

Grounds for dialogue

Intersectionality and superdiversity

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Abstract

This paper investigates the possibility of a fruitful dialogue between intersectionality and superdiversity. It argues that, despite the shortcomings of superdiversity, the complex migration-related configurations it focuses on can enable intersectionality to overcome some of its own challenges by becoming more precise and accurate. To empirically expose the mechanisms through which race-, gender-, and class-based inequalities are reproduced, it is necessary to anchor those mechanisms in a specific time and space – a historical, social, economic, and legal context. Through a case study of institutional responses to domestic violence, the paper demonstrates that superdiversity can help clarify the context in which these responses occur. Finally, by distinguishing between the object of study (the intersectional construction of disadvantage and prejudice) and the object of observation (public institutions where superdiverse situations are created by migration-related configurations), this paper examines a challenging situation for intersectional analysis in the context of Switzerland, a context that opens up to surprising articulations of discrimination and inequality for ‘migrants’ subjects to domestic violence.

Keywords: intersectionality, superdiversity, empirical operationalisation, migration-related diversity, domestic violence

Introduction

During a 1999 radio interview, Pierre Bourdieu answered a journalist's question about the reproduction of social inequalities as follows:

Something important that I try to show is that the social world is not in perpetual movement, permanently changing. When I started to deal with sociology, sociologists kept on repeating one word; it was the word 'change', 'mutation', 'everything changes, everything is in mutation'. This still exists nowadays, the idea that everything is permanently changing, but it seemed to me from very early on that there is some stability and stagnation, some inertia [in the persistence of social inequalities]. So, I've tried, on the one hand, to establish this inertia, these constants, through statistical studies; constants that by the way make science possible because they can be identified. And on the other hand, I've tried to explain this stagnation; I mean to understand the 'why' and the 'how' of their reproduction. (Bourdieu in: Carles, 2001, personal translation)

Bourdieu's observation continues to be relevant. The idea of 'change' and terms linked to it, such as 'transformation' and 'dynamics', still dominate the social sciences. The prerequisites of innovation and originality in academia might have something to do with the popularity of the idea of never-ending change and transformation in the social world (see the literature on social complexity, e.g. De Landa, 2006). Yet, while changing 'realities' and their dynamics are a popular subject of study, patterns of inequality continue to persist, whether they are ethnic, racial, class-based, or gendered (to name only a few). The debate between intersectionality and superdiversity theorists is related to this dual conception of the social world as both changing and stagnant, and it raises a question that remains relevant today: how can we study persisting power relations within a changing context?

This paper addresses the current debate on the compatibility or incompatibility of superdiversity and intersectionality (Humphris, 2015) in an attempt to find grounds for a fruitful dialogue between the two, and it argues that intersectionality theorists such as myself can benefit from some of the perspectives and methods of superdiversity.

A recurrent critique of intersectionality – which I will come back to in more detail later on – is that it is highly abstract, which makes it difficult to operationalise it empirically, whereas superdiversity pays special attention to a detailed description of specific contexts. Thus, the latter, although it is not concerned with power relations (Makoni, 2012), can help better situate the articulations of those power relations that intersectionality problematises. On the one hand, intersectionality theory helps us delimit our 'object of study', power relations; that is, it helps us choose what questions to raise and which issues to problematise to better understand the power relations involved. On the other hand, superdiversity helps us delimit the 'object of

observation', a superdiverse context with complex migration-related configurations. Its descriptive potential is useful in demonstrating the nature and content of this 'space' or 'site' of observation, situating its particularities and understanding its impact on what we attempt to study. To put it simply, while intersectionality is indispensable in helping us understand power relations and overlapping systems of domination, discrimination, and privilege, superdiversity is helpful in contextualising those relations and their consequences.

To investigate the grounds for dialogue between intersectionality and superdiversity, the first section outlines some critiques of intersectionality theory, primarily those regarding its ambiguity and difficulties in applying macro-theoretical concepts to micro-level real-life contexts and situations. The second section examines the concept of superdiversity and how it can address these critiques of intersectionality. The third section presents empirical data from my own research on the processing of domestic violence cases by Swiss public institutions in the context of migration. Taking a difficulty I encountered in the field as an example, I argue for a distinction between the 'object of observation' and the 'object of study' to clarify the difference and the relationship between superdiversity and intersectionality. The remainder of the paper examines the implications of this distinction and argues that superdiversity, although it is not capable of producing the same theoretical insights as intersectionality, can contribute to a more context-based operationalisation of the latter's categories and tools.

