Working Papers
www.mmg.mpg.de/workingpapers

Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity

Max-Planck-Institut zur Erforschung multireligiöser und multiethnischer Gesellschaften

MMG Working Paper 21-04 • ISSN 2192-2357

Steven Vertovec

Superdiversity and Social Complexity

Steven Vertovec
Superdiversity and Social Complexity

MMG Working Paper 21-04

Max-Planck-Institut zur Erforschung multireligiöser und multiethnischer Gesellschaften,
Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity
Göttingen

ISSN 2192-2357 (MMG Working Papers Print)

Download: **www.mmg.mpg.de/workingpapers**

MPI zur Erforschung multireligiöser und multiethnischer Gesellschaften
MPI for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, Göttingen
Hermann-Föge-Weg 11, 37073 Göttingen, Germany
Tel.: +49 (551) 4956 - 0
Fax: +49 (551) 4956 - 170

www.mmg.mpg.de

info@mmg.mpg.de

Abstract

Based on a keynote lecture[1], this paper places the superdiversity concept in relation to certain ideas surrounding complexity theory. Further, the implications of superdiversity for social stratification processes are stressed. Finally, with a view towards superdiversity and university environments, key features of social identity complexity theory are also related to both superdiversity and complexity theory, pointing to ways that promoting the recognition of individuals' multiple characteristics can bring about a number of positive outcomes.

Keywords: superdiversity, complexity, social identity, universities

Author

Steven Vertovec is Director at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity (MMG), Göttingen, and Head of its Department of Socio-Cultural Diversity. He is also a Professor at Georg August University Göttingen.

1 Transcript of a webinar given at the launching event of the Superdiversity Academy of UNIC University. The webinar took place on March 3rd, 2021. (https://www.unic.eu/en/events/webinar-superdiversity-and-inclusion: accessed 01.06.2021).

Contents

Today, I will speak not only about the super-diversity concept, but I also want to talk more broadly about complexity and complexity thinking and what complexity thinking can bring to higher education. I hasten to add that I do not know anything about higher education – well, I mean of course, I have been a professor in several universities and so forth. But in terms of theory, administration, practice and strategy, and all of those things at the university level – I do not know very much about. I will have to defer to conference colleagues about that and I hope that what I have to say does not run counter to what they will be saying, as they are the experts, not me.

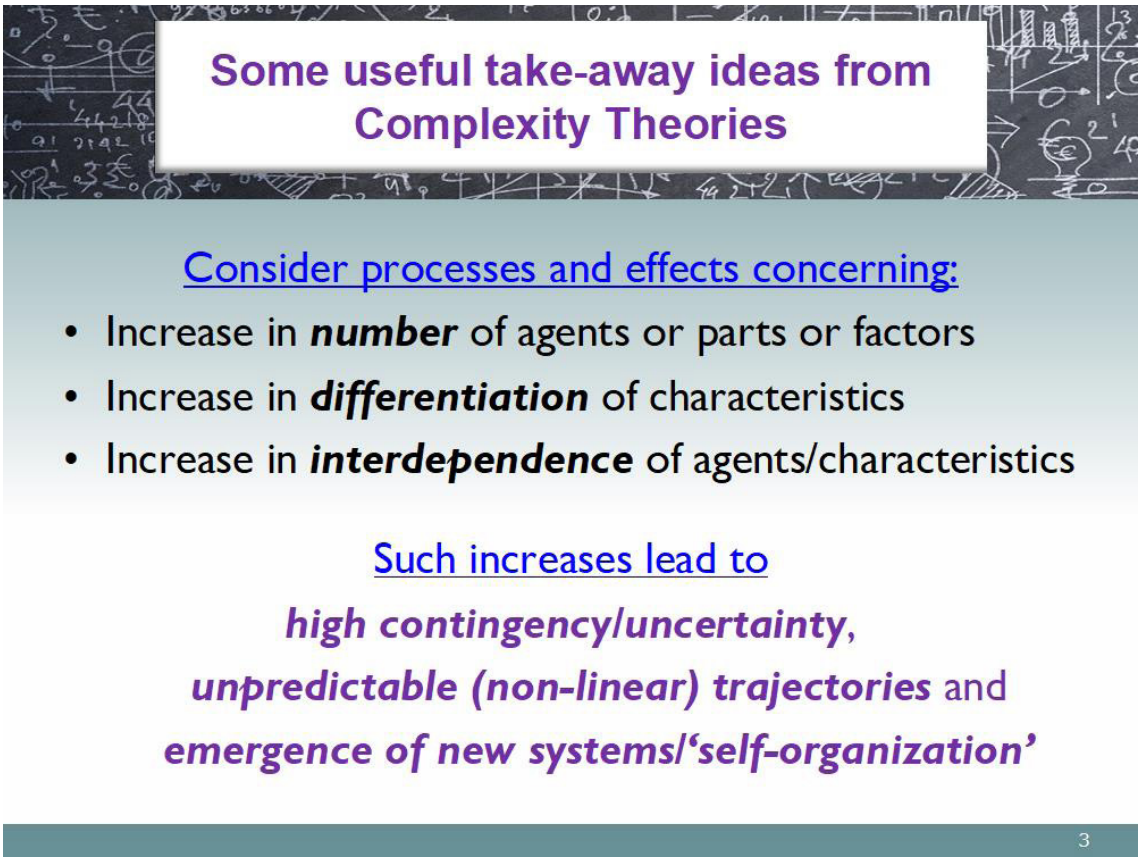
I want to talk broadly about some aspects of complexity. I see super-diversity as a mode of thinking about complexity, and I am going to introduce, from social psychology, the theory of social identity complexity, and how that fits together with super-diversity and what both of them might have to offer higher education. But again, these are just really kick-off ideas and I look to other speakers and our general discussion to develop some of these things especially in ways that UNIC might use within the future.

