



Contexts, categories and superdiversities

Steven Vertovec

To cite this article: Steven Vertovec (27 Feb 2024): Contexts, categories and superdiversities, Ethnic and Racial Studies, DOI: [10.1080/01419870.2024.2317958](https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2024.2317958)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2024.2317958>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 27 Feb 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

SYMPOSIUM: STEVEN VERTOVEC'S
*SUPERDIVERSITY: MIGRATION AND
SOCIAL COMPLEXITY*

 OPEN ACCESS

 Check for updates

Contexts, categories and superdiversities

Steven Vertovec

Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, Göttingen, Germany

ABSTRACT

The contributors to the *Superdiversity* book symposium welcome the myriad ways that scholars from a variety of research fields and social scientific disciplines have adopted the concept across varying scales, sites and social phenomena. Each writer nevertheless stresses the need to place any application of the term, descriptively or analytically, within specific social, political and historical contexts. Superdiversity appears very different depending upon an array of conditions – hence we observe a variety of context-dependent superdiversities. This point holds too for categories – especially ones drawn from colonial histories – that comprise differing configurations of superdiversity. These are also highly contextual. It is suggested that the superdiversity concept helps us to “unsee” purportedly fixed, uni-dimensional categories like ethnicity and to place more emphasis on multiple, intersectional combinations of categories. The re-thinking of categories and their contexts might also help us imagine possible superdiversity futures.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 31 January 2024; Accepted 7 February 2024

KEYWORDS Diversity; superdiversity; categories; contextualization; diversification; intersectionality

The concept of superdiversity – I’m happy to say – certainly generates extensive thinking and discussion about migration, diversity and societal diversification. Moreover, it has done so in myriad ways. This is abundantly evident in the extensive literature about or built on the concept that I review in my recent book, and in the welcome essays written by three prominent scholars in this *ERS* Book Symposium. I’m very grateful indeed for their critical reflections, especially knowing them, the value of their thought and the significance of their work.

While making cogent criticism and praise about the *Superdiversity* book, all three colleagues have welcomed the ways that the superdiversity concept has been open, malleable, fluid and adapted across a variety of disciplines

CONTACT Steven Vertovec  vertovec@mmg.mpg.de

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

and research fields. They point to various ways in which they believe this to be the case, especially in the kinds of fields in which they are expert.

What further unites the three essays is a common assertion that superdiversity must be understood by way of contextual analyses, although each recommends attending to different facets and dynamics of context. They note rightly that the concept itself was generated in a particular context, namely turn-of-the-millennium Britain where rapidly changing migration patterns were making it ever clearer that existing perspectives and ways of thinking about population diversity (particularly discourses of multiculturalism) were no longer adequate to describe and analyze social, economic, geographical and political dynamics. Beyond these origins, superdiversity has now been applied variably to a wide range of sites (especially urban settings in both the global North and South), scales (from homes and schoolrooms to megacities and nation-states) and social phenomena (including everyday interactions, linguistic dynamics, professional practices, policymaking and public service challenges), and even differing historical periods (some studies going back to early modernity). Across a considerable body of literature spanning academic disciplines, superdiversity is used in all of these ways and reference points mainly as a way to describe patterns of complexity, multiple processual factors and multidimensionality. That which is presented, in case to case, naturally looks very different depending on an array of contextual conditions. The concept itself is fundamentally, as Brenda Yeoh observes, “context dependent”. The emergent literature effectively provides varying accounts of contextually created superdiversities.

Yeoh makes a particularly powerful point concerning contextualization by way of superdiversity in Singapore. This has not just to do with the historical and contemporary conditions forming a post-independence society and politics out of a long-diverse (here, heavily racialized) population wholly dependent on the work of regional migrants. It has, quite significantly, to do with deep colonial roots of categorization, control and encounter. Hence Yeoh is critical of the fact that many such calls for contextualizing superdiversity (including my own) “[do] not go far enough to recognize the systematic colonization of mental and material spaces, understand the injuries inflicted by colonial race categories, or address the cultural politics of racialization in the new era of postcolonial nationalism.” This is a compelling, corrective call that I fully acknowledge and support (also see Spoonley 2022). Colonial racial categories have certainly been deeply embedded into societies of the Caribbean, encountered in my earliest work (Vertovec 1992), where they have defined and differentially shaped the economies, social hierarchies, trajectories and geographies of practically all people (see for instance Clarke 2015). The impacts of such colonial categories are also clearly evident throughout Africa (e.g. Bissell 2013) and Latin America (e.g. Fischer and O’hara 2009). Colonial categories continue to significantly structure

and condition the complex contemporary entanglements of “old” and “new” superdiversities (Vertovec 2015).

