Afterword

Methodological pathways to portray superdiversity: A few concluding thoughts

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Abstract

Superdiversity as a term has captured the attention of many researchers since it was first coined in 2007. However, the very characteristics of the concept have made its methodological operationalization insufficiently clear, beyond being bridged by the great migratory movements of the 21st century. As a result, we find a considerable diversity of analytical approaches without being empirically clear what the dimensions and variables are that should accompany those related to migratory flows. In this epilogue, methodological implications are critically discussed, especially those related to social differentiation factors and a hierarchy of predefined variables. Also, future research implications are discussed.

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Superdiversity has garnered much attention as a term in the last 10 years or so and has been applied and understood in many ways. The articles that compose this monograph issue of *Current Sociology* explore a variety of issues, some of them not necessarily correlated to migrations, including a meta-analysis of superdiversity in the literature (López Peláez, Aguilar Tablada, Erro Garcés and Pérez García), the applicability of 'superdiversity theory' beyond migration studies (Kirwan), digital competencies and skills linked to social networks and diversity (Castillo de Mesa and Gómez Jacinto), children and citizenship in a superdiversity context (Ferreira), and new insights into potential superdiversity dimensions (Álvarez-Pérez and Harris).

The various conceptions of superdiversity are a likely result of both the lack of understanding of what the father of the concept tried to convey as well as the versatility that the term itself allows in its theoretical-practical application (Vertovec, 2017). Regardless, it is evident that this term enables a (re)discussion of and differentiation from other ideas that have been present in the social sciences for decades, such as multiculturalism, interculturality, diversity or intersectionality itself, bringing with it a triple vocation: descriptive, methodological, and practical (or policy-oriented) utility (Meissner and Vertovec, 2015).

In practical terms, sticking to the methodological domain, it is clear that there is no consensus on how to approach superdiversity in a standardized and homogeneous way in all cases. If the main objective of research in superdiversity is 'exploring emergent social patterns and the architecture of social differentiation in contexts highly altered by international migration' (Meissner, 2016: 24), then two common questions that arise when thinking about superdiversity, especially when it comes to operationalizing it, are: (1) What are the empirically anchored elements or variables that define social differentiation? and (2) once defined, which elements constitute those with the greatest weight in the hierarchy of importance? That is, what are the empirically identified and demonstrable criteria that can be applied to define this hierarchy? Additionally, to what extent do these elements, their centrality and categorization, vary according to their usefulness? In other words, are there any viable differences if the research purposes are not the same(for example, if we are trying to conduct a characterization of the population rather than seeking evidence to propose public policies)? In summary, because of the multifaceted nature of the term, we are only able to provide and propose some potential lenses with which to explore and portray superdiversity in this monograph.

Although Vertovec himself briefly conceptualized the methodological aspect of superdiversity, that is, an exploration of some of the variables that must be considered and how to look at them (Vertovec, 2007, 2010, 2017), 'serious empirical applications remained rare' (Meissner, 2016: 22). In fact, most of the analyzed research literature is based on qualitative studies even though, paradoxically, Vertovec himself used statistical data to justify the creation of the concept. Among the possible reasons for the predominant use of qualitative research to expand and justify superdiversity concepts, we highlight two possibilities: (a) qualitative research is specifically designed to investigate the appearance of a new concept in an attempt to discover its differentiated dimensions through exploratory studies; (b) the most scientifically viable ways, to date, to attempt to explore the sociological meanings, content, and interpretative richness of these differentiated dimensions are qualitative methods.

Certainly, over the years, one of the objectives of furthering superdiversity research will be to move from exploratory and descriptive studies to more correlational and explanatory analyses which will allow for greater applicability of the concept and its dimensions on a larger scale, thus fulfilling the aforementioned policy-oriented vocation of Meissner and Vertovec. In order to accomplish this research objective, it will be essential to carefully define and select superdiversity's constituent elements so that they can be systematically analyzed and tested, with an acute awareness of the risk that this selection process may entail. Some methodological proposals to meet this objective have already been launched, such as 'Maximum variation sampling (MVS) or Respondent Driven Sampling (RDS)' (Goodson and Grzymala-Kazlowska, 2017). The methodological door is still wide open, however, to welcoming new strategies that examine the 'core' idea of superdiversity and that can overcome current methodological dilemmas, such as the 'problem of data generalizability and relativism' (Goodson and Grzymala-Kazlowska, 2017: 10).

