Introducing Vulnerable Groups

OVERVIEW

- The meaning of 'vulnerable' and 'vulnerability'
- The definition of 'vulnerable groups' used in this book
- The concepts of social exclusion and citizenship and their implications for policies directed at vulnerable groups
- Outline of the content and format of the book
- Suggestions for further exploration of issues addressed in the chapter

THE CONCEPT OF 'VULNERABLE'

Although the word 'vulnerable' is now widely used in health and social care, its precise definition remains elusive. This is partly because of its universality and dynamism in that everyone becomes or feels vulnerable to a greater or lesser extent at different times in their lives (Rogers, 1997; Pritchard, 2001). There are also many other reasons. These include the fact that it has a variety of meanings, such as that a person is in danger, at risk, under threat, susceptible to problems, helpless, and in need of protection and/support (Rogers, 1997; Sloboda, 1999; Spiers, 2000; Mawby, 2004; Grundy, 2006; Simpson, 2006). Its meaning also varies according to the context in which it is used. For instance, the Department of Health regards an adult as being 'vulnerable' when he/she is 'unable to take care of him or herself' (DOH, 2000, Section 2.3). In contrast, within youth justice the concept has

more of a gatekeeping purpose and refers to those who have an enhanced risk of suicide, self-harm or harming others (Smith, 2007). The overlap between the concept 'vulnerable' and other categories such as victim, troubled, troublesome is problematic (Goldson, 2002). In addition, there are different types of vulnerability; innate/person vulnerability is unique to the person concerned. Terms such as structural/contextual/environmental vulnerability are used to indicate when the particular circumstances in which a person is situated render them vulnerable (Rogers, 1997; Goldson, 2002). A distinction has also been made between emic and etic vulnerability; the former refers to the experience of being vulnerable whereas the latter involves the identification of demographic factors that lead to some groups being at a higher risk of health and social problems (Spiers, 2000).

A definition of 'vulnerable' is further complicated by the way vulnerability can be shaped by many interacting influences such as individual perceptions, and situational, social, historical, political and cultural factors (Rogers, 1997; Spiers, 2000; Pritchard, 2001; Goldson, 2002; Dixon-Woods et al., 2005).

VULNERABLE GROUPS

Thus the concept of 'vulnerable' is relative and open to interpretation. As a consequence, the term 'vulnerable group' is similarly contestable. There is little explicit definition of 'vulnerable groups' in the literature, and, when this does occur, the groups vary. For instance, Rogers (1997) defines those groups in society who are more likely to be vulnerable to ill health as the 'very young and very old people, women, racial minorities, those who have little social support, those with little education, those who earn a low income and those who are unemployed' (Rogers, 1997: 66). In contrast, Spiers (2000) says that vulnerable groups in healthcare include 'the elderly, children the poor, people with chronic illnesses and people from minority cultures, foetuses and members of captive populations, such as prisoners and refugees' (Spiers, 2000: 716). Researchers focus on particular vulnerable groups for the purposes of their own study. An example is Dixon-Wood et al.'s (2005) work on access to healthcare by vulnerable groups. This study focused on socio-economically disadvantaged (less wealthy) people, people from a black and minority ethnic background, children and older people. Similarly, Sanatana (2002) in her study of inequalities in access to healthcare in Portugal adopts a less specific approach; she argues that the most vulnerable groups in Portuguese society are 'those affected by poverty, deprivation and social exclusion' (Sanatana, 2002: 33).

Analysis of other sources, such as policy documents, shows that the definition of a 'vulnerable group' varies according to context. For instance, with reference to homelessness, Shelter identifies older people, people with mental health problems, drug users, female sex workers and gypsies and travellers

as being 'vulnerable groups' (Shelter, 2007a). For the purposes of the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Bill (2006) the criteria used to define a vulnerable adult are being in receipt of health and social care, living in sheltered housing, requiring assistance in the conduct of their affairs, in prison or in contact with the probation service, detained under Immigration Act powers, and involved in certain activities targeted at vulnerable adults, such as some forms of education and training (House of Commons, 2006).

