Introduction: Vulnerability and Child Protection

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Historically, the term "child protection" was founded on the idea that "children should be protected against the poor living conditions they endure in their families, in the institutions they frequent or in the environment they share with adults other than their parents" (Becquemin and Chauvière, 2013, p. 13) and on a certain idea of "possible parental unworthiness" (*idem*, p. 20). It was also built on a distrust of families which were perceived as the main cause of childhood disorders, distrust nourished primarily by knowledge from the fields of psychology and psychiatry[1]. Families requiring the intervention of child protection services were perceived as deviant and dysfunctional. This standardized perception, as well as dramatic situations of violence and neglect, have guided the actions taken in a risk-management rationale (Lambert, 2013; Vol, Jud, Mey, Häfeli and Stettler, 2010) which still largely influences social and educational interventions. The risks are primarily assessed with regard to family trajectories, the child's adaptive expression and the degree to which parents support the measures under consideration[2].

The issue of the family resources (social, economic, etc.) required to ensure the daily care and education of children, and the issue of the construction of parenthood from both psychological and social perspectives, challenge an intervention model based on correcting parents'

1 See Chauvière (1980) for the psychiatric factors behind the origins of delinquency. More recently, Lafantaisie, Milot and Lacharité (2015) have underscored the extent to which current research remains marked by an approach that focuses on the individual characteristics of parents and children in analyzing child protection issues.

2 A true historical presentation should incorporate the role of the International Convention on the Rights of the Child. As Wouango and Turcotte ask: "what place does the family currently occupy with regard to children's rights?"(2014, p. 239). In other words, how do the best interests of the child shape a specific vision of family responsibilities?

shortcomings[3] in an attempt to take vulnerability into account. However, as the NOCP[4] (2014) notes in a special issue: to what extent is the concept of vulnerability effective in interpreting, modeling and representing with accuracy and precision the risk situations that children encounter? We may also add: to what extent is it capable of representing with accuracy and precision the family situations encountered in the field of educational and social actions? It therefore appears essential to clarify our understanding of the different definitions of the concept of vulnerability and of how these definitions may stimulate reflection in the field of professional practices and research.

Reflecting on Vulnerability

The concept and the manner in which the term "vulnerability" is used has been marked by recent changes (Brodiez-Dolino, 2015; Garrau, 2018; Martin, 2013; Soulet, 2014), such as exclusion in the 1990s, leading Castel to describe it as "a portmanteau word to identify all the varieties of misery in the world" (1995, p. 13). Soulet (2014) somewhat reaffirms this view when he speaks of "a dominant, obligatory and almost hegemonic reference to describe the said social reality" (p. 8). For his part, Garrau underscores how "the success of this category raises a number of questions" (2018, p. 10) related to fashion trends or to the new way of reflecting on the social question and on the multiple meanings. Similar questions have been raised in the English-speaking world (Butler, 2005; Fineman and Grear, 2016; Gilson, 2014; Turner, 2006).

For Aubert (2010), the emphasis on the concept of vulnerability may also reflect a situation of crisis and loss in a hypermodern society, a society of excesses and transient moments. It is undoubtedly associated with some form of unease within an uncertain society, "a risk society that is no longer assured of its own future" (Soulet, 2014, p. 12), a society of *unease* according to Kaës (2012), one without harmony between social and intersubjective ties. Aubert specifies: "The hypermodern world [...] presents us with a set of acute and extremely rapid upheavals which affect the narcissistic base of our being. The intersubjective and intergenerational contract which allows us to establish our place in a coherent whole, obliging us to do so to ensure its maintenance, is itself shaken or shattered" (2013, p. 284).

In other words, this concept reveals a crisis of institutions, more specifically a crisis relative to the meaning that institutions ascribe to the term "vulnerability". Rather than merely detecting a threat of breakdown, institutions' unease may also reflect a difficulty in creating a community of like-minded people when "the individual is established as the supreme value because of the devaluation of social interdependence [and at the same time] our societies are forced to address

3 These primarily refer to what are perceived as the mother's failures. Except for specific sexual abuse situations, the father is often a blind spot in this model (Brewsaugh & Strozier, 2016; Scourfield, 2014; Zanoni, Warburton, Bussey & McMaugh, 2014).

4 The National Observatory for Childhood at Risk, which became the National Observatory for Child Protection (Paris) in 2016.

the problems of social cohesion resulting from the poor effectiveness of the systems of protection against the inequalities established during the 20th century." (Erhenberg, 2011, p. 564-565).

