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“Vulnerable” resilience: The politics of vulnerability as a self-improvement discourse

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ABSTRACT

Resilience has become a central aspect of self-improvement within neoliberal societies. In the present essay, I draw from recent critical scholarship on resilience to investigate vulnerability as an emergent self-improvement discourse. I analyse two popularised videos that profile Brené Brown, a figurehead of vulnerability as a means of resilience-building. I argue that these videos circulate ideas about how to enact “vulnerability,” acting as powerful pedagogical resources that instruct subjects to turn within and work on themselves. Although practicing vulnerability may lead to certain social rewards, it compels subjects to orient their psychic lives toward an individuating sense of self, bringing a myriad of consequences. Below, I assess what is at stake when vulnerability is mobilised as a relational tool located within resilience.

KEYWORDS

vulnerability, resilience, self-improvement, neoliberalism, subjectivity

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Introduction

In 1994 Arlie Hochschild exposed the self-improvement genre to be a key site through which feminine subjectivities are regulated. More recently, Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad (2018) revealed that resilience has become central within this genre, calling feminine subjects in particular to bounce back unscathed from the challenges they encounter. Relatedly, vulnerability is an emergent self-improvement discourse that offers a poignant promise in the context of neoliberalism. “Vulnerability” compels subjects to embrace uncertainty and discomfort to achieve connection, happiness and success. According to Brené Brown, social work scholar and popularised figurehead of vulnerability as a means of resilience-building, taking up vulnerability leads to a myriad of benefits. During her TEDx Houston Talk (2010) Brown states, “vulnerability is the birthplace of innovation, creativity and change.” In her Netflix (2019) special, she argues “vulnerability is the path back to each other.” Through these popularised media programs, Brown offers specific subjectivities and emotional practices that are becoming hegemonic within the self-improvement genre, bringing a panoply of consequences. In this essay I examine how subjects are called to perform vulnerability through Brown’s TEDx Talk and her Netflix special.¹ These videos build upon one another and act as powerful pedagogical resources, instructing subjects to turn within and work on their psychic lives to enact vulnerability. Moreover, the essay centers on media products and the popularised discourse about vulnerability, rather than on Brown’s thorough and thoughtful scholarship. Throughout this essay I draw from the features that Gill and Orgad (2018) identify as constitutive of the call to resilience. Specifically, that

resilience involves psychological elasticity to overcome crises, the recasting of injuries as opportunities, and the foregrounding of positive affect and repudiation of negativity (ibid). Below, I begin with a discussion of the promises offered through the vulnerability discourse.

Ideal resilient subjects

During her 2019 Netflix special *The Call to Courage*, Brown states, “there is no courage without vulnerability.” Additionally, she tells a story about a man she encountered who had difficulty grasping that vulnerability is courageous. She recounts this man’s assertion that courage and vulnerability were on “opposite ends of the spectrum” and suggests that “no, actually they’re [on] the same” (ibid). In positioning vulnerability as courageous, Brown destabilises the dominant cultural construction of courage as masculine. Moreover, it is this gendered destabilisation that makes vulnerability palatable to a broader range of people than those conventionally theorised as ideal neoliberal subjects of resilience. Here, feminist scholars have theorised middle-class, cisgender white women as ideal subjects to enact resilience since they tend to possess the privilege, time and resources to cultivate this individualised strategy of selfhood. These subjects are “ideal” precisely because they are already well-positioned to bounce back in a wildly uneven societal landscape. Yet, with its emphasis on “innovation” that holds promise for productivity, and its constructions around courage, vulnerability reaches beyond this ideal and targets a broader range of people. Additionally, in suggesting that vulnerability involves “having the courage to show up when you can’t control the outcome,” Brown sets the stage for ongoing elasticity in an uncertain climate, discussed below.

Vulnerable to be resilient

During her TEDx Talk (2010), Brown shares that fostering more vulnerability in her life involved bouncing back after a personal breakdown. She characterises this internal work as a “street fight” that involved going to therapy and “took about a year.” The promise she leaves her audience with is that in the end “[I] won my life back” (ibid). Here, Brown uses her personal story of triumph over hardship to cast her injuries as opportunities for growth, enacting a central facet of resilience discourses and calling subjects to do the same. Additionally, on Netflix (2019) she states, “the minute it becomes comfortable it’s not vulnerability.” Through the foregrounding of both discomfort and inner conflict, “vulnerability” makes space for negative emotions, yet, remains foremost centered on the self. Relatedly, Brown suggests that when people reject their negative emotions, they also numb happiness and joy, and argues that vulnerability is the “birthplace” of joy (Netflix 2019; TEDx 2010). While this centering of negative emotion might suggest that “vulnerability” breaks free from a common refrain in resilience discourses (i.e., the disavowal of negativity), a closer look reveals that the embrace of these emotions is a

means through which vulnerability is substantiated as resilience. Here, the performance of vulnerability is, paradoxically, a central means through which the self is legitimated as a resilient subject. This discourse makes space for negativity in pursuit of joy, thus acknowledging injuries temporarily and as a means to bolster resilience-building potential. Moreover, the temporariness of this acknowledgement is significant given that negative feelings can be political. They can be felt as a result of political conditions and, when they are oriented collectively rather than individually, can compel people to act in ways that have political results (Sara Ahmed 2010). Through vulnerability, acknowledging negative emotion with the aim of happiness remains an individuating strategy focused on the self.

Additionally, through the emphasis on discomfort, Brown offers subjects a psychic strategy that taps into the political economic moment. The resilience-building potential of vulnerability is constituted alongside the non-standardisation of jobs, the privatisation of risk, and the normalisation of precarity. In centering discomfort, Brown speaks to and soothes the uncertainty and insecurity widely felt due to austerity measures fueled by neoliberal policies, and now exacerbated alongside the COVID-19 pandemic. Relatedly, as Marianne Cooper (2014) has shown, many people report experiencing a *feeling* of insecurity despite being from vastly different positionalities. The vulnerability discourse needles into these feelings and transmutes them into possibility. Such feelings become a potential source of courage, or an injury that has yet to be transformed, making them less difficult to bear. Thus, “vulnerability” offers confirmation that life *is* uncertain, while providing assurance that by embracing the discomfort that is a reality for so many, life will not only get easier, relationships will become more loving and intimate (Netflix 2019). Furthermore, the popular resonance of Brown’s work legitimates scholar Mark Neocleous’ (2013, n.p.) argument that in times of instability, resilience eclipses security as a dominant subjectivity, exhorting people to “survive and thrive in any situation.” This has political effects since, as Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad (2016) have argued, self-oriented strategies of psychic labour often dovetail with neoliberalism to compel a turn away from the structures that gave rise to suffering.

It is important to note that the above analysis is not meant to diminish the effectiveness of vulnerability as a powerful psychic and relational tool. Vulnerability may work for many people, for instance in building connections and assuaging conflict, yet, the fact that it works does not place it beyond critique. In fact, that vulnerability resonates so widely in vastly unequal societies has been the incitement for critique in this brief analysis. As a resilience building strategy, vulnerability compels subjects to work tirelessly on the self, while turning away from the structures of domination that created the need to build resilience in the first place. Additionally, cultural, legal and political spheres have a porous relationship and continuously influence one another, as well as subjectivity (Rosalind Gill 2011). In cultural spheres, the continued emphasis on what individuals can do to bounce back from crisis deflects from what governments and legal systems should do to

better serve those who are most marginalised. Thus, while vulnerability may work, we might wonder why it works, and for whom it works best.

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Notes

¹ Brown's TEDx Talk has over 49,391,360 views. Netflix viewing numbers are unavailable.