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Discourse Formations Surrounding the Concept of "Vulnerability" during the Pandemic

This poster will present multilayered research designed to delve into the unilateral and abrupt paradigm shift around the concept of 'vulnerability' in the course of the ongoing pandemic. This study is being conducted in the frame of the research project "COV_enable: Re-imagining Vulnerabilities in Times of Crisis" (P 34641, Austrian Science Fund, FWF). The Covid-19 pandemic has categorized some people as vulnerable due to newly introduced disadvantages but at the same time put already vulnerable people at greater risk. The situation of those who were already disadvantaged – such as students with disabilities, families with low socioeconomic status, or refugee children – got more aggravated (UNICEF, 2020). However, a crisis, such as a pandemic, can make people vulnerable who have not been so far (Lancet, 2020). Groups that are considered vulnerable, therefore, are also dynamic in nature and vulnerability can be accepted as a vague term. Nonetheless, the way it is understood can have concrete consequences for the way decisions on measures are taken. The interpretations of vulnerability have a direct impact on political decision-making and these decisions can create new vulnerabilities or reinforce the existing ones.
The discourse that surrounds vulnerability had to undergo quick revisions at the beginning of the pandemic and it was reduced to a health-related understanding by concentrating on pre-existing or underlying health conditions (Abrams & Abbott, 2020). However, the months following the first lock down introduced new conceptualizations for vulnerability although the focus was mainly on the concept of vulnerability as an inherently corporal human condition. The shifts in the understanding of vulnerability can introduce new disadvantages as expressed by Clough (2017, 469) "about the way in which vulnerability discourse may be used to create dangerous new categorizations and binaries, and to effect social control and paternalistic intervention in the lives of those classed as vulnerable." The inception of new interpretations of vulnerability can insinuate a dismissal of the knowledge of the needs of socially marginalized groups. Hence, it is crucial to be attentive to how vulnerabilities are reshaped, re-imagined, and reinterpreted.
With this study, we adopt a socio-spatial perspective (Löw 2016) within a longitudinal and participatory research design. The aim is to shed light on the way that conceptions of vulnerability are being reshaped and how these impact people with disabilities in the fields of inclusive schooling and supported living. One of the leading research questions is 'What underlying normative concepts and (new) discourse formations of vulnerability are embedded

in policies and regulations imposed by the state and public authorities upon the fields of inclusive schooling and supported living?' A key outcome will be the co-creation of a framework for inclusive crisis management by systematizing and mapping the policy development related to the construction of vulnerabilities as well as by looking for how the vulnerability is understood, experienced, and incorporated by children and adults labeled as "vulnerable" during the pandemic.

To combine the individual and contextual lens, people from several different levels of the field, representing institutions, policy, practice, or individual experiences, participate in the study through multimethod research strategies. The project aims to unearth, question, and interrogate dominant and potentially hegemonic discourses while simultaneously unpacking the discursive re-formation of vulnerability in a broader context and portraying how these unfold in the lives of children and adults with disabilities. This poster aims to present the combination of these diverse methods of research and analysis strategies and their co-action to explain the complexity of the concept of 'vulnerability'.

The (new) discourse formations and their interplay with social practices that are imposed on the inclusive schooling and supported living situations of people with disabilities are being examined through Critical Discourse Analysis (Wodak & Meyer 2016) accompanied by expert interviews with policy-makers and experts. On the other hand, the application and interpretation of Covid-19 associated policies and regulations are being monitored by focus group discussions with practitioners (teachers, personal assistants, employees of supported living arrangements) and analyzed with Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2006). The inclusion of individual perspectives of people from inclusive schooling and supported living is being achieved with a combination of digital video diaries (Bates 2020), collaborative film-making (Baumann et al. 2020), and (virtual) focused interviews (Gibson et al. 2013) where documentary method (Schmitt-Howe 2019) is applied for the analysis.

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