In addition, the concept of a 'vulnerable group' varies between theoretical perspectives; **feminism** would argue a consequence of patriarchy is that women are more vulnerable group in society than men. A **Marxist perspective** according to **Marxist theory** would attribute the vulnerability of workers in low-paid jobs to ill health and work-related deaths to capitalist employment practices. Any attempt to define a 'vulnerable group' is further complicated by the fact that group members have multiple identities, lack homogeneity and membership of any group may be transient (Rogers, 1997; Goldson, 2002; White, 2002). For example a young homeless person can be unemployed and be experiencing mental health problems. He/she may also be temporarily homeless because he/she has just left care.

DEFINITION OF 'VULNERABLE GROUPS' USED IN THIS BOOK

These discussions therefore show that the definition of a 'vulnerable group' is flexible, refers to a wide range of people, and depends on the context in which it is used with many definitions only being applicable to areas of research and specific issues. Moreover, the concept is problematic and there is no universally accepted definition of a 'vulnerable group'. Consequently, a definition was developed that both engaged with the different aspects of the concept highlighted above and clearly related to the purpose of this book.

Over the past ten years, New Labour has produced a raft of policies that specifically use the words 'vulnerable groups' and are aimed at groups who are deemed to be 'vulnerable' in contemporary United Kingdom society. A recent example of such legislation is the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Bill (2006) that has already been mentioned. An analysis of these policies shows that a variety of criteria have been used in the construction of groups as being 'vulnerable'. These are based on the ways in which they are marginalized, socially excluded, have limited opportunities and income, and suffer abuse (physical, sexual, psychological and financial) hardship, prejudice and discrimination. Such groups include lone parents, people with disabilities, older people, children, ethnic minority groups, those living with a mental illness, the homeless, and asylum seekers and refugees.

The determination to address the needs of these groups is particularly illustrated by the focus on eliminating **social exclusion.** This has been defined as 'a shorthand term for what can happen when people or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdown' (Social Exclusion Unit, 2002). Social exclusion occurs because of the way that these problems are linked, mutually reinforce each other and are clustered in particular areas/neighbourhoods, which can lead to the creation of 'a vicious cycle in people's lives' (Social Exclusion Unit, 2004a: 7) unless there is effective intervention. It is also linked to multiple disadvantages that individuals face at birth and has been shown to persist from one generation to another. Several causes and consequences of social exclusion have been identified. These are 'poverty and low income; unemployment, poor educational attainment; poor mental and physical health; family breakdown and poor parenting; poor housing and homelessness; discrimination; crime; and living in a disadvantaged area' (Social Exclusion Unit, 2004a: 7).

The concept of social exclusion has displaced terms such as 'deprivation' and 'inequality' and is now 'firmly entrenched' (Levitas, 2006: 123) in both British and European Union policy. New Labour embraced it vigorously soon after its election to its first term in government in 1997; it promised 'inclusive politics' and set up the Social Exclusion Unit. This aimed to prevent the exclusion of vulnerable groups (such as those mentioned above) from full participation in society, ensure that mainstream services are delivered for everyone, and reintegrate people who had fallen through the net. The emphasis has been on addressing both the structural causes and individual causes of social exclusion. An example of the former is deprivation that has been transmitted across generations, and factors that have led to individuals not taking advantage of opportunities available to them are an example of the latter (Deacon, 2002).

Many policies have ensued from this political determination to eliminate social exclusion. Among the most notable are the **welfare-to-work** policies. The philosophy behind these is that the answer to poverty and social exclusion lies in work not welfare, and that as many people as possible should move from benefits into work. This is summarised in the much-quoted statement 'Work for those who can, support for those who can't' (Blair, 1998: 3). One of the initiatives that embodies this approach is the New Deal strategy, which aims to give those who are on out-of-work benefits the help and support that they need to get into paid employment. There are several packages aimed a different groups, such as those over 50, disabled people and lone parents. Everyone on a New Deal programme is allocated a personal advisor who is their point of contact throughout the programme. The personal advisor takes the time to understand each applicant, explains their options and helps them to find a suitable job. These New Deal packages will be addressed as and when their target groups are discussed in this book.

