

SANT/FAS 2018 Conference
Vulnerabilities
CALL FOR PAPERS



Swedish Anthropological Association
(SANT) in partnership with the Finnish
Anthropological Society (FAS)
19-21 April, Uppsala

Välkomna med förslag på presentationer (papers)! Skicka titel, sammanfattning (100-200 ord), namn, institutionell anknytning och email till antroetno@gmail.com senast **16 februari 2018**. Glöm inte att inkludera titel på den/de paneler till vilken/vilka du/ni väljer att skicka presentationen.

För information om konferensen, se vår hemsida <http://www.sant.engagingvulnerability.se/#swe> eller maila oss på antroetno@gmail.com.

Välkomna till Uppsala!

The call for papers is now open. Please consult the list of panels and send the title of your paper, an abstract (100-200 words), your name(s) including institutional affiliation(s) to antroetno@gmail.com no later than **16 February 2018**. Make sure to include the title of the panel(s) to which you submit your paper.

For information about the conference, please visit our web page <http://www.sant.engagingvulnerability.se/> or send us your questions at antroetno@gmail.com.

Welcome to Uppsala!

Panel 1 || Acknowledging potentialities of health vulnerabilities across the life course

Organisers

Erica van der Sijpt, University of Amsterdam

Natashe Lemos Dekker, University of Amsterdam

Abstract

In anthropology and other social sciences, vulnerability has long been conceptualized as a state of disempowered exposure to adverse structural conditions. Within this framework, scholarly attention has been devoted to the multitude of daily life risks and their underlying conditions on the one hand, and to the lived experiences of those exposed to them on the other. This panel interrogates and deconstructs the normative frames through which vulnerability is constituted, and explores how vulnerability may be approached differently. Inspired by a recent body of work that explicitly acknowledges the creative forms that may emerge in the context of structural adversity and individual fragility (Almedom et al. 2010; Mullings & Wali 2001; Panter-Brick 2014), we engage with the potentiality of vulnerabilities as culturally and socially productive.

In this panel, we wish to use this approach as a lens for looking at the different health vulnerabilities that people may experience throughout the life course. From the very beginning until the last moments of life, people may face critical health-related conjunctures provoking a heightened sense of vulnerability (Johnson-Hanks 2004; Kaufman & Morgan 2005). How can we understand these health vulnerabilities as moments of potentiality, and what would be the ethical implications of doing so? We invite papers that explore the intertwinement of vulnerability and potentiality during various stages of the life course and that embrace the concomitant ambivalence and contradictions.

Panel 2 || Age at the margins: Reconsidering the breadths and depths of age in Anthropological scholarship

Organisers

Clementina Amankwaah, Uppsala University

Nika Rasmussen, Uppsala University

Abstract

Age as a factor has lured backstage in many anthropological studies. When age has been a part of the analysis, many anthropologists have turned their attention to youth and the productivity that age-related vulnerability can engender. For instance, young people as a vulnerable but productive category has gained attention within political anthropology, highlighting young people's various political engagements and creating new political spaces and subjectivities. Studies on young people's attempts to overturn gerontocracies have addressed ideas of hierarchy, age and vulnerability as both productive and destructive.

However, apart from youth studies we consider that anthropologists should pay closer attention to notions of age. Even though the dynamics of age is always present in human interaction, anthropologists seldom explicitly turn their theoretical and analytical gaze on how age can alter, modify or reinforce structures of power that the people we study are entangled in. We propose that we as anthropologists tackle people's experiences of the positionality of age from an intersectional perspective (alongside more well-researched intersections of race, class and gender) in order to engage with how this transforms and stabilizes experiences of people in the world. We invite papers that reconsider the familiar space of anthropological engagements with vulnerability in the light of age to explore the potential productive lines an analytical shift to the dynamics of age can engender.

Panel 3 || Arenas of Vulnerabilities, Interventions, and Humanitarianism

Organisers

Sverker Finnström, Uppsala University

Tanja Granzow, University of Tuebingen

Abstract

Humanitarian crises open up “arenas” (Hilhorst & Jansen 2010) of assistance, typically with intervening actors providing service to affected collectives. Described as “the messy interaction of social actors struggling, negotiating and at times guessing to further their interests” (Bakewell 2000), humanitarian intervention responds to, creates, involves, and (ab)uses vulnerabilities. Contrary to a priori assumptions focusing merely on affected populations, ethnographic investigations show that all parties involved can be bearers and promoters of vulnerability with features and impacts that change over time.

