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Methodological pathways to portray superdiversity: few conclusive thoughts.

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Abstract

Superdiversity as a term has captured the attention of many researchers since its creation in 2007. However, the very characteristics of the concept have made its methodological operationalization not sufficiently 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 that should accompany those related to migratory flows. In this epilogue, methodological implications are critically discussed, especially those related to social differentiation factors and hierarchy of predefined variables. Also, future research implications are discussed.

Keywords

Superdiversity, dimensions, social differentiation, hierarchy of variables, methodological considerations

Superdiversity has garnered much attention as a term in the last ten years and has been applied and understood in many ways. The articles that compose this Monograph explore a variety of issues, some of them not necessarily correlated to migrations, including a meta-analysis of superdiversity in the literature (López et al., 2021), the applicability of “superdiversity theory” beyond migration studies (Kirwan, 2021), digital competencies and skills linked to social networks and diversity (Castillo and Gómez, 2021), children and citizenship in a superdiversity context (Ferreira, 2021), and new insights into potential superdiversity dimensions (Álvarez and Harris, 2021).

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 and differentiation with 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).

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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 2010; 2017; 2007), “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 by 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 the “Maximum variation sampling (MVS) or Respondent Driven Sampling (RDS)” (Goodson and Grzymala-Kazłowska 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-Kazłowska 2017, 10).

Being faithful to the notion of superdiversity requires the 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 documented in table 1:

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

Individual			
-Marital status -Age -Sex -Gender	-Personality traits (extraversion, neuroticism, agreeableness, conscientiousness, openness) -Country of origin -Language - Disability(ies)	-Religion -Principles and values -Lifestyle	
Migration			
<i>Legal status</i>	<i>Transnational practices</i>	<i>Migration channels</i>	
-Economic migrants -Undocumented migrants (illegal; irregular) - Family reunification - Return migration - Retiree migration - Forced migrants (refugees; asylum seekers)	- Sending of remittances and goods - Use of mother tongue/bilingualism - Consumption of products from the country of origin; - Third sector activities; - Visits to the country of origin - Participation in elections; - Personal contacts by Internet; - Use of online contact and exchange platforms - Letters, phone calls and sms.	- Opening of the channel that is used - Safety in the migratory process -Legality/illegality of the channel that is used	
Socioeconomic			
- Employment - Position on the labor market	- Schooling - Academic background	- Income - Purchasing power	
Contextual			
<i>Residence</i>		<i>Local Community</i>	
- Geographical area - Type of housing		- Social network with local residents / Neighborhood - Presence of other groups / minorities - Support / Responses from the host society - Associations - Places of worship	
Family			
Number of residents Degree of relatedness		Dependent family members Spoken language	
Networks			
<i>Structural dimension</i>	<i>Functional dimension</i>	<i>Relational Dimension</i>	<i>Contextual dimensions</i>
- Size - Density - Type (family, friends, neighbors)	- social support (material and instrumental) - social company - access to resources and new links - social regulation	- homogeneity or heterogeneity - intensity - durability - sources of stress	- geographical dispersion - contact frequency

Analyzed authors: (Vertovec, 2007, 2010, 2017; Meissner and Vertovec, 2015; Nowicka and Vertovec, 2014; Aptekar, 2019; Grzymala-Kazłowska and Phillimore, 2018; Schrooten, Geldof, and Withaecx, 2015; Boccagni, 2015; Meissner, 2015; Creese and Blackledge, 2018; Ozkazanc-Pan, 2019; Álvarez and Harris, 2021; Pride, 2015; Goodson and Grzymala-Kazłowska, 2017; Geldof, 2016; Robaey, Van Ewijk, and Dierckx, 2018; Padilla, Azevedo, and Olmos-Alcaraz, 2015)

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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