

Superdiversity and the quest for complexity thinking

Steven Vertovec

Steven Vertovec is Founding Director of the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, Göttingen, Germany and Emeritus Fellow of Linacre College, Oxford. His research interests surround international migration and transnationalism, social difference and patterns of societal diversity. Steve's latest book is *Superdiversity: Migration and Social Complexity* (Routledge, 2023).

I. INTRODUCTION

Since the publication of the German version of my book *Superdiversity: Migration and Social Complexity*¹ earlier this year, I've been musing more intensively about ways to convey some of the book's central messages to public and policy spheres. This is not least because, although the book has been generally well received in the German language press, in outlets such as *Die Zeit*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *FAZ*, or *Der Standard*, it has occasionally bumped up against something many academics know all too well: reductionist and linear thinking. That is, many journalists and readers seem to 'get' the superdiversity thing, i.e. the need to consider multiple, changing variables in migration dynamics, but nevertheless continue to think in rather ethno- or groupist-reductionist, single cause-and-effect, and uni-processual ways about migrant communities and developments within and around them.

'Integration', for instance, is thought about as a singular, straight line, one-size-fits-all phenomenon, and specific, perhaps negative, incidents (such as a crime), social interactions (such as tense neighborhood relations) or outcomes (such as poor school results) are attributed to one or another singular cause (most often 'culture' interpreted as ethnicity or religion or language). Subsequently, purported 'solutions' also are offered in simple, singular terms. Hence, in more than one interview, I've been asked how superdiversity can fit with

'integration', or if enforcing a 'Leitkultur' (E.N. leading or guiding culture) is the best way to bring everyone and everything together. I find these questions problematic as they are based on outdated modes of thinking about society. My book's message, and the quest to which, I advocate, we should all be given, is that of promoting complexity thinking in approaches to understanding society across academia, policy development, governance and public understanding.

II. ON COMPLEXITY THINKING

So, what do we mean when we talk about complexity thinking? To begin with and drawing on complexity research and theory across the natural sciences, complexity thinking in the social sciences recognizes that any social phenomenon and process is embedded within broader systems. We can think of systems as sets of interrelationships and interdependencies that impact the nature and quality of the phenomena or processes in question. Social systems are inherently comprised of numerous elements. With this fact established, the first premise of complexity science is that an *increase in the number of elements* within a system leads to more complex dynamics, more things happening within the system. "More is different," as Nobel laureate Philip Anderson famously said.² Likewise, if there's an increase in the differentiation of characteristics of any of the elements in a particular system, you're again going to generate new complexity dynamics.

The second premise of complexity science is that an *increase or change in the relationship* and the interdependence between elements again leads to more complex systems. Any increase in the number, differentiation or interdependence of agents, will generate complex dynamics and new

processes within a system. In turn, these processes lead to *high contingency*. In other words, what happens with and between those elements affects what happens to the whole system. Most often, this brings about something completely new, usually described as the *emergence* of new systems. In an older language, this was talked about as disequilibrium leading to new equilibrium, a new system that emerges from a system changed by numbers, differentiation of characteristics, or interdependence. The trajectories of development of these new systems are usually completely unpredictable and thus leading to *uncertainty*. We don't actually know how a lot of complex dynamics are going to play out. And this is an important aspect to consider when trying to apply a complexity science lens to understanding changing social systems.

III. SUPERDIVERSITY AND COMPLEXITY THINKING

In many ways, the concepts and approaches associated with superdiversity coincide with the concepts and approaches associated with complexity thinking. As such, we can think of the migration system as being comprised of multi-faceted individuals, engaged in multi-faceted relationships, who arrive in a country, city or neighbourhood, through diverse channels. Their arrival represents an increase or a change in the numbers, characteristics and relationships between the variables of existing, already complex, social systems. Following the logic of complexity science, we cannot predict exactly how system dynamics and relationships are going to play out following their entry into a neighbourhood, a workplace, or a school room.

I'm certainly not the first social scientist to advocate the need to apply complexity thinking, including new concepts, methods and practices, to analysing the varied systems and processes existing and developing within societies. Within migration studies alone, there has been an upsurge in work by researchers who have, in various ways, examined and talked about complex migration flows, complex social identities, or new complex social formations taking place in, for instance, neighbourhoods, workplaces, or schoolrooms.

Many of these scholars have chosen to employ the concept of superdiversity as an analytical lens, not least because we have been lacking other terms to describe social complexification.

In my book, I discuss not only how the number, types of, and relationships between social or legal variables are complexifying, but also how this is taking place within the context of broader contemporary transformations of several key social categories such as race, gender, sexuality, religion and language. We're seeing an increase in the number, interpretations, combinations, and transformations of what we mean by each one of these kinds of social categories. This has led me to a growing interest in the theory of Social Identity Complexity from the field of social psychology, which refers to the existence of a superdiversity within each one of us. Scholars in this field have looked at how people see their own multiple social categorizations within themselves. All of us belong to multiple social categories simultaneously, based on ethnicity, sexuality, gender, and so forth. But we also take on different roles, different affiliations, on different scales, based on these categorizations. Social psychologists have shown that, when individuals become aware of their own social category complexity, their own multiplicity, they are able to better recognize it in others, leading to more positive interactions with others. Therefore, understanding our own complexity makes us cognizant of the complexity of others, which has an immediate (positive) effect on intergroup relations.

IV. CONCLUSION

Everyone belongs to more than one social category. Today's complex societies are comprised of individuals with multiple and overlapping characteristics, belongings, and connections. Singular, unidimensional and reductionist thinking prevents us from 'seeing', understanding and managing such societies. We need various information campaigns, nudges, and reminders that complexity is part of who we are and of how we live, and that it is not inherently threatening. As I have written elsewhere,

Ideally such nudging should be in the direction of fostering a kind of 'complexity thinking' that is able to consider the presence of newcomers – indeed, all manners of 'difference' – in terms of non-groupist understandings, non-linear trajectories, diverse and overlapping networks and identities, complex modes of stratification and power differentials and multiple modes of belonging.³

This echoes, too, one of the concluding statements of my book *Superdiversity: Migration and Social Complexity*:

Complexity thinking – an approach, a set of tools, and a vocabulary borrowed from natural sciences to conceptualize better these multiplicities of meaning and relationship – is not just of value for social understanding, but for ordinary individuals to gain a more coherent view of society and social change, a positive appreciation of others, and a fuller understanding of themselves.⁴

To conclude, the task of 'managing superdiversity' cannot be undertaken based on false premises or misleading outlooks. Recognizing, thinking about and thinking-through social complexity is the only way forward in public policy and understanding.

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