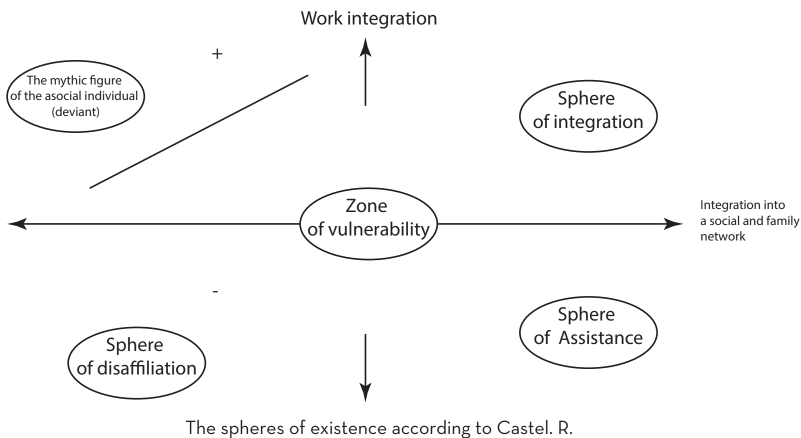
Vulnerability, then, may not be the narrative of an increase in our vulnerabilities, but the means of rethinking them, of reflecting on ties, solidarities and democracy (Gilson, 2014). Garrau (2018) proposes something along these lines when he argues that one must first distinguish between fundamental vulnerability and problematic vulnerability[5]. The first is linked to our human condition, i.e., to our dependence on others. It is an invitation to rediscover our original state of interdependence, as has already been suggested by multiple authors. Indeed, Elias had already noted that the society of individuals is marked by dependence: "Each individual subject is born within a group that was there before him or her. Better still, individuals are by nature made in such a way that they need others who were there before them in order to thrive" (1991, p. 57). Anxious to relate individual psychology and social psychology, Freud argued that we must not disregard the relationships that exist between individuals and their peers and must consider the individual as "a member of a tribe, a people, a social class, an institution" (1980, p. 84). For his part, Tronto emphasizes: "human beings are not fully independent, they are interdependent" (2009, p. 212), requiring attention and care, with care defined as "a set of activities through which we act to organize our world so that we can live as well as possible", rather than as a provision (2009, p. 14).

From this perspective, autonomy is not the affirmation of subjects who become accomplished by themselves, as though freed from all social constraints (the ideal of the hypermodern individual). For Garrau, the autonomy of each subject "depends on interpersonal relationships of care and recognition" (2018, p. 163). It refers to relational autonomy, in which the recognition process makes it possible to "exist as a human being, to be confirmed", and which "brings into play a community of subjects", to borrow from Le Blanc's definition (2019, p. 99). As Le Blanc emphasizes, vulnerability and autonomy are intricately linked: "Autonomy is certainly weakened by vulnerability, but vulnerability is what constitutes autonomy in human autonomy" (2019, p. 76). It is therefore conditional "on the presence, attention and cooperation of others" (Garrau, 2018, p. 163). Far from being a neoliberal vision of an all-powerful individual, "disconnected and disengaged, with no other objective than to achieve self-fulfillment" (Castel, 2005, p. 120), vulnerability takes us back to a subject who needs others to express "I". As Butler asserts, "the I that I am is nothing without the You and cannot even begin to speak of itself outside of the relationship to the other" (2007, p. 86).

The issue, then, shifts to the contexts which obstruct the development capacities of this autonomy, the capacities of expression, the possibility of making one's voice heard, which leads to being more than just a simple individual because, as Castel emphasizes: "There are individuals and *individuals* because all individuals are unequally supported to become individuals" (2005, p. 121). When the conditions for access to autonomy are not guaranteed, "fundamental vulnerability becomes problematic vulnerability" (Garrau, 2018, p. 164).

5 Gilson (2014) offers a similar distinction between *universal vulnerability* and *situational vulnerability*. Along the same lines, Butler (2005) suggests a distinction between *precariousness of life* and *precarity*.

If fundamental vulnerability reminds us of our human condition, our interdependence with others, the possibility of being hurt, if it concerns us all and invites us to think or rethink social ties, problematic vulnerability concerns individuals, families and groups whose capacities for action are reduced, whose voice does not carry or is not heard. Problematic vulnerability is not an attribute of individuals at the risk of psychologizing, of seeking the fundamental reasons for the difficulties in their most private lives; rather, it must be addressed from a relational and contextualized framework. As Soulet emphasizes, evoking vulnerability "obliges us to grasp the whole picture at a given moment and in a specific place, of a group or an individual with specific characteristics and a context or an environment itself endowed with specific characteristics" (2014, p. 19). Linked to social issues (Garrau, 2018) and to structural conditions associated with the levels of protection (Soulet, 2014), this concept also relates to issues of solidarity in a society of peers (Castel, 2013). One must therefore speak of a process of vulnerabilization.



The spheres of existence according to Castel. R.