Some critiques of intersectionality

Intersectionality, one of the, and for some even *the*, 'most important theoretical contribution[s]' (McCall, 2005, p. 1771) of feminist studies in conjunction with anti-racist scholarship has now even been defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED): 'The interconnected nature of social categorisations such as race, class, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage' (Intersectionality, 2018). This idea of overlapping discriminations is rooted in the work of black feminists in the 1980s, who pleaded for the placing of marginalised African-American women's subjectivities at the heart of feminist analysis (Humphris, 2015), which had previously focused solely on white middle-class women's experiences (Geerts & Van der Tuin, 2013). The term was coined in socio-legal literature by Kimberlé W. Crenshaw in 1989 and subsequently became a

central paradigm in feminist theory, providing ‘a name to a pre-existing theoretical and political commitment’ (Nash, 2008, p. 89). Since then, ‘intersectionality’ has been widely used as a theoretical and methodological paradigm, but also as a tool of political action (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013).

The following decades also saw numerous attempts to explore the difficulties inherent in this paradigm (see, e.g., McCall, 2005; Davis, 2008; Nash, 2008; Geerts & Van der Tuin, 2013).² Despite the heterogeneity of these attempts, one of the main challenges to which many scholars drew attention is its vagueness and the consequent difficulty in applying it empirically.

For example, some have referred to intersectionality’s high degree of abstraction and ahistoricism, which sometimes makes it difficult to operationalise it (Mazouz, 2015; McCall, 2005). Two feminist scholars, Candace West and Sarah Fenstermaker (1995), have argued that intersectionality approaches power relations as static and therefore neglects their historicity, and that it does not consider the continuous reformulation and situatedness of gender, class, and race. As a result, it risks perpetuating the deterministic discourse that imprisons individuals in predetermined identities. The authors draw on Harold Garfinkel’s (1967) ethnomethodology, which makes it possible to grasp the dynamic and processual assignments of intersectional social categories embodied in social interactions. The work of West and Fenstermaker sheds light on the importance of the situatedness and historicity of power relations (for other attempts to address this issue, see Anthias, 2008; Yuval-Davis, 2006; Winker & Degele, 2011).

The difficulty of operationalising intersectionality empirically is in part related to the difficulty of capturing a clear relationship between different power relations in a given situation. Sirma Bilge, an intersectionality theorist, argues that intersectionality remains imprecise enough on the question of the autonomy of domination systems (Bilge, 2010, p. 62). The ways in which gender, race, class, sexuality, and other power relations intersect one another is difficult to clarify. It is also challenging to determine which of these categories dominate a given social situation. Although intersectional theories clearly acknowledge that not all forms of disadvantage or categorisation have an equal impact, they do not always offer a way to understand and trace their unequal impact beyond noting its presence.

Several scholars have attempted to remedy this ambiguity at the theoretical level. Some have suggested various mathematical metaphors to capture those articulations. As a reaction to what Bilge (2010) calls the

monist approach, according to which there is one main domination system to which others are subordinated (such as gender for some white feminist scholars or class for Marxists), intersectionality theorists have postulated a pluralist approach: different systems of domination exist independently of each other, and their impact is cumulative or multiplicative (see Spelman, 1988). Attempting to avoid mathematical metaphors, Bilge (2010) has suggested a 'holistic' approach (based on Audre Lorde's approach to black female subjects, 1997, p. 378). According to this approach, the 'co-formation' and 'co-construction' (Bilge, 2010, p. 59) of different systems of domination – in other words, the ways in which those categories and their effects construct each other through their interaction – needs to be taken into account (Weldon, 2006).

Another attempt to solve the above ambiguity was proposed by feminist studies scholar Judith Ezekiel (2005), who argued that intersectionality studies the articulation of different power relations and not the essence of the categories through which those power relations operate. It is thus essential, from this perspective, not to consider gender, class, or other relevant categories as distinct and pre-determined factors whose joint effects are additive or multiplicative. Instead, one should acknowledge that different positions at the crossroad of different power relations (Crenshaw, 1989; Wekker, 2002) – or matrix of domination (Collins, 1990; Harding, 1995) – produce unpredictable effects. Those unpredictable effects are the result of specific articulations of power relations in specific contexts (Bilge, 2010, p. 45): an individual is always perceived in the light of those hierarchical assignments whose interactions vary based on the context (Yuval-Davis, 2015). The assignment of gender, class, race, or any other category of difference does not depend on individual identities or characteristics so much as on the situations that orient the activation of such categories. This openness makes it possible to contextualise the analysis in a given socio-spacio-historical situation (Prins, 2006).

