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Accessing Vulnerability

Investigating narratives of vulnerability at
DIGNITY – Danish Institute Against Torture

Author
Marie Raasthøj Hansen

Abstract

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Title of the work:	Accessing Vulnerability – Investigating narratives of vulnerability at DIGNITY – Danish Institute Against Torture
Author:	Marie Raasthøj Hansen
Supervisor:	Tina Kindeberg
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Summary:	The question 'What is Vulnerability' is hard to answer. This thesis deals with this question by investigating narratives of vulnerability amongst staff members at DIGNITY – Danish Institute Against Torture. Drawing on the thoughts, theories and epistemology of understanding vulnerability by Erinn C. Gilson and Judith Butler, this thesis seeks to uncover how vulnerability is narrated amongst staff who work with what they themselves call vulnerable groups. Based on a social constructivist methodology, the analysis investigates three themes of the narratives; normality, ambivalence and power representation, finding that it is the very ambivalence between the perceived and spoken normality of the individual and the perceived and spoken normality of the vulnerable groups which feeds and creates power relations. It all boils down to a discussion of the findings of the analysis focusing on the power of choosing to own ones vulnerability and the implications for the power structures surrounding the term vulnerability.
Key words:	Vulnerability, NGO, social constructivism, normality, power structures, Judith Butler, Erinn C. Gilson, feminism

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1. Introduction

"**Vulnerable (adj.)**

> c.1600, from Late Latin *vulnerabilis* 'wounding,' from Latin *vulnerare* 'to wound, hurt, injure, maim,' from vulnus (genitive *vulneris*) 'wound,' perhaps related to*vellere* 'pluck, to tear' (see svelte), or from PIE **wele-nes-*, from **wele-*(2) 'to strike, wound' (see Valhalla)."

(Harper, 2001)

When searching for an answer to what vulnerability is one comes across many different takes on the meaning of the term. When looking at the definitions offered by newer feminist research and philosophical discussions, the argument always starts with the statement that: "Human life is conditioned by vulnerability." (Mackenzie et al., 2013: 1) Following, human life is conditioned by the vulnerability of the human body, the vulnerability of the mind or the social structures to which the body and the mind are again vulnerable – it is inherently part of being alive. Vulnerability is largely described as a human condition, something we as humans all have to deal with, whether it is contextual or inherit. As a term it is relatable for most as something we try not to be, and something that we try to help others from being when we can (Mackenzie et al., 2013).

As an emerging field, little has been written or explored about vulnerability, but in recent time an increasing amount of feminist scholars attempt to shed light on how vulnerability plays a large part in the way human beings relate to each other in a social world (Butler, 2005, 2009; Gilson, 2014; Mackenzie, 2014). One of the premises for this discussion is that vulnerability is one of those filters we use to understand and relate to the social world, a given natural condition we lean upon to understand our place in it. Erinn C. Gilson addresses this discussion by reflecting upon how one can develop an ethics of vulnerability. The aim is to reflect upon the socially attached meanings of the word vulnerability, and through this instigate a discussion of how vulnerability affects relations between human beings. Through this Gilson questions how vulnerability, when accepted as a negative condition, affects relation and interaction and social structures of care. Central to this discussion is a critical analytical

approach to uncover how we socially create terms such as vulnerability in order to categorize and deal with our own fallible and fragile nature, and how being vulnerable seems to be negatively loaded and related to weakness. Gilson asks the question; if vulnerability is something we all possess, then what makes it related to negative connotations instead of being an instigator for relations?

Through these discussions it seems clear that a debate over how the term vulnerability is used and produced is emerging, and maybe also needed in sectors working with issues concerning the vulnerability of others. We, one might say the less vulnerable, have a moral obligation to care and provide social justice for those who are vulnerable, for those in vulnerable situations (Brown, 2011). Kate Brown claims that the "need to care for the vulnerable" is loaded with patronizing and paternalistic political agendas, and calls for an investigation of "conceptual boundaries of the notion" of vulnerability (Brown, 2011: 319; Gilson, 2014).

Taking departure in DIGNITY – Danish Institute Against Torture[1] as an exploratory case study, this thesis will aim at investigating precisely what Brown calls for, namely whether there exists reflection over the meaning of vulnerability, in work which is in essence set in place to prevent the vulnerability of potential torture victims or help torture survivors and protect their human rights.

1.1 The purpose of the study and choice of theory

This thesis writes itself into a field of investigation which is in itself ambivalent. Even though the term and concept of vulnerability is discussed and arguably very present on several levels of social science research, as well as within educational research and gender studies, it is largely not investigated through empirical research, as Brown states in her own investigation of vulnerability:

> "Generally speaking, examination of the literature related to vulnerability in the social sciences reveals the concept to be highly relevant and yet little-explored. Empirical research into how ideas about vulnerability are operationalised remains limited." (Brown, 2014: 373)

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[1] DIGNITY - Danish Institute Against Torture is an independent and non-governmental organization, working to

Through this investigation of vulnerability, this thesis seeks to uncover how the term is used, dealt with and accepted as knowledge within the context of an NGO working with vulnerable groups, and in this case more specifically a NGO working with the prevention of torture. Taking departure in DIGNITY as a case and through an analysis of interviews with staff about the term vulnerability, this thesis will provide a reflection of how the term is used, created and produced through these conversations, as well as investigate how different notions of vulnerability clash and interact. I take departure in a feminist philosophical discourse analysis, inspired by the writings of Judith Butler, Erinn C. Gilson and more. Inspired by the idea of vulnerability as a situated term, I will attempt to uncover patterns in how vulnerability is situated, expressed and attached to meaning through narratives by staff working with torture prevention within the organisation DIGNITY.

Seen through a lens of feminist critical theory, the analysis will be a discourse analysis of interviews conducted with staff at DIGNITY, working with prevention of torture on several levels. As this thesis takes its point of departure in social constructivism and as this is a study of a term used in a very specific context and time, doing a discourse analysis will allow for the findings to provide an image which will answer the research question and sub-questions, taking departure in recent philosophical feminist critique. Moreover, this thesis is based on pedagogical notions of regimes of knowledge and how knowledge and regulated social behaviour is passed on through interactions and power relations. It is as such an investigation of how an organisation perceives a term of knowledge which is passed on through social interaction.

1.2 Research question and field of study

Following the arguments above, my main research question is:

> ➢ How are different understandings of the term vulnerability constructed amongst professionals working with prevention of torture and how do these understandings reveal ambivalence towards and of the term?

Furthermore, the following sub-questions work as an inspiration for the analysis and following reflective discussion:

- How do the accounts of the meaning of vulnerability change according to the-sphere in which we talk about vulnerability?
- What are the perceived and expressed patterns of meaning suggested by the use of the word and the idea of vulnerability by DIGNITY staff?
- What other terms, words and ideas are attached to vulnerability in order to create knowledge of the meaning of vulnerability?

This thesis adds to an emerging feminist discussion of vulnerability, as it is investigated through critical reflection and philosophy, and seeks to contribute to this, in my view as a researcher, emerging new field of study within feminist research, Educational Studies and Gender Studies. Furthermore, the thesis serves as an attempt to uncover how sparking reflection about vulnerability can work as a tool to map the pre-assumptions attached to the term in this specific context. This is done in the hope of providing an image of what connotations of vulnerability are underlying in the work of an organisation such as DIGNITY, which by all means is an organisation which sets certain standards in bringing forward knowledge.

1.3 Delimitations

The empirical material of this thesis consists of interviews and focus groups made with staff from departments in DIGNITY that work with torture prevention, law, finance, marketing and PR. Because of this, the thesis does not add into a discussion of care work as it would have if the interviews were done in the department working with rehabilitation. It is therefore not possible for the outcomes of this thesis to address issues of healthcare, care service providers or personal interaction with vulnerable individuals.

The thesis is based on a body of feminist theoretical work, and is thus a feminist project, which cannot be removed from being politically situated. It is important to note that this thesis does not include gender as an analytical tool or point of investigation, but rather uses queer theory and feminist philosophy as its core epistemological tools.

Due to limited time not all interviews were fully transcribed, and thus not all interviews are available in full transcription. Furthermore, only eight of nine interviews are used in the analysis, as one proved less useful and thus dropped due to the limited timeframe. Moreover,

the focus groups will not be directly addressed and analysed, but instead serve as inspiration for the analysis.

1.4 Definition of key terms

Prevention of torture is in essence work towards the prevention of heinous acts of torture of any form. Freedom from torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment is protected under the UN human rights convention, and DIGNITY as an organisation has this convention at its core.

Vulnerability, as the topic of the thesis, will be explained at great length in chapter 2 and will therefore not be explained here.

1.5 Choice of case study and empirical data

The empirical data for this thesis consists of 9 interviews and 3 focus groups of varying length and were conducted with DIGNITY staff in March, 2015. In the analysis, only 8 interviews will be used.

DIGNITY - Danish Institute Against Torture was founded in 1982, and has since been an active NGO in the fight against torture across the globe. Based in Denmark, DIGNITY has had partners all over the world with the common goal of abolishing torture and other forms of organized violence (DIGNITY - Dansk Institut Mod Tortur, 2015). DIGNITY does rehabilitation, juridical advisory, research and intervention, and is also very actively engaged in the work of the Committee Against Torture with the United Nations. The organization is divided into three different central themes, being Detention, Urban Violence and Rehabilitation. The goal is to create an innovative environment where one can work across disciplines towards one common goal, namely to end torture.

DIGNITY is an organization which both directly and indirectly works with what they themselves call vulnerable families, youth and children (DIGNITY - Dansk Institut Mod Tortur, 2013)[2].

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[2] This document is not publicly accessible. For access to this document please send an email to mraasthoej@gmail.com.

DIGNITY was chosen as a site for the case study during my time as an intern with the organisation. As I got familiar with the current and upcoming projects of the organisation I came across a project addressing the visibility of vulnerable groups in prison, a study which sparked my interest in investigating what the term vulnerability entailed – both within my field of study, but also within DIGNITY as an organisation. DIGNITY is not a typical NGO, and the work they do to prevent torture following the torture convention, is in many ways outstanding in comparison to similar organisations engaged in the same problematics. This makes DIGNITY an interesting organisation to investigate in a case study like this, as it is so diverse within its internal organisation and at the same time works across most of the world, both with partnering organisations, with advocacy and policy work and with both qualitative and quantitative research. Furthermore, as I am doing a study from a social constructivist point of view (as elaborated in chapter 2.4.1), doing a study in a social sphere or context is highly relevant, and almost necessary if one wants to understand how the term vulnerability is operationalized within a given context.

With its work, DIGNITY is an organisation that holds and upholds ideas of human rights which staff brings with them as they enter into partnerships, start up new offices or conduct trainings amongst police, youth and judges all around the world. Following, it is relevant to investigate how words like vulnerability, which are central in human rights thinking and thus central to the work of an organisation such as DIGNITY, are used, thought of, reflected upon and if so redefined – and as such passed on as knowledge through the work of the organisation. In short, and seen from a pedagogical point of view, it is relevant to investigate the discursive patterns surrounding the use of the term vulnerability, in an organisation which passes on ideas of vulnerability – directly or indirectly – through its work.