What people will know is that complexity theory is a massive field that really took off, I suppose, since the 1980s and 90s – particularly in the fields of physics and mathematics and other natural sciences. It has, since then, been applied to many different things. Social scientists, as well, have tried to pick up aspects of complexity theory to apply to different sorts of things, anything from voting behavior to behavior of crowds or riots, anything that depart a large number of pieces moving around a number of agents. And so, I have tried to educate myself: read up, talk to colleagues, and participate in activities around complexity theory because I think it does have something important to offer the age we live in now and that we are moving further into and so what we can pick up as social scientists from complexity theory. And for me, what I have been able to gather boils down to these three points and they relate directly to the super-diversity concept that I coined[1] and have still been working with as well as a number of other people.

We need to talk about complexity and ways to think about complexity when you have any kind of social system − let us just stick to social science – a social system where, first of all, we have an increase in a number of agents or factors. So let us consider universities as a social system: What happens when you simply have a sheer expansion of a university? You start to move into various complexity dynamics when you simply have an increase in the number of parts or agents, also when those parts or agents themselves have characteristics that are differentiating. And this is where super-diversity comes in:

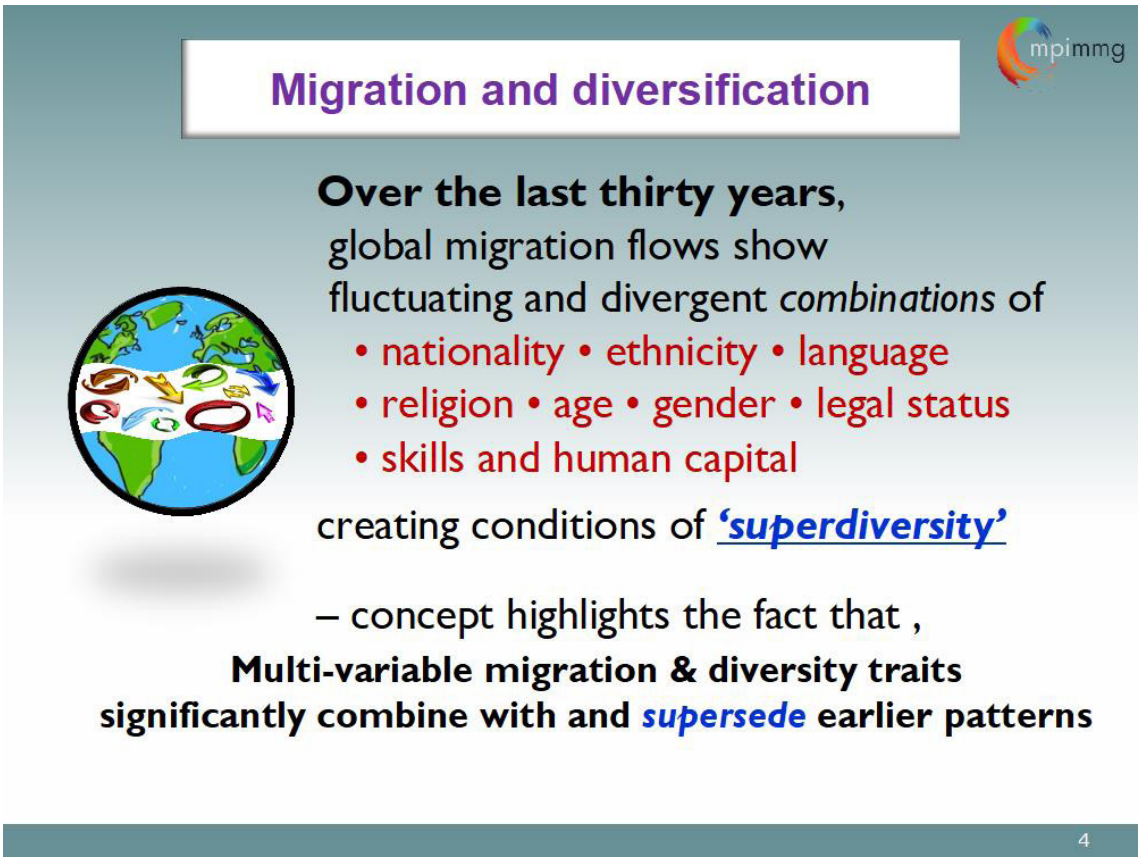
---

1 Steven Vertovec (2007) Super-diversity and its implications, Ethnic and Racial Studies, 30:6, 1024-1054, DOI: 10.1080/01419870701599465



you have, simultaneously, an increase in numbers and an increase in the differentiation of characteristics of the people that comprise a social system and then through various social dynamics, you have an increase of the interdependence between these people and their characteristics. Again, hopefully this will become clear when I talk about super-diversity but