may not necessarily be so stark. Relational dependency and the vulnerability related to it are not necessarily incompatible with autonomy (see Scully, 2014). Rather, there can also be an interconnection between the two. In Freire's pedagogy, the liberating power of naming oneself and one's world takes place in dialogical relations. Autonomy is thus always embedded in relationality. Conversely, pure relationality without a sense of autonomous selfhood may become a dependency inducing passivity. Fostering the freedom to name ourselves and our world through dialogue with others, is one way of developing relational autonomy.

9. Relational Autonomy

Catriona Mackenzie gives two reasons why such a relational autonomy should guide the way we understand and respond to vulnerability (Mackenzie, 2014, 45; see also Stålsett, 2007): First, the freedom to name oneself and one's world may counter any sense of powerlessness and loss of agency often associated with vulnerability. Second, developing such relational autonomy may help to "counter risks of objectionable paternalism" (2014, 45). Paternalism, she holds, takes place when specific groups are targeted as vulnerable and thereby, for instance, when they are subjected to surveillance or restrictions not applied to other groups. It also happens when they are treated as "incompetent and deviant" in ways that marginalize them. Often dressed up as "protection," such paternalistic measures, Mackenzie notes, express "relationships of domination and inequality among citizens or between the state and targeted groups of citizens" (2014, 47). This paternalism is utterly problematic since it fails to recognize persons as autonomous agents.

A final argument against assigning vulnerability as a characteristic of certain groups also follows from this emphasis on autonomy in relationality, expressed, for instance, in Freire's envisioning of subjects who meet to name the world to transform it. Only pointing out certain groups as vulnerable obscures the ontological fact of *shared* vulnerability. It undermines potential resources for solidarity, resistance, and human flourishing that show themselves to be inherent to the vulnerable condition common to all.

This point takes us back to Judith Butler's reflection on the two forms of vulnerability: the shared precariousness and the unjustly distributed precarity. Both kinds of vulnerability, she argues, the ontological and the situational, should be seen as a direct consequence of our relationality. Persons are vulnerable in and through relations. However, one can genuinely relate to other human beings only

by exposing oneself and thus making oneself vulnerable. Hence, the inescapable vulnerability is not – as it often is understood – a *regrettable* condition of life; it is also a condition *for* life, i.e., for entering into and remaining in life-sustaining relationships. No one can live outside of relations. Relations always imply vulnerability. As the very condition for life-preserving relationships, vulnerability thus precedes and constitutes life.

Significantly, though, according to Butler this fundamental relationality expressed as vulnerability is also something that takes us *beyond* ourselves. It undoes our foundation in ourselves. Through our relations, in a way we also live *outside* of ourselves. Here, Butler introduces the term “dispossession”: “Despite my affinity for the term relationality, we may need another language to approach the issue that concerns us, a way of thinking about how we are not only constituted by our relations but also dispossessed by them” (Butler: 2006, 24).

Butler develops this idea further in a dialogue with the Greek feminist philosopher Athena Athanasiou, in *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (2013). Comparable to the two dimensions of vulnerability, we may discover two senses of dispossession they point out. Athanasiou’s explains: “In the first sense dispossession stands as a heteronomic condition for autonomy, (...) in the second sense dispossession implies imposed injuries, painful interpellations, occlusions, and foreclosures, models of subjugation that call to be addressed and redressed” (Butler & Athanasiou, 2013, 2). To Butler and Athanasiou, seeing dispossession as the “heteronomic condition for autonomy” releases the potential of recognizing vulnerability as a foundation for agency, resistance, and common action to name and transform the world. “(T)hat recognition,” Butler comments, “has the power to change the meaning and structure of vulnerability itself.” (Butler: 2006, 43). Most importantly, one can thus perceive vulnerability as a precondition for humanization.¹¹

In my judgment, this crucial insight into the power of relational vulnerability is jeopardized in a practice that designates some particular others as vulnerable and in need of our support. Admittedly, such naming may lead to, as Goodin’s vulnerability model intends to show, an increased awareness of the plight of others. At best, it may also foster favorable actions on their behalf. However, as Butler and others have shown, it also risks undermining crucial resources of resistance and well-being present in the vulnerable condition.

