

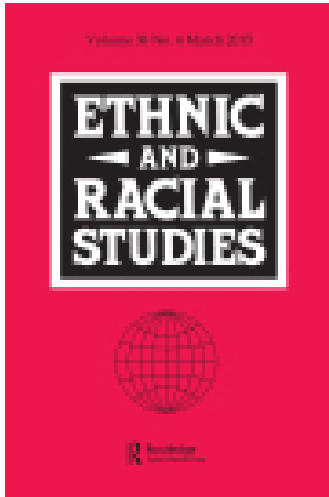
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Paolo Boccagni

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(Super)diversity and the migration–social work nexus: a new lens on the field of access and inclusion?

Paolo Boccagni

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The notions of diversity and superdiversity are of promising relevance to social work with immigrant clients. They enable a nuanced appreciation of the complex and varied sources of inequality to which such clients are exposed. However, these categories are sometimes employed in overly principled or prescriptive tones, and their distinctive contribution is relatively under-debated. How can diversity and superdiversity be used to make sense of migrants' disadvantages as welfare clients, and what do they add to the pre-existing social work perspectives? This paper revisits three major issues from within the literature on social work with immigrants: (1) the shifting ways of framing these clients; (2) the relevance of diversity and superdiversity in the self-representations and organizational arrangements of service providers; (3) the methodological underpinnings, and ensuing dilemmas, of helping relationships with immigrant clients. Overall, social work emerges as an exemplary field to assess the conceptual transition from diversity towards superdiversity.

Keywords: diversity; superdiversity; social work; migrants; minorities; ethnicity

Introduction

Social work with migrants and ethnic minorities, as a field of research and practice, offers a promising window on the heuristic value and the empirical relevance of diversity and, more radically, superdiversity. Against tendencies to over-culturalize migrants' patterns of disadvantage, often latent in the routine of social work agencies and practitioners, these notions are a welcome reminder of the more complex and varied sources of inequality to which migrants are exposed as welfare recipients. However, the distinctive contribution of these categories has been relatively marginal in the relevant debates. Despite its merits, the diversity discourse often assumes principled, prescriptive or even ritualistic tones, with little attention to the underlying empirical processes. Seeing the concepts of 'diversity' and 'superdiversity' as linked but distinct, this article aims to review their contribution to a better understanding of clients' needs and disadvantages, and of the ways to address them in social work practice.

No single understanding of 'social work' as a distinctive professional field can be found in the literature. My way of framing it here involves the sets of institutionalized social welfare services and measures that are embedded in national welfare regimes and mediated by specially qualified personnel. This limited definition does not cover

the emerging forms of transnational social work practice, nor the strong cross-country variations in state-based provisions regarding organizational arrangements, ways of financing, methods of intervention and so forth. Such a definition is intentional, however, as it makes for a substantive yet focused field to explore the added value of diversity and superdiversity.

Some literature on social work and immigration already argues for a multi-dimensional approach, mirroring the interdependence between the factors of disadvantage, inequality and discrimination that shape migrants' access to, and participation in, social welfare provision. What is the added value of superdiversity, compared with the pre-existing elaborations of anti-oppressive and culturally sensitive social work practice? How can it be used as a lens to make distinctive sense – in comparative and situated terms – of such interdependence?

Based on a review of the literature on social work with migrants and ethnic minorities, I will use the lenses of diversity and superdiversity – the latter entailing an accelerated interdependence between ethnicity and other diversity traits, and a complexification of the underlying social identifications. This is done to revisit three themes: (1) the shifting criteria and rationales employed to delimit the arena of social work claimants and legitimate recipients; (2) the significance of ethnocultural diversity in the self-representations of social work institutions and in their organizational arrangements; (3) the changing methodological underpinnings, and the ensuing dilemmas, of street-level relationships with immigrant or ethnic minority clients. In each of these respects, I wonder if and how the notion of superdiversity – as analytical lens and as empirical attribute – bears an interpretive added value that justifies further elaboration and empirical research about it.

