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Article

Beyond Individual Vulnerability: Recommendations for Structurally Informed Intervention

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Abstract

This qualitative research examines expert advice on interventions for populations facing social vulnerability. Based on semi-structured interviews with professionals in psychosocial support, health, education, human geography and public policy, the study employs reflexive thematic analysis to detect common themes in how vulnerability is perceived and managed in practice. The results identify three interconnected interpretive clusters: first, viewing vulnerability as a product of structural factors, highlighting issues like institutional fragmentation, bureaucratic obstacles, and policy inconsistencies rather than individual shortcomings; second, emphasizing relational and recognition processes, such as trust, active listening, and respect for personal journeys as key to meaningful engagement; and third, focusing on mediation and empowerment tactics, including institutional mediation, critical education, and digital literacy, to improve access and agency without shifting responsibility to individuals. Overall, the findings suggest that effective intervention demands integrated strategies that address structural conditions, relational factors, and empowerment methods. By consolidating expert insights, the study offers empirically based guidance for practice and service organization, emphasizing the need for structurally aware, relationally grounded, and context-sensitive responses to current vulnerabilities.

Keywords: vulnerability; intersectionality; relational practice; mediation; empowerment; systemic intervention

1. Introduction

The growing complexity of social inequalities underscores the inadequacy of individualistic frameworks for understanding social vulnerability. In contexts characterised by job insecurity, increased migration, fragmented public policies, and pervasive technological mediation, vulnerability is better understood as a structurally produced phenomenon. It stems from asymmetrical power relations and institutional mechanisms that unevenly allocate risks, resources, and opportunities.

1.1. Vulnerability and Intersectionality

The concept of structural vulnerability has been extensively employed to characterize these dynamics, referring to social, economic, cultural, and political conditions that expose certain groups to systematic patterns of exclusion, suffering, and limited agency, regardless of their individual characteristics (Quesada et al., 2011; Farmer, 2004). From this standpoint, vulnerability is not a consequence of personal deficiencies but results from the manner in which social structures regulate access to rights, recognition, and protection. By conceptualizing vulnerability as institutionally produced, an implicit appeal for systemic social redress is invoked. This encompasses policies aimed at redistributive justice to guarantee equitable access to resources, as well as recognition-based interventions that acknowledge and address the specific experiences of marginalised populations.

Such measures underscore the pressing need for public policies that transcend superficial symptom management and instead target the dismantling of structural mechanisms that perpetuate inequality.

Intersectionality provides a theoretical framework for understanding how multiple dimensions of inequality overlap and interact. Originally articulated by Crenshaw (1991) in the context of Black women's experiences in the United States, intersectionality posits that social categories such as race, gender, socioeconomic class, and sexual orientation intersect at the micro level of individual experience. These intersections reflect interlocking systems of privilege and oppression operating at the macro-structural level that have a direct impact on the micro level. Importantly, intersectionality is not a simple additive model of disadvantage; rather, it emphasises that the convergence of multiple social positions produces qualitatively distinct forms of vulnerability. Subsequent developments by some authors (e.g., Collins & Bilge, 2020; Garcia & Zajicek, 2022; McCall, 2005) have expanded this framework, demonstrating its relevance for analysing diverse social realities, including migrants, older adults, and LGBTQ+ populations.

Bowleg (2012) argues that a commitment to social justice renders intersectionality an indispensable analytic lens, as it captures how different identity markers combine to shape lived experiences of marginalisation and resilience. Literature has further demonstrated the value of intersectionality for analysing public policies and institutional practices, showing that ostensibly neutral systems may generate exclusionary effects when they fail to account for intersecting social positions, since they don't fully recognise the effect of the context in individual trajectories (Hankivsky & Cormier, 2011; La Barbera et al., 2023).

Together, structural vulnerability and intersectionality underscore the importance of examining vulnerability at the intersection of multiple systems of power, integrating both micro-level experiences and macro-level institutional arrangements. This perspective aligns closely with ecological models of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), which conceptualise human functioning as the product of dynamic interactions between individuals and their social, institutional, and cultural environments, always considering the temporal dimension. In other words, each individual must be considered in a systemic approach with a context, time, and multi-level interaction that has an impact on their development throughout their life.