1.6 Thesis structure

Chapter 2 will address the theoretical framework through which the analysis will be conducted and the data interpreted. The chapter will give an account of how the writings of Erinn C. Gilson and Judith Butler have influenced the body of the thesis, as well as provide the reader with an overview of the analytical framework, giving an account of key themes such as the vulnerability of the self and vulnerability within the institutional space. *Chapter 2.4* will give an account of the methodological considerations for the thesis and through this

also expand on the field of study. Furthermore, the chapter will provide an account of how the fieldwork was conducted, the preliminary thoughts and reflections during the process, as well as give an account of the researchers role in producing the data, both its creation as well as in its processing. Taking a point of departure in a social constructivist point of view, theory of knowledge and analytical framework are one and the same and will therefore be explained in one chapter. *Chapter 3* will provide a discourse analysis of interviews made with DIGNITY staff surrounding their own ideas and meanings of vulnerability on a personal and on a professional level. The analysis will work with themes and definitions of vulnerability mentioned in Chapter 2. The analysis will serve as a tool for answering the research question, and will be guided by the sub-questions. Following, *Chapter 4* will pick up the claims and findings from Chapter 3 and open up for a discussion of how the different ideas of vulnerability between spheres create ambivalence, co-create, overlap or interact. *Chapter 5* will then offer a concluding remark on the study, and sum up the findings of Chapter 3 and 4, and in order to provide a reflexive dimension to the thesis.

2. Theoretical Framework: Introducing Vulnerability

The following chapter will serve as introduction to the term vulnerability as it is used in the thesis through the theoretical material. The theories elaborated in this chapter will therefore also motivate the analysis, and provide the reader with knowledge of the theoretical point of departure for the thesis. The ontology of the thesis will be further elaborated in the remainder of the chapter, from 2.4 and onwards, as I elaborate on the use of social constructivist thinking and critical analysis. This study of vulnerability is a venture into uncovering what discourses of meaning are expressed in interviews with staff working towards preventing torture. Deeply inspired by Judith Butler and her discussion of the mutually created notions of normality and the self, and Erinn C. Gilson, who has made a considerable contribution to the current academic discussion of vulnerability from a feminist philosophical point of view, this chapter will provide an overview of the theoretical movement and feminist philosophical thinking which drives and shapes the analysis. Gilson's book "The Ethics of Vulnerability" (2014) explores the socially constructed notions of vulnerability in an effort to map how one can speak of an ethics of vulnerability. In her book she works with vulnerability on three levels;

the ethics of vulnerability, the vulnerability of the body and the care politics of vulnerability. Furthermore, she ventures into a discussion of how vulnerability and normality are co-constructive, derived from arguments of Judith Butler on precariousness, which ultimately leads to an investigation of the concept of invulnerability, and what the desire to move towards invulnerability does to human relation.

This chapter will thus explore the arguments of Gilson and Butler, amongst others, in order to create an image of what vulnerability is in the context of this study.

2.1 What is vulnerability?

This section will unfold the arguments of Erinn Gilson and Kate Brown, in order to provide the reader with an overview on how the term vulnerability is treated and understood as a premise for the thesis.

> "Vulnerability is presumed to be a common feature of the human condition, a basic susceptibility that all Possess. As such, an idea of vulnerability underlies our notions of harm and well-being, interests and rights, equality and inequality, and duties and obligations." (Gilson, 2014: 15)

Vulnerability appears as a term with incorporated diversity. It is expressed in many ways, regarded differently according to context, and attached to different attributes in different situations. It is both inherent and circumstantial, and can be a thing of nature as well as a human condition of life itself. One might say that vulnerability is both embedded and prescribed in the human condition. In the context of Scandinavia, measures have been put in place to make sure that those deemed to be vulnerable are taken care of by the welfare society. A manual of human basic rights has been put in place and upheld by UN divisions, government agencies and NGO's in order to protect and maintain "[...] positive and negative obligations, which demand that we refrain from harming others and act so as to aid them, derive from the basic fact that we are vulnerable creatures." (Gilson, 2014: 15)

Kate Brown raises a critique of the care work and NGO use of vulnerability, as it, according to her, produces power structures of those categorized as vulnerable, and those who categorizes – being the NGOs and societal care work systems, what she calls "contemporary social welfare" (Brown, 2014: 371). In her article "Questioning the Vulnerability Zeitgeist" (2014), Brown

explores how vulnerability has been described across areas of interest to show the diversity of the term. Through this reading she describes vulnerability as being close to synonymous with risk, and furthermore closely linked to ontological ideas of "[…] insecurity and powerlessness" (Brown, 2014: 373) and describes the term as being very closely linked to ideas of moral. As a concluding remark in her article Brown states, about the concept of vulnerability, that:

> "Unless it is used with care and defined as a state which is universally shared, vulnerability is a notion which can serve the exclusion of those who are seen as 'deviant', carrying the implication that it is only people with 'acceptable' behaviours that deserve support and assistance." (Brown, 2014: 383)

Even though she does not explicitly state this here, Brown calls for a reflexive approach to vulnerability as it is used more and more within the context of the British welfare society. To her, these analyses and her papers are part of a political project and she does not go into a philosophical dissection of vulnerability as Gilson does.

In her investigation of the social construct of vulnerability, Gilson makes three distinct points "[...] about the normative significance of vulnerability [...]" which then guides her further investigation. Firstly, she describes vulnerability as being essential, and fundamental to human existence. It is a condition of having a fragile body, existing in a social context and even though we, as social beings living in a westernized society, can put measures in place in order to minimize the vulnerability we experience and seek to distance ourselves from it (Gilson, 2014: 15).

We thus have, and maybe more importantly feel, an obligation to take and provide care for those who are vulnerable, seem vulnerable or are in a vulnerable position. If we were not vulnerable, such measures would not be in place (Gilson, 2014). Given that vulnerability is a precondition for harm, but not harm itself, these measures are there to help after the harm occurs, as well as provide some sort of pre-defined "safety net" and protection in case harm does occur. These measures are also there to try and abolish or remove some of the vulnerabilities that are contextual and circumstantial, so that we can minimize the risk of harm

(Gilson, 2014). Brown supports this approach in her article "'Vulnerability': Handle with care" as she unfolds her own position on vulnerability:

> "According to 'common-sense' understandings of the notion, it does not have particularly empowering connotation and implies a state of weakness. Upon closer scrutiny, vulnerability is a vague and nebulous concept." (Brown, 2011: 314)

Vulnerability exists in an acceptable form as long as it is something we can help, something we can care for or something we are obligated to take action against (Gilson, 2014). And as such it is something we deal with by putting in measures, in order for us to deal with it as little as possible.

In her second argument, Gilson points to the normative nature of vulnerability: "Second, the centrality of vulnerability to ethics demonstrates that vulnerability carries with it some normative force [...]" (Gilson, 2014: 15) As we act according to our vulnerabilities we put measures in place, both normatively and working agencies that make sure we all live in accordance to our vulnerabilities, and know to take care of others as our responsibility demands us to (Gilson, 2014). In essence Gilson seeks to shed light on an issue of a discursive reality which is, at large, not investigated through critical thinking. To her it is vital that the normative force of vulnerability and its precautions are recognized and reflected upon, so that we might unveil the underlying patterns of power and restriction embedded in the discourse of vulnerability she describes.

Thirdly, Gilson explains how vulnerability "[...] is most commonly considered a precondition to hazard and harm." (Gilson, 2014: 16) As a precondition to harm, it is something that we aim to protect ourselves from, and even though being vulnerable is not the same at being harmed, it still makes us want to put safety measures in place so that we are not as much in harm's way as we would have been without them. This being as it is, we are constantly in pursuit of something that will protect us from our condition of vulnerability, something that will make our existence a little more safe (Gilson, 2014).

Our constant pursuit of invulnerability creates a discourse of vulnerability as a sign of weakness, something we must remove ourselves from and ultimately eliminate. It is also what drives our need to care and protect what we deem vulnerable, in our personal sphere or on a

global scale. It is regarded as an extreme, a condition in which one feels uncomfortable and unable to take action, which places vulnerability outside what we believe, or at least what we strive for to be the norm. Invulnerability is perfection; vulnerability is non perfection (Gilson, 2014).

In an attempt to broaden the notion of how we can deal with vulnerability, Gilson proposes the argument, derived from Judith Butler's ontological notions of normativity and critique, that the desire to investigate vulnerability, without judgement and moral obligations, gives us a chance to better understand "[...] how we are related to others in a social world and the nature of ethical responsibility." (Gilson, 2014: 55) This argument also opens up for Gilson's proclaimed premise, that there exists an ontological idea of vulnerability as something we all share as a common denominator for relations and recognition in others and of ourselves. This premise is articulated as something to strive towards, but not as the accepted normality of vulnerability, which is in essence the opposite. Derived from these arguments, Gilson asks: "So, what does it mean that we apprehend vulnerability most easily and recognize it most readily when it appears in the guise of violability, injurability, and suffering?" (Gilson, 2014: 65)

2.2 Debating normativity and vulnerability

This section will dig into the co-constitutive relationship of normativity and vulnerability in order to further understand how the term vulnerability is attached to meaning and created through, as well as creates, discursive power structures for relations.

> "We must ask the difficult question about what kinds and whose vulnerabilities are perceived and recognized, why these ways of being vulnerable are available for apprehension while others are not, and how our common conception of vulnerability as susceptibility to harm contributes to framing vulnerability in inequitable ways." (Gilson, 2014: 68)

When investigating vulnerability, it becomes clear that the term is continuously connected to context, relations and moral coding, all of which are attached to language and discourse, and all of which are normative pieces of power driven or power producing puzzles. If vulnerability is most commonly equated with susceptibility to harm, weakness and negative connotations,

as Gilson proposes, it is of outmost importance to investigate the normative framework which prescribes vulnerability, in order to understand the implications of the same on human relation. It is not possible to set aside normativity, the creation of norms and the concept of vulnerability, Gilson argues in the quote below, as the two create each other through the self and its relations.

> "[…] the vulnerability of the self - its susceptibility to impression, its malleability and openness, its formation and mutation through relation – is the context in which norms are produced and reproduced both critically and conventionally. Thus, the relation between vulnerability and normativity is co-constitutive." (Gilson, 2014: 47)

In her book "Giving an Account of Oneself" from 2005, Butler unfolds thoughts on how the self and the other are co-constructed in the practise of recognition. According to Butler the vulnerability of the self is at the very core of why we as human being are so susceptible to social structures of power. Accordingly, the self is a storyless entity which is shaped and formed into meaning and existence by social structures that provide meaning. The structures or norms are existent outside the self, but also provide one with self-recognition, which incorporates these norms into the self (Butler, 2005). As such, norms surrounding vulnerability will always be recognized, or not recognized, by the self as true. Butler derives this thought from Foucault, and talks about it as a regime of truth. According to Foucault this recognition always takes place, and the regime of truth provides a frame of recognition for the self. This manifests itself in the constant negotiation of norms that the "I", the self will comply with (Butler, 2005).