Despite these numerous attempts to refine intersectionality not only as a theoretical paradigm but also as a methodology, the solutions remain focused primarily on the theoretical level. Applying them to empirical research remains challenging, and the problem of contextualising those macro-concepts requires more active engagement with empirical research. The next section investigates the possibility of using superdiversity to contextualise those power relations by inscribing them in a specific place and time.

Superdiversity as a descriptive tool

Steven Vertovec (2007) introduced the concept of superdiversity a decade ago in an article in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*³ that has become one of the most cited pieces in the history of the journal (Meissner, 2015). This amount of time is short enough for the concept to remain ‘a conceptual work in progress’ (Meissner & Vertovec, 2015, p. 542) and long enough to enable us to critically interrogate its interpretations. As Meissner and Vertovec wrote in a recent special issue in the same journal, ‘the concept seemingly appeals to many who address various kinds of contemporary social complexity’ (2015, p. 541-542). Examples include recent works in sociolinguistics that use superdiversity to analyse new sociolinguistic environments that are marked by the stimulation and amplification of processes of ‘social mixing and fragmentation’ (Arnaut, Blommaert, Rampton, & Spotti, 2016). The popularity of the concept is also due to its emphasis on a transition observed in several large European cities (Schrooten, Geldof, & Withaecx, 2015), where a majority of inhabitants have a migrant background (Crul, 2016), and some scholars have further applied the concept to smaller cities and superdiverse neighbourhoods (Maly, 2016).

Although the majority of scholars refer to superdiversity mainly in regard to the increasingly ethnic, cultural, and country-of-origin-related diversity that characterises Western European global cities, it was originally intended as a ‘post-multicultural term’ (Vertovec & Wessendorf, 2010). That is, superdiversity involves identifying ‘patterns of difference’ that do not only refer to the origin or destination of migrants alone, ‘but can be broadly described as migration-related’ (Meissner, 2015, p. 557). Vertovec’s original article referred to the concept as ‘a multi-dimensional perspective on diversity’ (Vertovec, 2007, p. 1026). In order to seize the complexities of migration-related diversity, the concept might be better understood in terms of ‘processes and patterns of diversification’ (Meissner, 2015, p. 560). Meissner and Vertovec elucidate this point as follows:

Many utilizing the term have referred only to ‘more ethnicities’ rather than to the term’s fuller, original intention of recognizing multidimensional shifts in migration patterns. These entail a worldwide diversification of migration channels, differentiations of legal statuses, diverging patterns of gender and age, and variance in migrants’ human capital. (2015, p. 541)

The authors emphasise three interconnected aspects of the term as originally intended – descriptive, methodological, and practical or policy-or-

iented. I focus primarily on the descriptive aspect, because I consider it the most useful and most relevant to this discussion, and because I consider the other two as derivations of the first.

The descriptive aspect of superdiversity covers changing population configurations that are not driven exclusively by a 'more varied ethnic, national, linguistic or religious background', but are also related to the diversification of migration channels (Vertovec, 2012, p. 303). Vertovec enumerates some of the complexities that result from this diversification. For instance, migration channels can include work-related migration with a specific permit, mobility within Europe as a result of European Union enlargement, the moving category of 'refugee', undocumented migrants, those who move to study, and those with a family reunification permit. These types of migration also entail a variety of legal statuses and attendant rights and obligations. They induce variations in education, work skills, and experience, and they impact patterns of gender and age amongst those labelled as 'migrants'. In light of these considerations, superdiversity 'is proposed as a "summary term" to encapsulate a range of such changing variables surrounding migration patterns – and, significantly, their interlinkages – which amount to a recognition of complexities that supersede previous patterns and perceptions of migration-driven diversity' (Meissner & Vertovec, 2015, p. 542). This potential of superdiversity to name the heterogeneity within the multiple axes of differentiation is the key to establishing a dialogue with intersectionality. We will see below how intersectionality can benefit from this aspect of superdiversity to capture the complexity of a given context.