The panel invites contributions that explore and theorize ethnographies of humanitarianism, intervention and vulnerability, including fluctuations over time and traits of productivity. Aspects to be addressed may include (but are not limited to) the sociopolitical dynamics that come with a chronification of a humanitarian crisis; the vacuum after the exit of humanitarians and their organizations; the involvement of military and paramilitary actors; and/or the coopting of humanitarianism by various parties, local as well as global.

Contributions shall be compiled and submitted to a journal of humanitarian studies as special issue.

Panel 4 || Care and anthropology

Organisers

Maris Gillette, University of Gothenburg

Anna Bohlin, University of Gothenburg

Abstract

This panel brings together ethnographies that explore historically situated practices of care and its relation to broader social and political processes. We illuminate specific cultural lexicons and expressions of care, and investigate care's structural properties, including how care may entail exclusion or violence. If to care is to be affected by another, what entities have the capacity to be affected, or to affect, and under what conditions? While care is increasingly getting attention in other disciplines, anthropological engagement with the topic is rare, and mostly limited to the field of healthcare. This panel seeks to explore how anthropological insights can broaden our understanding of care, and probe its relation to various social and political forms. Through ethnographic exploration, the panel participants provide the empirical groundwork for conversations about how care might be portable across discrete regimes of practice, and harnessed to broader political projects promoting environmental sustainability and/or cultural pluralism. We welcome contributions on a variety of themes related to care, e.g.:

- How is care practiced, expressed and organized within or across distinct social fields?
- What emotional registers and culturally specific sensibilities inform situated practices of caring?
- How do people experience being cared for by fellow human beings, or by other-than-human entities (animals, plants, gods, the planet)?
- What role do curiosity, identification, or indifference play in the social production of care, e.g. in the media?

Panel 5 || Children and vulnerabilities. Between agency and disempowerment

Organisers

Magdalena Radkowska-Walkowicz, University of Warsaw

Maria Reimann, University of Warsaw

Abstract

Seen from childhood studies perspective, children are on one hand rightful members of the society, who should be, as much as any other social group, given attention and space to fully express themselves, and on the other hand, they are vulnerable vis-à-vis adults (also: adult researchers) and therefore they should be granted especially cautious treatment, both in everyday life and while conducting research. In this panel we would like to encourage a discussion on children's vulnerabilities, and on the ways that children manage to negotiate and transgress their weak positions vis-à-vis the adults and the disciplining practices of modern culture. To what extent do children manage to create their own sub-cultures and independent worlds? When and how do they enact their will and agency? In their own narratives, do they see themselves as weak, or empowered? We invite both empirical and methodological papers that try to shed light on the complex position of children in modern culture.

Panel 6 || Conflicting conceptualisations of environmental vulnerabilities

Organisers

Carina Green, Sveriges lantbruksuniversitet SLU

Benedict Singleton, Sveriges lantbruksuniversitet SLU

Örjan Bartholdson, Sveriges lantbruksuniversitet SLU

Abstract

This panel focuses upon the different conceptualisations of rights, justice, gender, power, and identity-processes that occur around environmental issues, aiming to explore the effects of ‘clashes of concepts’, with concomitant impact on the vulnerability of various actors. Anthropology has a long tradition of research highlighting how the environment is culturally perceived, used, politicized, managed, measured, etc. The damage to local human rights e.g. as caused by extractive industries or conservation-led dispossession has long held anthropological interest. At the same time, anthropologists have turned to the human - nonhuman dichotomy and scrutinized animal and other non-human entities’ rights and social interactions as part of a multi-species ethnography. This has then further led to research exploring the ascription of personhood and potentially rights to untraditional entities such as forests, mountains and rivers. We therefore invite presentations that investigate anthropological perspectives on the environment as an arena for conflict and communication, thus exploring the occurrences and clashes between different bodies of claims and engagements. In what ways can power relations, rights issues and identity quests be understood within the environmental framework? How can we continue to develop our disciplinary recognition of the characteristics and importance of human - nonhuman interactions?