We cannot try and act according to an ethical codex towards others without being in a normative space, as the other only exists within the frames through which we see the other. Not only do we then speak into a normativity, we also pre-construct an interaction and therefore instigates a relation of power: "If the 'I' and the 'you' must first come into being, and if a normative frame is necessary for this emergence and encounter, then norms work not only to direct my conduct but to condition the possible emergence of an encounter between myself and the other." (Butler, 2005: 25)

Vulnerability is thus a term of normality with prescribed connotations of knowledge and truth about what the word means or what the term entails (Gilson, 2014). A prescribed notion means an idea that is already defined, but not necessarily known or open for reflection. Being prescribed indicates that the term vulnerability already has defined connotations of value or importance, which are embedded in what one might call "my personal idea of vulnerability" or "the general idea of vulnerability". Gilson investigates vulnerability and normativity in a manner, which is focused on understanding and judgement free reflection, so as to unfold knowledge and reflections of our shared vulnerability, rather than invoking norms and ethics (Gilson, 2014).

2.3 Vulnerability and invulnerability

This section seeks to elaborate on the ambivalence embedded in the relation between vulnerability and invulnerability. Following the arguments of Gilson, this section will dig into the implications, on human relation, of pursuing invulnerability and distancing oneself from vulnerability.

> "Rather than being an external constraint, a norm circulates within social practices, which manifests the norm and are the medium of its reproduction." (Gilson, 2014: 52)

According to Butler, norms are dependent on the mechanisms of social practice in order to function as oppressive reproductions of normativity. Norms upholds normativity through social practice. In the context of vulnerability, as it is both socially dependant and inherently embedded in our self and in our bodies, there thus exists a mutual creation process between what we feel as vulnerability, the vulnerability of the body, and how we socially construct vulnerability. Furthermore, vulnerability also becomes a construct of recognition in which we place groups or individuals in order to relate to them, categorize them, and in order to make ourselves able to help them if needed. In the introduction to her collection of essays on precariousness and grievability "Frames of War" (2009), Butler elaborates on what she describes as frames of recognition.

> "On the one hand, I am seeking to draw attention to the epistemological problem raised by this issue of framing: the frames through which we apprehend or, indeed, fail to apprehend the lives of others as lost or injured (lose-able or injurable) are politically

saturated. They are themselves operations of power. They do not unilaterally decide the conditions of appearance but their aim is nevertheless to delimit the sphere of appearance itself." (Butler, 2009: 1)

Arguably, the term vulnerability works as one of these frames through which one can be helpable, following Butlers thoughts on grievability. A vulnerable group thus becomes a group which is relatable through its vulnerability itself, or through the categorization which is attached to vulnerability, being gender, ethnicity, age or political affiliations etcetera. It is therefore the frame of vulnerability which makes a group relatable, and thus, according to Butler, visible and real so to speak. If one is to follow the argument above, then the frame of vulnerability also leaves some entities outside the perimeter of relation, as only so much can stay within the frame.

This also becomes apparent as the ideal we strive to achieve, in this case invulnerability, only exists insofar as vulnerability exists, and as they are both conventions of moral - social constructions of social practice. "[...] if norms are merely social conventions, then the moral norms that demand the transformation of convention so that it accords with an ideal are also just conventions." (Gilson, 2014: 52).

In the chapter "The Ideal of Invulnerability" (Gilson, 2014) Gilson investigates the epistemological ideas of invulnerability and wilful ignorance, and begins with positioning herself by writing:

> "On my account, ignorance of the situational vulnerabilities of others who are perceived as 'other' – for instance, the vulnerabilities of prisoners to the physical control and violence of the agents of the state – is a product of this deeper ignorance of shared ontological vulnerability." (Gilson, 2014: 75)

Returning to her original point of promoting a shared ontology of vulnerability, Gilson also digs into what to her seems as a given consequence of the lack of such ontology, namely glorification and pursuit of invulnerability. To her, invulnerability is a concept in which we can ignore aspects of life which we do not want to know about i.e. "[…] aspects of existence that are inconvenient, disadvantageous, or uncomfortable for us […]" (Gilson, 2014: 76). This is not to say that this is embedded in our filtering of the social world, it is something we are

conditioned and condition ourselves to strive for. Gilson argues that the consequence of this is a constant upheld *willful ignorance*, a term she extracts from Nancy Tuana as she lists 4 types of ignorance. Tuana offers a very concrete description as she uses incest and racism as very illustrative example topics of willful ignorance:

> "Incest and racism illustrate well the efforts to which individuals and groups are willing to go to preserve ignorance when they do not want to know. Both involve what Herman has called 'an active social phenomenon of forgetting'." (Tuana, 2006: 13)

Accordingly, Gilson elaborates and unfolds the argument that it is not an action motivated by interest, but rather a compulsive conditioning pushed forward by ambivalence "[…] and the absence of conscious awareness and commitment […]" (Gilson, 2014: 77). It is a conditioning that happens, not because we want to, but because we cannot accept our own vulnerability as being a shared experience as well as an individual experience, and thus we work towards invulnerability in order to remove ourselves from the ambiguity of vulnerability (Gilson, 2014). It allows us to maintain a position of willful ignorance which again allows us to maintain a position of privilege, as we can remove ourselves from the vulnerability of others. This ignorance becomes "[…] a self-deception oriented toward retaining privilege and eschewing recognition of those facts that would destabilize privileged subjectivity." (Gilson, 2014: 86)

Clearly, vulnerability is more than a topic of analysis for Gilson, it is a political project concerning itself with how our understanding of human relation can be opened up to an idea of vulnerability as something, which can initiate and uphold relation. In the course of doing this she unfolds partial images of how vulnerability is created and understood as a term within different topics, and how these can produce discourses of power which are rooted in an understanding of vulnerability as something inherently negative.

> "Only by departing from a solely negative understanding of vulnerability, though, can we conceive of vulnerability as being a resource for ethical response and political resistance of oppression." (Gilson, 2014: 93)

2.4 Conceptual framework and analytical strategy.

In this chapter I will present the methodological inspiration, based in social constructivist theory and thought. Following, I will motivate my choice of theory and analytical method and account for my use of discourse analysis. As this presents the framework of thought for doing both analysis and method, I will account for the thoughts and themes of analysis as well as the method used to gain data.

2.4.1 Feminist Social Constructivism and Critical thinking

"In this view of vulnerability that hinders that basic aim of 'the apprehension of equality in the midst of precariousness' and so we must seek to understand the practices, patterns of thought, structures, institutions, etc. that give rise to it […]. […] We must turn our attention toward a critical understanding of the conventional reception of the concepts, like that of vulnerability, that form the core of this normative account." (Gilson, 2014: 60)

The quote above illustrates how the topic of vulnerability is closely linked to the critical method of analysis. In the following, I will attempt to clarify my ontological standpoint as I take upon myself the task of doing the fieldwork and analysis of this thesis. For me as a researcher in particular, I am investigating the term vulnerability from a position of certain privileges, which predisposes me to understand vulnerability from a certain perspective as:

"The feminist researcher 'knows' from a specific and partial social location, and so is socially constituted as a 'knowing self' in particular way of thinking and authorizing knowledge." (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002: 65)

So, before the topic of the thesis was finally decided, the methodological thinking was at work, as I was already a feminist researcher investigating discursive manifestations of power relations (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002).

Following, this is not a study of logical empirical method which leads from theory to empirical production to conclusion. The theoretical background for the thesis and my own understanding of terms, standpoints and ontology has at all times influenced and indeed overflown the empirical production and the following analytical process. This is in essence a social

constructivist study, as a social constructivist analysis has the theoretical gaze at its core and as its starting point (Esmark et al., 2005).

Right from the beginning, when investigating a term like vulnerability, thoughts of social patterns of power appear. We, as social human beings, create meaning through our relations and structure our social world though these meanings. We cannot withdraw ourselves from these relations, and as such our social world will always be a product of this mutually creative space that our relations make. Vulnerability is a relation dependent construction. If one looks past the inherent vulnerability of the body, the vulnerability of the self is – just as inherent, and simultaneously created through, as well as creating relation. So, what is vulnerability? Vulnerability is clearly an idea shaped by individuality, but it is also something everyone shares as a condition of life. The self is constantly created through social conditioning in our need to be recognized in our environment. But the status of vulnerability as a common condition also predicts certain normative restraints in talking about it, as it seems universally accepted as something we try to help, something we aim to not be – and somewhat of a label which we prescribe others (Gilson, 2014). This calls for a critical investigation, based on the ontological standpoint that vulnerability is a common prescription of human existence. In Gilson's own words:

> "One may be aware of the ontological reality of a common vulnerability – one may have read Butler! – but without a consideration of the concrete way vulnerability is repudiated or appropriated as a form of privilege, it is difficult to translate that awareness into ethical response." (Gilson, 2014: 61)

According to Gilson, it is therefore important to investigate the situations in which we fail to acquire an ethical response, so that we might "[…] begin to understand how to remedy them." (Gilson, 2014: 61)

When investigating normative understandings and preconditions of language based concepts, one must always investigate one's own positioning within the normative relationship of the term, as the researcher will also be operating in accordance to the normative framework which she herself is investigating (Gilson, 2014).

Butler argues that to think critically is inevitable when investigating social structures and normative patterns, structures in which a researcher constantly find herself as she is trying to investigate it (Butler, 2009). Gilson picks up this argument and relates it to her investigation of discourses of vulnerability as she argues that: "Critique brings to light the delimiting conditions of our knowledge, the epistemological constraints that are the product of ontological framing […]" (Gilson, 2014: 52). As such, when investigating a term like vulnerability, with so many embedded discursive and situated patterns of meaning, a researcher needs to constantly and critically evaluate her own positioning, how the empirical material is formed and shaped by these structures, as well as by the structures in which the researcher herself is situated. Because of this, the analysis of this thesis will be concerned with the situated nature of the subjects, the interviews and of my position as a researcher in order to critically asses the discursive patterns of meaning which frame vulnerability during the interviews.

2.4.2 Discourse analysis

This section will unfold the analytical strategy to the reader, as well as account for some of the central themes of analytical interest.

The analysis is done with a point of departure in a social constructivist idea that an analysis is created through an analytical gaze, build up by all the different theoretical ideas that initiate the analytical process. This section is therefore an attempt to map those pre-understandings of the social world through which I see my empirical material and attach meaning to the things said in the interviews. To describe the individual idea of vulnerability, one has to consider the manner in which the interview subjects speak about it. Therefore, in an analysis of this type one has to look for moments when the interview subjects categorize vulnerability, and how they use specific words that create knowledge about what vulnerability is to the subject.

