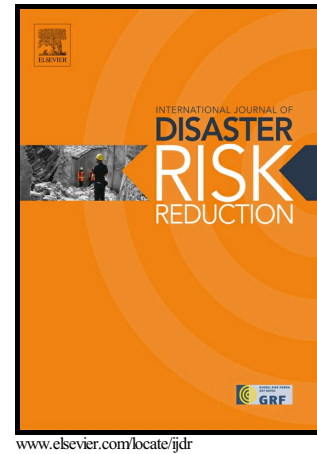


# Author's Accepted Manuscript

A critical analysis of vulnerability

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PII: S2212-4209(17)30329-1  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdr.2017.11.007>  
Reference: IJDRR713

To appear in: *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*

Received date: 9 August 2017  
Revised date: 7 November 2017  
Accepted date: 8 November 2017

Cite this article as: Christine Gibb, A critical analysis of vulnerability, *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdr.2017.11.007>

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# A critical analysis of vulnerability

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## Abstract

Vulnerability is a concept fundamental to the theoretical and practical dimensions of disasters. Paralleling, and sometimes diverging from, the dominant physicalist discourse in disaster studies, disaster management and engineering-oriented studies, the conceptualisations of vulnerability and their application have undergone several transformations. In this paper, I critically examine the naissance, use and critiques of a structural understanding of vulnerability in the context of disasters. I contend that a structural understanding of vulnerability is less problematic than its physicalist predecessor from both theoretical and practical perspectives, but it is not unassailable. In fact, not only does structural vulnerability have an Achilles heel, but its potentially fatal flaws are shared by the physicalist paradigm. Instead of rejecting the structural vulnerability paradigm or being paralysed by the apparent impasse, I argue that scholars, practitioners and policy-makers should focus on the ways in which structural vulnerability benefits disaster theory and practice, and foreground the relational character of vulnerability.

## Key words

Structural vulnerability; natural hazard; disaster; physicalist paradigm

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