

Super-Diversity and Systems Thinking: Selected Moments from a Conversation with Steven Vertovec

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1. Circumstances of an Interview with Steven Vertovec

We contacted Steven Vertovec in the fall of 2023 to invite him to participate in this Special Issue on systemic approaches when adopted by researchers, particularly anthropologists, in the context of their work on migration issues in the era of super-diversity. We sincerely thank him for agreeing to answer our questions on this topic, which seems to us to be of great importance.

The interview, moderated by Bob W. White, took place via Zoom on 17 January 2024. The transcript, obtained with the assistance of Maude Arsenault, was then edited by Sylvie Genest, who formulated a version suitable for publication. After proofreading and some adjustments, the version published here was approved by Professor Vertovec.

The resulting text takes the form of a series of themes on which Professor Vertovec shares his opinions, drawing generously on his previous work, his vast experience, and his spontaneous goodwill.

2. The Ferment of Systems Thinking in Anthropology

Early in my career, my academic background was in Religious Studies, which had a strong influence on my approach. I was immersed in Geertz's work on cultural models of reality, which I find very systemic, particularly in interpreting cultural systems and how individuals perceive and project these models onto the world [1]. As a scholar of religion, I was interested in exploring the relationships between myth, ritual, values, and everyday practices, understanding how these elements form religious systems. But later my focus shifted towards studying diversity in urban contexts. As a consequence, contextualization became crucial in my research. Context functions as a system that not only shapes but is continuously shaped by the interrelations between the elements that it contains.

My academic mentors, particularly James Clyde Mitchell, from when I was at Oxford, helped give me a deeper understanding of systemic thinking. Mitchell and Gluckman's situational analysis, which involves triangulating different layers of context around events, had a big impact on my work, especially in terms of methodology. The idea of "situational selection" introduced by Gluckman was a central concept of the Manchester School, and I think this encapsulates systemic thinking in an interesting way, making it possible to navigate between different scales of analysis [2].

3. The Social Organization of Difference

One way systems thinking directly influences my work is through the idea of the social organization of difference. I have written about this in an article where I take some inspiration from Mitchell's ideas [3]. I refer to three key components: the set of events or actual activities (encounters), the situation or meanings actors attribute to activities (representation), and the setting or structural context in which these things occur (configurations).



Citation: Vertovec, S.; Genest, S. Super-Diversity and Systems Thinking: Selected Moments from a Conversation with Steven Vertovec. *Humans* **2024**, *4*, 279–283. <https://doi.org/10.3390/humans4030017>

Received: 15 August 2024

Accepted: 30 August 2024

Published: 6 September 2024



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For me, those are the three parts of the Mitchell-Gluckman triangle. I have a section in that article on Mitchell and how it relates to situational analysis.

Mitchell was also one of the pioneers of Social Network Theory. He approached it metaphorically but also mathematically; he was originally a mathematician... so he brokered a lot of quantitative techniques for social network analysis, but he was also able to talk about social networks in a more classical ethnographic context [4]. I co-edited a festschrift for Mitchell called "The Urban Context". Clyde even contributed an afterword to it [5]. I also incorporate some of Barth's work into this discussion. Barth obviously did a lot of important work on social organization, especially his piece on ethnic groups and boundaries [6].

4. System

The concept of system is of primary importance, obviously. As an anthropologist, I primarily focus on social systems. To me, a system revolves around a series of interdependent relationships. Whether it's a person, a role or an institution, each component of a system maintains reciprocal links with the other parts of the system. When one part is affected, it impacts the entire system. Changes in one have ripple effects on the others, both quantitative and qualitative.

Another aspect of systems thinking that I consider very important for social anthropology is the openness of any system to its environment. One example of this is Gluckman's text "Closed Systems and Open Minds" [7]. The main message here is that it would be both naive and detrimental for a social anthropologist to concentrate only on one aspect of reality, ignoring other areas explored by other disciplines, or to limit her field of study in an attempt to separate it from the broader context of what is being studied. In other words, it's better for anthropology that researchers keep an open mind and avoid thinking about the systems they study as being closed.

So, I always conduct my research projects with this recommendation in mind. From 2011 to 2016, for example, I led a multidisciplinary team to carry out a project comparing diversity in public spaces in Singapore, Johannesburg and New York [8]. We explored the rules of spatial interaction that emerge from diversification, moving beyond closed-system approaches. Our research was carried out on a fairly large scale. But you could do the same thing on a smaller scale, that of a classroom, for example.

It is indeed a crucial methodological challenge to link different scales. In my work on super-diversity [9], I approach this by acknowledging that national policies shape immigration patterns, legal statuses, and economic participation. This happens at a higher, non-local scale. However, the effects of these policies play out at the local level through characteristics like gender, ethnicity, nationality, and legal status. So, it is a constant back-and-forth between these scales.

5. Double Bind

This is another major idea from Gregory Bateson's systems thinking that anthropologists of diversity have not always recognized as relevant to their work. Yet—and on this point I completely agree with Professor White and other authors who have published in this Special Issue—it is a concept that resonates widely in our field.

To demonstrate this relevance, I could cite the book, "The Cosmopolitan Canopy", in which Elijah Anderson talks about those cosmopolitan moments where everyone seems to get along, but there's always a moment when visible minorities are reminded that they're different [10]. I think this is a good example of a double bind situation that affects many migrants: at one point they are told "Be like us", and at another "You're different". They are caught in a vicious cycle where they cannot help but wonder: "What exactly do you expect from me?" These are difficult situations where they are constantly reminded of their otherness. It's not just a question of language, but also of subtle cues that send the message to migrants that they might be welcome, but that they do not belong.