these are just three basic takeaways out of complexity theory that we have: to be able to think about what happens in a particular system when these sorts of things increase. And, again, learning from complexity theory, these sorts of increases lead to high contingency or uncertainty as to the development of any kind of system. Again, whether we are talking about a biological system or social system. When these things are increasing in these sorts of ways – number, differentiation, and interdependence – we cannot be sure about the direction in which they develop, or what further processes will occur. It is unpredictable when we talk about non-linear trajectories. We cannot base our thought on what is happening to such a system on what we knew about the system beforehand, because it will inherently be changed through these increases. Yet, over time, new systems develop in what is called a self-organization. All of these agents have come to develop their own new mode of system dynamic. This is all very theoretical, but these are the key ideas that also lie behind the idea of super-diversity. So let me turn to that now, and see if I can link these things together.

I came up with the concept of super-diversity to try to point towards changes in data flows that I have seen. This is back when I was at COMPAS[2] in Oxford, and we were getting all kinds of data about migration flows in the UK over the last thirty years, and I noticed that there were some fundamental major changes going on with the people who are migrating to the UK. UK like most countries used to have numbers of people coming from a few places and arriving in the UK. The same goes for Germany or France of Holland or Belgium, or other places. You used to have mainly people coming from a few countries in large numbers. Over the past thirty years we have seen small numbers of people coming from many different places, a real diversification of migration flows and not just a diversification of places of origin, but all these other characteristics of migrants coming. Ethnicities, languages, religions, age profiles, gender profiles, legal statuses, skills, and human capital are much more complex now than they were thirty years ago.