The relevance of diversity and superdiversity to social work with migrants and ethnic minorities

The field of theory and practice mapped here is both under-theorized and over-practised. Broadly speaking, there is a rich and widespread repertoire of professional experiences, but far less reflexivity and theoretical elaboration, about the influence of diversity – in terms of identification, categorization and mobilization – in social work with migrants, ethnic and other minorities. It is thus necessary to first revisit the social science literature on diversity (cf. Boccagni 2015).

On the rise and ambiguity of diversity in human services

In the recent social science literature, diversity has primarily been used descriptively, to recognize increasing heterogeneity in today's societies along ethnic and cultural lines (among others), especially in larger urban areas. Less obviously, a sort of discursive appropriation of diversity (its 'valuing') can also be found, in a number of social domains, whereby this term is used as a way of supporting any arrangement assumed as more modern, innovative, even progressive or inclusive than the (supposedly homogeneous) past ones. In still another sense, the notion of diversity can empirically subsume the simultaneous effects of various kinds of social differentiation – in the case of immigration: ethnicity, legal status, gender and so on

(e.g. Faist 2009). At stake, from this perspective, are the mutually interacting social processes affecting a given phenomenon of study, such as migrants' access to social work provision. The argument is made that these social processes are irreducible to any one-sided or unidimensional understanding, or to any strictly hierarchical categorization. While this definitional attempt is merely indirect and negative, it does highlight a range of recent developments in the social sciences and the associated professional practices, including social work.

Making a case for diversity in social work entails caution about the collective categorization of service clients along ethnocultural (or other group) lines – which, while important, need not be fixed and all-comprehensive (Chau et al. 2011). Ethnicity itself is increasingly seen as processual, situated and negotiated (Wimmer 2008). Furthermore, focusing on diversity sheds light on the linkage between ethnicity and other variables potentially associated with social exclusion or disadvantage, such as class, age, gender, sexual identity, disability and legal status. Yet, the diversity lens is marked by an ambiguous coexistence of two stances: the overcoming of any essentializing and reifying understanding of ethnicity or of culture, thanks to a multidimensional and multi-factor approach; and the risk of downplaying 'the specific roots and processes' of social inequality, discrimination and racism, due to the lack of a consistently structural focus (Vickers et al. 2013). An appropriate use of diversity additionally requires awareness of the structural roots of minorities' disadvantage, including institutional racism (Penketh 2000).

Of crucial importance is, moreover, to appreciate ethnocultural diversity in situated and context-dependent ways – in the light of a person's representations about it, the structure of opportunities he/she deals with, the forms of capital he/she can mobilize. Embedding diversity in any specific context of social work practice, rather than using it as a principled and abstract category, is necessary to make it a meaningful conceptual tool – and not only a self-evident fact – for social professions.

Nonetheless, there is no consistent and well-bounded diversity approach – in social work at least – equalling the perspectives that I discuss subsequently. The definitional contours of diversity tend to be blurred, and its operationalization is at best uncertain. Even so, diversity has found a fertile terrain in social work theory and practice, as the professional literature shows (e.g. Fong 2007; for one exception, see Webb 2009). Some 'competence to practice with and on behalf of diverse populations' is typically mentioned in ethic and professional codes in the USA and elsewhere (Anderson and Wiggins-Carter 2004; Chow and Austin 2008).¹

What diversity amounts to in practical terms is far from obvious – even more since, just like cultural competence, it involves not only client–worker relationships, but also the broader organizational arrangements of social work provision. The latter are in turn embedded in, and dependent on, the organizational and policy context of a given welfare and integration regime. Keeping that in mind, in this article I will show how this notion can be relevant across different national settings of social work. The potential shift to superdiversity, and its distinctive heuristic value, is however discussed first.

Enter superdiversity: an acceleration of the status quo, or the inception of something new?

Against this background, Vertovec's (2007) coinage of *superdiversity* has been drawn on in several British contributions and beyond. This construct, primarily pointing to the increasing spread, speed and scale of migration-related diversification processes, mirrors an endeavour to overcome the overlapping between diversity and ethnicity. It is relevant, therefore, far beyond migration studies. It also needs to be appreciated as distinct from the pre-existing notion of *intersectionality*. The latter concept, as primarily theorized by feminist scholars (e.g. Yuval-Davis 2006), does not seem to cover an equally wide spectrum of axes of differentiation – including factors such as legal status, age, length of stay and so on. More importantly, the notions of diversity and superdiversity point to the relevance of an 'emic' perspective – or, how social actors perceive, make sense of and react to the situated intersection between multiple attributes over their life course. Superdiversity also calls for moving beyond the identity politics waged in the name of diversity, while recognizing the importance of individual trajectories (rather than cross-sectional categorizations) of migration, labour market participation and legal statuses.