Being faithful to the notion of superdiversity requires consideration of 'all' the possible elements of differentiation that international migrations during the last two decades have contributed to diverse societies, including that individuals can also justifiably be studied as the unit of analysis in superdiversity research. Such a lens requires us to rethink the main variables/dimensions of certain phenomena (e.g., ethnicity, nationality, and gender) that have currently been prioritized and considered as 'explanatory' and to put them under the scrutiny of scientific examination in order to (re)discover their potential weight within a contemporary social context.

Over the years, there have also been some attempts to delimit the 'radius of action' of the superdiversity term. As a result, we propose the intentional systematization of the term, based on six dimensions, as documented in Table 1.

Table 1. Six dimensions of superdiversity. Affiliation of variables found in the literature.

Individual

- Marital status	- Personality traits (extraversion, neuroticism, agreeableness, conscientiousness, openness)	- Religion
- Age		- Principles and values
- Sex	- Country of origin	- Lifestyle
- Gender	- Language	
	- Disability(ies)	

Migration

Legal status	*Transnational practices*	*Migration channels*
- Economic migrants	- Sending of remittances and goods	- Opening of the channel that is used
- Undocumented migrants (illegal; irregular)	- Use of mother tongue/bilingualism	- Safety in the migratory process
- Family reunification	- Consumption of products from the country of origin	- Legality/illegality of the channel that is used
- Return migration	- Third sector activities	
- Retiree migration	- Visits to the country of origin	
- Forced migrants (refugees; asylum seekers)	- Participation in elections	
	- Personal contacts by Internet	
	- Use of online contact and exchange platforms	
	- Letters, phone calls and SMS	

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

Socioeconomic

- Employment	- Schooling	- Income
- Position on the labor market	- Academic background	- Purchasing power

Contextual

Residence	*Local community*
- Geographical area	- Social network with local residents / Neighborhood
- Type of housing	- Presence of other groups / minorities
	- Support / Responses from the host society
	- Associations
	- Places of worship

Family

Number of residents	Dependent family members
Degree of relatedness	Spoken language

Networks

Structural dimension	*Functional dimension*	*Relational dimension*	*Contextual dimensions*
- Size	- Social support (material and instrumental)	- Homogeneity or heterogeneity	- Geographical dispersion
- Density	- Social company	- Intensity	- Contact frequency
- Type (family, friends, neighbors)	- Access to resources and new links	- Durability	
	- Social regulation	- Sources of stress	

Analyzed authors: Álvarez-Pérez and Harris, 2021; Aptekar, 2019; Boccagni, 2015; Creese and Blackledge, 2018; Geldof, 2016; Goodson and Grzymala-Kazlowska, 2017; Grzymala-Kazlowska and Phillimore, 2018; Meissner, 2015; Meissner and Vertovec, 2015; Nowicka and Vertovec, 2014; Ozkazanc-Pan, 2019; Padilla et al., 2015; Pride, 2015; Schrooten et al., 2016; Van Robaeys et al., 2018; Vertovec, 2007, 2010, 2017.
Source: Authors' chart and data.

Obviously, this list needs to be expanded. However, it should be noted that an expanded list of differentiated factors will assuredly be accompanied with a greater probability of encountering problems when operationalizing the research. Likewise, such an approach may increase the likelihood of researchers to seek to study 'respondents based on difference . . . rather than undertaking research within or between ethnic groups' (Phillimore, 2015: 10), which could lead to a hierarchy of predefined variables. Because the ultimate diversity unit of analysis is the individual, and not the group, we propose that personality traits and their associated elements should be carefully considered in future diversity research (as referred to in Table 1) because they are empirically well-grounded over time with enough consistency to provide increased understanding of differences between people. It will be up to future researchers to propose the correct research questions, guided by the data rather than by hierarchies of predefined variables, or by other selection issues and biases.

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