The second and third aspects of superdiversity – methodological and practical, respectively – are less crucial for the argument here. Briefly, they both relate to a necessary shift away from a so-called 'ethno-focal' or community-based lens (Meissner & Vertovec, 2015). To better understand the complexities that result from the diversity of migration-related contexts, superdiversity calls for a reorientation of migration studies. It calls for researchers to move beyond community-based approaches, which focus on particular ethnic/national groups (and sometimes fall into the trap of methodological nationalism; see Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002), and their group formation, assimilation, or 'patterns of transnationalism' (Meissner & Vertovec, 2015). This move would in turn enable policy makers and practitioners to better integrate concurrent characteristics of migration-related diversities and make it possible to avoid homogenising those labelled as 'migrants' by paying more attention to legal statutes, migration channels, and other patterns of diversification described by superdiversity.

But superdiversity has its own shortcomings. It has been critiqued from a variety of academic fields (see, e.g., Flores & Lewis, 2016 in socio-linguistics). Perhaps the most important critique is similar to that which has been made of the concept of diversity in general – that it conceals power differences and creates ‘an illusion of equality in a highly asymmetrical world’ (Makoni, 2012, p. 193; Ahmed, 2007).

Some non-Western scholars such as Finex Ndhlovu (2016), a linguist and socio-cultural theorist, has additionally criticised the Western worldview inherent in superdiversity, as the phenomenon is not necessarily new. He argues that similar phenomena already existed in other parts of the world:

... any new conceptual framework that claims to look differently at issues around migration, diversity and diasporas should make significant theoretical contributions beyond mere empirical observations of human population movements from one point to another. In its present iteration, the superdiversity approach does not seem to measure up very well when considered against this premium. (2016, p. 35)

Taken together, these critiques demonstrate the inadequacy of superdiversity for the study of power relations, which is at the heart of intersectional analysis. Nevertheless, without arguing that intersectionality is unable to address its critiques on its own terms or that superdiversity is indispensable to addressing the shortcomings of intersectionality, I argue that superdiversity can help address some methodological challenges inherent in intersectionality. The following section explains this proposition.

Intersectionality and superdiversity

This section argues that there is some ground for fruitful dialogue between the two perspectives. The multi-layered migration-related configurations that superdiversity aims to describe can help address some of the fuzziness surrounding the ability to operationalise intersectionality in some contexts.

As we have seen above, one of the main challenges of intersectionality involves its high degree of abstraction and ahistoricism, which can make it difficult to operationalise it empirically. The ways in which intersectionality articulates different categories of social difference driven by different systems of domination (or power relations) are hardly concrete. There is

still a need to demonstrate how those articulations work and which dimensions of power relations become more or less salient in what contexts and on which bases.

To address this issue, some intersectionality theorists have suggested including additional context-based categories of difference beyond 'the classic triad of gender-race-class' (Lykke, 2011, p. 210). Categories such as ethnicity, migration, religion (Winker & Degele, 2011; Fischer & Dahinden 2017), age, sexuality, and dis/ability have been suggested, to the extent that some have raised an 'et cetera' problem (Lykke, 2011), the concern that this open-ended line of categorisations might reduce intersectionality 'to a block box, a machine for throwing more and more new categories on the table' (Lykke, 2011, p. 210).

Superdiversity can help elucidate context if it is not used simply as a catch-all term without being unpacked. Configurations related to the diversity of the legal statuses of 'migrants', the multiple channels of migration created by restrictions on immigration, European Union enlargement, globalisation, and so on are anchored in specific contexts. These context-based situations and configurations can help better situate the articulation of power relations that intersectionality problematises. The ambiguity of intersectionality resides in its difficulty in observing and anchoring its macro-theoretical concepts in micro-social situations. The multi-layered migration-related categories to which superdiversity points can help better situate the effect and outcome of the articulations of power relations addressed by intersectionality. This dialogue helps contextualise, or historicise, those articulations because, although categories such as gender, class, and race are useful for academic analysis, they do not typically form the basis of law or governance. As such, these categories are reproduced only indirectly, through a range of other categories. Superdiversity therefore does not simply add terms we might want to account for when thinking intersectionally. Rather, it directs our attention to the more immediate and descriptive categories embedded within law, policy, and everyday practice through which forms of difference are (re)produced.