Panel 7 || Contested Vulnerabilities: Livelihoods and Entangled Ecologies

Organisers

Elisa Maria Lopez, Uppsala University

Tomas Cole, Stockholm University

Camelia Dewan, Stockholm University

Abstract

This panel sets out to engage with the ways in which discourses of vulnerabilities are contested in different ecological contexts. The concept of vulnerability is commonly used to encompass several interconnected socio-economic, environmental and political parameters (Crate and Nuttall, 2009). This panel call for papers that acknowledge the political role of vulnerability (Ferrarese, 2017), i.e. how the structural properties of the political economy (Watts and Bohle, 1993: 46) may place particular groups in vulnerable positions and how designating certain groups as vulnerable may itself be contested (Cuomo, 2011: 695).

To what extent does vulnerability help further our understanding of politics in environmental contexts? In order to further explore how we can think about the relation between vulnerability, livelihoods and the environment, the panel invites papers that critically engage with the ways in which dominant narratives of ‘vulnerability’, ‘development’ and/or ‘indigeneity’ can be contested - as well as strategically deployed - by differently positioned actors. How does vulnerability help analyse resource use and extraction and the indeterminacies that environmental damage and dispossession might entail? We also welcome more theoretically and methodologically-oriented contributions that ethnographically explore human and non-human interactions in these debates to further decolonise environmental anthropology.

Panel 8 || Counselling ‘the Vulnerable’

Organisers

Pia Maier, University of Konstanz

Melanie Brand, University of Konstanz

Abstract

In the last decades, counselling has become a popular tool to treat not only affluent elites, but also those who are commonly referred to as ‘the disadvantaged’ or ‘the vulnerable’ in different settings around the world. Yet, little ethnographic research has been done that would allow to pinpoint individual, social or political effects of counselling in the context of precarious livelihoods. In our panel, we seek to theorize the process, the attribution of meaning, and the hierarchies inherent in counselling initiatives through ethnographic studies. We conceive “vulnerabilities” in counselling, on the one hand, as an emic term taken from the field of counselling and, on the other hand, as an analytical term that captures the counsellors’ act of attributing ‘disadvantage’ and a special neediness to their clients. This, in turn, leads to claims of empowerment and to a certain classification (i.e. as ‘patient’) within the counsellor- client-hierarchy.

We invite theoretical and empirical contributions that focus on (1) the counselling process, especially on how notions of vulnerability influence the counselling encounter, (2) the counsellors’ and/or the clients’ role and performance of identity politics in counselling sessions, (3) the counsellors’ education regarding the treatment, needs, and peculiarities of certain ‘vulnerable’ groups , and (4) on a more structural level, the planning and realization of counselling interventions by the state or NGOs.

Panel 9 || Critical Perspectives on Migration and Vulnerability

Organiser

Johan Lindquist, Stockholm University

Abstract

Contemporary debates and scholarship concerning migration and the figure of the migrant are characterized by a priori ethical dichotomies—between “victim” and “perpetrator,” “good” and “bad.” These can easily be flipped as the “good” migrant can be transformed into the “bad” migrant. In line with the theme of the conference, this panel attempts to move beyond these dichotomies through an interrogation of migrant vulnerability as a productive process. For instance, what effects does the use of the term “victim of trafficking” have? What processes are initiated when a migrant is identified as an “asylum-seeker”? How does surveillance allow for new forms of migrant agency? In other words, rather than documenting suffering or blaming migrants, the panel thus asks how we can use vulnerability as a starting point for reapproaching migration and the figure of the migrant.

