



“Conceptualizing Vulnerability”

Victor Maddalena, PhD

ICE - CIHR Post-Doctoral Fellow

ICE Quarterly Meeting

September 12, 2006

Origins

- Vulnerable is derived from Latin *vulnerabilis* from Latin *vulnerare* (to wound) from *vulnus* (wound).
- ☞ The Canadian Oxford Dictionary (2001)

Dictionary Definition

- **Vulnerable:** 1. able to be physically or emotionally hurt 2. liable to damage or harm esp. from aggression or attack (a vulnerable position) 3. Exposed or susceptible to a destructive agent or influence (vulnerable to attack).
 - ◆ The Canadian Oxford Dictionary (2001).

Vulnerability:

- is an abstract concept
- affects those who are labeled vulnerable
- delineates responsibility to those who label others as vulnerable.
- often defined as a susceptibility to negative events

Who is Vulnerable?

- Poor and homeless persons
- Children and adolescents
- Substance abusers
- Mentally Ill Individuals
- Migrant workers
- Immigrants, refugees
- Abused individuals
- prisoners
- racialized minorities
- elderly, disabled
- Terminally ill

Context is Everything...

- Every person is vulnerable to a greater or lesser extent depending on their circumstances.
- This reflects the dynamic relationship that exists between the individual and their physical and social environment.
- Closely related to the concepts of susceptibility and risk.

Conceptual Basis of Vulnerability...

To understand vulnerability we must first acknowledge its many dimensions including: Limited control, victimization, disadvantaged status, disenfranchisement, powerlessness and health risks.

(Sebastian 1996)



Vulnerability

- Individuals
- Populations or Social Groups

What Predisposes Individuals to Vulnerability?

- Every person is genetically unique
- The environment comprises a wide range of stimuli (physical and social) to which the individual actually or potentially responds.
- Vulnerability is dynamic and can change over time
- Threshold of vulnerability varies for each person/group
- Illness/harm occurs when threshold is exceeded
 - ☞ (Lessick et al. 1992).

Predisposing Factors to Vulnerability

- Socioeconomic status
- age or gender related related causes
- health related causes
- life experiences
- Modifiable and non-modifiable risks

Social Groups

A social group is defined as "...a collective of people who have affinity with one another because of a set of practices or a way of life; they differentiate themselves from or are differentiated by at least one other group according to these cultural forms." (Young, 1990; p.186).

Social Groups

- Social groups can be defined in terms of gender, race, culture, ethnicity, age, religion, disability or sexual orientation (among others) and these designations often serve to afford privilege and advantage for some, and disadvantage and vulnerability for others (Young 1990).

