Anthropological perspectives on super-diversity: complexity, difference, sameness, and mixing

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Abstract

This article discusses anthropological perspectives on super-diversity, and includes reflections on why anthropology as a discipline has been reluctant to engage with the term. Super-diversity and its reception within the discipline is then compared with how semantically proximate concepts, namely migration, transnationalism, and multiculture, were received and developed. The long shadow of functionalism and its interest in stasis and bounded culture is discussed, and alternative or subliminal genealogies for super-diversity are presented, including especially the anthropology of the Caribbean. The discipline's reluctance to engage with race and working-class culture is contextualised and it is shown how this led to scholarship on multiculture developing separately from that of migration. The emergence of transnationalism in the 1990s made it possible for anthropology to reconceptualise long-held ideas around mixing, cultural fluidity, and relationships between culture and territoriality, but transnationalism was relatively weak on the understanding of inter-ethnic relations in areas of migrant settlement. It is noted that transnationalism poses fundamental challenges to ethnographic fieldwork conventionally conceived, and that the same is the case for super-diversity. To overcome these challenges, it is proposed that collaborative, participatory, and team-based ethnographies, that also seek to decolonise ethnography, offer a promising way forward. In the conclusion, proposals are made that seek to bring anthropological engagements with super-diversity into constructive dialogue with work on racism, multiculture, deportation, and intersecting inequalities.

Keywords

Anthropology, the Caribbean, collaborative methods, ethnography, multiculture, race, super-diversity, transnationalism.

Introduction: situating superdiversity within anthropology

Throughout its history, anthropology has been interested in questions of the particular vs the universal; anthropologists have documented the many different ways that people have organised themselves and made sense of the world, exploring and documenting human diversity as well as 'what it is that all humans have in common' (Eriksen 2017, 3). *Diversity* itself was however rarely a subject of research in the discipline; in the early to mid-twentieth century, anthropology was dominated by the functionalist paradigm and was primarily focused on small, supposedly homogeneous cultures and societies, and preoccupied by concerns around cultural purity and authenticity. Yet even classic functionalist studies such as Bronislaw Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1961; first published 1922) about the kula ring captured circulation, mobility and mixing.

After Steve Vertovec coined superdiversity in an article in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* in the mid-2000s (Vertovec 2007), it quickly gained traction across a number of fields, and has been applied to a very wide range of situations and places around the world (Vertovec 2017). The term can be seen as growing out of a longstanding, but minority lineage of anthropological work on urbanisation,

pluralism, cultural complexity, and creolisation. Superdiversity also has resonances with intersectionality and feminist anthropology in its concern with the complex interactions between markers of identity and difference, although this relationship remains somewhat under-developed (see, Berg and Sigona 2013).

Given anthropology's foundational interest in human social and cultural diversity and the fact that the term was coined by a leading anthropologist of transnationalism, it is perhaps surprising that major Anglophone anthropology journals have published hardly any work discussing superdiversity, not even critiques of it. In fact, they have barely afforded the concept recognition or acknowledgment.¹ By comparison, sociologists have engaged with the concept much more extensively.² But it is within the interdisciplinary field of migration studies³ that there has been most comprehensive engagement with the concept (see also, Vertovec 2017). Vertovec's 2007 article remains the top-most cited article in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*,⁴ and the journal included superdiversity among the themes selected for special discussion in its 40th anniversary issue in 2017.

Why has the anthropology been so reluctant to engage with a concept, even while much writing on superdiversity has been by anthropologists? This is the first question this chapter seeks to elucidate, drawing principally, but not exclusively, on work by UK-based anthropologists. I firstly situate superdiversity within the history of work on migration in anthropology, and specifically work on the Caribbean. I then compare superdiversity with the trajectories of transnationalism and multiculture, two concepts that are semantically proximate. Transnationalism, like superdiversity, is a concept that was coined by anthropologists, and which had a transformative impact on the field of migration studies. Multiculture is in some ways semantically closer to superdiversity yet grew out of a different intellectual lineage and is closely related to critical race studies in the UK. From this contextualisation and comparison, I discuss the challenges that superdiversity poses to anthropology, and then offer some reflections and suggestions about the potential for a dialogue between superdiversity and anthropology, including how critical anthropological work can contribute to refining the concept.

