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“We have to teach them diversity”: on demographic transformations and lived reality in an Amsterdam working-class neighbourhood

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to contribute to the ongoing debate on what the notion of super-diversity means in the practice of everyday life. Whereas the founder of the super-diversity concept, Steven Vertovec, primarily uses the term to point to specific demographic transformations, other scholars have deployed it in more ideological or theoretical terms. Based on ethnographic research in a working-class area of Amsterdam, this study analyses how and to what extent a new demographic super-diverse reality is lived on the ground. Whereas some studies show that super-diverse demographics can result in a super-diverse lived reality in which ethnic and racial diversity becomes the “new normal”, this article reveals a different situation. The findings of this study suggest that demographic transformations leading to increased migration-driven diversity can reinforce boundaries between groups of neighbourhood residents based on dominant class, racial and ethnic distinctions.

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Introduction

The concept of super-diversity, since it was coined by Vertovec (2007), has taken on a life of its own. Vertovec’s aim to “encapsulate a range of … changing variables surrounding migration patterns” (Meissner and Vertovec 2015, 542), resonated well with the difficulties and “newness and novelty” (Phillimore 2015) often confronting policymakers, welfare organizations and scholars in the context of the diversification of migrant populations and rapidly changing demographics in urban settings. Whereas Vertovec introduced the term as a descriptive tool to interrogate the “complexities … of
migration-driven diversity” (Meissner and Vertovec 2015, 542), recently the term also has been deployed by a variety of scholars in theoretical and ideological ways (for an overview and criticism of the multiple uses of the super-diversity notion, see Meissner 2015).

In initiating the concept of super-diversity, Vertovec intended to highlight three interconnected aspects: the description of transformed demographics arising from new global migration flows, the need for a new methodology to address complex and new social formations and more practical or policy-oriented aspects arising from the diversification of migrant statuses, migrations flows and channels (Meissner and Vertovec 2015). As Meissner and Vertovec (2015, 543) note, in contrast to the original meaning of the super-diversity term, it is often used “simply to mean the increasing presence of ‘more ethnic groups’”. Whereas Vertovec aimed to address “patterns of diversification among ethnic groups themselves” (Vertovec 2007, 1026), the focus in subsequent scholarly work on super-diversity has often been on the impact of growing ethnic, religious and racial diversity in urban settings, on – how residents perceive others and interact in the context of this new diversity. This article responds to the latter strand of scholarly literature, focusing on the implications of super-diverse demographics for everyday social life in urban settings.

In general, social scientists who use the term super-diversity refer to an urban setting where more people than before originate from a wider variety of different countries and speak a wider range of languages, and where many different religious, cultural and ethnic minorities live together (e.g. Creese and Blackledge 2010; Blommaert and Varis 2011; Sepulveda, Syrett, and Lyon 2011; Duarte and Gogolin 2013; Ram et al. 2013; Padilla, Azevedo, and Olmos-Alcaraz 2015). In addition, some scholars have employed super-diversity to emphasize the changing power balance in urban settings which have a growing and internally diversified migrant population. Numerous authors (Phillips 2008; Spoonley 2015; Crul 2016) argue that super-diverse demographics may create majority–minority cities where no single ethnic group dominates the public or semi-public sphere through sheer numbers. In such a super-diverse context, diversity, it has been contended, comes to be seen as the new normal (Wessendorf 2014). In a similar vein, Crul (2016, 57) argues in his discussion of super-diversity and assimilation that:

The idea of assimilation or integration becomes at any rate more complex in a situation where there is no longer a clear majority group into which one is to assimilate or integrate. … The group into which one assimilates in the concrete situation of a neighbourhood or a school is, as a result, more and more unlikely to be the old majority group but rather an amalgam of people of different ethnic backgrounds, migration cohorts, migration statuses and socio-economic positions.
Thus, a theme in some of the literature on super-diversity emphasizes that demographic super-diverse settings engender new power balances, including reduced cultural dominance of an “old ethno-racial majority” as well as less pressure on newer ethno-racial minorities to assimilate to the former dominant group. Sometimes, this development is accompanied by expressly optimistic and sometimes even ideological phrases. Social life in super-diverse urban communities, for example, has sometimes been presented as becoming more morally progressive, a “scenario of empowerment and hope” (Crul, Schneider, and Lelie 2013, 11) marked by “a general appreciation of diversity” (Wessendorf 2010, 20). The twenty-first century, in one view, is even perceived as morally requiring “the normalization of superdiversity in our rapidly changing modern world” (Geldof 2015).