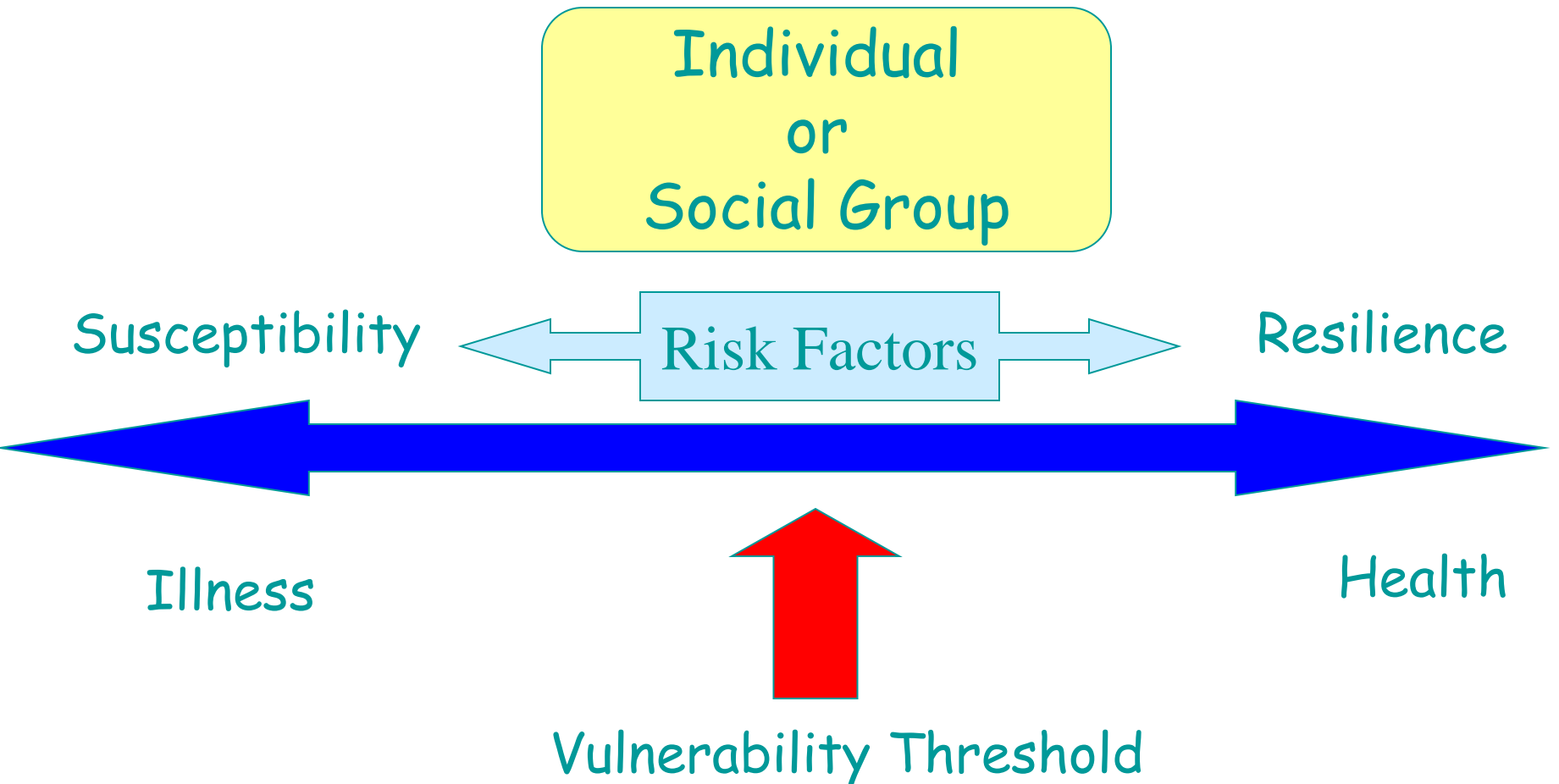
Vulnerable Groups

- are those who have an increased relative risk to develop adverse health outcomes. (Flaskerud and Winslow, 1998).
- Experience cumulative risks based on group membership
- social capital and resilience mediate risk and susceptibility

Outcomes of Vulnerability

- poor health outcomes
- chronic stress
- hopelessness
- sense of injustice, powerlessness
- exclusion
- cycle of vulnerability

A Conceptual Model of Vulnerability



Vulnerability at End of Life

- Modifiable/non-modifiable factors
- Transient and permanent factors
- Social (family support, work/income, living situation (rural/urban as well as home, neighborhood, social group membership, history, social support networks)
- Psychological (personal resilience, life experiences, coping skills)
- Physical (previous/current illness, prognosis, pain, mobility, genetics)
- Environmental (home, neighborhood, community, country)
- Other (justice, access to culturally competent care, knowledge of system) How do we identify vulnerable populations?

Policy Implications

- How do we identify vulnerable populations?
- Who defines vulnerable populations?
- Once we define a social group as vulnerable what are our responsibilities to those groups?

Key questions:

- Who defines a social group as vulnerable?
- What are the implications of one social group (i.e. elites) defining another as vulnerable?
- What criteria do we use to define a social group as vulnerable?



Questions/Discussion?