Drawing on the work of Castel, Martin (2013) offers a relatively enlightening outline. He intersects an axis which represents integration into the wage-earning society and the protection associated with wages (collective protection) and an axis which represents integration into a social, family and community network (close protection). This determines a sphere of integration (people well integrated into the labor market and into a family network) and a sphere of assistance (people furthest away from the labor market, but integrated into a family network); at the center, the sphere of vulnerability combines the fragility of primary social and family ties and precariousness in the labor market: the sphere of disaffiliation (people furthest away from the labor market and isolated, without social support) marks the future of people in vulnerable situations when all social ties break down. The emphasis here is on integration into the world of work and into a social and family network. However, the processes of vulnerability cannot be reduced to these two aspects alone. This is what Garrau (2018) suggests by drawing on Paugam's concept of social disqualification (2000) and on the concept of domination.

Paugam describes a process which involves an increase in vulnerability due to the loss of employment and the renouncing of autonomy, first because of requesting assistance, then because of dependence on that assistance. It is a process that results in some form of stigmatization, of disqualification in the sense of a loss of space and recognition, which gradually condemns one to slide toward social invisibility, or relegation, as Le Blanc (2009) emphasizes, and to "be subjected to social contempt". One is thus "disqualified from one's own social skills and therefore perceives oneself as useless, a pariah or a reject" (p. 17). De Gaulejac and Leonetti (1994) place great emphasis on what the request for assistance represents, i.e., the renunciation of autonomy and self-esteem and entry into the devalued category of welfare recipients. Problematic vulnerability is also the loss of an I that is recognized and retained by others.

Problematic vulnerability is also associated with domination. As Garrau mentions: "Certain social relationships thus seem to be able to function not as supports for autonomy, but as factors of vulnerability, by limiting the options accessible to individuals and undermining their representation of themselves" (2018, p. 219). Ideological, social and economic domination and its awareness affects subjectivities and capacities.

Does this mean that the production of problematic vulnerability is based on social determinants alone? What, then, becomes of subjects if they are merely individuals grappling with social realities that go way beyond them? One must be wary of all forms of psychologization defined not as "the use of psychic dimensions to understand and address situations", but as "the implementation of knowledge of a psychological nature using clinical mechanisms which perceive the other as a mere subject in establishing his or her individual and social resolutions" (Boutanquoi, 2004, p. 81). Reflecting on problematic vulnerability, and on the narratives it shapes, therefore means that we must continue to be concerned about how this vulnerability and these narratives concentrate "all the socio-historical factors which intervene in the processes of socialization on the one hand and, on the other hand, all the intrapsychic factors which determine one's capacity to take action both with regard to reality and to the social context" (De Gaulejac, 1999, p. 215). This concerns questions relating to attachment, psychic envelopes and identity construction in so far as these questions structure one's relationship with the world.

Problematic Vulnerability in Child Protection

Families receiving child protection measures appear to accumulate different aspects of problematic vulnerability, which may lead to neglect and even abuse. We must be careful, however, to avoid defining children's vulnerability as the result of their parents' behavior. As Kedell (2018) emphasizes, a neoliberal vision of vulnerability in the field of child protection, which highlights only the responsibility of parents, leads to our totally overlooking the social and economic realities of families, notably those linked to the poverty problem. Worse, this vision reinforces the logics of surveillance and control, views the needs of the child as being separate from the needs of families, and concerns itself only with the cost to society in the long term of leaving children in their families, perceived as factors responsible for poor adaptation.

Families experiencing problematic vulnerabilities may have painful stories; they often lack family, social and economic resources. They live in precarious conditions and this may have serious repercussions on their parenting and on their children's development (Zaouche Gaudron, 2017). They are dominated because of relegation and the absence of the possibility of participation, which Paugam (2008) defines as one of the foundations of the social bond and Garrau as a "means allowing the most vulnerable citizens to develop and strengthen their ability to make their voice heard in the public and political space" (2018, p. 305). Thus, families in the child-protection system are forced to submit to institutional rituals of "participation", laid down by laws and regulations, and which, in reality, are primarily driven by conformism (Lacharité, 2015). They thus find themselves dependent on welfare systems, or even subject to the constraints imposed by the legal framework, and lose some control over their lives. They are therefore in a position that reinforces domination because others have power over their lives and over their words. They are often discredited both by the very process that takes charge and designates them as deviant through revealing and naming the deviations from the norm that justify the intervention (Boutanquoi, 2001, p. 158), and by the decision-making processes which limit their role. They can also be stigmatized by their environment.

The situation may appear gloomy and burdensome and may even overwhelm professionals who may feel unable to provide the support necessary to enable these parents to gain access to a less vulnerable life. This is not what we are suggesting, particularly because the work undertaken by these professionals in increasingly difficult conditions, and the commitment they demonstrate, deserve respect. Nevertheless, a number of research studies highlight the extent to which child protection services may have engendered a sense of suffering, hurt, dispossession, incomprehension, anger and bitterness[6].