1.2. Empowerment, Literacy, and Mediation as Inclusion Strategies

The promotion of empowerment—understood as the process by which individuals and communities gain control over decisions and actions that affect their lives—constitutes a central pillar of community and psychosocial intervention (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995). Empowerment has been conceptualised as a multilevel construct operating at the individual, organisational, and community levels, encompassing the development of competencies, active participation, and the transformation of power relations (Rappaport, 1981; Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995; Zimmerman, 2000). From this standpoint, empowerment cannot be reduced to individual psychological strengthening; it necessarily involves structural conditions that enable agency and participation.

Emancipatory education, as formulated by Freire (1972, 1992), is inseparable from processes of empowerment. By fostering critical consciousness, education enables individuals to understand the social conditions shaping their lives and to develop the capacity to intervene in their realities. This dialogical, horizontal approach emphasises listening, recognition, and the co-construction of knowledge—principles that resonate strongly with both critical pedagogy and community psychology.

In contemporary societies, critical literacy—including media and digital literacy—has become increasingly important for inclusion and empowerment. In highly technologized environments, access to information, institutional communication, and digital platforms is a crucial factor for social participation. While initial studies focused on participatory skills in digital environments (Jenkins et al., 2006), recent research shows that digital exclusion is not just about access but also involves unequal use patterns, skills, and support (Ganito, 2018; van Deursen & van Dijk, 2014). Latest reviews indicate that digital exclusion more heavily impacts older adults, people with mental health issues,

and socioeconomically marginalised groups, thus deepening existing inequalities (Barros & Ganito, 2024; Ge et al., 2025; Rafi et al., 2019).

In this context, technological transformations add another layer of complexity to vulnerability and power relations, which we cannot identify as a new factor, since at the beginning of the century, Castells (2002) described the emergence of the network society as a reconfiguration of social structures through communication technologies, offering new possibilities for participation while simultaneously amplifying existing inequalities. Without adequate policies for digital inclusion and literacy development, technological expansion risks deepening structural vulnerability by creating new forms of informational exclusion.

In this context, mediation is a critical relational mechanism for translating institutional logics, facilitating access, and building trust. Research on intercultural and institutional mediation demonstrates its effectiveness in reducing power asymmetries and supporting navigation of complex systems, particularly in health and social service contexts (Mejsner et al., 2024; Díaz-Millón & Olvera-Lobo, 2025). These findings corroborate earlier theoretical perspectives that conceptualise mediation as both a relational and political practice, situated at the boundaries between social worlds.

1.3. Relational Dimensions and Social Support

The centrality of human relationships runs throughout the literature on vulnerability and intervention. Research in developmental and health psychology consistently shows that social support functions as a powerful protective factor in the face of adversity (Cobb, 1976; Cohen & Wills, 1985). Contemporary conceptualisations of resilience emphasise its fundamentally relational nature, describing positive adaptation as emerging through access to supportive relationships that provide meaning, guidance, and resources (Walsh, 2020, Ungar, 2013).

These relational processes are deeply rooted in psychology. Rogers (1957) emphasized empathy and unconditional positive regard as essential conditions for personal growth, underscoring the transformative power of genuine listening. Recent empirical research in social and psychosocial services indicates that trust, relational continuity, and recognition are not merely supplementary but fundamental to effective intervention (Heino et al., 2025; Cleece et al., 2025), highlighting a critical dimension of human needs.

At the community level, strengthening social networks and social capital remains a key strategy for mitigating structural vulnerability, as communities characterised by trust, reciprocity, and civic engagement provide informal protective networks that buffer against exclusion and marginalisation (Barros & Hanenberg, 2024; Putnam, 1995).

In summary, the theoretical landscape indicates that interventions with vulnerable populations should integrate a structural and intersectional understanding of vulnerability with strategies for empowerment, critical education, and cultural or technological mediation. Frontline workers may benefit from actionable insights on incorporating these theoretical frameworks into daily practice, including methods for fostering empowerment and improving access to essential resources. Nevertheless, there is a lack of empirical studies that systematically examine expert recommendations in these contexts to bridge practical knowledge with critical theoretical perspectives.

