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## “Superdiversity”: it still packs a punch

Miri Song

School of Sociology, Social Policy and Criminology, University of Kent, Canterbury, UK

### ABSTRACT

This book is devoted to the various ways in which superdiversity has been understood and employed by others. Given the runaway success of the term “superdiversity”, it is not surprising that this term has been used and interpreted in many different ways. One key appeal of theorizing on superdiversity is that, as Vertovec argues, the explanatory power of extant theories of migration are compromised by the ever-changing landscape it seeks to capture. In particular, categories, and the ways in which they are used, are at the heart of Vertovec’s elaboration of superdiversity. Furthermore, his emphasis on multiple levels and intersections of complexity provides important insight.

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I recall reading the original article laying out the concept of superdiversity in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* in 2007. Reading it again, as part of this book, the sheer breadth and complexity of this concept still packs a punch.

It is important to understand the context in which Steven Vertovec developed the concept of superdiversity. As a critic of British multiculturalism, he argued that many multicultural frameworks tended to espouse ossified and essentialist ideas about ethnic groups, without properly engaging with forms of inequality. Furthermore, while understandings of multiculturalism and diversity were based almost exclusively on post-colonial migrants from the New Commonwealth, Vertovec seized on the intriguing finding, that post-1997, the “other” category of migrants had increased significantly. This book was born when he decided that he needed to understand who these “other” migrants were, and whether this would necessitate a revised understanding of contemporary migration.

It is rare that a newly coined concept becomes such a runaway success that the author is left concerned about this concept’s use and over-use! In

**CONTACT** Miri Song  a.m.song@kent.ac.uk

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this respect, this book is at least as interesting in terms of its reflections on our use of terms and the often lazy, bandwagon tendency to adopt terms du jour (and a useful warning against such over-use).

So, what is superdiversity, if it is so often misunderstood? Chapter 2 is devoted to the various ways in which superdiversity has been understood and employed by others. It's unsurprising that this term, once launched online, has been difficult to "control". The "super" ineluctably invokes notions of expansion and scale, and this is conveyed in the original ERS 2007 article, as an important part of that article is about the increasing scale of ethnic and migrant diversity in terms of disparate nationalities, languages, religions, etc., and the multiplication of this scale. Despite Vertovec's dismay with the often "misplaced" ways in which the term has been employed by others (as in the "very much diversity" or, very similarly, "more ethnicity" readings of the term) or what Grillo (2015) has called the 'Super-Diversity Lite' understanding" (53), this use of the concept doesn't really degrade the intended, "true" meaning of the concept. One can think of the term as having layered meanings and uses. Rather than conceive of what he calls "superdiversity lite" as a compromised version of the full-blooded concept it is meant to convey, I think that the "lite" version is an integral (if only, partial) part of the concept, and one that does not necessarily cheapen it.

Given the many different ways in which superdiversity has been understood and used in scholarship, there is little doubt that the introduction of this concept has been generative for critical discussion and reflection in studies of migration and of changing ethnic and racial diversities. One appeal of theorizing on superdiversity is that, as Vertovec argues, the explanatory power of extant theories of migration (and there are many) are compromised by the ever-changing landscape it seeks to capture. Thus, the emphasis on multiple levels and intersections of complexity provides important insight.

In criticizing the banal and overused notion of "diversity", Vertovec wants to rejuvenate this term: he calls for "a new public understanding of diversity and diversification" (206). A detailed and much fuller elaboration of superdiversity is timely now, especially in light of the ubiquitous and often glib references to "diversity" (Lentin and Titley 2008), often as a marketing ploy. Given how widely used "diversity" is, Vertovec argues for the importance of not treating "all differences as the same in nature or consequence" (166).

So, what is superdiversity? We are told:

Superdiversity can be seen as a condition and a set of processes. The combining of the multiple – intersecting, multiple categories or, in this case, interdependent and mutually conditioning multiple processes – is its central approach and message. This is also, as examined later in this book, at the core of thinking around social complexity, too. (111)

There are several important contributions made in this book.

**First**, Vertovec makes an important contribution to theorizing on categories and ethnic groups. In 2007, Vertovec observed that many public discourses and service provision was based on a very limited set of Census categories - categories that didn't capture the extent of diversity in the British population today. Back in 1991, when the first ethnicity question appeared in the England and Wales census, respondents could choose from 9 categories. By 2021, the number had gone up to 19 (which included a number of write-in fields). But the proliferation of more ethnic group categories, based on unidimensional notions of "ethnicity", does not really capture the depth and multidimensional aspects of lived experiences - and a focus on ethnicity per se as a self-explanatory and revealing container of human experience is exactly what the concept of superdiversity is meant to transcend.