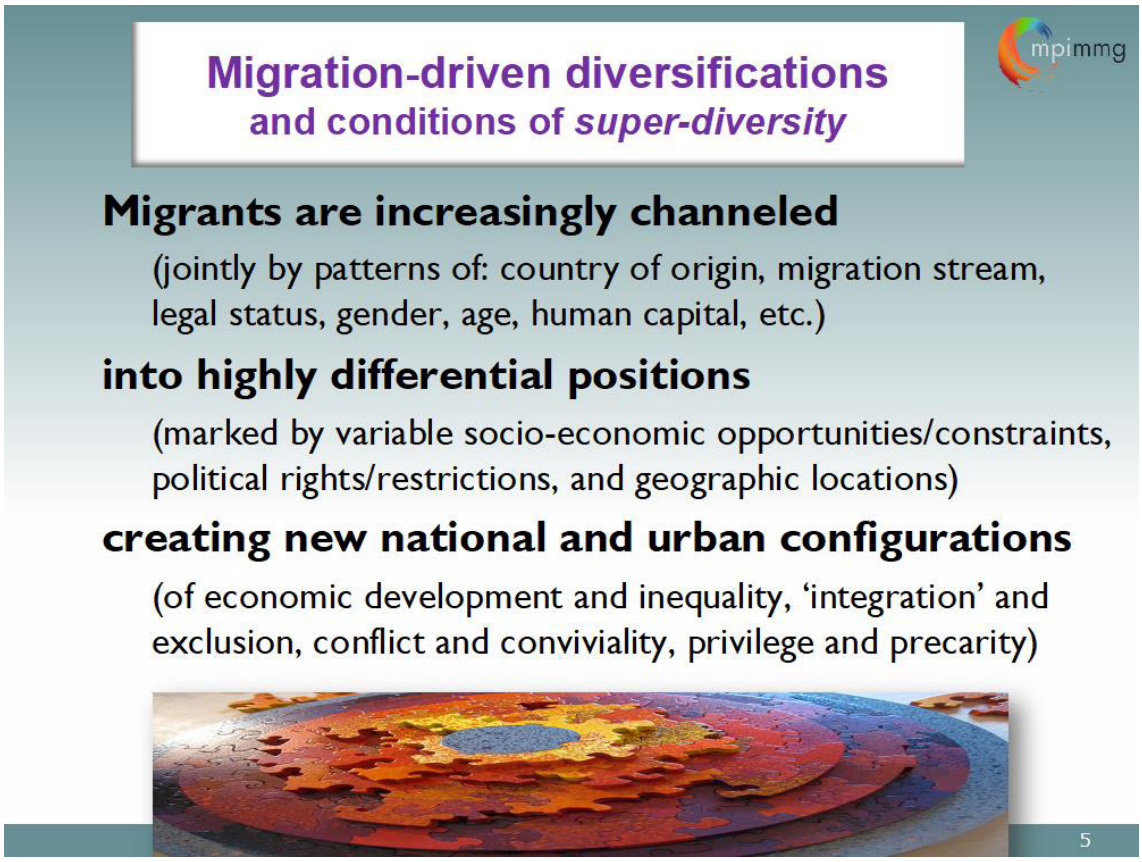
And this can be demonstrated by all sorts of data that I cannot get into for this presentation. But, that is the whole basic idea. It is about conditions of super-diversity, the "super" here meaning that it is a type or level of diversity and complexity that supersedes what

2 Steven Vertovec is former Director of the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society, COMPAS (2003-2007).

was there more than thirty years ago. We know that the UK or Netherlands or Germany had a certain kind of diversity thirty years ago and these new waves of migration with these divergent combinations of all those sorts of factors have mixed with the old diversity and produced a super-diversity, a more complex social system than existed before. So, again, it had that element of increasing numbers, increase of differentiation of characteristics, and increase of the way that these characteristics fit together because flows to a certain country became dominated by particular age, gender and ethnicity and language profiles, human skills profiles, and so forth. And so, it really was a complexification of global migration flows. This created conditions of super-diversity in the arrival destinations.

Here is one slide that kind of puts it all together, the flows and the outcomes. The basic idea with super-diversity coming out of migration-driven diversification, is that over the past thirty years, we have seen more and more and have the data to show it that migrants are increasingly channelled in different ways. I often talk about global migration now as a great sorting system − that people get sorted in moving for a variety of reasons, a variety of migration drivers which themselves are complex systems.

We see different combinations again of country of origin, migration streams. Here, we are talking about labor migration, high-skilled labor migration, asylum seekers and refugees, family migration, student migration. All those major kinds of streams and multiple legal statuses that go along with those together with age, gender, human capital, all those sorts of things again determine how people are sorted out in the global migration system. And when they then arrive in the Netherlands, in Germany, in the USA, in Canada – wherever they are already sort of pre-sorted and arrive in certain social positions, socio-economic hierarchies already into a stratification system that are largely marked by their legal status and this combination of factors: gender, country of origin, language, and so forth. Hence, migration instantly turns into this sorting system which is at the same time a stratification system. Migrants arrive in very different social positions depending on this combination of factors. And this array, when you put them all together, all the people arriving with different characteristics being inserted into society in different points of stratification system you have very different national and urban configurations. You have super-diverse configurations in cities and neighborhoods and universities. And all of those have a lot to do with integration and exclusion, conflict, conviviality, privilege, and precarity. So super-diversity – I just want to emphasize here – is not just about, as some people have misread it, more ethnic groups and more nationalities. The whole point is to get away from looking at ethnicity or country of origin as the only thing that determines social status amongst migrants. It is a whole combination of factors.

