IRiS Key Concepts roundtable series

Race and superdiversity – what are the links?

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The IRiS Key Concepts Roundtable series brings scholars together to discuss and interrogate the theoretical and analytical contours of superdiversity through its relationships to other germane concepts.

The Key Concepts series aims to begin a conversation regarding the ways different concepts offer vantage points and heuristic lenses to illuminate society and understand societal change.

The intersections of race and superdiversity were the theme of the third roundtable that was held on 11th November 2015. IRiS invited Professor Claire Alexander (University of Manchester), Professor David Gillborn (University of Birmingham), Dr Ipek Demir (University of Leicester) and Dr Rob Berkeley MBE (BBC, formerly Runnymede Trust) to address three questions: first, has the way we think about race changed with the emergence of superdiversity; second, how might a superdiversity lens help us to address processes of racialization in contemporary society; third; are new forms of discrimination or oppression emerging in the context of superdiversity?

Alexander opened the roundtable, expressing the timely and urgent nature of this event. She highlighted the danger superdiversity and race will diverge in the future and be set up in opposition in a similar way to race and religion or migration, which she considered to be problematic and unfortunate.

Emergence of race

Gillborn provided an overview of race as a social construct, 'an idea that's historically shaped, sometimes fluid, sometimes highly complex, sometimes subtle but always being contested and remade in multiple agencies across society and in everyday actions and in the routine and everyday of being a social actor particularly in things like the law, politics, media, education' (see also Goldberg 2002; Mills 1997; Omi 1993; Stoller 2002. Demir highlighted that a focus on race does not address difference in itself but, as with other social divisions, the focus is the 'social consequences of the attribution of significance, exclusion and privilege by society to certain patterns of difference'. It is not race or racial difference that is problematised but racial inequality, 'racialised societies are sustained by racialised regimes and not just by racialised individuals' (Knowles 2010: 31). Demir underlined that race thinking in social science developed in the context of racial struggle, emancipation, race riots, and social movements in opposition to slavery. Race became a subject of investigation as well as social and political action. Berkeley concurred by reviewing the genealogy of the term 'race' and how it is intrinsically linked to political struggle.

Gillborn reaffirmed this through his explanation of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and stressed that although CRT is not without its critics, its defining feature is an emphasis on anti-racist practice 'it doesn't only ask the question of how we got here but, crucially, what to do about it'. At its core, he argued, CRT looks at how racism operates to shape society in the interests of white supremacy. CRT understands the term racism as a 'highly complex, changing and often subtle phenomenon that propagates a comprehensive set of assumptions and practices that mean the interests of white people saturate society'.

Alexander reminded us that the contours around 'race' are constantly changing. Moreover, Berkeley highlighted a key aspect of changing conceptualisations regarding race is the people who are theorising the concept. He acknowledged new technologies have created more spaces to talk about race, which pivotally are taking place outside the academy (#blacklivesmatter[1]). In addition, this has spurred new ways of discussing race inside the academy (#Rhodesmustfall[2]).

Emergence of superdiversity

Berkeley posited his ideas regarding the definition of superdiversity in its relation to race and ethnic studies stating that superdiversity makes some additional claims to those invoked by 'diversity' for example disrupting how we think about the 'majority' and 'minority' and adding complexity to issues that might be easily simplified. All speakers welcomed the affinity between superdiversity and intersectionality (see Humphris 2015). Berkeley argued when both notions are utilised within the same analytical frame there is the potential to better describe society and the way in which our identities are formed within it. However, concerns arose regarding how the term superdiversity has been translated into academic or policy discourse, potentially creating effects that are detrimental to the fight for justice and racial equality.

Alexander, drawing on Stuart Hall's critique of multiculturalism, called on researchers to distinguish between the 'banal fact' of increasing diversity and 'how we make that matter and how it is made to matter by others in policy, theory and everyday life'. Specifically, she asked how superdiversity is being operationalised in theory and practice, 'what work it is being made to do in its intersection around race and religion or ethnic inequality?' To begin to answer this, Alexander questioned where superdiversification is taking place and how it maps on to older patterns of racial inequality. She highlighted three demographic dynamics from the last UK census. First, superdiversification is largely following previous patterns of migration and settlement. It is happening in urban contexts that are already quite diverse. Second, these processes are increasingly dispersed to places previously unaffected by migration and ethnic diversity. Third, there are still places untouched by either of those two patterns of migration such as 'white heartlands' or areas with long established ethnic minority populations. Alexander argued that when superdiversity is operationalised as 'more ethnicity', the concept 'trips over' previous patterns of settlement and marginalisation and doesn't help analysis of long established migrant or minority communities (for critique, see Vertovec and Meissner 2014; for alternative argument, see James 2014).