The study presented here provides a contrasting view. Whereas several scholars show that “commonplace diversity” and mutual assimilation can be a result of changing demographics in super-diverse settings, this article reveals that a super-diverse demographic reality can reinforce distinctions and create boundaries between residents, based on class, ethnicity, skin colour and lifestyle. As Wessendorf (2014, 176) has also highlighted in her book on commonplace diversity, considerations of race and class can continue to dominate everyday social interactions and impede conviviality even in urban settings where ethnic, cultural and religious diversity has become “surprisingly banal” (Wessendorf 2014).

Based on ethnographic research on social interventions in a demographically super-diverse working-class neighbourhood in Amsterdam, this article shows how social relations and power dynamics continue to reflect long-institutionalized class, ethnic and racial distinctions despite the declining number of residents from the old, native white majority. Existing boundaries between the white, native Dutch and those labelled foreigners (seen as “originally not from this soil” due to their colour or ethnic background, even if born in the Netherlands) are emphasized and indeed have been strengthened in the context of increased ethnic and racial diversity.

The area where I conducted my fieldwork can be considered a demographically super-diverse area. Over the last forty years, large numbers of old immigrant-groups from the former Dutch colonies – mainly in the Caribbean – and from Morocco and Turkey – who arrived as guest workers during the 1950s and 1960s – have settled in the neighbourhood, in large part because of its cheap housing. In addition, in the past two decades new immigrants (cf. Vertovec 2007, 1042–1043) from Eastern Europe, the Middle-East, as well as from different African countries have arrived in the area. Both the older and newer waves of immigration are internally diverse in terms of legal statuses, migration channels, class, gender, sexuality and age, contributing to the contemporary demographic situation of super-diversity (Vertovec 2007, 1043). Given the concentration of immigrants and their offspring, as well as
increasing levels of poverty, unemployment, crime, domestic violence, school-drop outs and feelings of insecurity among residents (VROM 2007, 2009; Wittebrood and Permentier 2011), this neighbourhood has raised concerns among and attracted the attention of policymakers and social welfare organizations.

The social interventions at the core of my research aim to enhance mutual integration and social cohesion among residents who differ along the lines of ethnicity, country of origin, race and religion. I was especially interested in how social workers, with financial support from the government, sought to integrate and indeed help individuals from the former majority group – white “natives” of Dutch descent – adjust to the new super-diverse reality in their neighbourhood. To what extent did these social worker initiatives help to establish mutual adaptation and integration within this majority–minority setting? And how were these top-down attempts at social engineering experienced by white native Dutch residents?

In what follows, I set the stage by explaining the Dutch tradition of state-sponsored social interventions in working-class neighbourhoods to situate my fieldwork. I then draw on my ethnographic findings to document how the manager and social workers at the community centre tried to “open up the world views” of elderly white working-class residents and help them acclimatize to the super-diverse era in which their old majority group has declined in numbers. I go on to discuss how the white working-class visitors at the centre responded to these top-down initiatives. Doing so entails an analysis of the intersections of class, race and ethnicity. As we will see, class distinctions, based on the middle-class norms of conduct underpinning the centre’s activities, encouraged a process of ethnic leveraging. Using this strategy, working-class visitors to the community centre resisted the implicit charges of the social workers of being “narrow-minded”, “immoral” and “pathological” by comparing themselves favourably to ethnic, racial and religious “others”. A strong sense of “we” arose among the white working-class visitors, who erected barriers to distinguish themselves from ethnic and racial outsiders. The article ends with some reflections on the implications of the findings for the concept of super-diversity.