Superdiversity, transnationalism, multiculture

One way of understanding anthropology's reluctance to engage with superdiversity, is to ask whether it has fared differently compared to semantically related earlier concepts, such as migration, transnationalism, and multiculture.

Throughout the early and mid-twentieth century, migration was never central to anthropology in the same way that it was to sociology (especially in the US). Migration was an important feature of many societies studied by anthropologists, but the discipline's functionalist orientation and reluctance to

¹ I searched for the terms 'super-diversity' and 'superdiversity' to appear anywhere between 2006 and 2020/21 in the following journals: American Anthropologist, American Ethnologist, City & Society, Cultural Anthropology (all published by the American Anthropological Association); Anthropology Today and JRAI (Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute); Social Anthropology (published by the European Association of Social Anthropologists); HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory; Current Anthropology; Critique of Anthropology. The highest number of mentions in any one of these journals was 5, and several had no mentions, or did not refer to Vertovec's original article or any other scholarly publications about the term. Linguistic anthropology is the sub-discipline that has done most work to address this, but it has informed mainstream anthropology in a limited way. A discussion of why this is so, is not possible in this chapter.

² I searched The Sociological Review, British Journal of Sociology, and Sociology.

³ In order of mentions from low to high: Ethnic and Racial Studies, Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, International Journal of Multilingualism, Journal of Intercultural Studies, Identities.

⁴ https://www.tandfonline.com/action/showMostCitedArticles?journalCode=rers20, accessed 10/07-2021.

grapple with social change and complex societies meant that research that addressed migration was relegated to the periphery of the discipline (Brettell 2000).

The Caribbean provides a telling example. The region is characterised by complex historically embedded patterns of transnational and regional mobility and migration, including the violence of colonialism and forced migration through transnational slavery, early modernity, and incorporation into capitalist world markets (Mintz 1996, Olwig 1997, 20). The history and heterogeneity of Caribbean societies and their inescapable colonial nature meant that anthropologists could not rely on the dominant tropes of sedentariness and pre-contact authenticity of early and mid-twentieth century functionalist anthropology (Trouillot 1992: 22). As a result, the region was marginalised in the discipline.⁵

However, the very same features made the region a perfect location for studying migration, diasporic identities, transnationalism, and creolisation, which came to the fore from the 1990s onwards. The last of these terms in fact originates in scholarship on the Caribbean (Mintz 1996: 300). A number of pioneering scholars in the anthropology of migration started out as students of the Caribbean, including Thomas Hylland Eriksen, Nancy Foner, Nina Glick-Schiller, Karen Fog Olwig, and Steve Vertovec. Work in and on the region had long grappled with these issues. An example is the Jamaican anthropologist M. G. Smith, who described Caribbean societies as 'plural' (1965). The Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz introduced the concept *transculturation* in the 1940s in his major work *Cuban Counterpoint* (Ortiz 1940, 1995 [new edition in English]). It represented a sophisticated and nuanced attempt at grappling with social and cultural change in a society forged through transnational migration, and characterised by diversity (Berg 2010). Yet despite a prompt translation into English and early recognition, including endorsement by Malinowski, Ortiz's concept and work were quickly forgotten about in Anglophone anthropology (Coronil 2005). Still, transculturation could be seen as a subliminal lineage for both multiculture and superdiversity (see e.g. Rhys-Taylor 2013).

Race and multiculture

Like migration, studies of race, racism, and urban multiculture were seen as inappropriate or unsuitable topics for anthropological research, and were accordingly marginalised during the discipline's long functionalist phase. Anthropologists who did work on race tended to have a background in field research in former British colonies and came at the issue from an ethnicity or 'race relations' approach, seen as neo-colonial by later generations of scholars and activists (Alexander 2004, 136-7). When studying migrant groups in the UK, anthropological accounts tended to focus on 'culture' and 'tribal features' of South Asian migration (Alexander 2018, 1039).