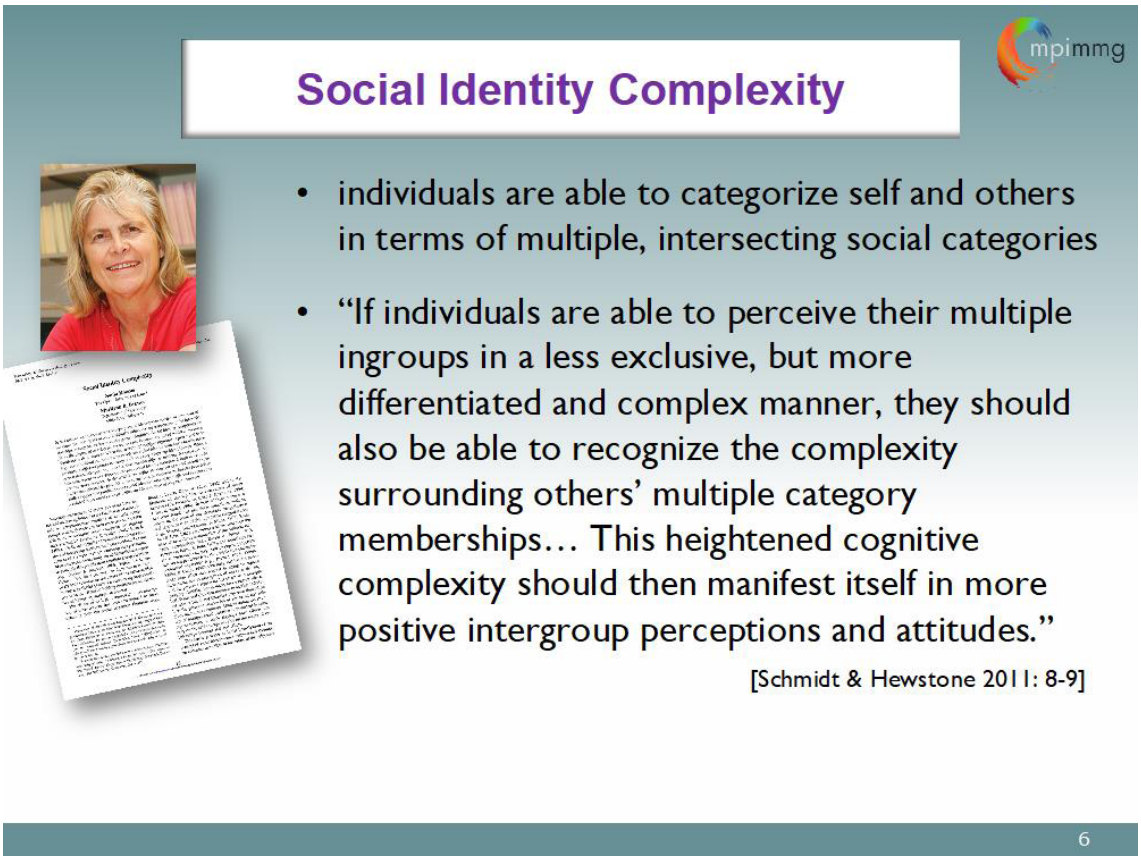


At once, super-diversity is about multiple characteristics and social stratification in this complex configuration. That is why I like this puzzle at the bottom of this slide. It is a layered puzzle of lots of different pieces and different pieces are inserted into different levels with different kinds of diversity. I hope that you get the sense of the complexity of super-diversity: multiple characteristics and multiple social stratification positions.

I am going to add complexity to complexity now as I move towards trying to say something about universities, another mode of complexity that I have gotten very interested in because it very much relates to super-diversity. So again, remember that for the individuals that we are talking about, the migrants and their families over multiple generations. Again, we are talking about people, all people. All of us have multiple group belongings, multiple categorical belongings. So for instance, just to exemplify, I just jotted down a number of things about the person I know best, me. You know, I am part of the baby boom generation, married, American British Citizenship, permanent resident in Germany with a work permit, white, male, heterosexual, able-bodied, father, high education, upper middle class, English mother tongue, middling German skills – although that is probably a matter of opinion if you talk to a German –, living in a mixed residential neighbourhood, no institutional religion but with catholic upbringing. So, for me, you know, I recognize

just some of those categories that I belong to and with social identity complexity theory in social psychology led particularly by Marilynn Brewer who you see here.