Panel 10 || Disappearances, absences and silences: Ethnographic inquiries into vulnerability

Organisers

Marita Eastmond, University of Gothenburg

Laura Huttunen, University of Tampere

Abstract

Social and political upheavals, as well as the large-scale migrations they often entail, create potentially vulnerable populations. This panel opens for themes that address vulnerability and loss in such contexts, and the different ways they are dealt with, both among those staying put and those who seek a living elsewhere. The specific focus is on the disappearances, absences and silences that often result from violent conflict and population movement. Close family members have been killed, others gone missing or migrated, and material possessions lost. How do such absences affect social relations and everyday life? How do people address these absences, symbolically and practically? Pervasive violence and insecurity also disrupt the taken-for-granted nature of everyday life and create a range of symbolic absences. Violence also creates silences of different kinds, e.g. avoiding topics considered as dangerous or painful, while silences may also enable new lives and identities in new places. How to approach ethnographically that which is “not there”, in investigating silences and absences of various kinds? We invite papers that address these topics, theoretically and empirically.

Panel 11 || Emerging Vulnerabilities

Organiser

Heidi Härkönen, Academy of Finland and University of Helsinki

Abstract

This panel explores experienced, perceived or imagined shifts of vulnerability. This panel approaches vulnerability not as a static category but as a process that takes place in particular social, economic and political conditions. The panel seeks to understand “emerging vulnerabilities” as social processes that take place in particular political, economic, cultural and historical contexts and define specific persons as vulnerable or create for certain individuals personal experiences of fragility, marginalisation and incompleteness. What creates, promotes or intensifies the processes by which particular persons or groups of people come to experience vulnerability? Are there ways for people to reject, resist or slow down such processes? What kind of new obstacles and exclusions do people encounter when they come to experience vulnerability or are defined as vulnerable by outside circumstances? On the other hand, what kinds of unforeseen possibilities, connections and forms of agency may people encounter in the processes of becoming vulnerable? The panel welcomes papers that draw on ethnographic evidence in diverse parts of the world. Possible topics include, for instance, the new precarious positions that neoliberalist political and economic developments create in multiple contexts, or persons who through particular processes come to experience depression, infertility, poverty or social exclusion.

Panel 12 || Feminist anthropology exploring the ambiguity of vulnerability

Organisers

Klara Öberg, Malmö Universitet

Sylva Frisk, Göteborgs Universitet

Johanna Gullberg, Stockholms Universitet

Abstract

The concept of “vulnerability” is multidimensional and ambiguous in its meaning, manifestations and practices. In a poetic essay on vulnerability, Judith Butler (2004) argued that the experience of “being laid bare from the start, dependant on those that we do not know” – that is, being vulnerable – is inherent in the human condition and to a large extent also the basis of our experiences and relationships. Yet for many feminists (anthropologist or activists) vulnerability is also an impetus to seek social and political change. In this sense, it can be used as an asset, a position, a form of agency, etc. and entails a politics of definition. Who is to be defined vulnerable and thus made into a subject of care or of having a voice, while other forms of vulnerability or positions of vulnerability are ignored.

The emergence of identity politics in contemporary society produces different forms of vulnerabilities that in some contexts are positioned and weighed against each other. In France after the 2005-law that prohibited the Muslim veil in public schools is French activism of the French banlieues (eng. suburbs, sv. förorter) a conflict emerged between anti-sexist and anti-racist perspectives and that positioned women’s vulnerabilities against racialised groups’ vulnerabilities. Another example is the emergence and popularization of the extreme right in Europe and later the victory of Donald Trump in the presidential campaign in 2016. Within these developments we see a white under-class and their vulnerable life-conditions being positioned against the political struggle of people in socio-economically vulnerable urban areas, the Afro-American movement (such as Black Lives Matter) and the European movement of right to asylum (asylrättighetsrörelsen).

We invite discussions of how the anthropology of gender and/or feminist anthropology can contribute to our understanding of such politicised positions, relations and discourses. Possible themes to explore are:

- vulnerability at the intersection of gender and religion, class, ethnicity, race, age, sexuality and so on
- embodied/contextualized/situated experiences of vulnerability and oppression as sites for agency/political action
- discussions of ethnography, method and analysis in relation to “vulnerability” and the anthropology of gender and/or feminist ethnography.

Panel 13 || From vulnerability to precarization?