Since the General Election in 2001 social exclusion has been even more at the heart of government. The posts of Minister for Social Exclusion and

Parliamentary Secretary for Social Exclusion have been created. The drive to help disadvantaged groups who have unique and complex needs gathered momentum in 2004, with more policies to address the needs of those groups that are 'harder to reach and last to benefit from policies' (Social Exclusion Unit, 2004b: 6) and experience 'deep exclusion' (Levitas et al., 2007). Indeed, the Social Exclusion Unit was closed down in 2006 and its work transferred to a taskforce in the Cabinet Office. This task-force is responsible for ensuring that government departments focus on the '2.5 per cent of every generation … stuck in a lifetime of disadvantage' (Cabinet Office, 2006: 3) who are the most severely vulnerable and have been immune to previous social exclusion initiatives. It evaluates and revises polices with the aim of embedding social exclusion work more deeply in relevant departments, such as health, education and communities (Deacon, 2002; Social Exclusion Taskforce, 2007).

Another concept that has simultaneously attained significance within political discourse is **citizenship**. New Labour's construction of this concept has had a direct influence on its approach to the social inclusion of vulnerable groups (Craig, 2004; Kidger, 2004; Lunt, 2006; Rummery, 2006). In order to explain the effects of this influence, it is necessary to briefly discuss citizenship and its interpretation by New Labour.

Although it has existed within political thought in the Western world from the eighteenth century, its popularity has waxed and waned. It has re-emerged in political and academic discourses in Europe, Canada, and the United States since the late twentieth century. Not only is it complex and multidimensional, but there are also many contested versions of citizenship, and what it means to be a citizen. The main dimensions of the contemporary approach to citizenship can be summarised as follows: all those who are full members of society have equal status. The conferment of this status on individuals is referred to as citizenship, and from it ensues feelings of self-worth, national belonging and identity. It also locates individuals in a series of legal and social relationships with other individuals and with the state. These relationships involve both equal rights and obligations. In terms of relationships between individuals, individual citizens are seen as being affectively connected with others with whom they share citizenship. This connectivity generates mutual concern and solidarity, which in turn entail rights and obligations between fellow citizens. With respect to the relationship between individual citizens and the state, the status of citizenship means that individuals have certain rights; they are accorded a nationality and can make legitimate claims on the state (Lister, 1997, 1998; Lewis, 2004). Marshall (1992), whose work formed the basis of a theory of citizenship in postwar Britain, held that this relationship between the individual and the state entails three types of rights: *civil citizenship* refers to the right to individual freedom, such as the freedom of speech, thought, faith and the right to justice. *Political citizenship* is the right to exercise political power, whether this is as a member of the public or as an elected member of a body that has political

power. The third element is *social citizenship*. This ranges from the right to economic security and welfare to the right to be able to participate in 'civilised society according to the standards prevailing in society' (Marshall, 1992: 8). In return for these rights from the state, individuals have certain obligations and duties in that they are expected to behave in ways that promote good citizenship. Examples of these are duties to obey the law, ensure that your children are educated, pay taxes and undertake jury service when required (Lister, 1997, 1998; Powell, 2000; Deacon, 2002; Lewis, 2004).

As indicated above, the whole issue of citizenship is controversial and, even though it has political currency once more, criticisms still abound. For instance, it has been argued that it is exclusionary in relation to age, gender, sexual orientation, class, ethnicity and disability. Its unstable nature and the fluidity of its boundaries have also been highlighted (Lister, 1997, 1998; Lewis, 2004). Nonetheless, the main political parties have incorporated it in their discourses; Conservatism adopted some aspects of citizenship in the 1980s and 1990s and themes such as self-reliant citizenship featured in their policies. However, in general the emphasis was more on citizens' rights as opposed to obligations, as illustrated by the Citizen's Charter (1991). Indeed, Lister (1998) argues that the Conservative conception of rights was both market-orientated and consumerist, reflecting the depoliticised and individualistic nature of the relationship between the state and the individual at that time. This sort of view was echoed in many academic and political circles with concerns about 'dutiless rights' being expressed.