Having said this, the term is not without its critics. Apart from the risks of indeterminacy discussed above, superdiversity should not necessarily be understood as a discursive celebration of diversity per se. It is rather a lens to further de-essentialize ethnic and cultural differences, casting light on the underlying concurrent processes of societal differentiation, individual identification and group (dis)alignment. In the frame of this article, therefore, superdiversity stands for an emerging lens on the impingements of accelerated societal diversification processes, particularly salient in large urban areas, for social work theory and practice. Nonetheless, it is for now unclear if, and under what circumstances, this construct stands for a merely quantitative change – that is for increasingly complex and accelerated patterns of diversity – or, rather, for a qualitative turning point, given the difference such patterns would make for those involved, and for broader societal arrangements.

Interestingly, superdiversity need not entail only a multi-level interaction between distinct axes of social diversification. It also points to insufficiencies of group-based criteria of identification and belonging. At issue is the relevance of orthodox diversity markers, conceived as internally homogeneous and mutually exclusive, for describing the lifestyles, preferences and needs of those who bear (or are attributed) them (Fanshawe and Sriskandarajahm 2010). This critique of the 'tick-box approach' to identity and ethnicity has potentially important implications for social work theory and practice. It challenges the routine ways of categorizing 'ethnic' clients, as much as the ordinary self-perceptions of social workers, and their agencies, as 'ordinary' and culture-free subjects. I will address such implications looking first at the theoretical debate and then at some key issues for professional practice. I specifically use *superdiversity* whenever I find it to produce distinctive implications for my argument – as a matter of accelerated and multidimensional diversity, or as a reminder of the inadequacy of rigid group categorizations. Otherwise I will simply use the notion of *diversity*.

Diversity and superdiversity in the theoretical map of social work with 'ethnic' clients

Diversity, whether 'super' or not, has long been hinted at in the literature on immigrants and ethnic minorities (Sundar et al. 2012). The added value of a distinctive elaboration on it should be primarily assessed against two long-standing traditions.

First, diversity should be located in the field of *culturally sensitive* or *culturally competent practice* (Lum 2007; Kohli et al. 2010; Harrison and Turner 2011). Several US-based models of intervention in social work, education and psychology have built on cultural competence as a 'multidimensional construct', broadly defined as professionals' incremental ability to meet the needs and expectations (both of them culturally defined) of ethnic minority groups (Boyle and Springer 2001, 55). Recommendations for practitioners to be culturally competent abound in the literature. Rarely, however, have the viewpoints and expectations of immigrant clients been factored into the definition of what this competence should amount to (for one exception, see Chau et al. 2011). Competence markers remain vague – amounting to a combination of self-awareness, knowledge and skills. Likewise, the impact of competence frameworks on social work education and practice remains remarkably understudied (Boyle and Springer 2001). At the same time, the gradual extension of this debate across Europe and elsewhere has enabled further refinements and less culturalistic views of professional competence (e.g. Ari and Strier 2010; Furlong and Wight 2011).

Inadequate cultural competence of helping professionals is often emphasized among the reasons for social care agencies' failure in providing ethnic minority clients with equal chances of 'success' – a point well demonstrated in the UK case, and widely claimed elsewhere (Vickers et al. 2013). Having said of the need for stronger investment in culturally oriented education and training, this charge may be instrumental in downplaying the responsibility and underachievement of social work agencies (Harrison and Turner 2011). Promisingly, in this respect, a case has recently been made for a shift of focus from 'staff cultural competence' to 'cultural responsiveness at the organizational level' (Chow and Austin 2008, 60).