**Doing ethnography of Dutch social engineering**

The Netherlands has a long history of social engineering, dating back at least to the 1920s. Whereas national and local governments initially sought to uplift members of the working class and to mould them as receptacles of middle-class norms and values, interventions today mostly target the economic and cultural integration of immigrants and their descendants into Dutch society (Duyvendak and Wekker 2016a). From the perspective of social workers and service providers, social integration is a two-way process
demanding efforts from both immigrants and the “native” population (e.g. Minkler 2012; Simpelaar 2016). Current interventions, therefore, encompass instructing white working-class residents on how to live with the diversity of ethnic, racial and religious “others” in their communities and wider society. The underlying assumption is that heterogeneous urban settings will become better places to live as local networks are strengthened through mutual integration and adaptation, and by all residents learning to live with diversity. The notion of super-diversity in which no ethnic majority is (or should be) dominant resonates with Dutch policy discourse as well as with the practices of local social workers and service providers.

The working-class area in which I pursued ethnographic research is generally considered disadvantaged. It is home to a large concentration of less well-educated immigrants and their descendants, and its residents report high rates of poverty, unemployment, criminality, domestic violence and youth delinquency (VROM 2007, 2009; Wittebrood and Permentier 2011). At the same time, members of the “native”, white working-class population, whose proportion has shrunk in recent decades, complain of feeling more and more out of place in their increasingly diverse surroundings (Duyvendak and Wekker 2016b). Current policies and social interventions focus on community-building and the creation of empowered local networks encompassing a wide range of residents. Heterogeneous networks in terms of class and ethnicity, it is believed, can help overcome integration problems (Veldboer, Kleinhans, and Duyvendak 2002). Activities such as neighbourhood gardening, computer lessons, street barbecues and neighbourhood dinners are encouraged by the national and local government through subsidies to local social organizations.

The local community centre in which my research took place provided inexpensive dinners to neighbourhood residents three times a week. By organizing these dinners, social workers were seeking to counter loneliness and isolation among residents. Above all, they sought to facilitate encounters between people of different cultural backgrounds and generations “to reduce mutual fear and incomprehension”, according to the manager of the community centre. By building local community, social workers believed that the neighbourhood would become a better place to live, that social control and conviviality would increase and that residents would know where and how to find help when needed. Current state-supported attempts to reach out to residents “of all kinds” and help them “bridge their differences” thus fit well within the Dutch tradition of top-down social interventions in working-class and immigrant areas.

Over the course of four months, I conducted 14 in-depth interviews of 2 hours each with regular visitors, 3 lengthy interviews with the restaurant manager, and intensive participant observation with a regular group of about 40 visitors who came to dine at the community centre three nights
each week. I had dinner with them, witnessed ongoing conversations and numerous discussions and participated in all kinds of activities organized by the restaurant’s management and social workers to improve the lifestyles of the working-class visitors. This included activities that sought to open up their world views and bridge differences with ethnic and racial others. The group consisted mostly of elderly native Dutch residents; only three persons of non-Dutch descent were regularly present at the community dinners during my fieldwork. This struck me as odd, given the proportion of non-Dutch ethnic minorities living in the neighbourhood (Wittebrood and Permentier 2011). The question then arose as to how this predominantly white, native Dutch community restaurant had come into being in a demographically super-diverse neighbourhood – and what this revealed about how the area’s demographic changes affected the level of experience and everyday social interaction.

Dealing with “strangers” in a community centre

As this section shows, the activities designed by social workers to encourage white working-class residents to “open up to strangers” had unforeseen and unintended outcomes. Based on their outcomes, I distinguish between two types of community-building practices: those that encouraged a sense of togetherness among smaller groups of self-chosen restaurant friends and those that encouraged a sense of solidarity and collective resistance among all visitors – turning them into a white working-class group sharing similar interests, experiences and an identity (cf. Brubaker 2004).

The first type of activity is illustrated by the practice of changing tables. While most visitors wished to remain at familiar tables and sit with their restaurant friends, the manager at times made them mix with others. This meant that all visitors had to sit with different people and converse on some predetermined topic such as “how to manage your budget”. The restaurant manager explained:

Participation is important to me. So, if you don’t want to participate, don’t come for dinner. (…) The moment we say: “Today we’re going to change tables”, everyone is going to sit down at a different table with people they don’t regularly sit down with (…). When someone responds by saying “I don’t want to sit here or there”, just don’t come; because you’re obstructing things then. In this restaurant, you make a reservation for a meal, not for a particular place to sit. So, one time you can join your regular group, and the other time we do things differently. That’s how we mix people, that’s how the restaurant gets its added value. (Interview with the restaurant manager)

The practice of mixing was unpopular; visitors at the centre were at times openly reluctant, especially as they felt forced to mix. In fact, complaints about the mixing strategy and the manager’s high-handedness created a
bond among the tablemates. As one of my respondents stated: “He [the manager] tries to tear us apart. But that won’t happen. We’ll become a bit angry then”. Instead of encouraging visitors to open up to strangers, the mixing strategy made the regulars more aware of the importance of their “own little club”, leading to efforts to distinguish themselves from other groups of visitors at the restaurant. Another respondent explained: “We simply don’t know them. We do know them by their faces, but not by their names, so they cannot sit with us”.