Intersectionality as 'object of study' and superdiversity as 'object of observation'

In this section, drawing upon an empirical research on the institutional responses to domestic violence in the Swiss migration context, I illustrate how a specific usage of superdiversity can help operationalise intersectionality. The need to empirically investigate the intersections of multiple power relations persists regardless of how polished and refined our the-

ories may be (Meissner, 2015, p. 561). One of the challenges I encountered in my own research was related to two – and, at first glance, incompatible – considerations: how can we study persistent power relations that operate through well-established patterns of racial, gendered, and class-based inequalities without neglecting context-based changes and transformations? In my case, linking intersectionality, as the ‘object of study’, to superdiversity, as the ‘object of observation’, made this possible.

I borrow the distinction between object of study and object of observation from Michel-Rolph Trouillot, a Haitian anthropologist who introduced it to avoid anthropology’s conflation ‘of the field as object of study, object of observation, and place in which observation occurs’ (Fernando, 2014, p. 237). He observed that ‘anthropology inherited a disciplinary monopoly over an object that it never bothered to theorize’ (Trouillot, 2003, p. 9), the object being non-Western cultures and peoples. As Mayanthi L. Fernando, a former student of Trouillot’s (2014), has argued, this resulted in ‘a seamless collapse of object of observation and object of study, and a lack of attention to broader configurations of power’ (2014, p. 237) that created and justified the interest in studying those cultures and peoples. For instance, in Trouillot’s work on the Haitian Revolution, Fernando has argued, ‘whereas the empirical facts of the Haitian Revolution were his object of observation, his object of study turned out to be the conditions of possibility of the revolution’s silencing in Western historiography’ (2014, p. 239). In other words, ‘if anthropology and historiography were objects of observation, his ultimate object of study was the West as a political, ontological, and epistemological formation’ (2014, p. 236). Inspired by this distinction, Fernando, in her own work on Islam and secularism in France, distinguishes between her object of ethnographic observation, Muslim French life, and her object of study, republican secularism and its discourses, institutions, and practices.

By adopting this distinction here, I argue that we can take as our object of observation a superdiverse micro-context that might be in the process of changing, while at the same time remaining attentive to the power relations that constitute our object of study in an intersectional perspective. The next subsection clarifies this point and its implications.

Applying the distinction: A research project

In the above-mentioned research project situated at the intersection of gender studies and the sociology of migration, I investigated institutional responses to domestic violence cases involving Swiss nationals as well as ‘migrants’ through an ethnographic study of three public institutions – a

police emergency unit, a women's shelter, and a medico-legal service provider at a hospital. Research was conducted most extensively between the summer of 2014 and the summer of 2016⁴ in a city in the French-speaking part of Switzerland where non-Swiss residents constitute 42.9 per cent of its population (Federal Statistical Office, 2017).

An intersectional lens became indispensable from the very beginning, as I was investigating the various categories that public institutions mobilised to adapt their practices. My interlocutors mobilised categories of constructed and perceived differences to justify their differential treatment of their beneficiaries. Although intersectionality theoretically allows for a context-based investigation of power relations and their surprising effects, and although it has seen its categories expanded to account for as many different contexts as possible, I was confronted with some situations that intersectionality categories could not adequately account for. The specific migration-related configurations and categories in the context of Switzerland produced some unexpected effects. Some reminded me of the epistemological difficulties of intersectionality in accounting for the positive experiences of marginalised and oppressed subjects who can be partially privileged in some circumstances and the negative impact of some policies on those whom we see as universally privileged (Geerts & Van der Tuin, 2013).

The next subsection explains how superdiversity helped me make sense of these situations.

An example

Swiss legislation regarding citizenship and immigration distinguishes between Swiss nationals and foreigners from European Union (EU) countries on the one hand, and people from so-called 'third countries' on the other, which includes everyone from countries that are not signatories to either the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) or the Agreement on the Free Movement of Persons (AFMP). This legislation has a tremendous impact on the rights and obligations of those who fall into each of those categories. EU nationals have the right to enter the country freely and access the job market. They usually benefit from more stable residency permits in Switzerland, including work-related permits, near-border residency permits, and permanent residency.⁵ 'Third-country' nationals, in contrast, need a visa to enter Swiss territory and have much greater difficulty in obtaining work permits, partly because the State Secretariat for Migration (SEM), which is responsible for issuing work permits, is required by law to favour citizens of EU, EFTA, and AFMP member states. Refugees, asylum seekers,

and undocumented migrants have much more restricted rights, while others, such as those with student or family-reunification statuses, have non-permanent permits. These different legal statuses and their respective conditions also affect the ways in which public institutions treat victims or survivors of domestic violence.