Against this background, the notion of diversity ushers in a more constructivist and fluid, less essentialist notion of culture, whereby 'individual experience and belief... cannot be assumed from attributions to, and about, larger cultural groups' (Chau et al. 2011, 23). It is a good reminder of the insufficiency of ethnic and cultural categorizations in accounting for the life options and behaviours – including the interactions with welfare agencies – of those labelled as 'diverse'. Interestingly, recent revisits of the cultural competence approach (e.g. Davis 2009) have likewise recognized the need to escape 'groupist' and immutable conceptions of cultural difference, arguing for a more relationally and contextually sensitive practice. The very understanding of cultural competence could be expanded to embrace non-ethnic 'identity markers' that are also associated with social exclusion – in fine resonance with the superdiversity thesis (Harrison and Turner 2011). Indeed, the latter does enlarge this debate, by addressing the interface between migration and other sources of individual and collective differentiation.

Furthermore, a comparative reference can be made to a stream of literature that has resulted, over time, in *anti-racist* (Dominelli 2008), *anti-oppressive* (Dominelli 2002) and *anti-discriminatory* (Thompson 2006) social work. What these distinct if cognate approaches share is an emphasis on the structural inequalities and power imbalances underlying social work practice – including those between clients and practitioners. While a stronger awareness of this inescapable power dimension should be integrated into the debate on diversity and superdiversity, the latter provides a more nuanced account of the practical influence of a social worker's background. The everyday encounter with (super)diversity, as embodied by immigrant clients, can make practitioners more sensitive to the relevance of *their own* identity attributes, in terms of ethnicity, class, gender, age and so forth. Professionals – not just theorists – are then called to a reflexive and self-critical turn (Hugman 1996, 140).

By tracing the interactions between practitioners' and clients' mutual identities, categories, power positions and prerogatives, an emphasis on diversity makes a remarkable contribution. It problematizes the homogeneity and exclusivity of the categories themselves (primarily ethnicity and ethnic groups), both as frames of identification for their members and as frames for oppression and discrimination against them. It sheds light on their intersections and mutual constitution within, no less than across, ethnic lines. A diversity lens also stimulates a reflexive appreciation of the potential plurality of identifications and identity markers on both sides of a helping relationship. A superdiversity lens would add to this the shifting trajectories that situationally put different salience on these intersecting differentiations.

Ethnic attributes and ascriptions, then, can be aptly relativized – their relevance depending on the external context and on the specific characteristics and needs of each client. The relatively non-hierarchical and non-dichotomous notion of diversity first questions 'the idea of a culturally neutral social worker' vis-à-vis the client as 'a culturally different "other"', and second, it contributes to 'work through differences', rather than across them, up to assessing if ethnicity is relevant ('and if so, how'), or if other variables matter more (Sundar et al. 2012, 365–367).

Towards the empirical study of diversity and superdiversity in social work practice

Ethnic, cultural and religious diversity is now an oft-quoted principle in the social work literature, mostly in an educationally oriented fashion (e.g. Kohli et al. 2010). Prescriptive accounts abound on how diversity should affect professional practice. Yet, the empirically based knowledge of this issue lags remarkably behind. Little research is available about, say, how client diversity is reflected in organizational arrangements and cultures; how it is perceived and understood by social workers, their managers and other relevant professionals; how and if it is constructed and claimed by clients and their families and community members. Given this state of the art, I exploratorily discuss three aspects of the professional practice on which the lenses of diversity and superdiversity raise distinctive insights and dilemmas: the ways of framing clients, the reception of diversity in social work agencies and the everyday interactions between practitioners and immigrant clients.

Framing clients through the lenses of diversity and superdiversity

Culture, or for that matter ethnicity, can easily be employed by social workers as a cognitive schema and overarching explanatory category, helpful for making cursory sense of psychosocial needs and problems with more varied and subtle roots (van der Haar 2009). One may wonder if a deeper awareness of the increasing diversity of immigrant service clients can prevent the traps of culturalization.