Whereas the mixing strategy created a sense of togetherness among small groups of restaurant friends, other activities aroused an overarching sense of solidarity among the centre’s white native Dutch working-class visitors. Activities in this category explicitly addressed these visitors as a group of people in need of educating on certain societal, cultural, health and financial issues. A young social worker explained at a lecture on healthy lifestyles: “It is important not to gain too much weight, to eat fresh vegetables and fruit regularly and to go to bed on time”. A man in his late eighties whispered to me: “During World War II, we ate rats, we ate cats, we ate raw sugar beet, and they come here to tell us how to survive? How old do they want us to become?”. During this lecture, and in many other instances, people cast glances and made faces at each other. The consensus among the larger group of visitors was that they had to endure such lectures as it was community centre policy, necessary to maintain municipal funding. To maintain their restaurant community, they had to accept being lectured to and taught how to improve their lives. Many of my respondents, however, believed that they had much to teach the social workers in return: “They may have their grades and diplomas, but I have my experiences”, one told me. “Therefore no one can tell me what to do or how to behave. I could teach them!”

Other activities that evoked a sense of “groupness” (Brubaker 2004) among all visitors included those aiming to bridge differences with those whom I will call ethnic, racial and religious “others”. To attract residents “of all kinds”, the manager of the community centre organized activities ranging from Brazilian night, a meal serving Surinamese food, inviting Muslim youngsters to prepare an iftar meal and showing films on diversity in contemporary Dutch society. However, ethnic minority residents generally did not attend these “special nights”, despite the efforts of the community organizers to “welcome them and make them feel at home”.

On one evening, the manager introduced speakers from an organization founded to create a “new sense of us” – designed to include immigrants and their descendants in the Dutch national identity while encouraging the native Dutch to embrace diversity. The spokeswoman (of German origin) introduced the organization’s aims, all the while emphasizing the importance of “widening our worldviews and learning from differences”. She then showed a short film in which highly educated minority citizens espoused the project of
embracing diversity. At the end of the film, a woman of Surinamese descent speaks directly to the camera: “To create a new sense of us, I suggest that all those who signed the petition to maintain Black Pete should immediately follow a naturalization program”.

Black Pete (Zwarte Piet) is the by now infamous blackface figure in the Dutch tradition of Sinterklaas. Black Pete, the black servant of the white “Good Holy Man” (de Goedheiligman), is performed by white people in blackface, replete with big red lips, golden earrings and more often than not, displaying comically infantile behaviour. While Black Pete has become controversial due to pressure from black Dutch citizens and a report from a United Nations working group, almost 2 million (out of 16 million) Dutch citizens signed a petition to defend the “tradition” of the blackface Pete. Their main argument – that Sinterklaas is a children’s celebration and has nothing to do with race or racism – hinges on the lack of conscious racist intent. Critics, however, point out that it is not the intent but the impact of the blackface figure that makes it racist.

The black woman in the film expressing her disapproval of those who had signed the petition was like a bomb going off in the community centre. Dinner guests began shouting, hitting the table with their spoons, telling me and each other that there was nothing racist about Black Pete, that they could not believe that black people were “even making a fuss about that”. While the lectures on health and lifestyle had only encouraged muted expressions of togetherness, the outburst of collective emotion now reaffirmed the strong bond and sense of solidarity among the white Dutch visitors. All agreed that the black woman had gone too far. Instead of bridging differences and increasing mutual understanding and adaptation between native Dutch residents and “ethnic and racial others”, the film aroused a strong sense of distinctiveness. According to the many visitors, I spoke with that night, “those black people” did not understand a thing about Black Pete and Sinterklaas. “They” did not share “our” traditions and culture so “why should we follow a naturalization program instead of them?!” The attempts of community organizers to encourage mutual integration and adaptation had evoked its opposite, namely an increased sense of us against them. Although the regular visitors felt united through their shared emotions and feelings of being treated unfairly, this was clearly not the kind of social cohesion the organizers had hoped for.