Family reunification permits were amongst the most common permits held by the 'migrant' women I met during my research who had fled domestic violence. This is a non-permanent legal permit that is dependent on marriage with someone with the right to reside in Switzerland. Nonetheless, one of the main solutions proposed by public institutions to help women flee domestic violence was separation or divorce. This solution is clearly much more challenging and costly for migrants from 'third countries'. They are faced with the 'choice' between getting a divorce and protecting themselves at the risk of deportation or the cancellation of their residency permit on the one hand, and maintaining their residency permit at the cost of their safety on the other. The diversity of conditions regulating migrants' rights and presence in Switzerland made it difficult to find a term that could capture the discriminations to which some were subjected, which made it difficult for me to operationalise the intersectional perspective. Adding the category of migration status or ethnicity to the spectrum of intersectionality axes of difference did not really suffice, because it was not the migration status of all which was a concern here. In addition, migration status and ethnicity were still too broad to account for situations where other factors played a role in determining the right of a victim to be protected by the authorities and receive an extended permit. For example, authorities considered the duration of the marriage in determining whether to make an exception and not cancel their permit. Another factor was the financial independence of the woman in question and whether she had received social welfare. How can we name this specific prejudice against some migrant women subject to domestic abuse who were faced with an impossible 'choice' of enduring violence or leaving the country? Is it enough to say that their situation resulted from their positioning at the intersection of gender, race/ethnicity, migration status, and class power relations?

This specific disadvantage related to migration status also cut across more than racial, ethnic, and religious lines. For example, I encountered a few cases involving Black French women who had long ago migrated from Guinea to France and held a French passport. Now migrating to Switzerland as wives of Swiss citizens, they could seek divorce without putting at risk their right to stay in Switzerland. They were not faced with this im-

possible 'choice', while two other women I met (one Ukrainian and another Russian), who were not perceived as visible minorities, were.

The above complexities could be accounted for by an intersectional perspective. I could use racialisation to explain the mechanisms that created such discriminatory situations. However, this discrimination was not really based on 'race' or ethnicity, or only on migration status and nationality. The different migration channels and their complex legal conditions created some surprising combinations that challenged a superficial use of intersectionality. Here, the more detailed focus of superdiversity, which unpacks what lies within each category of migration, ethnicity, or class, could help. It was not a matter of adding new categories to the list, but of studying diverse migration-related legal statuses in detail to understand how exactly they operate as instruments of discrimination toward some and spare others in unexpected ways.

Although it was thanks to intersectionality that I could be attentive to the overlapping effects of power relations, I found superdiversity helpful in situating the specific articulations of those power relations because of its ability to clarify the context. It helped me more accurately explain how some superdiverse migration-related configurations created unexpected situations where racialised victims could find themselves in a privileged situation and call on public services without risking their right to reside in Switzerland, while others who were visibly privileged, whether in terms of 'race' or class, hesitated to seek support from public services.

To consider the complexity and changing situations of migrants, but without neglecting well-established power relations, it is helpful to bring together superdiversity and intersectionality as the object of observation and the object of study, respectively. In this example, my object of observation was the more immediate and descriptive categories embedded within law and migration-related policy. The object of observation consisted of the categories mobilised by institutions and their agents in treating people involved in domestic abuse. Those categories reflected ever-evolving and increasingly complex situations involving legal conditions related to different migration channels and types of residency permits, financial and professional conditions, parental status, and fluency in French. These types of complexity created by patterns of diversification related to migration are what superdiversity attempts to make visible.

My object of study, in contrast, was the broader and deeper structural mechanisms through which forms of difference are (re)produced at the intersection of diverse systems of domination. I was not interested in only listing or describing new categories of difference revealed by observation,

but in the processes through which people were constructed as ‘different’ to justify their differential treatment, which is related to the same power relations and patterns of social inequalities to which intersectionality refers.