11 She underscores that vulnerability needs to be recognized in this way, so that its full potential may be released. On the ethical and political implications of recognition, see Honneth, 1995, Ricœur, 2005, Taylor & Gutmann, 1992.

10. Shared, Differentiated Vulnerability

So, just who are “the vulnerable”? I have discussed two dimensions of human vulnerability: (1) something that particularly characterizes the lives of certain persons or groups in certain situations and (2) a shared anthropological condition and ethical presupposition. These two ways of perceiving and interpreting vulnerability are related and can be seen as complementary in some respects. Nonetheless, there is also an inevitable tension between them, leading to a dilemma of designation in diaconal work. The first approach – assigning vulnerability to some but not all humans – has become increasingly common and may have the advantage of identifying needs and responsibilities, appealing to ethical action and legitimizing priorities. However, such an approach may undermine people’s agency, autonomy, and freedom to name themselves and their world. It may cover up causes and actual responsibilities in concrete situations of suffering and oppression. And finally, it runs the risk of increasing stigma and discrimination.

In the face of this dilemma, I recommend that diaconal work conceive of human vulnerability as a *complex* phenomenon, with both commonality and uniqueness in unresolved tension. In so doing, it should be particularly wary of the dangers of the “vulnerable-groups approach”: Instead of naming particular groups as (the) vulnerable, it should see vulnerability as a shared human condition that is differentiated socially and politically. Emphasizing prior human commonality in precariousness can promote empathic sensibility and practical solidarity. It can discover and support the, at times incipient, forces of resilience and strength present in even precarious situations. Underscoring vulnerability as a human foundation for caring and agency does not, in my judgment, conflict with a diaconal need to give special attention to those who are most at risk in certain moments and under certain situations. Rather, by recognizing a common human vulnerability and promoting the understanding of relational autonomy and the heteronomic condition for autonomy (cf. Butler & Athanasiou, 2013), diaconal efforts are better equipped to protect the vulnerable dignity of life whenever and wherever it may be threatened or violated.

Still, diaconal work cannot function without some designations. Generalizing categories and concepts are always necessary for strategic or practical reasons. So, what naming should be used instead? It follows from the discussion above that it is important to respect the self-designations of the people and groups in question. One should also use an open, dynamic, and varied language. Social realities are polyvalent and dynamic, and the use of language in diaconal work should reflect this. Taking into account our shared “linguistic vulnerability” (Butler, 2016, 16), diaconal actors should avoid designations that “fix” and essentialize people’s identities.

Rather than identifying people or groups as (the) vulnerable, then, it is in my view preferable to acknowledge that, in given times and at particular places, people find themselves in vulnerable *life situations* – and then specify what the causes

of these situations might be and how they may be changed. Such naming directs attention to the specific, changeable, temporary character of the calamity, injustice, or oppression in question. It avoids turning temporal circumstances into permanent and essential identities.¹²

There are, in my opinion, preferable alternatives to “the vulnerable,” such as persons, people, or communities “at risk” or “disenfranchised.” Other alternatives, depending on the context, could be “marginalized” or “disadvantaged.” Compare, e.g., this note posted on the webpage of the Wakefield Joint Strategic Needs Assessment:

The term “vulnerable groups” is often used interchangeably with the term “disadvantaged groups.” The stereotyped preconception that “vulnerability” is an inherent characteristic of women masks the fact that stereotypical gender roles and attitudes and their discriminatory impact on women, sustained by the lack/omission of acts on the part of states to effectively address them, impose disadvantages on women, which may result in increased risks of becoming vulnerable to discrimination, including violence. Therefore, the term “vulnerable groups” is not recommended, and “disadvantaged groups” should be used instead.¹³

No designation remains without some downsides, however. No naming fully escapes the danger of reintroducing the us/them dichotomy. It could even be argued that the permanent efforts to escape such a dichotomy – a struggle this article participates in – ironically also serves to reinforce it, by making “us” more acutely aware of “them,” the others we wish to include and not exclude. The diaconal dilemma of designation persists. That is why innovative and inclusive renaming is a permanent ethical and political task should be an enduring concern in diaconal studies and work.

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¹² This answers in my view to legitimate concerns raised by Goodin and others, discussed above.

¹³ <http://www.wakefieldjsna.co.uk/vulnerable-groups>, accessed on 9 June 21.

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