The relationship between social constructivism and discourse analysis is both widely accepted, and widely discussed. Taking departure in social-constructivism, discourse analysis is an investigation of language and the social structures which create, and which are created through language (Jørgensen and Phillips, 1999). Thus, working with discourse analysis is synonymous with working with understanding language and how it expresses underlying social structures which form our understanding of normal, deviant and all the things in

between (Bredsdorff, 2002). A discourse is a language-based framework for social understanding, which both describes and creates. In feminism these have been used to uncover and describe societal structures which maintain power structures within society, and this often in a very politically loaded and critical manner (Bredsdorff, 2002).

As such, when discussing and investigating the structures surrounding a term like vulnerability, discourse analysis allows the analysis to buy into the premise that the word, the term and the idea are mutually constructed and attach to physical reality as it is reflected upon by the interview subjects. As the analysis will be done on the basis of conversational interviews it is also interesting to investigate the change and ongoing reflection within the conversations themselves, as language and the social world are mutually constructive (Jørgensen and Phillips, 1999). The goal is as such not to uncover a right or a wrong, but to map out the narratives of subjective normative understandings of truth in order to investigate the discourse evolving the term vulnerability within the context of DIGNITY staff members (Jørgensen and Phillips, 1999).

The analysis is inspired by the principles of critical practice, articulated by Gilson as she is inspired by Butler: "[…] One interrogates the moral framework for what it conceals, assesses and seeks and understanding of what lies outside the given framework, and does so not just with respect to the normative frameworks of others but with respect to one's own." (Gilson, 2014: 55) Thus, already from the production of empirical material, and throughout the process of conducting a discourse analysis, the basis has been a critical investigation of a perceived normative framework of vulnerability, whilst incorporating personal narratives with respect to their own normativity.

As discourse analysis is primarily concerned with language based patterns, the analysis will concern itself with such patterns and attempt to map the meanings expressed through the narratives of the interview subjects. Therefore, in the analysis I will be looking at repetitions of phrases to uncover the meaning attached to the phrases, and I will attend to what the interview subjects explain to be synonyms in order to uncover how vulnerability as a word is treated and used by the interview subject in the interviews. Terms such as privilege, invulnerability and normativity all stem from the theoretical basis of the thesis, as elaborated in the beginning of this chapter.

2.4.3 Methods; Case study, interviews and bias

This section seeks to elaborate on methods used, my choice of doing a case study and on my ethical reflections upon conducting the case study. Ultimately this section will serve as a more factual appetizer for the analysis.

2.4.3.1 Doing a case study

My choice of doing a case study was not a first choice. Originally the thesis was intended to lean upon ideas of feminist anthropology and seek out a larger scale field work to support the thesis. In reality, what happened was a myriad of small and big obstacles and opportunities which in the end lead to a DIGNITY-based case study. What makes this a case study is the delimited nature of doing a study which is so situated, and only an example of itself in its particular time and place (Merriam, 2009).

> "A case is an edited chunk of empirical reality where certain features are marked out, emphasized, and privileged while others recede into the background. As such, a case is not 'natural,' but a mental, or analytical, construct aimed at organizing knowledge about reality in a manageable way." (Lund, 2014: 224)

This thesis bases its analysis on a small situated image of, as Lund puts it, empirical reality in order to offer a knowledgeable answer to the research question. In other words, the choice of a case study allows the thesis to capture an image of how vulnerability is attributed meaning in a very situated time and space. This case study is a study of a concept, and how it is attributed meaning and knowledge in a certain sphere and time, making it abstract (Lund, 2014). Sharan Merriam (2009) elaborates on case study as a qualitative method and explains it like this:

> "Qualitative case studies share with other forms of qualitative research the search for meaning and understanding, the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, an introductive investigative strategy, and the end product being richly descriptive." (Merriam, 2009: 39)

This is a qualitative research of how a term is reflected upon in conversations about personal and professional relations to the term, with me as the researcher, as a primary tool of investigation and analysis. It is a study of a concept and how it is used within a certain framework which has boundaries and limitations (Merriam, 2009).

2.4.3.2 Interviews and Focus groups

In order to uncover these reflections, a series of semi-structured interviews were conducted and followed up by focus groups in order to dig deeper into some of the discursive patterns which unfold in the conversations during the interviews, and the interactions during the focus groups. The choice of method for interviewing was based on the thought that semi-structured interviews would allow for the interview subject's reflections to move more freely. A semi-structured interview "[…] is defined as an interview with the purpose of obtaining descriptions of the life world of the interviewee in order to interpret the meaning of the described phenomena." (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009: 3) Following, focus groups were conducted in order to bring some of the findings of the interviews into play, and create a discussion of the terms and stories attached to the word vulnerability in the interviews (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009).

Within feminist research, semi-structured interviews are believed to stand as an opposite to quantitative research, as it ensures a stronger rapport and a non-hierarchical relationship in which the interviewee is less likely to feel used, and more likely to feel part of the process (Bryman, 2012).

Nine interviews were conducted, in order to make sure that there was enough material and participants for three focus groups, consisting of a minimum of 3 persons each. This format was very adaptable to sudden changes and as such there were no major obstacles during the data collection process.

The analysis will work with the interviews in order to create an image of the individual narratives in comparison to one another, whereas the discussion will be concerned with both individual interviews and inspired by focus group interviews, which are not cited, in order to better illustrate how these narratives show the ambivalence of the term vulnerability.

2.4.3.3 Ethical reflections and analytical delimitations

As a researcher one is always implicated by ethical considerations. An ethical reflection serves to underline the interconnectedness between the researcher and her object of research. The following reflections are inspired by the writings of Alan Bryman (2012 ed.) as he elaborated on ethical considerations in social science.

"Discussions about ethical principles in social research, and perhaps more specifically transgressions of them, tend to revolve around certain issues that recur in different guises, but they have been usefully broken down by Diener and Crandall (1978) into four main areas:

1. whether there is harm to participants;

2. whether there is a lack of informed consent;

3. whether there is an invasion of privacy;

4. whether deception is involved." (Bryman, 2012: 135)

Before conducting the interviews and engaging with the interview subjects, I had many ethical reflections on how to secure a relationship which would leave all parts feeling included and as being part of something, instead of used and then left out of the loop. As I was an intern at DIGNITY before conducting my research for my thesis, I was very conscious about maintaining good relations throughout the process, and therefore made sure that all interviews very thoroughly anonymized – even though this clearly had an effect on the quality of the analysis. As such, all names, places and organisations have been left out of the transcriptions and only few, and unavoidable analytically important personal information is included.

All interviews started with an introduction of the goal for the interview, and all the interviews ended with a discussion of the purpose of the thesis in which the interview subjects were encouraged to ask critical questions. Following, I asked them to comment on the quality of the questions and on their experience in order to make sure that all had a good experience of being part of my study.

In this case, because the object of study is vulnerability, it was important to make clear the boundaries of the investigation. Before the interviews, it was made clear that the interviews were to be anonymized and that very little personal information was to be disclosed. It was also made clear that the interviews were to investigate narratives of vulnerability and not the specific vulnerability of the individual.

3. Narratives of vulnerability amongst staff at DIGNITY

This analysis aims at investigating the discursive patterns in understandings of vulnerability amongst DIGNITY staff by mapping some of the clashes and ambivalences which are both described openly and are underlying in the contradictions within their narrative of vulnerability. Through an investigation of the ambivalences in the narratives, explained thematically, this chapter will lead up to the arguments of the discussion in chapter 4. The themes of the analysis will be ambivalence, normality and power representations.

3.1 Introducing the interview subjects and their narratives

The people interviewed for this thesis are all working staff at DIGNITY headquarters in Østerbro in Copenhagen. An elaboration of my choice of DIGNITY as a case, and a description of the organisation can be found in chapter 1.5. They work in a variety of departments, from marketing, PR and economy to research, advocacy, law and collaborative project management with foreign partners. All of them have in common that they work with torture survivors indirectly – not many of them have direct contact with torture victims as part of their daily professional life, but more occasional and during travels to partnering countries. Some on the other hand have regular contact with police, government officials and UN personal in their everyday work, and are as such not in direct contact with survivors of torture, as staffs of the rehabilitation clinic are. As such, the group of individuals who participated in this study work with the abolishment of torture, and as such with the interests of what they themselves call vulnerable groups in mind. They do not work in direct contact with victims or survivors, as they do in the rehabilitation clinic. The group of interview subjects consists of 3 male informants and 6 female informants, and differ largely in age, though all being more than 30 years old. Most of the interview subjects are Danish, but not all are. All currently live in Denmark and have been working with DIGNITY for more than half a year. In spite of small diversities the group of interview subjects is largely homogeneous, as they are all living in Denmark, are all working fulltime jobs with DIGNITY and most of them are in their thirties.

All the interview subjects express a feeling of doing work that matters, no matter what level of interaction they have with the people they work to help. All speak with a passion for the cause and the work they do. Especially when talking about a term like vulnerability this shows as a

strong linking factor between their own vulnerability and the vulnerability of the people they try to help. It all boils down to a common feeling of meaningfulness in their professional life, which links them in their work with the abolishment for torture. The interview subjects are called IS2, IS3, IS4, IS5, IS6, IS7, IS9 and IS10, and all are described as their acted gender. In order to anonymize the interviews as much as possible, very little description of their age, background or personal details will be disclosed in this analysis. This is therefore a thematic analysis and not a life story analysis, which will be reflected in the lack of personal information disclosed throughout the following pages. The quotes shown in the analysis have been edited for the purpose of making them more readable. For all quotes used in full length and context, please consult appendix in chapter 7[3].

3.1.1 Situating the interview subjects[4]

This section will briefly provide the reader with an introduction to the interview subjects. As this study was conducted on the premise that the interviews were anonymous, this section will not go into detail about the individuals involved, but rather serve as a tool for the reader so as not to feel estranged when reading about the interview subjects narratives. Following the principle of keeping the informants anonymous, some of the information in the following will be somewhat vague to ensure a feeling of safety for the informants.

Overall, being a case study, the informants were at large a homogenous group, both in regards to gender, age, ethnicity and income. The elaborated section of this chapter has been edited out for this edition in order to secure the anonymity of the interview subjects.

3.2 Introducing the themes of the analysis

This section will briefly elaborate on the themes and the structure of the analysis, so as to make it easier for the reader to access my thoughts and conclusions. This analysis will draw upon some of the themes brought up in the theoretical framework, and try to exemplify, investigate or even challenge some of the statements made by Gilson and Butler, as elaborated in chapter 2.

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[3] Transcripts will only be available in versions adapted for examination. For information regarding the empirical material please send an email to mraasthoej@gmail.com.
[4] This chapter will be edited for the version submitted to the DIGNITY Library as to ensure as much anonymity as possible. For enquiries about the empirical material please send an email to mraasthoej@gmail.com.

