

Reaping the rewards of super diversity

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Summary

- The news has been dominated by debates about migration and dealing with the ‘challenges’ that go with it.
- However, there is increasing recognition that ‘superdiversity’ arising from years of migration and mixing of different socio-economic groupings can have positive benefits.
- This briefing examines recent research from the Open University’s [Living Multiculture](#) project, which looked at the way people from different backgrounds interacted in public parks and franchised cafes; research from Bristol University, which [attributes](#) the success of London’s pupils at GCSE to its rich ethnic mix; and the outcome of an international [conference](#) on superdiversity organised by the University of Birmingham [Institute for Research into Superdiversity](#) (IRIS), to better understand how different communities interrelate and how we can maximise the benefits of superdiversity.
- This briefing will be of particular interest to councillors and staff working in policy, demographics, strategic planning and education.

Briefing in full

Background

Globalisation, conflict and improved transportation mean that the World’s population is more mobile than ever before, leading to a super diversity of ethnic and social groupings living side by side in communities in Britain and elsewhere.

While these developments prompt fears about the erosion of locally held values, fragmentation, racism, conflict, lower pay and reduced job security, less, and more

expensive housing, worsening access to public services and pressure on natural resources if approached positively superdiversity can bring enormous benefits.

This briefing summarises a number of key, recent pieces of research on superdiversity which suggest approaches councils can take to improve interaction and promote more dynamic and harmonious communities.

Superdiversity – rethinking society in an era of change

In June the University of Birmingham Institute for Research in Superdiversity (IRIS) organised an international conference bringing together over 120 academics, policymakers and practitioners to explore this emerging phenomenon.

There was general agreement that ethnicity alone is no longer a suitable lens through which to see diversity. Speakers argued that factors like language, established versus newer communities and differences in educational attainment should also be considered when analysing difference and that people now have multiple identities and affiliations which need to be factored in.

While diversity is not new, factors like new technology, improved mobility and the accelerated pace of change are complicating social realities. Neighbourhoods are now a series of interconnected histories and narratives which require investigation and interpretation.

Superdiversity marks a shift away from mono-dimensional and bi-dimensional models. Prevailing European assumptions such as 'it is the duty of the migrant to adapt to the prevailing culture' must be challenged and reworked.

Research methods will need to adapt to take account of superdiversity – researchers will need to think about things like language and setting, to enable them to gain meaningful access to a broad range of people.

Some argued that the notion of superdiversity can mask inequality, while others believed that it could help to better explain the complex nature of power and privilege in modern society and why some are able to rapidly redefine their roles in different social contexts to take advantage of emerging opportunities.

Suzanne Wessendorf, Marie Curie Research Fellow at IRIS, has just published a [book](#) called *Commonplace Diversity*, social relations in a superdiverse context. Drawing on fieldwork from the London Borough of Hackney she argues that diversity has become so commonplace there, that residents see it as a normal part of everyday life. The book describes their daily activities and social relations and how they pragmatically negotiate difference.

Everyday encounters in franchised cafes

Researchers observed and interviewed people using three branches of franchised

cafe chains in Milton Keynes, Oadby near Leicester and Hackney to see how they worked to bring people from different communities together. Such establishments are often dismissed as homogeneous and commercialised non places, but the researchers found that their very blandness and anonymity may encourage greater mixing and familiarity between groups who might otherwise be separated by ethnic difference.

The research centred round a large McDonalds in central Milton Keynes, where, according to the 2011 Census, 26% of the population is not from a white British background. Costa Coffee is the setting for the research in Oadby, a small, affluent town on the edge of Leicester, where 71% described themselves as white British and 18% Indian in the 2011 Census, and a branch of Nandos in Hackney, East London, where only 36% of residents described themselves as white British in the last Census the rest constituting a rich mix of 'other' white, black African and Caribbean South, and East Asian. This ethnic superdiversity is being further compounded by rapid gentrification.

Each cafe space had distinct layout and design. McDonalds was bright, functional 'North American', with hard chairs and bright lights to speed customers efficiently through the eating process, Costa borrowed from Italian culture, self service, but with soft chairs and newspapers which seemed to encourage a more leisurely approach – the branch also had a room that could be booked for meetings blurring the lines between work and leisure, while Nandos emphasised its African/Portuguese heritage with African prints and a menu of barbecued chicken in various guises. All of the restaurants could be said to be in place, but not of it.

All three cafes attracted a diverse range of customers in terms of ethnicity, age and class.