In the 1980s, several pioneering anthropologists of race and multiculture who wanted to avoid these pitfalls, found their homes outside the discipline, in sociology and later in the burgeoning interdisciplinary field of migration studies. Les Back's pioneering ethnographic study (1996) of urban multiculture and racisms among young people in south London, based on his anthropology PhD, is a telling example. The book has become a landmark publication in the sociology of race and racism, and was the subject of a conference in 2016 that marked the twentieth anniversary of its publication. The book has been much less read within anthropology. An interesting contrast is Gerd

⁵ Apart from the ambiguities the Caribbean has presented in terms of fitting in to the disciplines of Western academia – not quite white enough to fall within sociology, but not quite native enough to fit into anthropology either (Trouillot 1992, 20) – it was not geo-strategically important enough to attract funding from major funding agencies (for the US, see Gupta and Ferguson 1997b, 9). See also Berg (2010). ⁶ Vertovec also cites work on pluralism in African societies as an inspiration for his thinking on superdiversity (2007, 1026).

⁷ See https://newurbanmulticultures.wordpress.com/.

Baumann's Contesting Culture, based on fieldwork in a multi-ethnic and multicultural London suburb and published in the same year (Baumann 1996). Both Baumann and Back were critical of exoticising and culturalist accounts of urban multiculture, but Baumann had prior fieldwork experience in Africa and linked his work to classic Africanist ethnographies; his book remains widely read in anthropology. Meanwhile, following the focus of his doctoral research, Back 'couldn't get a job in anthropology', and says he had 'no alternative but to leave the discipline in the 80s' although he 'felt a strong link to anthropology' (personal communication, September 2020). He went on to have a distinguished career in sociology. In the US, some anthropologists of migration equally found their intellectual home in sociology where migration was more of a mainstream issue (Nancy Foner, personal communication, August 2021).

The wider UK context for the discipline in this decade was a tough funding climate, a government that was hostile to the social sciences, and possibly a belief that migration was not going to be an important issue. Anthropology remained an elite discipline, linked with colonialism, and centred on Oxford-Cambridge-LSE (Mills and Berg 2010). The discipline also remained reluctant to engage with urban, working-class, and popular culture in UK (Degnen and Tyler 2017, Leach 1984).

As a result, in the UK, studies of race and multiculturalism developed separately from studies of migration and ethnicity (Alexander 2004, 137), with different intellectual genealogies, and institutional and disciplinary homes, i.e. mainly outside the Oxford-Cambridge-LSE circuit that so defined anthropology, and within cultural studies and sociology departments rather than anthropology. One could argue that the emergence of cultural studies was partly a function of anthropology's colonial legacy, exclusionary elitism, and reluctance to engage with migration, multiculture, race, and working-class culture.⁸

Transnationalism

Things began to change, when, during the 1990s, anthropology engaged in important and necessary work on deterritorialisation, flows, cultural fluidity and mixing (Hannerz 1987, 1992, Gupta and Ferguson 1992, 1997a). This led to pioneering work on migrant transnationalism (Glick Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton 1992, Rouse 1991), growing out of grounded ethnographic engagement in 'migrant sending' areas, including the Caribbean, and on diasporic groups (Clifford 1994). This work greatly contributed to our understanding of migrant experiences, and helped counter the sedentarist bias (Malkki 1995), methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002), and essentialising holism (Candea 2007) of anthropology. Literature on transnationalism and diasporas gave scholars the conceptual tools to describe and analyse migrant practices that previously had gone unacknowledged. It challenged sociological staples, notably assimilation, as well as long-held anthropological ideas about the isomorphism of culture-people-place, and led to a virtual explosion of innovative and creative anthropological and ethnographic work and questioning of the foundations of ethnography (Coleman and Hellermann 2009, Falzon 2009). Yet the idea of ethnic communities remained intact (Glick Schiller, Caglar, and Guldbrandsen 2006, 613). Transnationalism literature was also on the whole weakly grounded in societies of settlement, and had relatively thin accounts of inter-ethnic relations in both 'home' and 'host' societies (Berg and Sigona 2013, 354).

As the concept of transnationalism was taken up by mainstream sociology, its grounding in political economy and structures of racism and discrimination waned, while the more celebratory aspects that foregrounded migrant agency were retained, thus diminishing the concept's critical edge. From this work arose questions around how transnational engagement and 'integration' related to one another, as well as an appreciation of the continued importance of space/place.

⁸ See Leach (1984) for a discussion of 'class' as unmentionable in British social anthropology. See Back and Tate (2015) and Alexander (2004) for discussions of sociology as a segregated discipline and white sociologists' reluctance to work on race and racism.