In principle, a diversity lens has the potential to move beyond the stereotypical framing of immigrants under the guise of one ‘ascribed collective culture’ (van der Haar 2009, 146). This holds in three respects. First, diversity casts light on the influence of a variety of cultural subgroups – and not only of a single predefined ethnic group – on a client’s life circumstances (Gelman 2004). Second, it traces the background of their disadvantage in several factors that lie beyond ethnicity (and, combined with the latter, may have a cumulative effect). Third – and here the ‘super’ label would specifically apply – it invites revisiting the relevance of one’s ethnic group as a frame of identification: is this really the primary frame (which may well be the case), or do different, less visible axes of identification matter more to a client’s life circumstances? While encountering, for instance, an immigrant middle-aged woman with several dependent children and in search of some job, a social worker could investigate the connections between her unemployment and such variables as ethno-national background, labour market barriers and lack of work–family conciliation services. Less obviously, though, a ‘superdiverse’ range of individually relevant factors could also enter the picture: among them, gender, age, religious beliefs, family care obligations, level of education and a lack of informal support networks. While the client’s exposure to structural inequalities and discriminations is part of the problem, such factors point to a more complex profile of disadvantage, and to the need for integrated and multidimensional practice.

Incorporating a diversity-oriented approach is, of course, not without its costs. A variably rigid categorization of service users is not simply an effect of practitioners’ cognitive schemata. It also links to, possibly primarily, the routinization of work practices and decreasing resources available to deal with individual cases. Additionally, diversity – taken seriously, rather than as an evocative slogan – is not something simply and easily ‘out there’. Rather, it points to a constellation of social pressures, irremediably reluctant to ready-for-use categorizations. In principle, the need to do justice to client diversity all over the helping process is justified by sound theoretical and ethical grounds, as mission statements of social work agencies emphasize. In practice, it raises costs and issues that go beyond the cultural competence debate.

Likewise, a more systematic recognition of the diverse circumstances of each client could be instrumental to a professional practice better ‘tailored’ to their specific needs and life views. Embodying the diversity principle in a person-centred social work practice, however, may turn out to be an ambivalent effort. Effective ‘personalization’, particularly with immigrant or ethnic minority clients, would entail dealing with an entangled web of meta-individual references that paradoxically depersonalize the social work process; they enlarge its remit to a much broader network, hence to a spectrum of different needs and interests. The influence of family-, community- or religion-based ties, obligations and mutual expectations is likely to militate against

any ego-centred solution – and possibly against the self-reliance of any individual client. The literature on case and family work with clients from minority ethnic or religious backgrounds is replete with instances, and dilemmas, of this sort.² How much of their diversity can be grasped in cognitive terms *and* used as a constructive resource to address individual social problems or disadvantages, is again a question with no pre-given general answer. While appreciating diversity in situated, contextual and relationally thick ways is commendable, dealing seriously with it may be tantamount to opening Pandora's box. This applies even more if commonly used identifiers are further differentiated, as the superdiversity notion suggests. Under the typical work circumstances of social workers, this could be enough to justify the explicatory centrality of a client's culture or ethnicity – sometimes, regrettably, at the risk of essentialization.

As far as service users are concerned, the diversity debate has a parallel in the increasing 'demands of "minority" groups... for more relevant responses to their needs, provided in ways which recognize their identity' (Hugman 1996, 131). One may wonder, then, if diversity and in extension superdiversity are effective discursive resources for client mobilization vis-à-vis welfare agencies and public institutions. What do they add to clients' demands for involvement in service provision, or to claims-making based on principles such as equality, anti-discrimination or recognition?

That a broad and 'politically correct' notion such as diversity has the potential to catalyse collective identifications and coalitions seems to me quite dubious. The same likely holds for diversity as a resource for social workers' advocacy on minorities' behalf (Healy 2004; Martínez-Brawley and Zorita 2011). While clients' shared identities and backgrounds may be less rigid or unidimensional than they were perceived to be in the past, such fluidity risks being a poor substitute of traditional frames for collective action such as gender, disability, sexuality or even ethnicity. I return to this point below.

How diversity matters, and is understood, within social work agencies

Organizational cultures and arrangements have provided, in the last decades, a promising meso-level at which the potential of diversity can be appreciated, both as a principle and a set of practices. The need to take diversity into account is increasingly recognized, rhetorically at least, within welfare institutions and organizations in Europe (Faist 2009) –including social service agencies. For the latter, an interest in diversity has been driven by a concern with equality, social justice and anti-discrimination, more than by any entrepreneurial vision of diversity as an organizational asset. Notions such as 'culturally responsive organizations' have been developed accordingly. Among the measures to translate these principles into organizational procedures, routines and cultures, staff training has generally been the most obvious option, in the USA at least, above all in child welfare and in mental health (Chow and Austin 2008).