This study addresses this gap by identifying and systematising recommendations from experienced professionals for effective interventions with socially vulnerable groups. This approach aims to contribute to a theoretical-empirical articulation of vulnerability, intersectionality, and community intervention, generating guidelines that balance scientific rigor, practical relevance, and ethical sensitivity.

2. Materials and Methods

This study adopted an exploratory qualitative design based on semi-structured interviews with experts to identify and systematise recommendations for interventions with vulnerable populations. The qualitative method is suitable for in-depth exploration of professional concepts, practices, and

guidelines (Charmaz, 2009; Silverman & Patterson, 2021), as well as for capturing the complexity and contextual aspects of vulnerability.

The analytical framework of the study was based on reflective thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019), informed by a post-positivist (Charmaz, 2009).

2.1. Participants

This study is part of a larger research-intervention project and draws on expert interviews conducted in two phases. In the first phase in 2022, eight experts were selected for their professional and academic experience in areas related to social vulnerability, psychological and social interventions, medicine, education, human geography, and public policy to help construct research instruments for interventions with transnational families. Participants combined academic activity with professional practice or direct intervention with vulnerable populations.

After this phase, in a second data collection in 2024, five additional experts were interviewed. This extension of the sample was analytically motivated by the emergence of additional topics during the initial analysis. The inclusion of these participants aimed to deepen and consolidate the analysis of these dimensions.

The final sample, therefore, comprised (13) thirteen experts. To preserve confidentiality, participants are identified in the results section using alphanumeric codes (E1–E13).

The average age of participants was approximately 45 years (range: 30–60). The interviews lasted between 50 and 95 minutes, either in person or via video call, as indicated by the participants. Professionals from different regions of Portugal were included in order to capture geographical and institutional diversity.

2.2. Procedure

Participants were recruited through a two-step process. In an initial stage, an open online call for participation was disseminated through professional and academic networks, inviting experts with experience in psychosocial intervention, social vulnerability, and related fields to register their interest. Eligibility criteria included professional and/or academic experience in intervention contexts and direct engagement with populations experiencing social vulnerability.

Following this initial recruitment, snowball sampling was employed, whereby participants were invited to suggest additional experts whose profiles and experience were relevant to the aims of the study. This strategy was used to broaden the range of expertise represented and to access information-rich cases that might not be reachable through open recruitment alone.

Data were collected through interviews focusing on participants' conceptualisations of vulnerability, challenges in intervention, professional experiences, and recommendations for working with socially at-risk populations. Particular attention was paid to the main social issues with which participants interacted in their professional contexts.

All interviews were documented as detailed analytical notes, validated by the participants at the end, and subsequently organised and systematised for analysis. The use of analytical notes rather than full verbatim transcription reflects the study's applied and exploratory nature, as well as its focus on identifying key dimensions and recommendations relevant to research and intervention.

2.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the phases proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019), including familiarisation with the data, initial coding, and the construction and definition of themes. Coding was conducted using NVivo (Version 14), with nodes created to represent themes identified both inductively from the data and deductively in dialogue with the research aims and relevant literature.

At a later stage of analysis, themes were organised into interpretative clusters. The construction of these clusters was supported by NVivo's cluster analysis tools, drawing on coding similarity

between nodes and visual representations of thematic proximity. This process enabled the grouping of themes into clusters reflecting different levels and logics of intervention.

3. Results and Discussion

The thematic analysis of the interviews resulted in the identification of three interrelated interpretative clusters: 1) Structural and systemic conditions, 2) Relational and recognition processes, and 3) Mediation and empowerment strategies. These clusters synthesise complementary dimensions of intervention and reflect a shared understanding among participants of vulnerability as a phenomenon that is simultaneously structural, relational, and intersectional.