These late twentieth century intellectual developments, provided the ground for the neighbourhood turn, which superdiversity is part of. Transnationalism was a new term for a long-standing social phenomenon that migration scholars had not previously noted because of their theoretical and conceptual bias towards sedentariness (Foner 1997). By contrast, superdiversity was presented as a new term for a new 21st century phenomenon, although diversity in cities like, e.g., New York was also considerable in the early twentieth century (Foner 2017). Careful historiographical work may uncover further historical precedents (see also Schrover, this volume).

Against this brief sketch of recognised as well as non-canonical lineages of superdiversity and semantically related concepts, I will now address how superdiversity challenges anthropology.

How superdiversity challenges anthropology

Transnationalism left largely unexplored experiences of conviviality and everyday encounters with diversity and difference that are commonplace in urban spaces in the 21st century. It effectively limited itself to examining transnational 'corridors' of engagement between migrants and their places of origin. Superdiversity by contrast, changed the lens to a focus on assemblages of characteristics in urban social spaces, and the related spatial dimensions of the politics of difference (Berg and Sigona 2013, 348). As such, the diversity turn in scholarship has provoked a return to studies of neighbourhoods (Berg and Sigona 2013, 349), a staple of both sociology and urban anthropology traditions, which had been out of fashion for their 'groupism' (Brubaker 2002) and lack of attention to extra-local and transnational connections and mobilities.

Early examples of studies of ethnically diverse neighbourhoods, such as Baumann's (1996) ethnography of Southall in London, does not encompass discussion or recognition of connections that Southallians maintain beyond Southall. Such ties and connections would surely have existed and made themselves felt during the course of Baumann's fieldwork, e.g. for Sikhs in Southall – his fieldwork took place during a period of intense conflict in Punjab, but such connections fell outside his scope. Brian Keith Axel's monograph (2001) on the Sikh diaspora published only five years later gave a radically different account of Southall as seen through a diasporic and transnational lens. Susanne Wessendorf's (2014) monograph on Hackney, also in London, one of the first full-length monographs written within a superdiversity framework, gives a textured account of diversity in Hackney, but does not trace translocal or transnational connections (see also Hylland Eriksen, this volume).

Studying diverse neighbourhoods clearly presents anthropologists with profound epistemological and methodological challenges, namely how to ensure the insights from transnationalism are woven together with a focus on diversity in particular spaces and areas, to ensure that the importance of translocal and transnational connections and relations, and their importance in people's lives is not overlooked. Additionally, in superdiverse settings, not only may residents be transnationally connected and mobile, such areas are also often characterised by high degrees of churn and transience, as well as multiple languages, fragmentation, and stratification (see also Berg 2018)[see also Palmberger, this volume]. Conventionally, anthropological fieldwork has been conducted by a single ethnographer who embedded themselves in a bounded community. This ideal is difficult enough to honour in conventional settings; even small-scale settled communities are marked by stratifications of gender, age, and other divisions, but in superdiverse settings it seems impossible, even at just a practical level (how many languages would be 'enough'? How do we define who the 'locals' are in areas of high churn, street homelessness, and high levels of census and service provider 'invisibility'? (McIlwaine, Cock, and Linneker 2011, Berg, Gidley, and Krausova 2019). Put differently, how can we produce textured accounts that are both locally grounded as well as translocally attuned, open to and appreciative of the existence and importance of transnational and diasporic practices and relations of urban residents (Berg, Gidley, and Krausova 2019, Gidley 2013, Galipo 2019). In superdiverse areas 'parallel perspectives, often utterly incommensurate, multiply'

(Gidley 2013, 368) and 'multiple scales of difference and belonging' (Berg, Gidley, and Krausova 2019, 7-8), including transnational and diasporic networks, make notions of bounded fieldsites inadequate, hence challenging the central core of anthropology's claim to knowledge.

I note that these are not new challenges; questions around local vs global and how to bound the ethnographic field resonate throughout the discipline's history and have contributed to its development and to enriching and enlarging our understanding of the diversity of human life-worlds. An approach to superdiversity that is simultaneously attentive to local encounters as well as translocal connections would not only lead to richer, more layered accounts, but would also elucidate the significance and impact of diasporic/transnational connections for local relations and dynamics in superdiverse neighbourhoods and vice versa. New ethnographic approaches are needed for this to happen (see also Wessendorf, this volume).