In this book, Vertovec argues "that despite considerable interest in the concept of superdiversity and its emphasis on multidimensional characteristics, it is hard to get beyond unidimensional understandings of demographic diversification based on singular categories such as race or nationality." (103) He is right that ethnicity is the most common category of analysis for migrants. So reliant are we, upon these categories, as markers of particular types of social treatment, or of inequalities, or of assumed commonalities around cultural and religious sensibilities, that it is difficult to avoid the use of ethnic or racial groups as a starting point of social inquiry.

Superdiversity does offer, among other things, a powerful counter to the neat and rather simplistic conceptions of ethnic groups as bounded, largely homogeneous entities. Given the evidence of "unsettled" identities and blurring boundary formations round ethnicity and race, and national belonging, an elaboration of superdiversity constitutes an important theoretical intervention.

Drawing on Amartya Sen's concept of "singular affiliation", and how public understandings of identity can often be reductive and unidimensional, Vertovec's elaboration of superdiversity makes more concrete the way in which social identity is a social relation (Jenkins 2014) - and not merely an attribute or set of characteristics.

Thus, categories, and the ways in which they are used, are at the heart of Vertovec's elaboration of superdiversity. The book builds toward a discussion of **categories** and their use in our superdiverse societies. These "unsettled identities" are not just vagaries of nomenclature. In fact, there is evidence that people can vary in their self-conceptions and the salience of various axes of identity can differ over their life course, and in disparate contexts. Vertovec's reflections on the multiple ways of being Black, for instance, in Chapter 6, illustrate the kinds of social complexity he is trying to capture in this book.

The dynamics associated with superdiversity are complicated by the fact that there is a significant amount of public contestation (Vargas and Stainback 2015) involving the assertion and validation of specific identities. Categories and group membership will continue to be in flux. The number of people in each “race” who do not consistently identify (or behave, present themselves) in relation to the race groups to which they were born/descended, will increase (Morning 2018). Increasingly, the normative presumption that there is a clear correspondence between ethnic and racial phenotype, presentation, and their stated identity category, will wane.

While Vertovec is right to caution against the monolithic framing of people according to race, he recognizes the powerful ways in which forms of racialization can still reduce people (who should be characterized in relation to so many other variables) to particular racial stereotypes and denigrating forms of social treatment.

**Second**, this book makes an important contribution to extant theorizing on “integration”, pointing to the limitations of some hugely influential theories, including segmented assimilation theory. A recognition of the many variables at play in shaping a migrant’s incorporation into the wider society suggests, for Vertovec, that longstanding truisms about integration require further empirical scrutiny – for instance, the questioning of whether intermarriage is necessarily a good indicator of integration (Song 2009).

Vertovec argues for “an abandonment of unilinear interpretations of processes such as ‘integration,’” (223). There is no uniform integration process and there are numerous possible pathways of integration, based upon an intersection of multiple factors that will situate the migrant in a system of social stratification – all of which is subject to the vagaries of disparate locations. Here, the migrant is part of multiple, intersecting and interdependent processes that require scholars and policymakers to see them as more than uni-dimensional members of distinct ethnic groups (and categories).

The emphasis on multiscalar and uneven forms of integration, and its attendant modes of belonging and affiliation, is a far cry from, for example, Berry’s (1992) model of individual acculturation along two dimensions (the retention or rejection of an individual’s native culture, and the adoption or rejection of the host culture – modelled in a quadrant). How we should conceive of migrants in a societal context is captured in this excerpt:

Further, each migrant embodies a complex array of identities, interests, practices, and social networks. It follows that a migrant newcomer can become an engaged participant in a new context ... but not just in one way. For these reasons, we need to foster a kind of “complexity thinking” towards “integration” based on multidimensional and intersecting characteristics, non-groupist conceptualizations, non-linear trajectories of incorporation, diverse and overlapping networks and identities, complex modes of stratification, and multiple modes of belonging (this point is elaborated in Chapter 7). [101]

**Third**, the insights of superdiversity point to the need to disaggregate and rethink the “White” category. Toward the end of the book, there is a convincing and lively discussion about the problems associated with singular affiliations and the tendency of some to retreat into their exclusive and reductive category membership. Just as Vertovec points to the insights gained from debates about prescribed scripts of behaviour associated with Blackness (as played out in responses to the Tyler Merritt video of himself), another major implication of superdiversity is the need to recognize the limitations of talking about “White” people.

One major area of pressing social inquiry concerns the category White – a category that has been treated in a fairly monolithic way until relatively recently. Despite some analysts who have pointed to the ways in which Whiteness is typically characterized in terms of middle-class norms of respectability (Hartigan 2003), most conceptualizations of Whiteness have emphasized White privilege (including the luxury of just being an unmarked individual) (Frankenberg 1993). As Vertovec notes, a consideration of superdiversity will increasingly have to address the changing boundaries and meanings associated with the racial membership of multiracial people, and who is deemed White – but in ways that reveal the multiple and varied intersections of individuals whose lives are shaped by many more variables than race.