The scale of superdiversity was also questioned by Alexander. She highlighted superdiversity is easy to see in micro encounters but was uncertain about how these map onto national policy. She argued that when superdiversity is operationalised beyond interpersonal encounters it 'can make all kinds of dubious claims about ethnic minorities exploiting each other (which may or may not be true) but that is then used as an alibi for not actually doing anything about it or doing anything about anything. You can look at the grooming scandals and there may be lots of complicated dynamics going on there but that is not what they're looking for when they're formulating policy. What they are looking for is an excuse for inactivity or an excuse to clamp down'.

She argued this kind of discourse becomes 'more dangerous or more ineffective the higher up the scale you move'. In the discussion, Dr Sigona concurred that the analysis of scale in superdiversity scholarship is not fully developed and acknowledged that superdiversity is often made to do too much or too little. He added there have been attempts to apply the term to places and realities which are extremely different, including the politics underpinning them. This work is emerging, for example Knowles (2013) who has examined the issues around 'scaling superdiversity' is keenly attuned to notions of power and civic engagement (see also Chimienti and Liempt 2014). Professor Phillimore added the strength of the superdiversity lens is to get away from presumptions about

what is most important in particular areas to try to find a way to look at what happens when people try to engage with policy or practice. She reiterated that superdiversity gives us the scope to highlight the issues that matter and make a difference "on the ground" in neighbourhoods offering potential to inform policy making.

Superdiversity and racial inequality in academia and policy

Alexander highlighted that superdiversity may be dogged by the same problem as many of the discussions around diaspora, hybridisation, new ethnicities or multiple identities within ethnic and racial studies particularly since the emergence of 'new ethnicities' and politics of difference in the early 1990s (Hall 1996). Alexander emphasised academics have been very keen to deconstruct race and ethnicity, pointing to the complexity of how these things are lived and how they change over time. However, despite beginning as good critical concepts, she argued all these terms have 'ended up as a stick to beat the race equality agenda with'. In addition, Alexander argued that superdiversity has undergone a similar trajectory in policy discourse and has been infused by the same critiques of multiculturalism, 'in the way that multiculturalism, diaspora or hybridity is deeply ambivalent because it relies on the distinction of discrete national or ethnic groups that come together to be superdiverse'.

Demir suggested this translation of superdiversity into policy was a consequence of the genesis of the term, and in particular the fact that superdiversity does not stem from struggle or social movements (in contrast to analytical lenses such as race, class or gender). She argued therefore that scholars utilising a superdiversity lens, need be particularly attentive to power and struggle. Dr Wessendorf responded by stressing if the term is used as a lens to look at what kind of differences make a difference in what kinds of contexts then a superdiversity approach places issues of inequality and power at the centre of the analysis, from the bottom-up without starting from a particular position or viewpoint.

Berkeley turned attention to the politics behind terminology drawing on Ted Cantle's movement from 'community cohesion' to 'interculturalism'. Wessendorf highlighted how all these examples illustrate what happens when terms are taken over by policy makers and become infused with the same problems (Vertovec and Wessendorf 2010; see also Berg and Sigona 2013). The way political discourses infuse academic terminology was particularly prominent in the discussion regarding superdiversity's affiliation with 'diversity'. All speakers raised reservations regarding the historical use of the term 'diversity' in light of its intersections with research on race (see also Vertovec 2012). Gillborn highlighted how the term diversity has operated as a way to side-line issues around race and oppression 'diversity is a code word that switches debates to a deficit analysis and allows racism to be seen as an individual incident.' He argued that this acts to leave the interests of white people unexplored and unquestioned (see also McGee 2008; Ramadan 2011). Berkeley also stated that when he talks about diversity it doesn't disrupt things as much as talking about race.