Organisers

Niina Vuolajärvi, Rutgers University

Jukka Könönen, University of Tampere

Abstract

Along with the concept of vulnerability, precarity (or precariousness) is widely used in academic discussions to address the insecure and disadvantaged conditions related to labour markets, social exclusion, migration or impoverishment. Yet, the often descriptive application of these concepts in empirical research risks essentializing precarity or vulnerability as a state of marginalized groups. Instead of understanding precarity as an ontological (e.g. Butler) or sociological category (e.g. Standing), we want to draw attention to socio-political processes of precarization that subject people to vulnerable and precarious living and working conditions (such as immigration regulations or neoliberal policies). Following feminist and Marxist discussions on precarity, we understand precarity as an inherently contradictory and ambiguous situation, traversed by subjective desires and aspirations, not simply as a forced, victimized condition. We suggest that shifting the focus on the processes of precarization and to the ways people create sustainable life strategies in precarious life situations offers a productive way to examine vulnerabilities. It also enables to think of new collective strategies for secure and autonomous life. In this workshop, we invite empirical and theoretical papers that engage with the concept of precarity and precarization, or discuss the relationships between the concepts vulnerability and precarity.

Panel 14 || Migration and the narrative of Europe as an “Area of freedom, security and justice”

Organisers

Magdalena Kmak, Åbo Akademi University

Reetta Toivanen, University of Helsinki

Abstract

For this panel, we invite papers that will deal with counter-narratives on Europe as an “Area of freedom, security and justice” and that focus on the impact of forced displacement on shaping the European legal, social and religious/cultural narratives. Recognising the traumatic experiences of exile and forced displacement, this panel aims at breaking up with the dominant narratives of vulnerability and security dominating in migration discourses and suggests approaching forced displacement as dynamic and generative process. In particular, we would like to look at the role of exile and refugee experience in constructing the European legal and theological thought, specifically, the European identity grounded in the idea of rule of law and human rights. Possible questions for the papers in this panel would be: What is the role of broadly understood forced displacement (exile, refuge, statelessness, internment and detention) in the production of the idea of Europe? What are the ideas of Europe and European democracy, human rights and the rule of law, that emerges from the experience of historical and contemporary exiles, refugees and asylum seekers?

Panel 15 || Power, Vulnerability, and Navigating the State

Panel canceled

Panel 16 || Prosperous vulnerability: the ambiguities of the informal sector

Organisers

Anna Baral, Uppsala University

Cristiano Lanzano, The Nordic Africa institute

Abstract

Despite its ambiguities, the concept of informality keeps being ethnographically and theoretically productive. While Hart's seminal work (1972) clarified that the informal sector is not a reserve for the poor, informality has often been used to evoke low productivity, unreliability and insecurity. Irrespective of whether informal workers are victimized, or romanticized as neoliberal heroes (De Soto, 1989), elements of precariousness and unpredictability permeate the imaginary around the informal economy. Urban petty trade, small-scale mining, domestic work (but also smuggling, trafficking and other less legitimate or more remunerative occupations): all these economic activities share an element of vulnerability. The informal sector is a multifaceted field, where structural relations with the formal sphere are constantly rebuilt, while processes of accumulation of capital and power produce various forms of inequality. However, informal workers unite, mobilise or simply find ways to navigate the uncertainties of their predicament (Lindell, 2010). Not only do they survive, but some also prosper, constructing mechanism of social security that shun the control of the state, or are variably related to it. Exposed to economic and political fluctuations, these mechanisms remain vulnerable, but they also create the precondition for productive relationships and tactics.

The panel welcomes ethnographic contributions on informal economies and their ambiguous connections with states and formal markets, on processes of social differentiation and marginalization within the informal sector, and on the ways in which informal workers create the conditions for their prosperity in, and not against, vulnerability.

Panel 17 || Reproductive Vulnerabilities: Transnational Commercial Surrogacy and Beyond

Organisers

Johanna Gondouin, Stockholm University

Camelia Dewan, Stockholm University

Suruchi Thapar-Björkert, Uppsala University

Abstract

We engage with transnational commercial surrogacy through the prism of postcolonial feminist theory, biopolitics and neoliberalism. Our point of entry is through the pivotal concept of vulnerability and we are interested in exploring how claims to vulnerability activate different registers; allowing some to maintain permanent privilege while leaving others to navigate a continuum of unfreedoms. On the one hand, we have discourses that highlights the vulnerability of surrogate mothers (gestational carrier) while simultaneously emphasizing their agency and the other focused on the ‘reproductive vulnerability’ of intended parents. Thus, by foregrounding their vulnerability, the couple not only make an unacceptable practice appear ‘normal’ but the symbolic power of the discourse of vulnerability overrides its potentially disempowering effects on the commissioned surrogates. Furthermore, the politicized nature of white vulnerabilities, it is our contention, harbours the potential for symbolic, epistemic and material violence in three ways:

- a. it claims entitlement through a discourse of vulnerability, thus effacing the reverse; i.e. the lack of entitlements as contributing to vulnerability,
- b. overrides the ontological/existential condition of vulnerable subjects.
- c. masks the geopolitical workings of capital, class and race by creating new geometries of power and powerlessness.

Panel 18 || Slow healing: beyond vulnerability and resilience

Organiser

Kasia Mika, Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies, and University of Amsterdam

Abstract

This panel looks at long-term, open-ended practices and processes of recovery and healing in order to go beyond the problematic, binary conceptualizations of vulnerability and resilience.

Whereas vulnerability is most often used to denote a community's or an individual's propensity to be harmed, resilience is positioned as its stark opposite with, for example, post-disaster aid hoping to 'rebuild resilience' of affected communities. Although they do have some converse characteristics, vulnerability and resilience are not exact opposites and can exist simultaneously (Kelman et al. 2016). Similarly, both can act as a marginalizing and dehumanizing discourse. After the 2010 Haiti disaster, for example, claims of 'extraordinary resilience' were premised on the notion of Haiti's permanent vulnerability and its 'endless capacity for suffering' (Glover 2012). These demonstrated how 'vulnerability' is a form of Western discourse, classifying certain regions 'as more dangerous than others' (Bankoff 2003).

The panel recognizes that even if some structures of vulnerability can be amended, the personal losses will never fully be alleviated or healed. It invites interdisciplinary, site-focused as well as theoretically-innovative submissions that explore practices and ideas of non-teleological healing, remaking (Das et al. 2001), and recovering in the aftermath of complex crises (e.g. disasters, civil wars and others).

Panel 19 || Spatializing vulnerability

Organisers

Piet Tutenel, KU Leuven

Stefan Ramaekers, KU Leuven

Ann Heylighen, KU Leuven

Abstract

The notion of vulnerability has been developed in various approaches, relating it to an existential characteristic of the human condition, the human body, or to the existential experience of relatedness and interdependence (eg. Shildrick, 2002; Van Wolputte, 2004; Käll, 2016). The goal of this panel is to enrich our understanding of vulnerability by exploring some of its spatial aspects. We acknowledge that built space plays an integral part in social practices – the doings of built spaces (Reh & Temel, 2014).

Questions we want to address include, but are not limited to: how do built spaces make or break, but also mediate and enable vulnerabilities? And how can these vulnerabilities challenge and inspire architects in designing built spaces?

These questions are triggered by the ‘Room for vulnerability’-project, of which preliminary results will be presented. This project seeks to investigate how the lived experience of children and youth affected by cancer can inform the design of cancer care environments.

For this panel, we welcome researchers who focus their inquiry on space and vulnerability in a variety of contexts. The aim of the panel is to discuss and exchange ideas about methodological and more theoretical approaches that bridge or question (socio-)materiality/spatiality and vulnerability.

Panel 20 || Thinking Vulnerable Animals

Organisers

Don Kulick, Uppsala University

Tom Shakespeare, University of East Anglia

Simo Vehmas, Stockholm University

Abstract

Recent work in Disability Studies has begun to highlight parallels between the lives of people with disabilities and the lives of animals. Philosopher Martha Nussbaum, in *Frontiers of Justice*, compares people with disabilities and animals in order to highlight fundamental flaws in conventional conceptualizations of social justice. Disability Studies scholar Sanaura Taylor's book, *Beasts of Burden: animal and disability liberation*, discusses many ways in which issues of disability and animal rights are deeply entangled. Public intellectual Temple Grandin writes about how she as a person on the autism spectrum "thinks like a cow", and therefore is uniquely placed to advocate for the humane treatment of farm animals. The book *Loneliness and its Opposite* by anthropologist Don Kulick and historian Jens Rydström argues that Jacques Derrida's concept of "non-power", formulated in relation to animals, is also illuminating of people with significant disabilities, and of other people's relationships with them.