One way forward is collaborative, participatory, and team-based ethnographies, which not only have the potential to enrich and nuance depictions of local areas, but can also contribute to decolonising ethnography (Alonso Bejarano et al. 2019), and to diversify the voices and perspectives of anthropology (Back and Sinha 2018). On the note of decolonizing, ethnographic exploration beyond the usual global cities and with a deeper historical contextualisation – accounts of superdiversity with different histories and genealogies – could also helpfully reflect back on the existing ethnographic record and pose new questions for exploration. Anthropologists are well-placed to contribute comparative perspectives, including different ways of conceptualising, understanding and interpreting diversification processes in different contexts at different times (see also, Vertovec 2015, and Grillo, this volume).

Having considered the challenges that superdiversity poses to anthropology, I will now consider potential areas for fruitful and mutually enriching dialogue between the anthropology and the study of superdiversity.

Reflections and proposals for a dialogue between superdiversity and anthropology

With its sheer multiplication of axes of difference, including not just ethnicity and country of origin, but also immigration status, labour market experiences, discrete gender and age profiles, patterns of spatial distribution, and service provider responses (Vertovec 2007, 1025), superdiversity has unleashed a range of innovative work that examines the complex diversification of difference seen in urban areas. This includes work that seeks to count and enumerate differences, and construct typologies (see, e.g. Poppleton et al. 2013). Anthropologists are more likely to ask questions around the social texture, subjective experiences, everyday practices and interactions, and cross-cutting relationships engendered by superdiversity. Superdiversity helpfully sharpens the ethnographic lens on assemblages of characteristics and their complex interactions and entanglements, but it is less helpful in terms of capturing context, social texture, and relations. For this, the concepts of multiculture/multiculturalism (Hall 1999) and conviviality (Gilroy 2004), each with its own distinctive intellectual lineage, contribute different aspects of dimensions of socio-cultural complexity. Both have grown out of critical traditions that address power, racism, and racialisation, which critics have found wanting in superdiversity (de Noronha 2019, Alexander 2018, Back 2015). Writing in 2021, and in light of events in 2020, which exposed the deadly consequences of racism in the form of higher Covid-19 morbidity and mortality rates for black and minority ethnic groups across both the UK and the US (Sze et al. 2020), complex mutually interacting links between existing inequalities, deprivation and Covid-19 (Bambra et al. 2020), and anti-black police brutality, this critical tradition is more important than ever.

In particular, we need to 'moor superdiversity' to a 'brutal migration milieu' in Suzi Hall's evocative wording (2017). As work on 'the hostile environment' for migrants in the UK has shown, a central

characteristic of today's migration and bordering policies is the proliferation of migration statuses and channels, sorting migrants according to a racialised logic with profound effects on livelihoods, labour market integration, and everyday lives (Jones et al. 2017). The complexification and concomitant stratified access to services creates inequities and exclusions, even within families, e.g. siblings may have different statuses from each other, and children may have some access to some welfare services (e.g., schooling) even when their parents are excluded (Benchekroun 2021). An important point here is that externalisation policies and other bureaucratic and legal sorting processes contribute to producing characteristics and contours of superdiversity that have ramifications even before people start their migratory journeys; 'changing dynamics across social, economic, political, cultural, and environmental realms have influenced processes of migration and (im)mobility around the world in different ways, including by facilitating, forcing, preventing, normalizing, criminalizing, and securitizing the movement of diverse people and objects' (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Berg 2018, v). Early work in the anthropology of migration focused on processes of articulation 'between the place whence a migrant originates and the place or places to which he or she goes' (Brettell 2000, 98); bringing this perspective to bear systematically on the processes of diversification and channelling in the migration process and in superdiverse localities, could lead to new and more expansive understandings of the differences that make a difference. This would include engaging with important work on the anthropology of deportation (De Genova and Peutz 2010, De Genova 2002, De Noronha 2020) and how deportability (De Genova 2002) works as an especially violent and brutal form of differentiation, and interacts in complex ways with other forms of it. Just as in the case of the relationship between superdiversity and transnationalism, it seems more productive to think in terms of both and (superdiversity and transnationalism and deportability) rather than either or, and to recognise the complex mutual interplay and interactions between differentiating factors.

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