Strategies to make social work practice more reflective of clients' diversity include the ethnocultural diversification of staff recruitment and of service providers. In one way, ethnic clients' increasing participation in social professions is a desirable

development in itself. In another, it should not be necessarily assumed as a prerequisite for culturally competent practice. Even less should it be understood as a way out of the power asymmetries and the distinctive role prerogatives that are inherent in social worker–client relationships. Limited evidence exists in support of a major difference that ethnic recruitment would make in meeting ethnic clients' needs, or in addressing their disadvantages (Sakamoto 2007). Available research suggests that an 'ethnic/cultural/racial match' between practitioners and clients 'is not necessary for successful work' (Gelman 2004, 102), as the former's ability to understand the latter's life views need not rely on cultural bases. What is more, such matching is likely to prove increasingly complex if the variety of clients' categorizations and identifications is to be taken 'in earnest'. As the superdiversity idea helpfully suggests, culture or ethnicity need not be the only or major distinctive markers of minority clients. Other factors – such as social class, legal status, lack of education or of support networks, as well as overexposure to discrimination – can turn out to be equally relevant. The challenge for social work practice, then, lies not only in focusing on the situated 'intersection' between race, gender and class, as an intersectionality lens would suggest. More radically, the field of the potentially relevant axes of diversity should be appreciated as open-ended and in need of systematic investigation over time, depending on the faceted profiles of immigrant clients, as well as of service providers.

On the side of welfare agencies, linguistic and cultural proximity may well be crucial in the early contacts between clients and agencies. That said, other variables appear as or more predictive of effective practice over time; among them, social services' investment in anti-discrimination, collaboration between service providers (and other professionals), and the broader structure of opportunity for migrants' local integration. Greater empirical attention should also be given, in the debate on diversity-oriented social work practice, to the organizational cultures and settings of social work agencies. In a sort of tacit over-individualization of cultural competence, organizational influences are often downplayed, contrary to individual workers' intercultural attitudes and skills. In principle, external pressures for budget retrenchment and overburdened caseloads, along with broader trends to managerialization and hyper-specialization (Lorenz 2005; Ferguson 2007), do not question the discursive salience of non-discrimination, cultural competence or respect of diversity. In practice, however, they do risk undermining the enactment of these principles, thus enlarging the implementation gap between official declarations and everyday practices of social work agencies (Harrison and Turner 2011).

How diversity affects street-level relationships between social workers and immigrant clients

The ways in which diversity plays out in day-to-day interactions between professionals and minority clients provide another promising research terrain. What does the literature suggest about the understanding, enactment and impact of diversity-related traits and claims within helping relationships? Empirical research on this is limited, to my knowledge, to a few qualitative case studies (e.g. Van der Haar 2009; Harrison and Turner 2011). Even so, some issues are worth sketching out.

A widespread and compelling case has recently been made for the need to include ‘user perspectives’ in the design and implementation of social work interventions (Beresford 2012). When it comes to immigrant minorities, this should entail, once again, forms of consultation or involvement that do not rely solely on ethnic frames and assumptions. The challenge does not lie only in immigrant clients’ overexposure to discrimination, nor in their typically limited or tokenistic forms of participation (Vickers et al. 2013). It is equally critical to recognize that, once unidimensional accounts are discarded, what diversity is, or should be, is not necessarily self-evident to service users themselves.

Ironically, the erosion of the traditionally strong boundaries of identification and affiliation along ethnic or other ‘strong’ lines (e.g. class, gender or religion) need not be universally welcomed as ‘valuing diversity’. Put differently, the relative permeability and mutability of the mainstream ethnocultural categories may generate an essentialist backlash in those who could be labelled, at least from the outside, as ‘superdiverse’. At a personal level, there is nothing obvious in accommodating the ensuing variety of partial and fragmented forms of membership, affiliation or belonging. The process may well depend on one’s economic, human, social and cultural capital. The compelling argument for deconstructing static and reified categories, such as ethnicity, seems sometimes unreflective of a simple matter of fact: the obstinate persistence of many forms of essentialism, first of all along ethnic lines, in everyday life practices and representations – as, among other things, basic tools of sense-making of the social reality.