The themes in this analysis are based on ideas and language used by Gilson and Butler in their written work about vulnerability. Vulnerability is to them a term loaded with pre-understandings which can be seen in expressions of normative understandings, presumptions and in representations of ambivalence in the data produced for, and used in this thesis.

Firstly, I will critically asses how the interview subjects see themselves and link their identity to vulnerability. Following, in a chapter focused on narratives concerning the professional life of the interview subjects, will be an investigation of the issues of power representation and the categorization of 'vulnerable groups' as it is expressed by the interview subjects. Lastly, a chapter will shortly sum up the findings and lead to a discussion of these representations of meaning on vulnerability. Throughout, the themes of normality, power representation and ambivalence will occur as analytical terms to underline the points of the analysis.

Normality is mostly articulated through given and truth like statements made by the interview subjects. In this particular study, it was often very apparent and in some cases it was even directly the topic of the conversation and thereby very closely linked to the reflections on the meaning of vulnerability. As an analytical tool, normality is meant to explore some of the basic ideas of vulnerability, which are dependent on the normality of the interview subjects and thereby explains the situated nature of the interview subjects and the interviews as we sat down to talk about vulnerability.

Much like normality, power representations is also a topic of investigation which shows up the moment the interview subject does not question his or her position in their narrative. It is closely linked to normality, as normality also serves as a doorway to understanding power relation and representation. In this particular analysis, when investigating power representations and ambivalences in narratives which depict power structures and discursive patterns, I will also look for representations of privilege. These representations will be sought in wording which makes clear that the interview subject is either comprehensive of him or herself being in a position of privilege, or the exact opposite, meaning being unaware of the same.

Lastly, the analysis will be centred on representations of ambivalence in the narratives of the interview subjects. These representations already showed up in the early stages of analysis,

and turned out to be pivotal for understanding how vulnerability is a term which, following the different interpretations of the term, can both bring together and divide. In this context, investigating ambiguity means looking for clashes of themes within the narratives and signs of discomfort with the interview subjects, as well as unwillingness to reflect on a topic during the interviews.

In the following, the analysis will investigate the term vulnerability as it is seen through the eyes of staff members at DIGNITY, and through tools and a gaze provided by social constructivist ideas of critical analysis.

3.3 "My own vulnerability"

This section is an investigation of how the interview subjects narrate their own personal idea of vulnerability. This investigation will be focused on collecting the different statements from the different interviews in order to give a broad representation of the narratives of the interview subjects, and the similarities and differences they portray.

When the interviews started all the interview subjects were asked what first occurs to them when they think about vulnerability. The answers reflected very individual understandings, not only of the term but also of the purpose of the interview. Some immediately began to talk about associations like children, women and prisoners, while others started talking about personal notions of vulnerability like strength and relational manifestations of vulnerability. By doing this, they immediately started defining the social categorizations by which they understood vulnerability, and therefore also by which they could explain it. Overarching is the impression that they seemed to be closely related to what was going on in the interview subjects life at that moment, and in that connection reflects a very personalized narrative of vulnerability and the interview subjects own and very situated idea of what vulnerability entails. Following, the narratives they told, both when asked about personal reflection and professional reflection, were largely situated at a certain time and in a certain space, more or less apparent to the interview subject.

In the following, personal ideas of vulnerability will unfold as the narratives of the interview subjects are investigated.

3.3.1 Identity and relation

IS4 had many thoughts on what vulnerability meant to her personally. In her reflections on what vulnerability meant to her, she immediately went into an explanation of how it was connected to her self-understanding as a sign of strength, power and uniqueness.

> "[…] the first thing that pops into my head, is like yeah, somebody who is actually brave and strong and dares to stand as who they are completely without having to have any filters or any protection […] there is no protection so you are open for attacks and that is, so to me that is a very brave person who is daring to be vulnerable." (#00:08:57 IS4)

This formulation continued to pop up during the interview and was said in more or less the same way more than 4 times. Each time it was a little more elaborated and a little clearer how exposed you actually are when you *decide* to show your vulnerability. In the above quote, eight minutes into the interview she explains it as being without filters or any protection. Gradually, the exemplifications become more bodily linked; from open to attacks and criticism to standing completely naked and exposed. In her narrative, when talking about herself and her close relation, being vulnerable becomes a choice, a tool to create relation and show strength and bravery. To IS4 it is about being true to your true self, it is a sign of strength and a sign of freedom, as she elaborates:

> "I just feel it's a place of freedom, it's a complete rest because everything is out in the open. So I think its strength, it shows strength because it brings you to a stage of freedom, whereas we are hiding things and protecting ourselves, and not being hurt then, then we don't get the most of what life has to offer." (#00:41:01 IS4)

The statement above seems very idyllic and self-reflective as it stands in connection to statements of daring to stand open and exposed to harm, aware of the consequences, but soon after the inhibitions of social conduct show themselves as IS4 alters her statement to fit into the context of her own life. As she goes on, it becomes clear that complete exposure is not what she means. It still controlled and managed to fit within the normative frame of the social structures in which she works and see herself. Accordingly it is a matter of insights and choices which in the end make up a toolkit for knowing when to show vulnerability, and when to hide it – so as to ensure yourself as much freedom as possible. IS4 clearly speaks from a

position of privilege which allows her to choose and use her vulnerability as she likes and as she sees fit in order to ensure her personal freedom. In this case IS4 speaks from a position of privilege in that; she is white and she was born and currently lives in a country which preserves human rights. Her narration of vulnerability as a choice and a sign of strength and bravery show that to her having a choice means freedom. As it is told, this narrative gives rise to the question of whether the choice of vulnerability is a choice for everyone.

To other interview subjects like IS9, identity also had a lot to do with his understanding of vulnerability, but this was more driven by the need and desire to connect with others – personally and through his work.

> "Well I think that I kind of use it to kind of connect to the subject. I use my own vulnerability as human being to connect with the subject. So I think that, of cause I sympathise with the people who have been subjected to torture. I connect with the cause on an emotional level. For me it's not just work, it has to make sense." (#00:04:31 IS9)

In IS9's narrative vulnerability is also inherently positive, especially in connection to his own self-understanding and identity but also in his work. To IS9, vulnerability is a shared human condition, and he largely elaborated on how the emotions connected to vulnerability, or "the emotion" vulnerability is important for him to relate and deal with the stories of torture survivors he encounters through his work. Curiously, vulnerability as a word is not part of his work and not used on an everyday basis. Still, to him vulnerability is something which drives connection and creates relation, on a personal level and on a professional level. IS9 explains vulnerability as if it was a chain of self-realization which to him is necessary for individual reflection and growth. To him "[…] people who are not vulnerable are cynical, not in contact with your emotions." (#00:07:13 IS9) Accordingly, what is meant is not that these *cynical* people are not vulnerable, but that they fail to realize it and thereby fail to evolve by reflecting on their own vulnerability. IS9 continues: "The minute we stop evolving, the minute we stop developing ourselves we die. We wither. So constant movement is good. Especially when it comes to emotions." (#00:07:13 IS9)

Like IS4, IS9 constantly talks about vulnerability as something you as an individual should own and take upon yourself as a mirror of yourself to show the world. IS4 talks about it as

something which is brave to expose and carry with you on the outside, and IS9 talks about it as something central to the human conditions and as something which, for him at least, drives connection which is supported by Gilson's argument of vulnerability as a creator of relation (Gilson, 2014).

These narratives provide an image of how understandings of vulnerability are closely linked to a person's understanding of his or her individuality, and thus in the construction of the self and the relations which drive, shape and create the self. Keeping this in mind, taking vulnerability upon you as a tag for recognition is an instigator of relation which, in both of these narratives proves to be of pivotal importance to the interview subjects.

Again, in both cases it boils down to vulnerability as being a choice and a quality, rather than a category in which you are put. These narratives do not dwell on the specific types of vulnerability that one can choose to show in order to open oneself to meaningful relations. Following, having a choice of vulnerability stands out as having the freedom, the environment and the strength to open oneself to others, a privileged position in essence as it is removed from the categories of vulnerable groups.

3.3.2 "I think it is very much context dependant"

As the different narratives show, vulnerability is a term which is dependent on the context in which it is to be understood and explained. All the interview subjects brought with them a memory and a context which influenced their narrative. Whether it was having a very bad day, going through something hard or having a baggage full of positive encounters, all the narratives were, as vulnerability is, coloured by the context of the interview subjects.

To IS7, her own understanding of vulnerability is constantly and very apparently reflected in her context and her current emotional state, which is a state that she, perhaps rightfully, projects onto others.

"Me: What are the first words that occur to you when you think vulnerability?

IS7: Women, India [referring to a documentary about sexual abuse in India which had recently aired in television - "India's Daughters"] but a part from that child abuse - home basically, and this is probably because of where I come from. I know in Denmark you

can't beat you kids but when I was a young kid parents were beating their kids, and it wasn't considered as child abuse. I don't know about now." (#00:04:21- IS7)

IS7 had just seen the documentary the night before, so had I and so had other interview subjects, as I learned in two other interviews. Furthermore, IS7 has a young child and is a woman, and these thoughts of vulnerability kept going back to a narrative which was related to the human rights of those who are discursively categorized as weaker or more fragile in different societies. In her narrative of vulnerability, these groups need protection of themselves and their rights, due to standing outside what she herself calls a category of 'normal people'. A category, which directly distinguishes between vulnerable groups as weaker and as worth less than 'normal people', and individuals who have the opportunity to not be placed in a group of vulnerability, but to seek invulnerability.

"Me: Normal people. That's an interesting way to say it.

IS7: Yes. Because we usually say that vulnerable groups are weak people, kids, young kids, women, gays. But they are not; they are worth as much as a man for example, in terms of acceptance." (00:08:11- IS7)

IS7 is not the only one who links the idea of vulnerability to a group standing outside the norm, or 'the normal'. This reflection seems to be integrated amongst many of the others who tell the same story. Even if they do not explain it exemplified as IS7 does, they list the same categories of vulnerable groups as she does, also implying that they are extraordinarily vulnerable and that this vulnerability is not within 'the normal'. As IS9 explains when asked what a vulnerable group is: "[…] Vulnerable groups in connection to my job is groups in prisons who are not on the top hierarchy, who are at the bottom of the list so to speak, so you have like women, it could be refugees, people who don't speak the language, paedophiles, homosexuals." (#00:08:05 IS9)

Gilson leans against the statement that vulnerability is a shared condition, something that is a condition of human life (Gilson, 2014; Mackenzie et al., 2013). In this narrative it becomes clear that vulnerability, to IS9, is universal, something all can become under certain circumstances. Moreover, social categories serve as a distinction between the interview subject and the vulnerable groups. Even though IS9 might belong to one or several of these

categories, these are removed from his self-understanding, as groups he works with – groups he tries to help. Even as vulnerability is not articulated as something the subjects talk about in everyday life, it seems to be central to their self-understanding as something they either take upon themselves or something they try to help via their jobs.

