Intersectionality in social work: a correction of the hype about superdiversity

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This column is written from the perspective and experience of, on the one hand, a psychotherapist and staff member for diversity in the field of Flemish social work, and on the other hand, a literary scholar with a keen interest in gender theory and intersectionality. Both of us share the view that the hype about superdiversity is not useful in social work and possibly even dangerous. We want to make this clear by pointing out some shortcomings of superdiversity as an analytical concept and practical tool, more specifically when working with people in precarious situations. We define a precarious situation as a cumulative disturbance of several existential dimensions, such as emotional, physical and psychic wellbeing, social participation, communal belonging, opportunities for personal development etc., due to a long-lasting lack of aid and resources. We also want to stress that we mainly address the inflationary use of superdiversity in contemporary policy making and mediatized discourse, rather than the scholars who introduced and operationalised the notion.

Trying to describe the complex diversity of Europe’s population with the notion of superdiversity is understandable; contemporary reality is indeed characterised by a plethora of different existential situations, not only between but also within societal groups (cf. the notion of diversity within diversity, as in Geldof, 2013). Plain diversity might be too powerless a notion, too much of an understatement to form a fruitful basis for a larger scale politics (Maly et al., 2014). But is it helpful, then, to draw on a superlative extension of that notion? Can the notion be used for other diversities than those caused by recent demographical and social changes due to migratory movements (Vertovec, 2007)? Does this superlative discourse really provide a tool to grasp in a clearer analytical way the contemporary reality of a growing number of diverse people finding themselves in precarious existential situations? And can it be informative of methods and practices to change those situations? At least in social policy in Belgium and Flanders, the ubiquitous use of the notion doesn’t do any of these things. From the perspective of social workers, capturing the manifest diversity in European societies under the umbrella of superdiversity, is merely a cosmetic operation, a surface labelling.

Let us start with a critique of the basic semantics of the composite noun. The prefix ‘super’ per se is misleading when describing the experiential realities of people in precarious situations, as it has the connotation both of ‘extreme’ – a ‘complexity surpassing anything the country has previously experienced’ (Vertovec, 2007, p. 1024) – and of ‘excellent’. With these connotations, the prefix installs a hierarchy and a quantitative dynamic of adding up diversities (a diversity that is more than just diverse), and possibly also a progressive managerial development (the aspiration to manage that extreme diversity), see for instance the conviction and discourse that Brussels already is a superdiverse city, that Gent is becoming a superdiverse city, and that regional towns will inevitably follow the same direction. With these connotations, this concept is very difficult to translate into practice-based social work – and that is what theoretically informed social workers have to do, to translate the notions into practical methods that connect with the experiential realities of the clients. People in precarious situations experience their situation as complex, uncomfortable, unjust, difficult or even threatening. Do they consider their situation as being ‘super divers’? It could be interesting to empirically investigate the processes of identification of people in precarious situations with regard to diversity, instead of imposing on a city or society as a whole the superlative term of superdiversity, that inevitably normalises and homogenises individual or group experiences and situations of difference. Neither do the possibilities to deal with or change the complexities of concrete situations lie in an attitude of mastery or management of their ‘super divers’ nature.

Superdiversity was first and foremost coined to address the changes and increasing complexities in the ethnic and cultural constellations of Western-European societies, an origin that easily lends itself
to implying that Europe loses its grip on diversity. The talk about ethnic minority groups about to replace the ethnic majority group in large European cities is a symptom of the dominant power position from which the notion is easily operated. It demonstrates how the thought of losing the majority relies on the dichotomous opposition of the one majority and the many unruly minorities in the first place. Furthermore, in emphasizing the ethnic or ‘colour’ aspect of superdiversity, as often happens in the popular political and mediatised usage of the notion, the complexities of different societal groups living together are reduced to visual and conspicuous elements of difference. This creates the illusion that we can see and access the complexities of diversity. However, as the practice of social work shows, the complex intertwinenment of discriminations and disadvantages in precarious situations is not only related to mechanisms of visible minoritisation but often remains hidden under the inconspicuous surface of trying to be a part of society, of trying to survive. This gap between what we see on the surface, and the structures and mechanisms of power and injustice that inform concrete lives in precarious situations, is not exposed by this non-analytical buzz word. ‘Super’ is a totalising prefix that covers up instead of making things clearer.

The most dangerous development lies in the embrace of the notion of superdiversity by policy makers, which in the case of social policy leads to a growing gap between policy making and the reality of people in precarious situations. The Flemish Agency for Integration and Citizenship (Agentschap Integratie en Inburgering) for instance sees an answer to superdiverse reality in strengthening an attitude of resilience (bon.be). Taking resilience as the basis for integration in a superdiverse reality means considering integration in terms of success or failure. The discourse of success or failure forms a pitfall for people in precarious situations in two respects. Firstly, it foregrounds goals that are not political but profoundly economical in nature and sees integration as something that can be managed and measured, that has a certain value. The one who manages best the complexities of his or her superdiverse situation, will be a better integrated citizen. This is very literally the case in the superficial embrace of (super)diversity by the economic sector. Economy and employment in general only pay lip service to (super)diversity: the diversity of (potential) employees is embraced, as long as it does not slow down efficiency and productivity. However, fully integrating diversity in all its forms on the work floor (for instance including disabled people and people with chronic illnesses) inevitably entails another economic model, one that does not adhere to economic growth. Secondly, this economical reasoning goes hand in hand with a perfidious psychological effect: it induces those who fail or don’t perform ‘good’ enough with guilt. Social work on precarious situations, on the contrary, opposes the model of individual guilt.

We argue therefore that such understandings make superdiversity not suited to be translated into concrete methods and practices of social work, nor does it capture the complex processes of disturbance and structures of disadvantage that lead to precarious situations. We believe that intersectionality, on the contrary, though at first sight a more difficult notion than the easily readable and catchy superdiversity, can offer more efficient tools for social work. In our view, intersectionality is an analytical way of looking at the specific and complex interconnection of privileges and discriminations for each individual situation whilst at the same time relating this individual situation to structural mechanisms of power relations (see Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013, p. 801, with reference to MacKinnon, 2013). To put it more simply: superdiversity can describe very well what your place in society is, but intersectionality relates this place to your position.1 Intersectionality can also provide a useful self-critical lens to trace and remedy issues of privilege, exclusion and inaccessibility in social work itself. Particularly in social work, the lens of intersectionality is useful not only in a deconstructive but also in a reconstructive way: social work not only analyses how precarious situations come about

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1 Interestingly, scholarly work that starts out with superdiversity as a descriptive notion sometimes moves into an intersectional approach (without acknowledging this) when in depth analysis is needed, see e.g. the synopsis of the book Solidariteit in Superdiversiteit. Handvatten voor concrete actie, by Nick Schuermans et al., Leuven: Acco 2017, published on http://www.kifkif.be/actua/solidariteit-in-superdiversiteit
but, in the concrete contact with individual clients, also works with their stories and mobilises their competences, abilities and motivations. The lens of intersectionality here prevents to read the clients' stories as purely individual or psychological cases in need of greater resilience and allows to situate them in dynamics of inequality and marginalisation. This in turn relates the therapeutic work to an explicit social justice concern (Krumer-Nevo & Komem, 2015). A further exploration of the possible uses of intersectionality in the field of social work thus seems to us an important and urgent task for both academics and social workers.

References