More generally, many white participants at the community centre (and one of the three people of Surinamese descent) regularly demonized ethnic, racial and religious others who, in their view, should adapt to them and Western society rather than the other way around. Confirmation and reaffirmation of common concerns regarding the danger and abnormality of “foreigners”, “Islam”, “Moroccans” and “black people” turned out to be non-negotiable when it came to becoming part of the restaurant community. For the three
people of colour who were regulars at the restaurant, inclusion in the community entailed adopting and expressing these same ideas. The elderly Surinamese-Dutch woman was willing and able to become part of the in-group by echoing the same ideas. To make her position clear, she stated at her table:

Well, I think all this talk about Black Pete is rubbish. You know, children in Suriname, they like it. It isn’t the elderly Surinamese people around here who are making trouble, it’s the younger generation. They start talking about discrimination. But it’s a children’s celebration, it’s about giving presents.

The middle-aged man of Surinamese descent, sitting at the same table together with his younger sister, made clear that they did not share these views: “It’s because Black Pete is called a servant, that can be perceived as denigrating”, the man explained to his tablemates. The elderly woman of Surinamese descent immediately countered: “Well, I think that’s ridiculous!” The other tablemates loudly supported her, and the man and his sister kept quiet for the rest of the meal. Later that night, he told me:

I feel excluded here … I’m excluded from contacts … having contact with other people is difficult here … But, it’s my own shortcoming … I’m not able … I’m not able to put myself in their shoes. Their world is so different from mine. They’re Dutch, you know. Yeah, but I just … I just accept it as it is. That’s what I’m good at. Yeah … that’s what I’m good at.

The key point for the analysis of the ethnographic material here is that the dynamics of social interaction that I observed do not support the findings of, for example, Crul (2016) or Wessendorf (2014) that residents in majority–minority cities (including the white native residents) start to experience ethnic and racial diversity as the new normal in public and semi-public spaces, such as schools and neighbourhood centres. At least in the setting that I observed, top-down attempts by the municipality and the community centre’s leaders to teach the white working-class diversity did not lead to greater acceptance of, or ease with, members of different ethnic and racial groups but ended up strengthening hostile sentiments towards them. The forceful attempts of the manager to bridge ethnic and racial differences and increase mutual understanding resulted in collective acts of resistance among the white Dutch and the exclusion of those who did not comply to Dutch cultural norms.

Discourses of (in)tolerance and othering

In what follows, I will discuss two – seemingly opposite – discourses that were used by the manager and social workers involved, to distinguish between themselves and their working-class visitors: a discourse of tolerance combined with a discourse of othering. At the same time, the visitors used a discourse of othering combined with a discourse of intolerance to distinguish themselves
from so-called foreigners As the material below shows, both combinations of discourses helped maintain institutionalized boundaries between the white middle-class social workers and their white working-class visitors, as well as between white Dutch people (including the management and visitors), and coloured, non-Dutch residents.

The various activities at the centre I have described that were initiated by the manager and social workers were at times underpinned by mixed messages from them. On the one hand, the social workers relied on a discourse of tolerance towards differences – “we are all different and can learn from each other”. Aware of the prejudices and worldviews of those who came to the centre, the manager told me he had to organize bridging activities to teach the white working-class tolerance towards ethnic diversity:

It is this segment of the population. When you’re so straightforward, when you don’t have any education, when you’re not used to dealing with matters in a profound way, then, at a certain moment you start repeating yourself, you stick to your own account simply to make things understandable. (…) If we wouldn’t organize activities like these, they wouldn’t get in touch with it; they must learn how to deal with diversity.

On the other hand, and while deploying their discourse of tolerance, the manager as well as the social workers carefully distanced themselves from what they referred to as “this segment of the population”. Despite their good intentions, the manager and social workers used a discourse of othering to distinguish between “us” (tolerant, educated, middle-class people) and “them” (the narrow-minded, less educated, white working-class visitors at the center). As became apparent in the centre’s activities, tolerance was preached for ethnic, racial and religious differences – but not for class differences.