3.3.3 Strength or weakness?

Two words seemed to come up constantly during the interviews, namely strength and weakness. This seemed to happen as the interview subjects constantly aimed at categorizing vulnerability into yet new groups of predefined understandings.

The reflections and narratives in the interviews often revolve around vulnerability as strength or vulnerability as weakness, narrated as a contrast, but not necessarily in opposition to one another. When asked directly about personal notions, ideas or manifestations of vulnerability, the stories again revolve around these two central themes, either indirectly or very apparent. Some explain how vulnerability to them is strength and connects it with daring to stand alone and exposed, due to a certain amount of self-worth. For others it is a weakness and synonymous with being at risk, which actually refers to the established meaning of the word when it is looked up in a dictionary, as seen in the introduction of this thesis.

> "[…] it makes me weak because I feel that the situation, there we go back to the situational factors, the situation than I am in makes me vulnerable, makes me weak because, you know, these tare thing that are, certain of them are perhaps within my control and other I have no control over. And it's this; it influences my ability to act. So I would see it from the other perspective, it is not something which makes me strong at all." (#00:13:40 – IS5)

IS5's narrative describes the ambivalence of vulnerability as she strikingly describes it by saying "it influences my ability to act". To her, being in a situation which leaves her vulnerable inhibits her ability to make her own choices, to act according to her free will. This illustrates how, in the narratives, there is a distinct difference between two understandings of vulnerability, one as strength and as something you take upon yourself as a part of your identity, which according to IS4 gives you freedom. The narratives of perceived individual vulnerability directly clashes in the cases of IS4 and IS5. The one IS5 presents stands out as

weakness, something which inhibits you and makes you involuntarily unable to act according to your own wishes, which would be quite the opposite of freedom. One seems to be narrated as a choice and the other is narrated more as vulnerability as a condition manifested in weakness. Both threads of narratives are very concerned with how ones vulnerability is perceived and recognized in relations.

The narrative of IS5 is one of the narratives which contest the narratives of IS9 and IS4. IS5 tells a story of feeling weak and unable to act, and relates this story to her own experiences of being in situations in which she cannot control the conditions. IS7 expresses doubts in her quite melancholic narrative of vulnerability when asked to elaborate on what the word means to her.

> "I can't find even a synonym for vulnerability. If I had to say what is vulnerability equal to? What is it, its weakness? Bad luck; I called it bad luck before." (#00:54:54 IS7)

Saying that it is bad luck removes the responsibility from the vulnerable, which stands in contrast to the narrative of vulnerability as something you choose to be, something you choose to show. Interestingly these stories of individual understandings of vulnerability provide an image of ambivalence, as they show weakness and strength in the same condition, and choice and force in the same condition as well. Seemingly, vulnerability is something everyone is, something everyone can relate to – but not something we necessarily give much thought to unless we are asked. As IS9 states, as he is asked if it is something he works with and uses in his work:

> "I use the words that are relevant for the job I am doing, and vulnerability is not something that I have used. I don't remember using it, I might have. But it is not something I use very often.
>
> Me: So it's more something that you relate to personally?
>
> IS9: Well, yeah and I never, well of cause I thought about these things that I just told you, but I never consciously sat down and said 'Ok this is my vulnerability'." (#00:06:05 IS9)

The majority on the other hand express a divide between their personal idea of vulnerability and the word itself; as it is not something you directly use in everyday speak. It is something inherent that we recognize or maybe fail to see in each other. This manifests itself when the subjects discuss vulnerable groups and what a vulnerable group entails. None of the subjects talk about vulnerability as strength in connection to vulnerable groups. Vulnerable groups appear as a social category through which you can treat, discuss or even ignore groupings of people. Gilson proposes that:

> "[…] failing to recognize the vulnerability of others is a consequence of dehumanizing frames that set those others outside the realm of perceptible awareness and concern." (Gilson, 2014: 65)

In this case, the narratives show how a failure to recognize that the vulnerability in the ones placed into social categories of vulnerable groupings is in fact the same as the one which the interview subjects feel themselves at times or in fact take upon themselves as an attributed strength.

> "I think for me vulnerability has to do with power, and power relation. […] I would see it more as the weakness point rather than a strength [laughing] on a very personal level […]" (#00:13:40 IS5)

Those who see vulnerability as weakness seem to be more touched by vulnerability through their jobs and also state that they work with it. They simply express more empathy and concern with the people they feel that they are helping through their work. Those who see vulnerability as strength seem to be more removed from the thought that they are working with vulnerability through their fight against torture.

Discursively this provides an imagery of how understandings of the term vulnerability are created and maintained though relation, and the lack of the same. Whether it is humanizing or dehumanizing, it becomes a frame in which we attempt to recognize and label our relations, and as such it becomes a tool of power and social categorization (Gilson, 2014). In the quotes in the beginning of this chapter, IS4 sheds light on several discursive ideas of vulnerability that overlap and interlink in her reflections. On one hand she has a strong feeling of taking her vulnerability "on her", making it her own and making it her strength, and through this also

making it into a thing she relates to in others. Later in the interview she explains it as something which she recognizes in others and builds relational bonds on. She also manages to regulate herself, as she will not state clearly how she herself feels about vulnerable groups, but still categorizes them as "the ones who need help", a category in which she does not seem to place or recognize herself.

3.4 Vulnerable groups – those we work with

This section provides an investigation of how vulnerability is narrated when it is set in a professional context. In the interviews the subjects were asked to both elaborate on personal and professional understandings of vulnerability, and how these interlink and overlap or do exactly the opposite. By investigating these narratives of interview subjects explaining how they work with vulnerability, this section attempts to shed light on what happens when the subjects are asked to conduct such a reflection.

This section will aim at uncovering representations of power embedded in the narratives of the interview subjects. Through investigating how vulnerability is used as a social category by the subjects, this section will provide an overview of the gathered statements through exploration of emotional and ambivalent narratives presented in the interviews. Furthermore, this section will investigate how the interview subjects explain and attach meaning to what they themselves refer to as *vulnerable groups*.

3.4.1 Working with vulnerability

According to Gilson we, as human beings, try and remove ourselves as far away as possible from vulnerability, as it reminds us of our own vulnerable state and possible demise (Gilson, 2014). In the following quote IS7 is explaining how her perception of vulnerability changed after she started working with DIGNITY.

> "[…] before I started working here I was closing my eyes to vulnerability, I accepted not to see it. I was living a happy life, I was, yeah irresponsible […] I knew it was bad so I accepted not to accept it. It was ok for me not to hear about it, not to think about it, as it doesn't exist. I actually started paying attention on this when I started working here." (00:33:47 - IS7)

As IS7 starts working at DIGNITY her notion of vulnerability changes into something which in her own words "exists", as something she has to relate to. This is an example of how the self and the institution interact over the notion of vulnerability. She explains how her notion of vulnerability has expanded and how this understanding has shifted from being a knowledge of something that was not realized or accepted as true, to something that is imminent and apparent to her in her work. She refers to the suffering that she indirectly deals with in her work and categorizes it as something that she felt removed from before.

This statement clashes with the narration of vulnerability as a sign of strength, and is in direct contrast to the narrative told by IS4. This ambivalence draws an image of two different spheres for understanding vulnerability; the vulnerability of the individual and the vulnerability of the group; or the vulnerability you can own and the vulnerability you are prescribed. IS4 expresses a very strong personal idea of vulnerability being something of strength, but at the same time she expresses a need to keep her work and her personal idea of vulnerability separated. In her own words, when she is asked to explain her first thoughts when thinking about vulnerability:

> "Well, definitely not something from a DIGNITY context, ehh, the first thing that pops into my head is actually that it's a positive word […] so it's kind of like from a different world than what I am assuming and expecting that we will be talk, but we'll see […]" (#00:08:75 - IS4)

This exemplifies an ambivalence between her own idea of vulnerability and the one that she has about vulnerability in connection to her work, whether it being her workplace or her actual work. When asked about why she does not think of it in a DIGNITY context, IS4 explains how her work is centred around victims, which is not what she related to in her own idea of vulnerability.

> "I, again I had very few thoughts on how this [the interview] is gonna go, but the, when we talk about, which is not very often, but when we talk about vulnerability or vulnerable people in our line of work we, I think they are more seen as like [thinks] people that we should [thinks] not feel sorry for, but they are kind of like the victims or the ones that need help." (#00:10:18 IS4)

When being asked to think about it, it seems like it comes to the subjects attention that the idea of vulnerability is implicit in the work they do at DIGNITY. It seems that during the interviews they have been offered another categorization to use in their reflection, and an opportunity to reflect upon vulnerability as a term and as a tool for categorization and understanding. In the quote above, IS4 regulates herself in saying that we ought not to feel sorry for "the ones that need help". What she means is that we should not as the helping entity show signs of pity in our contact with the ones who need help, but they are still victims. This self-regulation is interesting, because it seems like she knows what the *proper* conduct is, but also what the truth is; that they in fact are the ones who need help, removed from the helping party.

In conclusion, there is ambivalence between the vulnerability of the individual and the vulnerability of the group, which in these narratives is expressed through narrations of the personal understanding of vulnerability and the professional understanding of vulnerability. Going back to the issue of privilege it is interesting to see how vulnerability goes from being an asset to being a condition. Moreover, if one has to be privileged in order to own vulnerability, then there is an issue of power relations in the relation between the one who can chose vulnerability and the one who is prescribed vulnerability. The following section will attempt to show how power plays an essential role in understanding vulnerable groups and how vulnerability is narrated by the interview subjects in connection to their work at DIGNITY.

3.4.2 Thoughts of Power

In some ways the interview subjects also express ambivalence when addressing their work with vulnerability, whether they state that they use the word or not. Many express that the work is extremely important, but there is a dissonance in the relationship between the helping part and the helped part. When asked 'Who decides who are vulnerable?' IS10 answers:

> "Yeah that's interesting. Not always the person himself because if you are a child and you get abused or whatever, you don't decide yourself if you are vulnerable. But then it's maybe the society that decides this. So." (#00:30:04 IS10)

Much in thread with IS10, IS9 elaborates even further and includes his own work into the equation:

"Well I think it's probably for some people, depending on who you are, I think that we as an NGO has quite a lot to say on the matter, because we label people as vulnerable groups, and then if some people - Oh you got me going there [laughing] […]" (#00:18:05 IS9)

Repeatedly, narratives of a divide between the vulnerable party and the helping party came to light. Some were obvious and directly worded, and some were more subtle and attached to speaking from a point of privilege. The relationship to vulnerability is described as being distant, academic and difficult to handle as a word in this connection. Some say they work with it very directly, some say they work with it indirectly, and some say they do not think of it as if they work with vulnerability, but that they probably do if they are to reflect on it more. IS5 explains how she had been working with it indirectly but constantly during her professional life. As the following quote shows, she exemplifies how one who states that they work with vulnerability also feel that vulnerability is something connected to weakness.