Brewer has been one of the key figures in what is now a major body of theory in social psychology. The idea is that the more people can be aware of the complexity of their own self categories like I just outlined: not just what categories I belong to, but also what is the relationship between all of those categories that I just listed. Some are dependent on one another, some might be in conflict, some might have developed over the years, some, I might have only recently acquired. To be introspective about all the categories that I belong to then, they would say that I would have a high awareness of my own social identity complexity. Now, the interesting thing is – okay, that is kind of taken for granted – we all know we belong. We have multiple identities and all those sorts of things. But what experimental work in social psychology shows: The more people can become aware of their own super-diversity – all of these categories which I have combined including class and social status and residency as well as the usual gender ethnicity, language etc. – the more people are aware of their own social identity complexity. Experimental work shows, that the more there are aware of this, the greater ability they have to recognize social identity complexity in others, i.e. to not treat people as just belonging to one or another box that we often tend to put people in. We see a white Eastern European male, or a Muslim



woman in a head scarf, and that is the way that we approach people, we minimize categories rather than recognizing the social identity complexity in others.

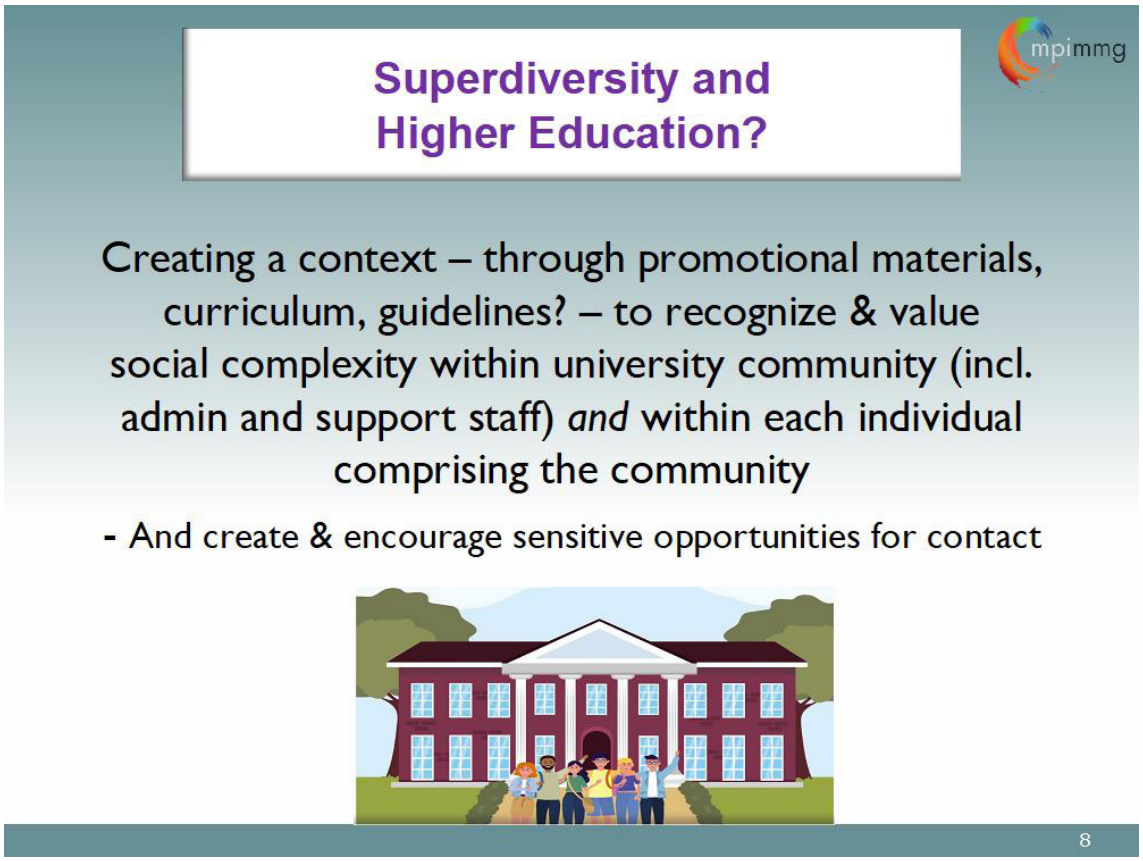
Social psychologists show that, again, the more we are aware of this complexity in ourselves, the more we can recognize it in others – and positive intergroup perceptions and attitudes flow from that. And this is demonstrated in experimental work and I find that really interesting and very relevant − I hope you will see it, too – to super-diversity because we have more and more of these characteristics and more and more social complexity in our societies, our neighborhoods, and in our universities. And so, the question is: how can we make relations, perceptions and attitudes better? Well, possibly, by trying to get people to recognize their own social identity complexities and those of others, a lot more.