This gap between specialist and common wisdom is particularly worrying in a field like social work, which has necessarily strong practical implications. Of critical importance to its practitioners is an appreciation of the disjuncture between diversity (i.e. multi-causality) of service users’ disadvantaged conditions, and monolithic and essentialist understandings that clients may have of their condition. How clients define and understand diversity is a major research gap. It is up to social workers to try to bridge this gap through the professional relationships that they build – although insights about diversity, and even more so superdiversity, are likely to be more helpful as a *pars destruens* than as a *pars construens*.

Conclusion

Diversity is by now a recurrent category in social work course syllabuses and in the self-representations of social work agencies. What ‘honouring’ or ‘valuing’ it should practically entail is, however, more dubious and less generalizable. Unsurprisingly, research on how diversity is negotiated in street-level interactions between professionals and ethnic minority clients is relatively scant. A gap exists between the pedagogical merit of a multidimensional and flexible approach to clients’ identities, needs and circumstances, as a compendium of the diversity notion; and the cognitive and organizational costs that this raises in practice. The gap grows even larger if the more ambitious notion of superdiversity is taken into account. The latter category has a promising heuristic potential for understanding minority clients’ faceted needs and claims. The scope for applying it at an organizational level, though, would seem to depend on a significant revisiting of mainstream practices and modes of thinking.

While dealing with superdiversity calls for a flexible, open-ended and personalized approach to immigrant clients, it also requires organizational and professional resources – in terms of training, supervision and workload allocation – that should not go unnoticed.

As an empirical attribute, superdiversity need not be relevant to any social work setting. The actual relevance of superdiverse societal arrangements, and of possibly ‘eccentric’ social identifications, is very context-dependent – large urban areas and countries with a stronger immigration background being typically more superdiverse than the rest. That said, coping with the implications of this category for social work means looking for some mediation between two contrasting pressures: on the one hand, the simultaneous and accelerated influence of distinct axes of differentiation and identification on users’ identities, needs and claims; on the other, the need for relatively simple and rigid categorization practices, and the inertia to extensive change that is inherent in any professional organizational arrangement on a large scale.

The relevance of the ‘super’ label, then, is ultimately a matter to be empirically assessed, rather than aprioristically asserted. Whether ‘super’ or not, diversity is worth exploring not only as a societal attribute and an externally attributed category, but also as a subjectively meaningful one – that is, as a source of personal identification that may coexist with a variety of other ones. Another potential gap should then be addressed: that between diversity as a set of intersecting processes out there, and the sense that people (here: social work practitioners and clients) make of them. Importantly, to escape a merely ‘orientalist’ depiction of diversity – as if it pertained only to a cultural other (in this case, a minority client) – both service users and providers have to be considered in this lens, as opposed to a neutral and culture-free standard that social workers would embody.

Altogether, practically dealing with (super)diversity in social work is no easy task. It still seems preferable, however, to an over-reliance on clients’ culture or ethnicity – which, as a frame for helping relationships, neither cognitively nor ethically does justice to them. While much literature seems still to be stuck in the age-old stalemate of culturalized versus culturally blind accounts (cf. Richmond 1917, 382), a (super)diversity-oriented perspective, to be refined further, may well provide a reasonable way ahead.

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Notes

1. Witness to this, even in Italy – a country with a relatively short immigration record and a weakly institutionalized anti-discrimination culture – a reference to diversity stands out in the national Code of Ethics of Social Workers (2009, art. 35):

A social worker must always... be fully aware of the social reality of the area in which he is based, and take due note of its cultural and ethical context by recognising the value of the diverse and heterogeneous nature of those who live there as something to safeguard and defend, and by refuting any form of discrimination.

2. See, for instance, the overview of case and family work with Muslim clients in Crabtree et al. (2008).

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PAOLO BOCCAGNI is a Lecturer in the Department of Sociology and Social Research, University of Trento, Italy.

ADDRESS: Università di Trento, Dipartimento di Sociologia e ricerca sociale, via Verdi 26 -38122 Trento, Italy. Email: paolo.boccagni@unitn.it.