From having been perceived (often rightly) as degrading, comparisons between the lives of people with disabilities and the lives of animals are gaining increasing traction as a way of thinking innovatively about things like empathy, justice, interdependence, engagement, and the meanings and practices of vulnerability.

This panel invites papers that discuss people with disabilities and/or animals in relation to vulnerability in ways that foreground the possibilities – and the limitations – of how attention to the actual lives of vulnerable animals (including human animals) can reconfigure how we might think about vulnerability more generally.

Panel 21 || Vulnerability in closed institutions

Organiser

Jari Pirjola, University of Helsinki

Abstract

When a person is placed to closed institution (prison, immigration detention facility, psychiatric institution, closed social care home, etc.) he or she becomes more vulnerable than persons living outside institutions. Within these institutions some groups - minorities, women, disabled persons, elderly, foreigners, radicalised persons, socially excluded, etc - become even more vulnerable than normal inmates, totally excluded from society. How should modern democratic states deal with this type of legal and social vulnerability is a growing challenge in Europe and elsewhere. What kind of anthropological research has been done in this field and what could be the role of anthropologist in addressing this type of vulnerability? What is the role of law and legal safeguards in dealing with vulnerability? How can we give voice to these people behind locked doors?

Panel 22 || Vulnerability, Agency, and Environmental Change

Organisers

Isabell Herrmans, University of Helsinki

Anu Lounela, University of Helsinki

Abstract

This panel engages vulnerability and precarity as analytical tools to understand life under rapid social and environmental change. This is done in a particular contemporary high-vulnerability context: the global frontiers of natural resource extraction. It asks how accelerated development, expanding state control, commodification, unprecedented resource extraction, and severe environmental degradation, affect social relations between people and their relations with the natural environment, causing new forms and experiences of vulnerability. The focus is on how people engage with their own or others' understandings of their vulnerability and how this constrains or affords agency. Vulnerability is a contested concept, criticized for hypostatizing lack of power and resources, but we suggest that the concept may profitably be reconsidered in terms of an expanded understanding of agency. We invite papers that explore how people variously adapt to, resist, reflect upon, or remake the conditions of a precarious existence, suggesting that all these manoeuvres entail a sort of agency. We are interested in the affective, ethical, epistemological, and political trajectories whereby people make do with the indeterminacy of their life conditions under accelerated social and environmental change.

Panel 23 || Vulnerability, Power, and the Possibility of Solidarity

Organisers

James R. Walker, DePaul University

Fanny Söderbäck, DePaul University

Abstract

Advocates of social justice and structural change – including those who embrace vulnerability as a shared ethical horizon – often stress the need for solidarity across hierarchical schemas of vulnerability and power. But to what degree is such solidarity possible, in light of the unequal distribution of vulnerability that is our lived reality? Given the depth of radical structural inequalities and the degree to which this creates epistemic gulfs and other chasms dividing groups situated differently within such matrices, upon what sort of “identifications” is solidarity across different degrees of vulnerability to be established? What does it mean to speak and act in the name of “shared” vulnerabilities, or a “human” horizon of precariousness? How to assure that agents whom are in positions of radical vulnerability occupy the leading roles in processes of structural transformation? This panel looks to engage these kinds of questions, from both ethnographic and philosophical perspectives, as they manifest in a range of possible contexts, from issues of aid and development in the global south, to overcoming long-entrenched systems of patriarchal coloniality, to global protest movements and other manners of addressing structural inequalities.

Panel 24 || Vulnerable cities

Organisers

Annika Björnsdotter Teppo, Uppsala University

Charlotta Widmark, Uppsala University

Abstract

When studied from a global perspective, cities may be vulnerable in various ways. Changes in their ecological circumstances, infrastructure or physical environment might cause their delicate life-support systems to malfunction. Emerging patterns of migration, scarcity of resources, and/or unequal social structures and relations might lead to big changes in their liveability. These differing circumstances may produce situations where inhabitants have to face disasters (e.g. erosion, inundation, lack of water and other resources), health problems, conflict, and lack of security. In this session, we wish to explore themes related to urbanism and vulnerability, focusing on the intersections and relations between different kinds of vulnerability that emerge in urban contexts.