Again, I do not know anything about higher education and diversity but I know that it certainly has been around for a long time. I lived and worked in the UK long enough to know a little, way back when multicultural education was a huge field in itself and just developing in the ‘80s and ‘90s. These concepts have been around for quite some time. Now it is about diversity; diversity is the catchword now more than multiculturalism. In order to prepare for this lecture and to see what I might be getting myself into, I looked around and I saw for instance that there is, the Journal of Diversity in Higher Education. This is a journal of the American Psychological Association – therefore, I think, it is fairly prominent. The mission statement for the journal is to look at “experiences and outcomes of individuals from underrepresented and underserved communities, focusing on institutional barriers and challenges, patterns of access and achievement, and the impact of engaging with diverse students, faculty, and administrators.” And I would like to add, we have to look at all the support staff, all of the gardeners and the cooking ladies and the cleaners and so on. They are parts of the university, too.

I looked through the past five years of this journal, four issues a year, to see what sort of things they covered. And, indeed it covers a number of things as diversity. There are articles about the experiences or barriers or whatever of you know disabled students, transgender students, lesbian and gay students, students with criminal records − so that is a quite interesting take on diversity −, students with ideological diversity, which can mean many different things − so I found this interesting −, and of course, the concept of intersectionality is very important, also for all of the things I am talking about including social identity complexity. There are a number of articles that look at students who are both queer and disabled or both queer and a person of color and so forth. So, you know there is quite an array of things. But being an American journal, I would say that it seemed to me that 70 to 80 per cent of the articles were just about race. And then we

can move into a whole discussion of what diversity means in different countries because in the U.S. diversity as a concept is dominated by race. We have to realize that diversity is what they call a floating signifier; it can mean different things to different people in different places. But nevertheless, I would say that you know as highly respected as this journal is and highly interesting and important as the articles are, I would not say that we are getting to the complexity as I am talking about it by way of super-diversity and social identity complexity.

That is where, I suggest, higher education needs to go. There is all this good and important work being done here, but how can we make it even more complex to address what is happening to our societies and student bodies?



For me, how to combine super-diversity and higher education would somehow be within the university to create a context through promotional materials, through the curriculum itself, through guidelines or other sorts of programs to students and staff how to recognize and value social complexity, super-diversity within the university community and also within each individual who comprises the community – so not to just look at boxes and so forth around the place but to recognize that everybody on campus has this social identity complexity array, much of it arising out of migration over the last thirty

years, some of it not or some of it more long-standing maybe over the last hundred years or something, and how to create that context and combine it with what I would call sensitive opportunities for contact for people to meet by way of their multiple identities, their multiple categories. And I call it sensitive opportunities because let us face it, we have done some work here and I have looked at the literature on events that are created to promote diversity and to promote contact and you know they are all well-meaning and most of them very successful, but sometimes they are staged in such a way that they are kind of immediately privileging one group over another or that some people are less comfortable in that opportunity for contact.

I would like to end with this example: years ago, I was doing research in Northern England and in some schools and the teachers were very upset that at parent-teachers' meetings working-class white British parents and Muslim Asian British parents did not come to parent-teachers' meetings. And it became quite clear: it is because the parent-teachers' meetings were framed in a very white middle class sort of way that made other people uncomfortable being there because it was not their habitus; it was not their sense of practices. So, it was an opportunity for contact that failed because it was not quite sensitive to others. And I have read other diversity programs that have had similar problems. So, I think that has to be born in mind when developing opportunities for contact within universities as well.

I hope some of the concepts I have floated might be of use and I look forward to the discussion. Thanks very much.