Each cluster corresponds to a distinct, though interconnected, level of intervention and allows the empirical material to be articulated with the relevant literature on vulnerability, intersectionality, recognition, and empowerment. Table 1 presents a summary of the clusters, their analytical focus, and the main themes identified.

Table 1. Interpretative clusters.

Cluster	Analytical focus	Core themes identified with a number of references
Cluster 1 Structural and systemic conditions	Structural and institutional production of vulnerability	Structural inequalities (16); fragmented policies (9); bureaucratic barriers (12); gap between formal rights and effective access (11); rejection of individualising explanations (12)
Cluster 2 Relational and recognition processes	Centrality of relational dynamics in intervention	Trust and active listening (15); respect for individual pace (11); non-paternalistic approaches (7); recognition of subjectivity (10); relationship as a condition for intervention (14)
Cluster 3 Mediation and empowerment strategies	Mediation, education, and empowerment as transversal mechanisms	Institutional/organizational mediation (11); translation of systems (13); institutional and digital literacy (10); critical education (7); supported autonomy and agency (15)

3.1. Cluster 1 – Structural and Systemic Conditions: Vulnerability as a Social Product

In all the interviews, participants consistently rejected individualising interpretations of vulnerability, instead framing it as the outcome of structural inequalities, institutional failures, and fragmented public policies. This next excerpt illustrates this:

“There is always a tendency to ask what the person did or failed to do, when the problem is in the system that does not respond. We [as doctors] need to be aware of a more systematic approach” (E3).

The structural understanding of vulnerability aligns with views that see risk exposure as rooted in social, political, and institutional systems rather than individual behavior (Quesada et al., 2011; Farmer, 2004). Participants clearly shifted blame away from individuals, instead highlighting institutional factors, echoing criticisms of moralizing perspectives on social exclusion.

About two-thirds of participants emphasised that formal access to rights does not guarantee their effective realisation, particularly for individuals experiencing prolonged precarity, migration, or cumulative exclusion. We illustrate this point with a phrase to a psychosocial intervention expert:

“The rights exist, but between existing and actually being able to access them, there is a huge distance, full of bureaucracy and invisible barriers. To have minimal guidance in the normative ways of state mechanisms, we need to fill a lot of documents that state the emergency” (E7).

This account aligns with intersectional analyses that show how multiple dimensions—such as legal status, socioeconomic position, and institutional literacy—intersect to shape interactions with public systems (Crenshaw, 1991; Bowleg, 2012).

Participants’ descriptions concretely illustrate how institutional fragmentation and administrative practices contribute to what recent literature defines as structural vulnerability, operationalized through everyday encounters with systems of welfare, health, and social protection (La Barbera et al., 2023; Metzl et al., 2018).

Importantly, nearly half of the experts highlighted that institutional responses are often discontinuous and poorly coordinated, producing cumulative effects that intensify vulnerability rather than mitigate it. These findings underscore the need for interventions that address systemic determinants and institutional logics, rather than focusing exclusively on individual adaptation.

3.2. Cluster 2 – Relational and Recognition Processes: The Centrality of the Relationship

The second cluster emphasises the central role of relational processes in intervention with vulnerable populations. All participants consistently described trust, active listening, and respect for individual rhythms as indispensable for effective engagement and change. The next statement reflects a shared understanding among participants that relational work is not an auxiliary component of intervention, but its very foundation: “Without a relationship there is no intervention. If there is no trust, nothing else works” (E2).

Several experts noted that many individuals in situations of vulnerability carry histories of institutional interactions characterised by judgment, distrust, or dehumanisation, which make these individuals opt to close in on their problems and not be open to possible solutions, as we can see in this excerpt of E11:

“Many people have been ignored or treated like numbers. When they feel this again, they shut down completely because they say [in therapy] that they feel minimised and almost like outsiders.”

Such accounts align with theoretical perspectives on recognition, which emphasise that experiences of misrecognition undermine agency and participation (Mejsner et al., 2024; Díaz-Millón & Olvera-Lobo, 2025). From this standpoint, the relationship between professional and service user functions as a space for symbolic recognition that can counteract prior experiences of invisibility.