Another example I could think of has to do with how we talk about immigration more generally. There is research showing that increasing diversification can actually improve social relationships, but at the same time there is a discourse that talks about diversification as something that is disruptive. That's what is being described in Susanne Wessendorf's article "Being open, but sometimes closed" [11]. As a result, people often find themselves in a double bind between their personal experiences and the discourses they're exposed to. And it shows in opinion polls. At the local level, people might say that the diversity is great, but at the national level, there is fear of too much immigration [12].

6. Threshold

I wrote somewhere that the diversity/super-diversity distinction is not a matter of quantity, but of the co-occurrence and mutual influence of a number of classifications [9]. The concept of super-diversity does not suggest the existence of a threshold or breaking point at which diversity becomes super-diversity.

That being said, actual diversification processes can strain professionals as it is observed in different areas or disciplines. A good example would be this 2021 article on "Teachers' Emotions in Super-Diverse School Settings" [13]. Research from Montreal indicates professionals developing new prejudices due to the challenges of working in a super-diverse environment. They require more time and resources, leading to burnout.

So, regarding social services, you could refer to my book in Chapter III and the bibliography [9]. You'll find numerous works that leverage the concept of super-diversity to address various professions such as teaching, nursing, social work, youth services, sports, and how they handle diverse contexts. Many researchers are actively exploring these questions and challenges within these fields.

On the subject of thresholds, the famous British journalist David Goodhart once wrote that there was "too much diversity" leading to social breakdowns [14,15]. I do not agree with this view. It is based on a misconception that homogeneity is necessary for the functioning of society. Challenges exist in health clinics or social work due to diversification. However, I see this as a resource issue, not a diversity issue. I recognize the challenges of diversification for professionals, but I think they would be the first to agree: the problem is not diversity per se. It's just that we don't have the appropriate level of resources or training to deal with it.

7. Multiculturalism versus Interculturalism

Around 2010, I initiated discussions on post-multiculturalism [16], and more specifically with Susanne Wessendorf, with whom I published "The Multiculturalism Backlash" [17]. When I coined the term "super-diversity" I had been thinking about this question for a long time. At some level, it was intended as a critique of multiculturalism, because multiculturalism as a political discourse was simply not addressing the change that was taking place in Britain at that time. It was just not fit for purpose, and so I tried to come up with something else. Whether that was fit for purpose I don't know.

Since then, new elements have been added to my thinkings on this subject.

Multiculturalism and interculturalism are certainly different paradigms. From what I know of interculturalism, at least the European variant, I probably lean more on that side of the debate. I mean I have never had the impression that interculturalism is essentialist; I do have that impression about multiculturalism, no matter how much the multiculturalists claim that it is not.

Multiculturalism still sounds to me like it is about bounded groups with homogeneous practices and values; groups that can be represented and can be given group rights. The debate about group rights was an important debate to have; group rights are something that had to be struggled for, especially if the idea is to create a society where group-based identity is no longer a problem in terms of equality or social justice. The fact that people presume that we are organized in groups and this group identity has to be defended or normalized, I think this is a problem. This is why we talk about super-diversity and about

intersectionality. In the same way, from my point of view, interculturalism is an argument against groupism.

Parekh's ideas resonate with this approach [18]. Public spaces should allow individuals to express their identities without confining them to specific group labels. If we agree that groups are socially constructed through active processes of identification and mobilization, the challenge is then to recognize diversity without reinforcing static group boundaries. In this sense, interculturalism challenges the notion of groupism by emphasizing dynamic interactions and fluid identities within public spaces. Quebec's interculturalism navigates a distinctive path, promoting inclusivity without erasing differences or promoting strict assimilation.

8. Systems Theory in Contemporary Anthropology

There is likely to be some reluctance among anthropologists to engage with systems theory, particularly in contemporary anthropology. In the early days, anthropologists like Edward B. Tyler discussed culture as an integrated and "complex whole" [19], leading to British structural functionalism. However, since the 1980s and the "writing culture" turn with Clifford and Marcus [20], there's been a shift away from viewing culture as an integrated whole towards recognizing its diverse and unevenly distributed parts. For example, scholars like Barth emphasized cultural complexity, where cultures are seen as composed of many parts that are inter-related and context-dependent [21].

Scholars like Mitchell and Gluckman were interested in social change, which wasn't well-received within traditional anthropology, especially British anthropology, which was focused on understanding integrated cultural systems from a holistic perspective.

Early systems theories, including cybernetics and the influence of French structuralism, were considered too orderly and static, even though this is not the case. There's a worry that embracing systems theory might limit our ability to understand cultural dynamism and change. In fact, contemporary anthropology is experiencing a boom in complexity theory. There's a lot of exciting work happening right now, exploring complex systems with an anthropological perspective. This approach allows us to avoid the pitfalls of rigid structural functionalism by embracing the dynamic processes inherent in complex systems.

It is intriguing to explore why complexity theory is attracting anthropologists now, especially in light of emerging questions about non-human interactions and artificial intelligence (AI). But, you know, although I am becoming more and more interested in complexity theory, I still have to say that in my opinion it basically comes down to systems theory. We talk about system dynamics and systems that provide an environment for other systems and so on. I think that the concept of super-diversity can shed light on a lot of this complexity. However, I think it is also essential to communicate these complexities in a clear and understandable way. And this is where diagrams and visual representations can help simplify complex ideas without losing their essence. That's why my team and I designed a set of innovative interactive tools with the intention to help people visualizing super-diversity and "seeing" urban socio-economic complexity. The aim is to picture, perceive and apprehend complex analyses of multidimensional data on urban diversity in new, more intuitive ways [22,23].

Acknowledgments: The guest editor thanks the Intercultural Relations Research Laboratory (LABRRI) at the University of Montreal, its director, Bob W. White, and Maude Arsenault, member, for their respective contributions.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Short Biography of Author

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