"Well I've been working, I think indirectly, not you know - it hasn't been defined as such, but indirectly I think my entire professional career has been surrounded within this area of vulnerability, because I've, when I worked for the [organization] I was primarily monitoring places of detention and obviously that's the group of people, not only monitoring places of detention but also dealing with victims of war. So these are you know some of the most vulnerable groups that you have." (#00:10:07 IS5)

Underlying was that the articulated difference between vulnerability as a prescribed condition and vulnerability as a choice makes a difference in the discursive power structure that follows the notion of vulnerability. Gilson relates these power structures to what she herself calls *willful ignorance*, as elaborated in chapter 2.3. In her view, ignoring the privilege in not having to deal with others vulnerability is a willful ignorance which enforces a power structure which allows for uneven societal structures (Gilson, 2014).

In the narrative of IS2, the professional relation to vulnerability is explained as more distant, and as vulnerability of groups which seems to be the main way they speak about vulnerability in connection to their work.

> "Yes, I – I actually, ehm vulnerability is not really part of my work vocabulary as such, I don't use it. […] I think it has to do with the kind of things I do, I do a lot of administrative work […] I also do a lot of advocacy work […] I mean it's always there, so for instance I focus a lot on advocacy work in Palestine […] they are very vulnerable, so it's is there, it's just not, It's not sort of a word that I use on a day to day basis. It is not something that, like an integrated part of my vocabulary as such." (#00:08:32 IS2)

The majority of the interview subjects say that they are not working directly with vulnerability, but that in essence they do. They seem to be describing a distance between what they previously described as the meaning of vulnerability and how they see that they work with it in their job. This could be because of the way perceived vulnerability of the individual and the vulnerability of groups are so far apart in their minds, that these are not linked automatically when they link vulnerability to their professional life. But it could also be due to a need of distance between themselves and their own vulnerability and the vulnerability of others. This need, as elaborated by Gilson, becomes apparent in that we feel obligated to change the vulnerable status of others, and as we ourselves do what we can move towards invulnerability (Gilson, 2014).

The narrative of IS3 is very illustrative of the power relations between the helping party and the helped party. In the following quotes he elaborates on how the differences of normality between the cooperating partners prove difficult, creating a level of distance as mentioned before. IS3 argues that the common understanding of DIGNITY and the partnering organisation is based on different assumptions and normality understandings – which at large makes good sense as even though the cause is the same, everything else is different. To IS3, the difference is worded by use of the word normality and abnormality:

> "And I think that kind of you know, contrast between being out there with them and come back to this office work here is extremely, how do you say, it's an extremely strange thing, a strange thing to see that, kind of, DIGNITY as an organisation, a Danish

or it could be any office anywhere in Denmark, a normality kind of situation with all the intrigues and conflicts that we have in the office, but then again you know in contrast with the abnormality out there in those circumstances in Bangladesh or in Philippines or in here where it is." (#00:20:55 IS3)

Here IS3 refers to what he himself calls the hardships of life, which is experienced in places like the Philippines and Bangladesh, but are at large not even comparable to living conditions in Denmark. To IS3, this reflection produces some feeling of ambivalence as he is deeply moved by the struggle his colleagues in partnering organisations in other countries have to deal with. He is in this situation very much aware of the privilege he has in being in a position of power in this specific comparison, but still sticks to the category of abnormality when describing the partnering organisations. Later in the interview IS3 expresses doubts on whether the good intentions of the work which DIGNITY does, which in his own words is to stop the vulnerability of others, is beneficial and has the desired outcome in the end. When speaking about the clients and those DIGNITY tries to help IS3 states that:

"We don't, by all that goodness, we don't create independence and we take away from them any self-pride and motivation. After all it's amazing that these people, they do actually, they have been able to navigate through human smugglers and long distances and clever clandestine moves to reach to Denmark. And when they come here suddenly they are completely helpless." (#00:48:50 IS3)

It seems IS3 reflects like this because he wants to humble himself and his privilege in order to show the torture survivors and the partnering organisations respect by acknowledging the ambivalence and power structures which exist in the relationship. All these thoughts are very much centred on his work, his working history and personal opinions about the Danish society, that somewhat stands in contrast to his elaboration on his own relation to vulnerability, which is very much centred around the feeling of insecurity and the wellbeing of loved ones.

3.4.3 Vulnerable groups

All interview subjects were asked to elaborate on their thoughts regarding what a vulnerable group meant. Almost everyone had a list of categories they regarded as vulnerable, and for

most it was the same: women, children and homosexuals. Some talked of refugees and some talked of prisoners, but mostly all seemed to stick with the same few categories of vulnerable groups.

As mentioned before, IS7 grew up in a context in which she did not experience vulnerability as something of concern, indeed as something that existed in her world. In the following she connects this feeling to her idea of vulnerable groups.

> "IS7: So I didn't grow up with the notion of vulnerability
>
> Me: But did you grow up with the notion of others being vulnerable?
>
> IS7: Yes.
>
> Me: Who?
>
> IS7: Gypsies [laughing]
>
> Me: Well that's interesting.
>
> IS7: They have always been very vulnerable.
>
> Me: What makes them vulnerable?
>
> IS7: Exclusion from the society.
>
> Me: Why are they excluded, I know this is a big question.
>
> IS7: I don't know exactly, my idea is that they never wanted to be included. They are just this type of tribe that, they are a triple, another society, they can't blend, they are just a tribal nation, and they love to live according to their norms and to their believes, and they are not the same as the country norms and believes, and this makes them vulnerable. They are not part of the total, they are not part of the big. [incomprehensible] and always mistreated in [country] in many ways, whatever you wanted, used and ..."
> (#00:21:19 IS7)

From the first few lines it seems clear that this is not an easy topic to talk about. IS7 seems reluctant to answer in an explanatory way, but keeps it short and simple, almost as to avoid the topic. The fact that she laughs after saying gypsies also supports the feeling of discomfort. Growing up, gypsies were at the bottom of society to her, and in the country where she grew up they still are. As IS7 gives in to elaborating her statements it becomes clear that her understanding of gypsies has changed and thus does not fit the understanding which she is trying to explain to me. As she lays it out, this is a vulnerable group which is not seen as one,

but as a parasitic entity in society, fittingly placed as the bottom, taking the blame and all the trash from those who have the privilege of choice. This being a different world view that she was brought up with, it is not that strange to have it provoke some level of unease. Consistently IS7 relates her narrative to issues of normativity and how vulnerability stands outside the normal, at least to her. In her view, vulnerability is not something you choose or do not choose to show, but something which is created by circumstance and *bad luck*. Following, in IS7's narrative of this vulnerable group 'gypsies', she sheds light on a very important and ambivalent issue, namely do I want to stay vulnerable or do I want to leave the group.

> "Sometimes it's also, do I want to get out of this vulnerable group because this makes me comfortable. I am surrounded by people with the same needs around me so I might feel more comfortable staying there and being accepted within the unaccepted, or within the different than." (#00:23:58 IS7)

In this way, the vulnerable group becomes the unaccepted and at the same time the safe space for the unaccepted, which makes it the only place for the member of this vulnerable group to exist in the minds of others, and maybe in their own minds. At least in the narrative of IS7, this image seems to take form as she elaborates by telling stories of criminal injustice done to gypsies and prejudice against the same.

Whereas the vulnerability of the interview subjects relate to themselves as individuals appears to be a choice of standing out, as exemplified by IS4 and IS9, the vulnerable groups seem to be a forced categorisation, one in which you would maybe not see yourself, but in which others see you and treat you accordingly. IS4 explains that in her mind, a vulnerable individual who is treated in the rehabilitation clinic of DIGNITY is seen as a victim, a weak individual, whereas a friend would be seen as a strong person for being open and honest about her vulnerability. Again, here lies an ambivalence embedded in the unasked question of who is allowed to feel and express their feelings according to their own needs. According to IS4's narrative, an individual who, in her own words, chooses to stand open and exposed is brave for showing emotion – a conscious choice loaded with notions of power and strength. On the other hand, a client of the clinic will never heal properly if he or she does not commit to finding his or her own vulnerability and faces the trauma of surviving torture. Linking ideas of

power and the vulnerable groups, IS4 puts up an imagery which clearly draws a picture of a power relation between those with a choice and those without a choice.

Going back to IS7, whose reflections of vulnerability were largely centred on vulnerable groups, the vulnerability of these groups seemed to be pivotal to her and her own understanding of the importance to her work:

> "It's over there, you cannot close your eyes and you have to help these people. And you have to work towards educating people that this is happening and that vulnerable groups in different countries get an extremely hard life. Not only kids, not I am talking to gays as well, I mean they are also a vulnerable group in many settings. Maybe not in Denmark.
> Me: Maybe? What makes them not vulnerable in Denmark?
> IS7: Acceptance. Habits. Freedom of speech, of expressing yourself. Democracy if you want to call it a democracy." (#00:06:08 IS7)

To IS7, vulnerability stands outside normality. It is something different – sometimes something which challenges the norm by existing. IS9 explains something similar when stating that:

> "So I think it is a constant negotiation of how to perceive other people, and maybe also a little bit of a [incomprehensible] [laughing] .. [I ask him to explain] Well I think I just tried to, that for rehab people it is more important to put emphasis on strong words and strong labels on people, so not use words as victims and vulnerable groups, but as strong and survivor and they didn't die from torture, so I think maybe in there is a constant negotiation about how to label people, and what are the effects of labelling groups, obviously, but I guess that goes for all, I think that is the whole point of.." (#00:19:57 IS9)

Moreover, IS9 ads a layer to his understanding of vulnerability – when it comes to groups, it is a word associated with weakness. By doing this, when addressing the issue of vulnerable groups, he also sheds light on structures of power evolving around the concept of vulnerable groups. If vulnerability is a term connected to strength when said in connection to

individuality, it seems strange to have it change meaning so drastically when it comes to groups.

Throughout the analysis it has been attempted to illustrate how ambivalence constantly pops up as the term is investigated. As the interview subjects were encouraged to reflect on the term and were given space and time to do so, their personal and professional ideas of vulnerability, and how those interact and overlap, unfolded and shed light on how vulnerability, though not talked about or used in a literal sense, is of immense importance to the work at DIGNITY. The following chapter will use the findings of the analysis to further discuss and reflect upon these narrations of the term vulnerability.

4. Discussion

The following chapter will discuss and critically asses the findings of chapter 3, with a basis in the theories and thoughts of chapter 2. This discussion will touch upon the issue of privilege, and why willful ignorance seems to follow the term vulnerability. It will also problematize the issue of power structures between the helped party and the helping party. Finally, the discussion will look into the possible consequences of having a non-reflective approach to vulnerability using the findings and statements from the analysis.