Also, almost half of the experts explicitly rejected paternalistic or prescriptive approaches, emphasising the importance of respecting individuals’ timing and autonomy, as we can see in E1 narrative:

“You cannot impose change. You have to walk at the person’s pace, otherwise you just reproduce the same violence patterns”.

These findings align with the literature showing that trust and relational continuity are critical to engagement and effectiveness in social and psychosocial services (Heino et al., 2025; Cleece et al., 2025). The data suggest that relational processes mediate access to resources and support, reinforcing the view that recognition is a core mechanism of social justice rather than merely an ethical add-on.

3.3. Cluster 3 – Mediation and Empowerment Strategies: Education, Literacy, and Agency

The third cluster brings together recommendations on mediation, education, and empowerment, highlighting these dimensions as transversal strategies for inclusion. Participants described a substantial part of their work as helping individuals navigate complex institutional systems.

It is important to note that a significant proportion of respondents emphasised the importance of mediation, either directly or by describing its role in their professions. We include an example from the narrative of E9, which indicates:

“Very often we act as translators of the system: we explain, accompany, and help overcome barriers to find a path to well-being”.

This description corresponds closely to contemporary research on institutional and intercultural mediation, which conceptualises mediators as agents who reduce power asymmetries and facilitate access to rights by translating bureaucratic and symbolic codes (Mejsner et al., 2024; Díaz-Millón & Olvera-Lobo, 2025). Participants emphasised that empowerment should not be understood as the mere transmission of information, but as the development of critical understanding and autonomy.

This perspective aligns with empowerment theory as a multilevel process that integrates individual agency with structural conditions (Zimmerman, 2000; Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995). Participants were careful to stress that empowerment strategies must not shift responsibility onto individuals in the absence of institutional support.

Education and literacy—particularly institutional and digital literacy—were repeatedly identified as key resources for promoting inclusion. Seeing the observation of E5: “If people don’t understand the language of institutions, they are excluded before they even start”, we can connect with recent research demonstrating how digital and institutional exclusion reproduce broader social inequalities, particularly among already marginalised groups (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2014; Ge et al., 2025).

Almost all participants emphasised that literacy initiatives must be accompanied by mediation and sustained support, rather than framed as individual competencies detached from context.

3.4. Integrative Interpretation of Clusters

Taken together, the three interpretative clusters indicate that participants conceptualise vulnerability as emerging from the interaction of structural conditions, relational processes, and mediation practices. The clusters are analytically distinct but practically inseparable, as each shapes the conditions under which the others operate.

Cluster 1 situates vulnerability in structural and institutional arrangements, rather than in individual deficits. Participants’ emphasis on bureaucratic barriers, fragmented services, and policy discontinuity aligns with conceptualisations of structural vulnerability that locate patterned exposure to harm within political and institutional systems (Farmer, 2004; Quesada et al., 2011). Recent empirical work further demonstrates how such vulnerability becomes visible in everyday institutional encounters, including administrative gatekeeping and unequal access to protective resources (Metzl et al., 2018).

Cluster 2 highlights relational processes as central mediators of engagement with institutions. Participants’ focus on trust, active listening, and respect for individual pace is consistent with recognition-based perspectives, which emphasise that misrecognition undermines agency and participation (Honneth, 2003). Studies in psychosocial and social services similarly show that trust and relational continuity are key conditions for effective intervention, particularly in contexts of prior institutional mistrust (Heino et al., 2025; Cleece et al., 2025).

Cluster 3 emphasises mediation and empowerment as practices through which structural constraints are navigated concretely. Participants’ framing of empowerment as developing critical understanding—rather than transferring responsibility—aligns with empowerment theory as a multilevel process linking individual agency to organisational contexts (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995;

Zimmerman, 2000). Their accounts of translation and accompaniment resonate with recent research on institutional mediation, which shows its role in reducing power asymmetries and facilitating access to services (e.g., Díaz-Millón & Olvera-Lobo, 2025).

