



Superdiversity: New paths for social sciences in the upcoming future

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Abstract

Contemporary society has been characterized by its social complexity, which was boosted thanks to international migration flows, among other factors. This phenomenon brought us ‘superdiversity’ as a concept, which has been very well received by many social scientists, as well as criticized by others due to its similarities with previous notions such as diversity, multiculturalism, interculturalism or even intersectionality. However, this concept, with all the semantic breadth and defining ramifications that characterize it, has opened an interpretive door, and made possible an analytical framework that differs from the rest. As a result, we find superdiversity as a guiding research concept throughout all social sciences areas assuming a whole variety of approaches, without necessarily considering international migrations as a background variable. This monograph reflects this reality and is presented as a hybridization of more orthodox positions with other more flexible and interpretive ones.

Keywords

Social change, social complexity, social sciences, social policy, superdiversity

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Contemporary social reality is becoming increasingly complex, in a context that has been transformed by the COVID-19 pandemic. This complexity includes difficulties in the lives of people who are trying to deal with the day-to-day problems of life (Wittchen et al., 2011), with very real repercussions on individual mental health. Increases in the diversification of difficulties and needs have also necessitated the continuous growth of institutional 'care' and a simultaneous reduction of investment in local social supports, creating an ever-increasing institutional dependence (van Ewijk, 2018).

This notion of complexity is intrinsically associated with the concept of social vulnerability, which by definition is not a causal result of socioeconomic or sociocultural disadvantage, or of psychic disorders, physical or learning deficiencies. It is rather an interwoven sum of personal and social factors, creating an indissoluble link between the external and internal world.

Social complexity is related to the growing space for change along with the issues of increasing mobility and flexibility, fragmentation of services, professions and products, and bureaucracy in processes. As a result, it is impossible to reduce all of these issues to a single cause or to determine a clear diagnosis, at least not to a unidimensional 'one-size-fits-all' answer or solution (van Ewijk, 2018).

Social complexity suggests that it is almost impossible for people to fully balance their own world and to manage their personal and family daily lives because of the numerous challenges, changes, demands, ambiguities, conflicts and pressures they face. It is indeed because of this daily context that a phenomenological analysis of individual and group reality through a multidimensional lens which promotes sustainable social change is critically necessary.

Bearing in mind that cultural diversity can be considered a living and renewable 'good' that guarantees the survival of humanity, avoids fundamentalisms, and respects the dignity of the person, as well as promotes and preserves existing cultures (UNESCO, 2001: 61–64), it is worth reflecting on how progress has been made in this domain within the social sciences, at the theoretical, methodological and practical levels.

The study of superdiversity in all areas places us in a different context in which debates about multiculturalism or interculturality are reformulated (López Peláez and Gómez Ciriano, 2020) precisely because diversity not only affects immigration flows but also such things as nationality of origin in mixed-race societies. Researchers who are moving both sociological theory and social policies forward continue to attempt to assist people from superdiverse societies who are struggling with how to show greater tolerance towards each other both to without and within groups (Castillo de Mesa et al., 2020). Social ties in a digital context in which the phenomenon of eco chambers (Gillani et al., 2018) confirms the implosion of social groups on themselves (Hochschild, 2016) reveals a good example of the importance of analyzing superdiversity as a phenomenon that transforms our interaction and changes our patterns of behavior.

It has been 12 years since the concept of superdiversity was introduced (Vertovec, 2007) and there is still a long way to go to reach its full conceptualization, especially in terms of its dimensions. From its origins, researchers have sought to primarily develop three interconnected aspects of superdiversity studies: (1) the description of the superdiverse realities in specific contexts taking into account the variables of existing patterns in migratory flows; (2) the methodological dimension in which there is a paradigm

shift in studies related to migrations, moving away from classical explanatory variables focused on specific ethnic groups or specific nationalities towards a broader vision in which there is a theoretical-methodological redesign which affords a more nuanced understanding of social interactions in superdiverse contexts; and (3) the policy-oriented practical dimension, with the aim of giving light and relevance to the underlying dimensions of global migration and population changes by moving away from the ethnic focus in order to give rise to neglected variables such as age, gender, as well as the ethnicity and gender of the migrants, along with the legal aspect endemic to migratory flows which undoubtedly conditions these mobilities (Meissner and Vertovec, 2015: 542–543).

With these background ideas in mind, we propose that the reason why we can consider superdiversity an important new path for the social sciences in future years is because of its versatility in explaining our societal realities and because ‘ethnic diversity has actually become so normal in the everyday lives of *our* research subjects that this aspect of differentiation has become somewhat ordinary’ (Meissner, 2015: 557). Superdiversity theory allows researchers, policymakers, and other stakeholders to move beyond the challenge of using a stifling ethnocentric approach to solving the problems diverse individuals and groups are facing to the liberating and innovative use of ethno-relativist and inclusive approaches best suited to solving their problems in real time.

This monograph aims to respond to this challenge by using superdiversity theory to explore innovative and practical solutions to helping people successfully manage the diverse and varied situations they are facing. By exploring how superdiversity can be addressed (or should be addressed) in new and innovative ways, practical solutions can be found to inform social policies in the best possible way, and these solutions can in turn promote social change that is sustainable and adequate to support people’s current realities.

With this aim in mind, we first present a metaanalysis by Antonio López Peláez, María Victoria Aguilar Tablada, Amaya Erro Garcés and Raquel Pérez García, entitled ‘Superdiversity and social policies in a complex society: Social challenges in the 21st century’, which focuses on the treatment of superdiversity in the literature with the aim of better informing social policies from a sociological perspective.

Next, we introduce Gloria Kirwan and her article ‘Superdiversity re-imagined: Applying superdiversity theory to research beyond migration studies’, in which she creates bridges to analyze other social realities and promotes as her central argument that the basic principles of the theory of superdiversity can help address epistemological issues that go well beyond the traditional parameters of migration studies.

Joaquín Castillo de Mesa and Luis Gómez Jacinto discuss ‘Digital competences and skills as key factors between connectedness and tolerance to diversity on social networking sites: Case study of social work graduates on Facebook’, and provide us with an interesting technological approach to the analysis of digital connection patterns and their influence on tolerance associated with diversity and social capital.

Pablo Álvarez-Pérez and Victor W Harris present us with their study ‘Personal social networks as a superdiversity dimension: A qualitative approach with second-generation Americans’ in which some significant differences in the interpretations between the classic definitions of nationality and cultural identity are discussed, highlighting personal networks as a new and innovative dimension to consider for the analysis of superdiversity.

Jorge Ferreira, in his article ‘Children’s life in superdiversity contexts: Impacts on the construction of a childhood citizenship – the Portuguese case’, addresses the issues of citizenship and the eco-social dimension in the territorialized intervention of family policies with contemporary approaches to superdiversity, concluding with a systematic review of current related problems which concern the child as a citizen in contemporary society.

Roberta Teresa Di Rosa and Santa Giuseppina Tumminelli, in their article ‘Diversification of diversity: Migrations, cultural pluralism and urban transformations in Palermo (Italy): a case study’, analyze the most prominent challenges of superdiversity in Palermo, Italy, such as: the impact on the school system; linguistic-cultural pluralism; the change of religious belongings and identities; the daily dynamics of cohesion/marginality; and the relationship between spaces and identities.

Finally, Guido Rings, in his work ‘The superdiverse precariat of British higher education? *Limpiadores* revisited’, explores the challenges of the superdiverse and precarious protagonists of this documentary as an example of contemporary neocolonialism, suggesting possible ways to move beyond its implications towards the future.

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