Across the 19 ethnic groups listed in the England and Wales 2021 census, the largest percentage point increase was seen in the number of people identifying through the “White: Other White” category (6.2%, 3.7 million in 2021, up from 4.4%, 2.5 million in 2011) (ONS 2021). An engagement with superdiversity enables us to question what a rise in the “other white” category might mean. One rather obvious conclusion may be that, given the growth in the diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds of contemporary migration streams, and demographic trends associated with racially mixed relationships and people, fewer Britons see themselves as White. But drawing on the logic of superdiversity, this sort of conclusion doesn’t get us very far in understanding all the social complexity that underlies the growth of the “other White” category, or the multiple ways in which people in this category see themselves, interact, and engage with the wider society.

What migration pathways (if any) may be associated with those who chose White other, and how may this population be disaggregated in terms of age, religion, gender, and socioeconomic backgrounds? These are exactly the kinds of questions that are needed at a time when there is ongoing debate – such as in the US – about whether there is the growth of honorary Whites, or people deemed to approximate near-Whiteness (see Alba 2020). In *Whiteshift*, Eric Kauffman (2018) points to a major demographic shift – the decline of white ethnic majorities before they blur and expand to absorb those of mixed race. In the USA, by 2050, white people are predicted to be a numerical racial minority – though this is hotly debated.

The categorical flux and contestation around categories more generally, but especially in relation to Whiteness, forces us to question the binary frameworks of majority/minority – dyadic concepts so central to much social science and certainly to many areas of migration studies. If one applies a superdiversity mindset, one would have to be extremely circumspect in how one used these terms, as references to “majority” and “minority” would require constant and consistent qualifications and exceptions. In what ways, and in what social spheres, can someone be said to be a “minority” (Song 2020)?

The book’s theorizing of social and cultural complexity constitutes the strongest and most original part of the work:

To make more comprehensive the complexity-relevant qualities of superdiversity, we must also consider the multiple constellations of meaning that people have, negotiate, and reproduce about these changing, multidimensional characteristics. ... social complexity should be considered as simultaneously encompassing the realms of social organization, meanings, and social relationships (see Vertovec 2007). Under conditions of superdiversity (considered as multiple causalities variously triggering increasing numbers, diversifications, and inter – dependencies), unpredictable non-linear processes of self-organization are set in train through which new patterns of social organization, meaning, and social relationship emerge. (165)

Vertovec argues for the potential benefits of increased contact (drawing on Allport’s famous contact theory, which specified certain conditions of contact). Increased and heretofore unimagined forms of contact can be recognized in a context involving “unpredictable non-linear processes of self-organization”. Such contact is more imaginable in a world shaped by the conditions and processes associated with superdiversity – where people are more attune to their multiple affiliations and senses of self. In such a world, people are more likely to regard others (at least in certain ways) as potential in-group members – and not just in relation to the definitive and blunt binary of us and them.

However, the positive effects of social identity complexity are not easily achieved. One reason is this: “For a start, some people have a high need, motivation, or vested interest in maintaining a status quo of simpler, singular (often groupist, culturalist, and racialized) single category representations of society (Roccas and Brewer 2002).” (188). In an important passage, Vertovec writes: “Once more we must bear in mind that not all people are equally free to reflect on their multiple categorical identities, especially when living in deprived social circumstances or subject to various forms of identity-based inequity or bigotry. While such forms of inequality and prejudice need to be tackled in and of themselves, measures to promote social identity complexity should be encouraged.” (189)



While a sense of group threat can diminish the potential for people to consider various commonalities they may share with others, people who are visibly marked and stigmatized may stubbornly embrace singular racial or ethnic identities that they deem paramount, in relation to other parts of themselves. Analysts as disparate as Paul Gilroy and Kenan Malik have argued for the importance of transcending ethnic and racial affiliations, toward a more humanist sense of belonging. But the motivation to loosen such “singular” affiliations in favour of this greater social complexity may be challenging, when those forms of racial solidarity can be both gratifying and seen as a kind of haven.

Does the elaboration of superdiversity end up delivering what it is meant to do? This concept is meant to “do” a great deal. But, in a nutshell, yes. As a hugely ambitious concept, it succeeds in engendering real thought about the need to engage with what Vertovec calls “complexifying dynamics”. This means “... more components (in terms of more people via migration or demographic change), more differentiation (changing social variables), more relations and interdependencies (new patterns of social variables themselves and interactions among people comprising them), and greater uncertainties and emergent forms of organization arising from them (new social and spatial arrangements, inequalities, social movements and political conflicts or compromises).” (190)

Engaging with these “complexifying dynamics”, and especially engaging with the uncertainties we are bound to encounter, is critical for both an open and realist mindset about diversity, and for the ability of policymakers to address the multiple and overlapping forms of such diversity.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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