The heterogeneity of migration-related configurations to which superdiversity points clarifies the object of observation. This, in turn, makes it possible to better situate the object of study – power relations and their sometimes unexpected discriminatory outcomes. In this example, some of the observed categories, such as residency status, the migration channels that precede it, and nationality, created a specific context. Some ‘migrants’ were marked as ‘different’ by legislation, which in turn justified treating them differently. This discrimination existed independently of ‘race’ and could even contradict our expectations of discrimination on its basis. This discrimination affected migrants who were not necessarily racialised but did not hold the ‘right’ passport or residency document. Consequently, clarifying the context made it possible to capture the situatedness of power relations and allowed for a more refined analysis of the effects produced by them.

Conclusion: Grounds for dialogue

The challenge faced by sociology reported by Bourdieu – how we can recognise transformations of and changes in the social world, the dynamics of social interactions, actors’ agency, and so on, without neglecting and obscuring the persistent structural power relations and inequalities underpinning them – resurfaces every once in a while in academic debates. How can we recognise that some things (such as gendered, racialised, or class-based power relations) have not changed, while others (such as some contexts in which those power relations operate) have? In this work, I have brought together intersectionality theory and superdiversity within this broader debate, drawing on the epistemological distinction between the object of study and the object of observation. My goal has not been to put intersectionality and superdiversity on an equal footing. Instead, I have attempted to establish a dialogue between the two to demonstrate that, despite superdiversity’s inability to expose mechanisms of structural inequality, it helped me better ground my intersectional analysis empirically. In turn, thanks to intersectionality, Bourdieu’s heuristic problematic of structure and social change, and Trouillot’s epistemological distinction, I

was able to use superdiversity to expose the structural mechanisms of inequality inherent in complex migration-related configurations.

To expose the mechanisms through which racial, gendered, and class-based inequalities are reproduced in a way that was empirically convincing, it was necessary to anchor those mechanisms in a specific time and space – a historical, social, economic, and legal context. Distinguishing the object of study (the intersectional construction of disadvantage, prejudice, and inequalities) and the object of observation (superdiverse situations created by migration-related configurations), enabled me to analyse those challenging situations in the specific context of Switzerland, with its specific migration-related regime, that created surprising articulations of discrimination and inequality. A superdiversity perspective alone could not link legal statuses to differential rights and their unequal outcomes. But an intersectionality perspective alone could also have difficulties in accounting for unexpected patterns of privilege and disadvantage that emerge out of complex ever-evolving contexts.

This consideration of the context and situatedness of power relations and their articulations has allowed for a more refined intersectional analysis, which in turn allows us to return to the two critiques of intersectionality discussed above – its ambiguity and the difficulty of grounding it empirically. In this case, my intersectional perspective benefited from better precision and accuracy by adopting the complex configurations to which superdiversity pays special attention. While intersectionality was developed in the specific context of the United States to account for the situations of Black women in that country, a dialogue between intersectionality and superdiversity makes it possible to apply an intersectional analysis to other situations more effectively. In the example provided here, it has been applied to the situation of both long-term residents and newer migrants in Western Europe whose conditions of discrimination and prejudice may follow an intersectional logic of domination but are operationalised through new categories of difference anchored in specific local situations.

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Notes

1. McCall (2005), for instance, has emphasised the methodological challenges of applying intersectionality; Davis (2008) has drawn attention to its vagueness; Nash (2008) has critically interrogated the assumptions underpinning it and questioned its empirical validity; and Geerts and Van der Tuin (2013) have addressed its challenges related to the problematic of 'representation' and suggested a move from intersectionality to 'interference'.
2. Vertovec had already used the concept in a research project in 2005, but its popularity increased considerably after the above-mentioned 2007 article.
3. This research is part of an on-going PhD project funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation entitled Manufacturing Difference: Institutional Responses to Intimate-Partner Violence in a Context of Migration. It investigates how intimate-partner violence is identified, named, and addressed differently for Swiss citizens and migrants, even though it concerns the same social problem, is treated by the same institutions, and involves people living in the same territory. The field observations were conducted over fourteen months between 2014 and 2016, during which an uncountable number of informal interviews and 55 expert interviews with agents from these institutions were conducted. For this article, I have drawn on my four-month observation period in the women's shelter and mainly my interviews with the 21 social workers and psychologists who worked there.
4. For an overview of residence permits, see <https://www.ch.ch/en/renewal-overview-swiss-residence-permit/>

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