When New Labour came to power in 1997, it not only embraced but also transformed the concept; it has been much more explicit in its advocacy of citizenship and has emphasised individuals' obligations. A key theme has been that there is a contract or partnership between the state and individuals with mutual obligations on each side. As part of their rights to the citizenship that the state is obliged to grant them, individuals are expected to ensure social order and cohesion by showing personal responsibility and fulfilling their social obligations as citizens. This includes their duties to each other as citizens, being responsible parents and community members, and undertaking paid work. Different types of citizenship to represent the range of obligations we have as citizens have also emerged within political and academic discourses. Examples are environmental citizenship to indicate our responsibility to protect our environment, and active citizenship which refers to responsibility to give some of our private time to participating in community activity, such as voluntary work (Deacon, 2002; Lister, 1998, 2003; Parker, 1998; Lewis, 2004).

New Labour's approach to social exclusion reflects this interpretation of citizenship; the right to full participation and inclusion in society and the associated enjoyment of the status of citizenship is not automatic but conditional on fulfilling certain obligations. Consequently, preconditions have been attached to many of the routes offered out of social exclusion.

This reframing of social issues, such as vulnerable groups, in terms of inclusion, and within the language of citizenship is not exclusive to this

country; it has been a 'major trend in western nation states' (Invernezzi and Williams, 2008: x) over the last decade. However, there are many debates about the effectiveness of the obligations and preconditions in New Labour's policies to address essential aspects of social exclusion. These will be addressed in the chapters on the specific vulnerable groups concerned in more detail; recurring criticisms centre around New Labour's increasing shift towards an employment-based citizenship and the primacy it has placed on paid work as a precondition for addressing the social exclusion of vulnerable groups. Consequently, the concept of citizenship will be returned to on many occasions during the course of the book.

To conclude this discussion of an appropriate definition of 'vulnerable group', this book will focus on the groups identified above as having been constructed as 'vulnerable'. Therefore, the 'vulnerable groups' who are the subject of this book are those groups who are and have been politically constructed as 'vulnerable' through government policies.

USING THIS BOOK

The very nature of the concept of vulnerable means that those in the aforementioned 'vulnerable groups' are more likely to have multiple, rather than discrete sets of vulnerabilities. For instance, childhood is not the only cause of a child's vulnerability; ethnicity, belonging to a lone-parent family and the mental illness of a parent can also be significant factors. As this book aims to enable the reader to identify and understand the health and social care needs of selected 'vulnerable groups' in society, each chapter will focus on the key issues for one particular group from a broadly social science perspective. While repetition will be avoided, examples of overlapping vulnerabilities will be acknowledged where appropriate. Although these groups now have a high profile in health and social care courses, relevant, contemporary information and material about them is time-consuming to research because it is currently only available from numerous disparate sources and organisations. Therefore the chapters in this book will also draw on the wide range of literature about each of the groups and the reference list should be a resource in itself. The groups are as follows:

- lone parents;
- people with disabilities;
- older people;
- children;
- ethnic minority groups;
- the mentally ill;
- the homeless;
- asylum seekers and refugees.

In order to provide the reader with a clear and comprehensive overview of health and social care issues for each group, the chapters will address a range of relevant models, concepts and theoretical perspectives and cover three main areas; one main area is the key concepts, definitions and statistical data required to gain an understanding of the group that is the subject of the chapter. Another is those needs and experiences of the group under discussion that contribute to their vulnerability. The third main area is the trends in policy responses to the groups. Reference will be made to specific policies to illustrate these trends. The same terminology may not be used to denote these three main areas and they will not necessarily be addressed in the same order in each chapter. The data and policy references will be as up to date as possible at the time of going to press in May 2008.

The intention is that the chapters can be read independently, although it is suggested that readers familiarise themselves with the overall approach taken in the book as set out in this introductory chapter before starting any of the chapters. While the emphasis will be on the contemporary United Kingdom, material presented and discussed will be located in its historical, European and wider international context as and when appropriate. A brief outline of the content of each chapter is set out below.

Chapter 1 – Lone parents

This chapter will discuss the increase in lone parents, the nature of their experiences and the causes of their vulnerability. The policies aimed at lone parents will be outlined and evaluated.