The mixed and contradictory messages were picked up by my white working-class respondents. They knew that middle-class moral standards and norms of conduct portrayed them as different, pathological and other (cf. Wekker 2017). The mixed discourse of tolerance and othering thus had an unforeseen – yet profound – effect on the working-class visitors at the community centre. In an attempt to establish respectability (cf. Skeggs 1997; Scharff 2008), they collectively resisted the assumption underpinning the organized activities that they were the ones whose lifestyles and conduct needed improvement. As the following passage and my field notes suggest, many white working-class visitors to the restaurant preferred pointing to the pathologically bad morality of foreigners rather than bridging differences and embracing diversity:

We, the Dutch people aren’t aggressive. (…) But when I say something to a Moroccan, I’m drawn into a fight immediately. That’s just not right. (…) And there are more of these people than we might think. It’s not just two neighbors,
it’s half of the neighborhood! (…) And we don’t go out onto the streets to fight for our own space, you know. (…) I mean, Hitler slaughtered a whole bunch of people, and … well, that’s not the way to do it, of course. (…) I guess, we just have to live with it. (Interview with Piet)²

At one table, Bob asked the other visitors: “What do you all think about the American who was beheaded by Islamic State? Your opinions please?” This led to a heated conversation. One woman said: “I think it’s in their blood. These people from the East, they just have to kill.” Another woman added: “Yeah, I know. It’s been a blood thirsty bunch of people, for as long as I can remember.” Yet another woman said that she couldn’t believe that “these people” are religious. The elderly woman of Surinamese descent began a detailed explanation of how the Islamic State gets its weapons, and why Jews should never have gone to Israel. “I say,” another woman interjected, “it’s all the same: Israelites and Palestinians, one bunch of blood-thirsty people.” Everyone nods their approval. (…) Then a man says something about a new mosque that’s going to be built in Amsterdam. Bob starts shouting: “Shut all the mosques down! Shut them all down and send all the Muslims back to their own country!” (Research diary)

Discussion and gossip about these “bad others” played a central role during community dinners, contributing to a sense of togetherness and self-esteem among the white Dutch residents.

In sum, the class distinctions drawn by the social workers and manager – between themselves and their white working-class charges – were primarily based on the latter’s unwillingness to tolerate ethnic, racial and religious differences. By emphasizing the importance of tolerance as a means to distinguish between social classes, both class and ethnic boundaries were accentuated rather than bridged.

A related issue is the mechanism through which white working-class visitors at the community centre sought to resist the management’s assumptions that they were pathological and a threat to social integration.

As we have seen, talking about ethnic, racial and religious others created a cohesive bond among the white Dutch visitors to the community centre. To put it another way, they felt connected and better about themselves as a group by comparing themselves to an “other”. This mechanism, where one group is valorized with the purpose of distancing and delegitimizing another group, is known as ethnic leveraging (e.g. Bertossi 2012; Winter 2014).

Although the white Dutch visitors did not see themselves as part of an overall in-group of friends – and were sometimes even unwilling to mix with other “co-ethnics” who came to the centre – an overarching moral community seemed to emerge through the mechanism of ethnic leveraging. Paradoxically, this was in part a response to the management’s forceful attempts to bridge differences. Visitors were eager to defend themselves against the implication that they needed to be educated to be more tolerant. They repeatedly claimed that they were not racists, that they did not need to be
taught about diversity, and, above all, that it was the Muslims and black people who should be held accountable for the decline of their neighbourhood and Dutch society as a whole. “It is not our lifestyle that has to be improved”, many told me. As a result, it became almost impossible for “ethnic, racial and religious others” to become part of the restaurant community and for the manager to change the ideas and conduct of the white native Dutch residents visiting the centre. Despite the attempts to invite and welcome minority residents, the overarching in-group of white native Dutch visitors was able to maintain its barriers to outsiders, thanks to their regular meetings and collective resistance to the management of the community restaurant. Unwillingly and unintentionally, the neighbourhood restaurant facilitated the empowering of white working-class visitors and the exclusion of ethnic, racial and religious others.