Following Yeoh, we should indeed delve into the entrenched – especially colonial – histories of social categories, personal relations, geographies, politics and policies in order to gain better understanding of how they continually shape processes of diversification and condition the production of contemporary precarities and inequalities (Ye and Yeoh 2022). Further, Yeoh emphasizes, such contextual bases of categories and configurations of superdiversity also dynamically play into the nature of everyday encounters and spaces of contact (see, among others, Berg and Sigona 2013; Hall 2013; Wessendorf 2022).

Yeoh further suggests that the concept of superdiversity serves “to blend into a wide range of theoretical approaches, where its presence as part of the conceptual toolkit alerts us to look harder for other dimensions of difference that may not be immediately obvious.” In this way, she also suggests that superdiversity helps us to “unsee” fixed and taken-for-granted categories. This is because it is a fundamentally intersectional concept, stressing that multiple variables and categories are always simultaneously in play as well as being ever contextually, relationally and historically situated (Vertovec 2021).

Miri Song also highlights this feature of the superdiversity concept – and book – by way of contributions to theorizing on categories and ethnic groups. She describes the methodological and theoretical need to move beyond “unidimensional notions of ‘ethnicity’” and “a focus on ethnicity per se as a self-explanatory and revealing container of human experience.” So conceptually implanted have such approaches been, she points out, that it is extremely difficult to avoid the use of ethnic or racial groups as starting points of research, explanation and theory. Drawing from discussions in my book, Song puts her finger on a conundrum: how to discuss, as social scientists, the nature, meanings, dynamics and outcomes of social categories while drawing upon, critiquing and trying-not-to-reify Census data, self-asserted collective identities, “othering” and other public discourses resting on “groupist” or racialized understandings of categories. I don’t think we’ve fully cracked this yet.

Another key inquiry that Song develops out of my book is how the salience of identity categories varies for individuals. This can be seen in a number of phenomena. One is observable in the rapid growth in the number of people identifying as “White Other” in the UK Census. What do they mean by this self-categorization, and how might this help us to “disaggregate and rethink the ‘White’ category”? Another instance – which Song humbly does not discuss here – concerns her own seminal work on the “multiracial” category (e.g. Song 2021). How do people who “fall between”, or “combine” more than one official category identify themselves, and how does such categorization impact on social positionings? And yet other example of changing identity salience is flagged by Song as “the multiple and varied intersections of

individuals whose lives are shaped by many more variables than race". This was of course the original focus of intersectionality theory, concentrated on race, gender and class. Superdiversity is a concept that draws directly on intersectionality, applying the approach and reasoning particularly with regard to migration and incorporating numerous additional categories. While initially coining the concept of superdiversity to describe social patterns, in the book I go further to discuss individual category dynamics especially via my interest in social identity complexity theory (e.g. Roccas and Brewer 2002). Also, as a way of moving beyond uni-dimensional views of race, ethnicity, nationality and many other categories, I am convinced by this body of theory and the positive impact potentials arising from the nurturing and boosting people's awareness of their own multiple identities, categories and affiliations.

Finally, after a variety of important interventions over the last several years drawing upon the superdiversity concept, Nando Sigano here focuses on the matter of contextualization and "specific geopolitical shifts and related ideological projects" that are sometimes central to understanding the development of superdiversity configurations. Also essential to many of his other publications, Sigano is concerned with forces that define, drive and shape mobility and migration and how they "play a role in producing social hierarchies and different modes of membership, but are not independent variables". This is a big picture approach to the subject, but with attention to how localized specifics are affected. Superdiversity is about the development of patterns surrounding migration-driven diversification, and Sigano's pertinent question is: "what drives migration-driven diversification?" Shaping an answer, he notes how the emergence of superdiversity as a concept and phenomena has everything to do with "a specific historical conjuncture and cultural milieu" at the turn of the millennium. In the case of the UK, his contemporary answer has much if not everything to do with Brexit. [Taking a cue from Yeoh: there is much to consider here, too, by way of considering connections between Brexit and colonialism; e.g. Koegler, Kumar Malreddy, and Tronicke 2020.] Before this, a very similar view has been taken by Suzanne Hall (2017) who describes the shaping of superdiversity within Britain's "brutal migration milieu". Overall, Sigano is very much in line with Yeoh's call to examine the emergence and transformation of superdiverse contexts together with other context-specific explanatory frameworks.