How are these vulnerabilities expressed and perceived in urban contexts, what are their consequences for citizens, and how are they managed through the policies and practices of daily life? How, and by whom, are vulnerabilities employed as strategies for influence and mobilization? How do people construct, use, and control cities affected by experiences of vulnerability? What are the intersections of vulnerability around concepts of class, ethnicity, race, and gender?

Panel 25 || Vulnerable Infrastructures, Infrastructural Vulnerabilities

Organisers

Chakad Ojani, University of Manchester

Susann Baez Ullberg, Uppsala University

Abstract

Infrastructures have turned into prolific objects of anthropological research recently. Ethnographers have explored the power relations, symbols, ideas, temporalities and subjectivities that are embedded in and produced by such material relations. Regardless if we focus on the hidden work of infrastructures or its more spectacular dimensions, infrastructures as material processes of connectivity are always subject to potential breakdown. Infrastructures such as power grids, roads, rail tracks and hydraulic works (just to mention a few) are dynamic and tightly coupled systems, which are constituted by materials that age and undergo constant processes of change and deterioration. Residents and experts need to be alert to the fluctuating state of multiple infrastructures marked by leaks, interruptions, and variations in speed, pressure, or quality of service. In addition, natural hazards and political antagonists threaten infrastructures of locales, regions and entire countries, demanding public investments, corporate anticipation, expert knowledge and citizen awareness. Hence, infrastructures can render people and institutions vulnerable, but are also themselves vulnerable to wear and damage. As such, they are objects of risk, security and disaster. We invite papers that ethnographically and theoretically explore the intersection between infrastructure and vulnerabilities in the production of ideas, practices, and experiences.

Panel 26 || Vulnerable Pasts

Organisers

Timo Kaartinen, University of Helsinki

Katja Uusihakala, University of Helsinki

Abstract

This panel explores the use of memories and traces of past events as signs of vulnerability. We are interested in discourses and actions that evoke, allude to, and suppress sensitive aspects of the past, such as displacements, desecrations, human rights violations, and disgraceful acts against persons which have not been resolved through political action. Studying the sore points of personal and collective experience raises the problem whether they should become matters of public discourse, and what purposes (catharsis, recognition, justice) this would serve. While the belated recognition of historical suffering satisfies a liberal imaginary of citizenship and equality, the people who identify with the victims of past conditions may resist their incorporation in the normative public that results. This resistance against making all things public is evidence of politics of memory in which certain narratives signify vulnerability – whether based on subalternity, or constructed by élites as a tool for identity politics.

We invite papers on a variety of situations in which these dynamics play out. The examples might include public apologies, truth and reconciliation practices, conflicts over the interpretation of cultural heritage, micro-histories over fake news and the controversial use of social media, and other circumstances in which people assume vulnerability as a stance towards the public discourse about painful past events.

Panel 27 || Vulnerable writing

Organisers

Henni Alava, University of Helsinki

Marjaana Jauhola, University of Helsinki

Abstract

The desire to know, expose and explain is in many ways at the heart of the research endeavour. Often, however, people do not really know, nor understand, and much in social life remains inexplicable. This is as true of those the ethnographer studies, as it is of herself. Furthermore, ethical considerations may pose limits on desires for exposition: some topics are best left unwritten. These questions are particularly accentuated in social environments tinged by silence, fear or violence. In such contexts vulnerability rarely remains a sterile and detached object of research: rather, it seeps in and through the research process as a whole.

Recently, Tiffany Page has called for vulnerable writing, wherein the “unsettled uncertainty of the research process, rather than foreclosing on further understandings, provides space for new forms of unknowing and continued attempts at understanding the stories of others” (2017, 28). This panel calls for reflections on practices of writing – and not writing – that attend to questions of knowing and not knowing; of silence and breaking of silence; of clarity and confusion. How can research practices labour through uncertainty, confusion, and hesitance in epistemologically, ethically, and analytically productive ways? Papers may include empirical pieces, as well as theoretical and methodological reflections.