These findings are congruent with the work of many scholars who have shown that a sense of community among one group of residents inherently involves the exclusion of others (Elias and Scotson 1994; Hage 2000; Besnier 2009; Binken et al. 2012). Cohesive in-groups with strong bonding social capital can reinforce hatred, violence and aggression against others as they lose their capacity to deploy bridging social capital and become isolated from others:

Strong moral bonds within a group in some cases may actually serve to decrease the degree to which members of that group are able to trust outsiders and work effectively with them. (…) At best, this prevents the group from receiving beneficial influences from the outside environment; at worst, it may actively breed distrust, intolerance, or even hatred for and violence towards outsiders. (Fukuyama 2001, 14)

Thus, ironically, in demographically super-diverse contexts, the creation of strong cohesive local communities can actually impede the emergence of the tolerance of cosmopolitan values that in many accounts super-diversity is supposed to promote.

Conclusion

Super-diversity as coined by Vertovec (2007) was initially meant to be a descriptive term to refer to “a recognition of complexities that supersede previous patterns and perceptions of migration-driven diversity” (Meissner and Vertovec 2015, 542). The super-diversity concept, however, has limits in describing social transformations on the ground, especially as it has been elaborated and used by a number of scholars concerned with super-diversity’s social implications. This article has addressed this latter strand of the literature that seeks to understand how super-diversity has transformed social relationships in everyday life and thus, in the process,
has added new theoretical, and at times ideological, features to the concept.

While this article has focused on a single community centre in one Amsterdam neighbourhood, the analysis, I believe, has broader implications. Unlike many scholars (Wessendorf 2014; Geldof 2015; Crul 2016) who have adopted the super-diversity concept, this study has shown that the demographic realities of super-diversity do not necessarily result in social realities where residents experience ethnic and racial diversity as normal.

This research has shown that at the everyday level of practice and experience, residents in super-diverse areas can actively resist the increasing diversity that comes with changing demographics. Ethnic and racial diversity here is not seen as normal, but rather used as a tool for educated social workers to distinguish themselves from the white working class and for the white working class to establish group cohesion and respectability by elevating themselves above ethnic and racial others.

As I have shown, class distinctions and ethnic leveraging were crucial in the establishment and reproduction of a white local community in a demographically super-diverse setting. To resist the forceful attempts of middle-class social workers to “teach them diversity”, white working-class visitors to the community centre restaurant affirmed their own worth against the foil of ethnic, racial and religious “others”; a mechanism that reinforced barriers for residents of non-Dutch descent who sought to become part of the center community.

Some ethnic minority groups – in the case of the Amsterdam neighborhood, the white ethnic Dutch – have found ways to resist adaptation and assimilation into an “amalgam of ethnic minorities”, contrary to what Crul’s (2016) analysis of super-diversity would lead us to expect. Moreover, I found that forceful and ideological state-supported attempts to help a super-diverse social reality come into being evoked its very opposite: the reinforcement and accentuation of boundaries between ethnic groups.

The role of class and ethnic leveraging, I would argue, needs to be considered more carefully when adopting Vertovec’s descriptive super-diversity concept. The impact of class distinctions and related processes of ethnic leveraging may be decisive in understanding the limitations facing community organizers as they seek to create a convivial super-diverse social reality that corresponds with super-diverse demographic features. Ultimately, it is clear is that as a descriptive tool super-diversity does not provide solid theoretical grounds to understand why and how social relations in such demographic situations unfold in certain ways. This is in effect the challenge for the future. What increasing migration-driven diversity means in everyday life and how it affects social interactions remain open questions to be further empirically interrogated and theoretically elaborated. By taking
into account the distinction between the realm of demographics and of social life, as well as intersections of class, race and ethnicity, we can help to further advance our understanding of super-diversity and its many implications.

Notes

1. This is the literal meaning of the commonly used word “allochthon”, which was deployed in Dutch public discourse and public policy since the 1970s. The term was used to refer to the first, second and third generation of citizens with a migrant background living in the Netherlands. The word has recently become highly debated for its suggestion of ethnic minority groups being “less legitimate Dutch citizens” (tweederangs burgers). This resulted in the abandoning of the term by the Dutch government in November 2016. See also: https://english.wrr.nl/publications/investigation/2017/06/26/summary-migration-and-classification-towards-a-multiple-migration-idiom

2. The evening meal during Ramadan, when Muslims end their daily fast at sunset.


4. All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

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