Ultimately, the key question, which appears to be shared by both professionals and researchers, is hardly about denouncement: does the model with which these institutions are preoccupied (they are yet to free themselves from the idea of parental failure), and the established practices that draw on expertise (professionals know what parents do not know or have not had the opportunity to learn), really allow children, young people and families to emerge from the sphere of problematic vulnerability?

As Brodiez-Dolino specifies, the vulnerability problem appears "inseparable from the processes of support, trajectory and individualization, but also from the dialectics of dependence, autonomy, care and empowerment" (2015, p. 17). These are the processes that must be questioned. Can the concepts of care and empowerment really help in this questioning? Like the concepts of exclusion and vulnerability, they too come with their share of problems. When care is reduced "to an approach and a sensitivity (for others) making it even more difficult to recognize the injustice of social and political arrangements" (Paperman, 2005, p. 294), and when empowerment gives back responsibility for their state to individuals and groups and summons the logic of workfare, then whether or not these concepts open up new perspectives is uncertain.

6 Various chapters in this book refer to it.

Ravon relates the use of the concept of vulnerability and the development of the logics of care and empowerment, which he refers to as a presenteeism regime with a clinical-like intervention, "a clever mix of listening, care and working on oneself." (2014, p. 267). He underlines, however, the risk of interference through the generalization of conditional aid implied by the notion of contract[7] and how one may "switch at any time from aid, to empowerment, to having to submit to control when, for example, parents are viewed as responsible for the means with which they must face their difficulties" (*id*., p. 268).

However, if we view care as the attention to needs, responsibility toward others, competence and the capacity to respond (Tronto, 2009), and if we view empowerment as the recognition of the "capacity of individuals to define the terms of their own life, of their own identity, and of their own projects", as "practices which seek to strengthen the power of individuals and groups to act like families"(de Montigny and Lacharité, 2012, p. 55), then this may help to shape reflections on professional practices toward parents, children and families. As Le Blanc specifies, rather than consider care or empowerment, one must think about "care *and* empowerment. More specifically, care that is based on empowerment" (2011, p. 188).

Soulet argues that to avoid making vulnerability no more than an additional empty term, it is important "to draw on the position of actors[8], of individuals, in order to rethink the issue of social intervention based on individuals' skills and capacities, however embryonic" (2014, p. 34). This undoubtedly involves working on thought patterns to free oneself from negative representations and to focus less on failures and more on resources and social- and family-support networks. This may lead to what Châtel refers to as "an ethics of vulnerability with, at its heart, responsibility for others" (2014, p. 73), a way of rethinking the relationship to others, and to their autonomy.

While the key objective of any intervention is the development of the capacity for autonomy, one must reflect on the conditions that allow "subjects to become and remain able to speak and act on their behalf" (Garrau, 2018 p. 161), to speak, to have a voice. If autonomy means being able to say "my discourse must replace the discourse of the other, of a foreign discourse that is in me and dominates me" (Castoriadis, 1975, p. 152), then we must question how we speak about children, young people and families, including in research work. We must also question the tendency to cover others' words with our own: "Isn't my voice that claims to speak on behalf of others taking away from them their own speaking capacities?" (Le Blanc, 2011, p. 89). How can one "give an account of oneself to someone" (Butler, 2007, p. 68) if this someone listens but does not hear, if he or she does not accept to be questioned even as he or she questions (*id*., p. 86)?

A recent multi-authored book focused on children's and parents' speech in child protection (Lacharité, Sellenet and Chamberland, 2015). The researchers noted in particular that this

7 Established in France since the implementation of the RMI (minimum integration income) in the early 1990s, the contract stipulates that the recipient of aid undertakes certain activities in return (for example, training or job-seeking activities). The issue most frequently raised concerns the imbalance between the parties and therefore the real margin of negotiation for recipients.

8 Understood here as the subject's narrative capacity.

speech requires the creation of in-between spaces, in the margins or boundaries, neither institutional nor family, favoring a mutual decentered attitude of family members and professionals. Therefore, children's and parents' speech in the framework of child-protection systems raises a fundamental issue, i.e., the issue of gratitude conceived as a social justice issue, as described by Fraser: "It is not the identity of a group that must be recognized but the status of the members of this group comprised of fully fledged partners in social interactions" (2011, p. 79).

Taking action supposes being able to participate not only in the name of a democratic ideal, as promoted by Garrau (2018), but also in the name of the recognition of one's capacity to think, act and decide[9].

9 The idea of this book emerged after a conference held in June 2017 at Besancon. The different chapters were written, reread and restructured between 2018 and 2019. At the time of publication, the desire to reflect on vulnerability as a human fact, and to think of care as a social imperative necessary for the construction of ties, is a reminder of our dependence on others, one which resonates strangely in a period marked by the Covid-19 pandemic.