Chapter 2 – People with disabilities

The arguments that disability is socially constructed will be discussed at the beginning of the chapter. The problems experienced by those in this vulnerable group will then be explored, followed by an analysis of recent approaches to addressing their needs.

Chapter 3 – Older people

The length of this chapter reflects the growing body of literature about this vulnerable group; after examining the concept of an 'ageing society', this chapter moves on to examine the experiences of ageing and old age. Both recent and planned initiatives aimed at reducing the vulnerabilities of older people are also considered in relation to the evidence presented.

Chapter 4 – Children

This chapter starts by looking at the changes in the construction of childhood and the growing national and international concerns about children's

vulnerability. It then discusses and assesses some of the many policy initiatives that have been produced as a result of these concerns.

Chapter 5 – Ethnic minority groups

The extent of the inequalities still experienced by many of those in this vulnerable group in our society is a major theme in this chapter. Definitions of race, ethnicity and ethnic minority groups are discussed before the chapter looks at the evidence of these inequalities and their relationship to racial divisions. Existing policies and approaches are then evaluated in the light of current research.

Chapter 6 – The mentally ill

The various explanations and theoretical perspectives about mental illness are explored at the beginning of this chapter. Discussion of the nature of the vulnerability and extent of the social exclusion of those living with a mental illness is followed by a critical evaluation of the initiatives that have been introduced to increase the inclusion of this group in society.

Chapter 7 – The homeless

The many different types and causes of homelessness are explained in the first part of this chapter. It then moves on to consider what life is like without a home. The second half of the chapter discusses the nature of support available to the homeless, the implications of recent policy changes and possible directions for future initiatives.

Chapter 8 – Asylum seekers and refugees

The concepts of 'asylum seeker' and 'refugee' are clarified at the beginning of this chapter. The exploration of the extent of their vulnerability both upon arrival, and when living, in this country that follows shows how this can lead to their marginalisation and social exclusion. The impact and effectiveness of past and current policies are also considered.

Chapter 9 – Concluding comments: the future for vulnerable groups in health and social care

This final chapter gives a brief overview of the main arguments in the book in relation to the concepts of vulnerability, social exclusion and citizenship. It then makes some recommendations about future approaches to addressing the social exclusion of vulnerable groups.

The concentration on the three main themes outlined above will also give students the breadth of information about these groups that they

require. Those students who wish to deepen their knowledge will be able to independently explore the extensive range of literature cited in each chapter. In addition, there will be suggestions about points for further discussion and study (see below).

CHAPTER FEATURES

The aim will be to make the text as readable and interactive as possible. Features will include:

- An overview of the main topics to be addressed at the beginning of each chapter.
- Key concepts will be highlighted in the text on their first appearance and clearly outlined in the glossary at the end of the book. The glossary is designed to provide relevant understandings for those with differing levels of social science knowledge. It can also serve for reference purposes.
- Activities based on extracts from primary sources (for example, case studies, historical documents, newspaper articles, policy documents and statistical data). Where appropriate, post-activity comments to help the reader reflect on his/her work on the activities are set out at the end of chapters. Some can also be enlisted and/or adapted by lecturers and tutors for workshops and classroom discussions. The presentation of these activities is designed to reinforce and support students' learning as opposed to being essential to main text in each chapter. They are easily identified as they are presented in boxes and can be omitted by those students who do not require them and they feature:
- links with other chapters highlighted;
- tables, diagrams and graphs;
- discussion points for either individual study or teaching purposes;
- suggestions for further study and reading, plus web resources.

FURTHER STUDY

A visit to the Social Exclusion Taskforce website is useful if you want to gain a deeper understanding of its philosophy and current initiatives to address the needs of vulnerable groups in health and social care. For further insights into citizenship, it's worth reading Marshall's seminal essay "Citizenship and social class" (Marshall, 1992) and Chapter 1 in Lewis (2004). Lister's work provides interesting criticisms of this concept, particularly New Labour's use of this and its exclusionary powers (Lister, 1997, 1998, 2003).