Although just in passing, Brenda Yeoh intriguingly asks "what comes after superdiversity"? It is indeed well worth considering the possible future social imaginaries (Taylor 2004) and social imaginations (Mulgan 2022) of "diversity" as discursive concept (Vertovec 2012) and superdiversity as a social condition (Vertovec 2023). Miri Song offers us some ideas onto such possibilities. In one way, she envisions us moving beyond references to "majority" and "minority" views of society. In another, she foresees that "Increasingly, the normative

presumption that there is a clear correspondence between ethnic and racial phenotype, presentation, and their stated identity category, will wane" ... serving to create "a world shaped by the conditions and processes associated with superdiversity – where people are more attune to their multiple affiliations and senses of self." There are certainly signs of this already happening in certain quarters, but these are just a few possible superdiversity futures. The task of answering Yeoh's question might entail contemplating: what we might think ideas of difference and diversity should ideally entail and what social relations arising from such ideas could look like; what dystopian visions and characteristics of difference and diversity might encompass; and what might be the scenario if current racisms, xenophobias, misogynies, linguaphobias, homophobias and transphobias continue down current tracks unabated. Such a thought exercise should include considerations of what phenomena (public interventions, artistic or creative engagements, or Sigona's "specific geopolitical shifts and related ideological projects") might facilitate, catalyze or hinder developments in any direction. And once again, in any case, contextualization, historical and emergent categories and distinctive configurations of future superdiversities will profoundly matter.

Disclosure statement

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

References

- Berg, M., and N. Sigona. 2013. "Ethnography, Diversity and Urban Space." *Identities* 20 (4): 347–360. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2013.822382>.
- Bissell, W. C. 2013. "Casting a Long Shadow: Colonial Categories, Cultural Identities, and Cosmopolitan Spaces in Globalizing Africa." In *Postcolonial African Cities*, edited by F. Demissie, 25–41. London: Routledge.
- Clarke, C. 2015. "Race and Labour, Forced and Free, in the Formation and Evolution of Caribbean Social Structures." In *The Routledge International Handbook of Diversity Studies*, edited by S. Vertovec, 132–139. London: Routledge.
- Fischer, A. B., and M. D. O'hara, eds. 2009. *Imperial Subjects: Race and Identity in Colonial Latin America*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.
- Hall, S. 2013. "Super-diverse Street: A 'Trans-Ethnography' Across Migrant Localities." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 38 (1): 22–37. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2013.858175>.
- Hall, S. 2017. "Mooring "Super-Diversity" to a Brutal Migration Milieu." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40 (9): 406–417. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2017.1300296>.
- Koegler, C., P. Kumar Malreddy, and M. Tronicke. 2020. "The Colonial Remains of Brexit: Empire Nostalgia and Narcissistic Nationalism." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 56 (5): 585–592. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2020.1818440>.
- Mulgan, G. 2022. *Another World is Possible: How to Reignite Social and Political Imagination*. London: Hurst Publishers.

- Roccas, S., and M. B. Brewer. 2002. "Social Identity Complexity." *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 6 (2): 88–106. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327957PSPR0602_01.
- Song, M. 2021. "Who Counts as Multiracial?" *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 44 (8): 1296–1323. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2020.1856905>.
- Spoonley, P. 2022. "Superdiversity in Settler Societies: Toward a Decolonial Superdiversity." In *The Oxford Handbook of Superdiversity*, edited by F. Meissner, N. Sigona, and S. Vertovec, 465–480. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780197544938.013.22>.
- Taylor, C. 2004. *Modern Social Imaginaries*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.
- Vertovec, S. 1992. *Hindu Trinidad: Religion, Ethnicity and Socio-Economic Change*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Vertovec, S. 2012. "'Diversity' and the Social Imaginary." *European Journal of Sociology* 53 (3): 287–312. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S000397561200015X>.
- Vertovec, S., ed. 2015. *Diversities Old and New: Migration and Socio-Spatial Patterns in New York, Singapore and Johannesburg*. Basingstoke: Palgrave. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137495488>.
- Vertovec, S. 2021. "The Social Organization of Difference." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 44 (8): 1273–1295. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2021.1884733>.
- Vertovec, S. 2023. *Superdiversity: Migration and Social Complexity*. London: Routledge.
- Wessendorf, S. 2022. "Ethnographies of Superdiversity." In *The Oxford Handbook of Superdiversity*, edited by F. Meissner, N. Sigona, and S. Vertovec, 151–162. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780197544938.013.12>.
- Ye, J., and B. S. A. Yeoh. 2022. "Migrant-led Diversification and Differential Inclusion in Arrival Cities Across Asia and the Pacific." *Urban Studies* 59 (16): 3243–3252. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00420980221128434>.