Across clusters, institutional and digital literacy emerge as transversal resources that can either enable participation or reproduce exclusion, depending on the availability of support. This observation is consistent with evidence that digital exclusion increasingly reflects inequalities in skills and support rather than access alone (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2014; Ge et al., 2025). Overall, the clusters suggest that vulnerability is structurally produced, relationally mediated, and practically negotiated through mediation and empowerment strategies.

3.5. Recommendations for Professional Practice

Firstly, the results suggest that professionals working with vulnerable populations should adopt a structural and intersectional reading of the situations they deal with. This implies recognising that individual difficulties often reflect systemic barriers, such as complex bureaucracies, restrictive eligibility criteria, or disjointed institutional responses.

Secondly, the centrality that specialists attribute to relational processes points to the need for practices grounded in active listening, trust-building, and recognition of subjects' lived experiences. The professional-user relationship emerges as a fundamental space for symbolic mediation, capable of counteracting trajectories of institutional delegitimisation. Thus, it is recommended that the initial and continuing training of professionals integrate relational, reflective, and ethical skills.

A third recommendation concerns the role of mediation and training as cross-cutting axes of intervention. The results indicate that supporting the navigation of institutional systems, promoting institutional and digital literacy, and developing critical skills are essential practices for expanding the autonomy and agency of individuals. It is important to emphasise that these strategies should be understood as situated and monitored processes, rather than transfers of individual responsibility.

3.6. Recommendations for Public Policy

At the public policy level, the results reinforce the need for integrated, intersectoral approaches capable of addressing the complexity of contemporary vulnerabilities.

It is recommended that policies incorporate a cross-cutting perspective, from diagnosis through implementation to evaluation, recognising how different axes of inequality intersect to produce vulnerability. This implies reviewing administrative criteria, access mechanisms and institutional practices which, although apparently neutral, produce cumulative discriminatory effects.

The results also point to the importance of investing in education, literacy and mediation policies, including digital literacy, as structural components of social inclusion. These dimensions should be integrated in a coordinated manner with social protection, health, housing and employment policies, avoiding one-off or short-term solutions.

Finally, the data suggest that effective policies should recognise and value relational and mediation work as central, rather than ancillary, functions of social intervention.

3.7. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Studies

This study has some limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. The qualitative and exploratory nature of the research, based on a limited number of interviews with experts, does not allow for generalisations. However, this methodological choice enabled an in-depth analysis of professional recommendations and practices in contexts of vulnerability.

Secondly, while focusing on expert perspectives is valuable for understanding intervention guidelines and principles, this approach does not directly incorporate the voices of individuals experiencing vulnerability. Future studies could benefit from participatory methodologies that integrate these individuals' lived experiences. Adopting co-research approaches with vulnerable populations would align with the empowerment ethic advocated in this study, enabling those

affected by social vulnerabilities to actively participate in the research process and ensuring their perspectives are represented.

Future research could delve deeper into specific contexts or use longitudinal methodologies to analyse vulnerability dynamics over time.

Finally, future studies could more systematically explore the impact of the mediation, empowerment, and critical education strategies identified in this study, contributing to the development of more integrated and sustainable intervention models.

4. Conclusions

This study aimed to systematise expert recommendations for intervention with populations experiencing social vulnerability, drawing on qualitative interviews analysed through reflexive thematic analysis. The findings identified three interrelated clusters of recommendations addressing structural and institutional conditions, relational and recognition processes, and mediation and empowerment strategies. Together, these clusters offer a coherent account of how vulnerability is understood and addressed in professional practice.

Experts agree that tackling vulnerability requires more than just individual efforts. They highlight the importance of examining institutional structures, fragmented services, and policy gaps that influence access to rights and resources. However, they also stress that understanding these structures alone isn't enough; ongoing relational work grounded in trust, active listening, and respect for people's experiences is essential. Practices like mediation and empowerment are practical strategies to enhance access and agency, especially when institutional and digital literacy levels vary.

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Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The datasets generated and analysed in this study are not publicly available because they are part of Post-Doctoral research with ethical protections for participants' interviews. However, general data can be obtained from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Note that the transcribed interviews in this research are in Portuguese.

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