The observations reveal the multiple ways people use these spaces – passing time, meeting, socialising, reviving, both alone and in groups, the way the clientele changes at different times of the day and the incidental interactions which arise.

Evidence of laptops and smartphones underlines the emerging importance of such cafes as places of work, as well as places where people may interact interpersonally as well as with 'multiple elsewhere's'.

At busy times people are forced to share tables, which can also facilitate informal interaction.

Regular users of franchised cafe spaces quickly familiarise themselves with the protocols and etiquette – they knew 'what to do' and hence seemed confident and able to express themselves freely – which included ethnic-related banter – one woman commented 'I'm Asian not Greek, they've got the wrong continent'.

The researchers also visited independent cafes and talked to groups of sixth form students, park, and library users and social groups about their thoughts about the local cafe offer.

In Oadby the researchers found a local, quaint, independent café was quiet, stilted and had a less diverse clientele compared to Costa. In Hackney an ethnically diverse group of creative writers, many of whom had lived in the area for a long time, were uneasy about the growth of independent coffee shops established by mainly white, more affluent incomers. They were unsure who they were catering for, or felt they were aimed at a niche, rather than at everyone.

A visit to an independent cafe in Hackney uncovered a less ethnically diverse clientele than in Nandos.

Multiculture and public parks

Researchers interviewed users of urban parks in Milton Keynes, Oadby and Hackney alone, and then in groups, and attended special events in the parks. They found that parks encourage easy and informal social interaction. Less formal collective activities such as football, dog walking and fun days in particular offer valuable opportunities for amicable interaction between different ethnic groups.

Knighton Park in Leicestershire is a 78 acre park with woodlands and gardens within easy reach of Oadby. It is a day trip destination for people from all over Leicester. Springfield Park in Hackney covers 48 acres of heath, and woodland and contains an ornamental lake football pitches and tennis courts. Its location means that it is often walked through en route to somewhere else,

Willen Lake and Campbell Park are products of Milton Keynes's new town design with formal landscaping, planted woodland, paths and cycleways. These parks are destinations, rather than walk through venues, and their users tend to be less ethnically mixed than the other two – although on special events such as fireworks night a greater mix was evident.

Parks are the venue for a range of activities including sport, eating and relaxing – participants from Leicestershire and Hackney in particular said they saw the same people repeatedly and became familiar and comfortable with them, even if they did not converse.

Participants reported a deep affection for their parks based on memories as well as a liking for the setting and resources the parks had to offer, as well as the opportunities for social interaction. One participant felt it was easier to interact with neighbours in a park than if they were passing them on the street because they were both choosing to be there, enjoying the space.

One participant commented that her park was simultaneously typically English, with its lawns and ponds and at the same time a universal symbol of calm that could be recognised and appreciated by people the World over.

While observations were generally positive some, especially in the less diverse parks of Milton Keynes cited bad as well as good memories and there was evidence that participants adjusted their use of the parks in line with seasons or time of day. Some

concerns were also raised about ball games, rap concerts in the parks, uncontrolled dogs and picnics spreading too far.

Superdiversity and educational attainment – understanding the success of London's schools

This paper from the Centre for Market and Public Organisation at the University of Bristol found that GCSE candidates in London from non white British backgrounds made more progress than their white British peers. And because London has a higher percentage of these pupils – 64% compared with 16% in England as a whole, the presence of so many higher scoring newly migrant children almost entirely explains the higher average GCSE results achieved by London pupils - 60.8% of London's pupils achieved five or more good GCSE passes including English and Maths in 2014, compared with 52.6% in England.

White British pupils also do better in London than the rest of England, but the authors argue this is likely to be due to the positive influence of aspirant, ambitious, newly migrant children and their families.

The report argues improved standards in places like London and Birmingham are not down to government policies like the London Challenge, or good teaching and school leadership, but to the parents and pupils, who have created successful, ethnically integrated school communities.

Comment

The concept of superdiversity is still a relatively new one. Academics and policymakers are still getting to grips with what it really means and available research still only covers a limited range of topics.

However, superdiversity provides a useful framework to explore the myriad ways in which the complexities of the World economic and political situation play out at local level.

The research on public spaces and education outlined in this briefing shows that, if approached correctly, superdiversity is not necessarily a barrier to the creation of harmonious communities – in fact it can bring strategic, competitive advantages which should be exploited to ensure localities can thrive and prosper.

For more information about this, or any other LGiU member briefing, please contact Janet Sillett, Briefings Manager, on janet.sillett@lgiu.org.uk