> "The problem is not that the line between the normative and the descriptive is blurred, but rather that the blurring of this line is not acknowledged and normative judgements are allowed to masquerade as description." (Gilson, 2014: 55)

According to Gilson, an investigation of the underlying structures of how vulnerability is perceived and spoken about is needed in order to transcend the barriers which make it difficult to see vulnerability in a new and nuanced manner. Following the argument of Brown, this would open up for an understanding of vulnerability which would not only allow human relation to be created on the very basis of vulnerability, but also challenge the power structures embedded in using the term vulnerability as a social categorization. Brown's study is in many aspects different from the study of this thesis, as she thoroughly investigates the direct operationalization of the term, whereas this thesis concerns itself with underlying patterns of operationalisation. Still, even though there is the difference of the term being used directly and

being used indirectly or not at all, both studies depict an inherent ambivalence connected to the term as it is in any way operationalised – it becomes a label, a toe tag and a tool of categorization. If you are not reflecting on vulnerability itself, at least it should be possible to reflect on how your notion of vulnerability has an effect on the world around you, and in the case of DIGNITY, on your partnering organisations and their goals (Brown, 2011).

The fact of the matter is that DIGNITY staff takes with them an understanding of vulnerability; a standard of vulnerability which inadvertently affects their relations in their work. Following the argument of vulnerability as being a denominator for creating relations, one could say that whatever the understanding of the term vulnerability, its use has consequences to the surroundings of whoever projects this understanding. Both IS4 and IS9 explain how their ideas of vulnerability are instigators of relation or feelings of relation. To IS4 this is primarily an individual phenomenon whereas IS9 explains how it affects him in his work. Clearly the interpretation of vulnerability differs largely from individual to individual, which makes it difficult to speak of a common vulnerability understanding amongst the staff interviewed for this thesis. Even so, one common trait in the analysis is the ambivalence which prevails in the way all the interview subjects in one way or another attempt to distance themselves from the vulnerability of vulnerable groups. As stated in the analysis, vulnerability becomes a tool and an asset for some, while it becomes a category of weakness for others. Those in a position to take upon themselves vulnerability as an individual quality are arguably privileged in that they are not forced into a category, but have a choice of owning it. Moreover, it seems that adhering to vulnerability as an individual quality legitimizes blindness to a shared vulnerability of humanity, as opposed to using vulnerable as a classifying category.

> "Ignorance of vulnerability is a wilful ignorance, first of all, because the ambiguity of vulnerability produces deep discomfort and we feel compelled to resolve it in a way that eliminates the unease." (Gilson, 2014: 79)

In this particular case, the interviews do not directly reveal a wilful ignorance of vulnerability, but a wilful ignorance of a shared vulnerability between the staff members and those whose vulnerability they are trying to treat through the abolishment of torture and all the work which is connected to this cause. By creating and using social categories, the interview subjects remove themselves from the equation, and places themselves in a category of people "helping"

the vulnerable groups. Gilson proposes that the pursuit of invulnerability is a symptom of this, as vulnerability is regarded as a one-sided idea – one of negative connotations, and continues: "[…] if to be vulnerable is to be weak and subject to harm, then to be invulnerable is the only way to be strong and competent." (Gilson, 2014: 79)

The interview subjects are not completely binary as in Gilson's exemplification, as many of them themselves take upon them a vulnerability which they acknowledge having, as well as everybody else. The thing to look for here is the spoken representations of binaries between the vulnerable groups and the interview subjects, or maybe even just *the vulnerable subjects*. As IS4 states several times in her interview, it is the difference of making the choice of taking your vulnerability upon you as a part of you that you yourself can interact with and regulate, or whether it is a social category into which you are put by virtue of your gender, ethnicity, political affiliations, sexuality etc. It is a matter or choosing to show, or being labelled as vulnerable. Throughout the analysis, the power of choice has stood out as central to the understanding of the term vulnerability to the majority of the interview subjects. It is very deliberate that the wording *the power of choice* is used here, as the narratives lay bare the connections of vulnerability and identity as being a choice of adopting a possible weakness as a possible strength – taking it upon you and making it an integrated part of your own self. Here the word *power* serves as a double feature, as it is power of the self, as well as privilege of the individual and in this case power of the individual over the group.

Through representations of ambivalence, the narratives show how the vulnerability of the individual and the vulnerability of a group, or of *others*, are clashing in the minds of the interview subjects. Only one time did one of the interview subjects, IS6, fully commit to being part of what would be called a vulnerable group. Being a woman and a proclaimed feminist, IS6 talked of sexual harassment and female vulnerability in a manner so that I had no doubt that she had experiences which had proved to her that she, even in her privileged position of being white, cis[5] and living in Denmark, had to see herself in connection to the social category of vulnerable women.

Summing up the analytical points, several discursive patterns proved to be embedded in understandings of the term vulnerability. Several interview subjects showed ambiguity when

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[5] Cis-gendered means adhering to the gender assigned to one at birth.

trying to relate their own understanding of vulnerability, connected to their individuality, and their understanding of vulnerability in connection to their professional work.

Vulnerable groups are generally described by the interview subjects as standing outside the norm, being different, deviant and thereby exposed to harm. In this context it is not explained as a choice, but as a context dependent situational thing – something outside of your control. In these narratives vulnerable groups are explained as very binary categories and often, in a summarizing way, narrowed down to women, children, homosexuals and prisoners. In some cases these categories are elaborated; Women might be less vulnerable in Denmark than in India, and gay men are less vulnerable in Denmark than in the Middle East. Basically, they were described as groups who needed help or who were in a risk group for needing help – this being the case at least in the minds of DIGNITY staff about groups in which they do not place themselves. In this way a woman can speak of women as vulnerable without including herself, and a gay person can speak about homosexuals without placing themselves in that group. The stigma of being in a vulnerable group is thus not part of the individuals understanding of him- or herself, and the categories become easier to deal with.

It all boils down to the individual not being at risk in the same way as the groups are, and whereas both might be vulnerable, the prescribed notion of risk differs greatly. In this particular case it means that the interview subjects are able to speak of the vulnerable groups and link them to themselves, without feeling the vulnerability themselves, and thus not feeling the risk. The perceived vulnerabilities of the interview subjects and the perceived vulnerabilities of the groups which they aid, simply do not match, allowing the interview subject to speak freely.

Furthermore, the stigma is not only the thing which sets apart the vulnerable interview subject and the vulnerable groups – it is also what drives the need for providing help for those who need it. This inevitably leads to the question of who decides who is vulnerable, and therefore needs help, a question which was asked to all interview subjects, and to which almost all stated that DIGNITY as an NGO has a voice in the matter. If this is so, then it is problematic that reflections of the term vulnerability are not part of the work, as the work was explained by the majority of interview subjects.

This knowledge of vulnerability which is produced and seen through these interviews is the knowledge DIGNITY staff brings with them in the encounter they have through their work. Being an organisation of a certain status, DIGNITY could very well set the standard of understanding vulnerability in the work they do, and it is therefore pivotal to investigate and reflect upon what knowledge is passed on through these encounters.

5. Conclusion

So what is vulnerability? This thesis has not answered this question as much as elaborated on the diversity and ambivalence embodied in a term which seems to both bring humans together and divide us into categories. According to Gilson, a new ontology is needed in order to transcend notions of vulnerability as being loaded with weakness and as being something we need to move away from. In her "Ethics of vulnerability" she seeks to underline the essential need to investigate and reflect on terms such as vulnerability in order to know how the term is produced and reproduced (Gilson, 2014). Following, Brown makes a similar assessment as she calls for a reflexive approach to care work and NGO based work in order to better understand and perhaps challenge the meaning of *vulnerable groups* – so as to make it into a common condition which drives relation, instead of making it into a category which divides humans into the helped party and the helping party – those who are vulnerable and those who help the vulnerable (Brown, 2014).

Vulnerability is a term closely connected to ideas of normality. As stated in chapter 2.2, it is loaded with presumptions of social coding and morals, as well as deeply embedded into social structures. It is something we all are, and at the same time it is something which divides us. In the analysis, a picture was drawn of vulnerability being a matter of choice and the power structure embedded in this choice, or as being the opposite, namely a category in which you are put. Being able to make that choice is to be in a privileged status, as it allows you to take upon you your vulnerability as your own – a trait of personality, rather than a sign of weakness. On the opposite side, vulnerability becomes the common denominator for others to categorize you by. This binary relationship proves problematic as it shows how ambivalent the notions of vulnerability are, which thus calls for a reflection over how vulnerability is prescribed as knowledge during encounters. This also sheds light on the issue of privilege and

the ability to make a choice as being in a privileged position. The difference in the narratives about individuals and the narratives about vulnerable groups suggest, that the different ideas of what being vulnerable entails gives rooting to power structures which enforce a relationship where one party gets to choose to own their vulnerability and the other party is put into a category of vulnerability.

In conclusion, in the empirical material of this thesis, vulnerability is narrated as both an instigator of relation and as a tool for categorisation. Through the analysis it seems clear that vulnerability, according to the majority of the interview subjects, is a common denominator for the human condition, and plays a big role when it comes to human relation. This being so, it does not seem to be reflected upon as a tool for relation amongst the interview subjects, but more as an individual quality or a social category. Most of the interview subjects expressed difficulty when reflecting on the term as a term used in their work. Either it was not used at all, or it was explained as being too academic and therefore far removed from the reality of their work. According to Gilson, in order to understand how vulnerability can be an instigator of relation, one needs to reflect upon and investigate the ambivalences which are embedded in the term (Gilson, 2014). Those ambivalences become present in the moment we try to move away from vulnerability and towards invulnerability. Drawing on arguments made by Gilson and Brown, this type practice is advisable when working with what is labelled as being vulnerable groups. Linking this to the findings of the analysis, it seems that reflecting on understandings of vulnerability is not a common practice at DIGNITY.

5.1 Future perspectives

This study seeks to add to an emerging field within feminist philosophy. It is in essence an attempt to shed light on how empirical material can add to understandings of how vulnerability is understood in connection to human relation and what regimes of knowledge are in place to attach meaning to the term. Following previous arguments it is necessary to understand the social structures created around understandings of vulnerability in order to, in a reflexive manner, address how vulnerability affects and creates human relation, instead of sticking to knowledge of vulnerability as a sign or weakness – or as the analysis showed, as a social category (Brown, 2011, 2014; Butler, 2009; Gilson, 2014).

In the specific case of DIGNITY, based on the findings in the analysis, it seems that a reflexive approach to understandings of vulnerability would open up for reflections of how staff engages with others, being friends and family, colleagues or partners. Also, a reflection on what it means to categorize someone as vulnerable and thus make them helpable, would open up for a discussion of how ideas of vulnerability can affect how we work with others and how we categorize them.

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7. Appendix

7.1 Transcripts

In this appendix you will find transcripts of the interviews, some full and some partial. However, the transcriptions will only be available in the versions edited for examination, and not for the ones edited for library uploads.

For further information about the material and other similar requests please send an email to mraasthoej@gmail.com.