Within the policy sphere Berkeley indicated that diversity is used is to make arguments for certain kinds of policies to promote 'diversity', rather than an effort to gain social justice. Berkeley encapsulated his question regarding race and superdiversity through the debate that emerged between #blacklivesmatter and #alllivesmatter. He asked how a superdiversity lens might help us understand the resistance from marginalised groups to #alllivesmatter, which emerged to criticize the Black Lives Matter movement for focusing on specific injustices done to African Americans[3]. He noted how there seem to be new forms of oppression emerging such as the recent response to #killallwhitemen[4] and questioned whether a diversity focus (which sees diversity as a good end in and of itself) withdraws the opportunity for a safe space for women of colour. However, Berkeley

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[3] For an overview of this debate see http://www.huffingtonpost.com/news/all-lives-matter/
[4] For more see http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/03/bahar-mustafa-charges-dropped-killallwhitemen-row

conceded that the term 'diversity' is running its course and new terms such as 'inclusion' which has a similarly chequered past, is the new buzzword for schemes and policies that were previously branded as 'diverse'. His remaining question was whether the 'super' tag was enough to remove superdiversity from the historical connotations of diversity in political discourse.

Phillimore argued that superdiversity has been useful to disrupt the way social policy is created. She reviewed how social policy work has previously been internally focussed on a particular ethnic groups (see also Boccagni 2014). She argued that superdiversity can be used as a tool to bring together fragmented work on one hand, and very homogenising work on the other. Rather than creating inertia or kneejerk policies, superdiversity has allowed social policy research to get a grasp on what is going on in communities to offer new perspectives and has also provided the tools to communicate that reality in a manner that has the possibility of disrupting some of these systems, such as the NHS (Phillimore 2011, 2013, 2014).

Superdiversity – Between fragmentation and solidarity

All speakers raised concerns that superdiversity has the potential to be a fragmentary lens rather than a tool to promote solidarity. Demir highlighted that diversity has not undermined the possibility of struggle in the past but the term lacks two key elements theories of race have highlighted; first recognition, as race helps people make sense of their social and historical position and second solidarity, as race carries a progressive power to mobilise groups. However, Demir didn't consider race and superdiversity as mutually exclusive and therefore was hopeful that superdiversity could work hand in hand with race.

Sigona posited that superdiversity can help us to think of new conditions on which solidarities can be built through intersecting identities in a specific place. For instance, what makes the difference in a specific place could be the foundation on which to build solidarities (for another example see Squire 2011). This use of superdiversity to build new solidarities was reiterated by Phillimore who explained that in research undertaken in Handsworth, a neighbourhood that has received arrivals from over 170 countries in the last decade, potential for solidarity was emerging on the basis of superdiversity because 'we are all diverse here". Similarly, Professor Creese stated from her research 'you can listen into how people use differences resourcefully and make connections with one another in society'.

Conclusion: Critically conceiving superdiversity in light of race theories

Demir encouraged researchers to be attentive to the fact that 'we are also actors through our research. Our categories and how we draw boundaries do not just describe the world but also construct it. Therefore we should be careful about how concepts are used'. Gillborn echoed this, invoking intersectionality as a warning for how academics use terms, including superdiversity and critical race theory. He argued intersectionality has often become a self-serving term and devoid of meaning, rather than accounting for the complex differences about the way groups have been positioned historically, socially, politically and economically. He urged scholars to engage in serious critical research and avoid becoming 'an academic fashion item'. Creese argued that the interdisciplinary nature of superdiversity ensures constant vigilance regarding the way our terms construct as well as describe the world. At the level of the academy she argued that superdiversity is creating the space for deeper interdisciplinary research that is open and willing to question itself (as shown by the Key Concepts series).

Drawing the roundtable to a close, Alexander, recalled Stuart Hall to remind us that the point of academic thinking is to 'bend the twig', to get people to think in a different way and push against dominant discourses. For her, this involves addressing ethnic and racial inequality in its old and new forms such as asylumphobia and Islamophobia. This resonates with Balibar's recent and timely intervention, which states that 'old conflicts, old resistances and the old commitments have been

supplemented (not become obsolete) by others which make for a much more complex and politically uncertain pattern, adding at the same time new resources of intelligibility and civic innovation and formidable obstacles to any simple programme of emancipation, in which the positions of oppressors and oppressed could be assigned to antithetical separated groups formed by history' (2015: 7). It was clear from the wide ranging discussion that theoretical transformation is all the more important when faced with the overdetermined nature of hierarchies of oppression and the new technologies shaping the world. There have long been calls for a sustained critique of the categories social scientists have been using. This roundtable was a step in that direction.

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