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COMMENTARY   **Open Access**

Of straw figures and multi-stakeholder monitoring – a response to Willem Schinkel

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Abstract

This article is a response to Willem Schinkel's provocation piece. While mostly agreeing with Schinkel, my response questions Schinkel's commitment to losing immigrant integration as an object of analysis. I point to the integrationist logic with which Schinkel assaults superdiversity, to more broadly question how prescriptive a social science that is 'against immigrant integration' should be.

Keywords: Superdiversity, Straw figure argument, Immigrant integration, Disintegration

Willem Schinkel (2018) offers a thoughtful but also - as he intends - provocative article. The relevance of his work for migration and diversity scholars goes beyond researching immigrant integration. His article highlights a core tension in our field of study: We always move our subject matter along a very steep and perilous ridge. Inadvertently or not, migration research can contribute to harmful othering. This includes feeding on and/or feeding into racist power dynamics. Academic institutional structures are not well equipped to counter those dynamics and they may even perpetuate them. As a research field tackling a 'core societal challenge'[1] the risks are amplified - researching migration and its implications is by definition policy relevant and at least somewhat normatively driven. Migration-related research is always politically charged (why listen to those claiming otherwise?).

The danger of reinforcing oppressive dynamics could mean that the potential harm of migration research outweighs its possible gains. The equation is not that simple. Schinkel himself does not frame migration research as a proverbial persona non-grata. He calls for "new pathways of social scientifically imagining the social dynamics of sameness and difference in the context of migration" (2018, p. 9). He emphasises the importance of social theory and of being more careful about how we do research by recognising and actively shaping its performative implications. This is a timely reminder that should encourage those reading this debate, even those not working with immigrant integration terminology, to take Schinkel's provocations seriously.

Reading Schinkel's paper (2018) and book (2017) I was partial to his analysis on immigrant integration and the problematic conception of society it perpetuates. Writing about superdiversity, I recently suggested shifting attention to disintegration, not as an antonym of integration, but as a more complexity-sensitive way of thinking about social dynamics in contexts of migration (Meissner, 2018). Elsewhere, I discuss immigrant integration as instrumental to logics of ordering migration often alluded to in

detrimental ways (Meissner, 2017). Previously (Meissner, 2016), I analysed the absurdity of using ethnic-homophily to measure immigrant integration in contexts of superdiversity. In that analysis I also explain why expanding taxonomic registers is not the core analytical challenge that thinking with and through superdiversity entails. Migration-driven diversity is inherently relational. Paying attention to this makes its complexities empirically better accessible and casts doubt on seeking simplified linear causal explanations. With this background, I connected to many points in Schinkel's writing and found it easy to agree that immigrant integration should not be a maxim. It is too divisive a notion that errs too consistently on the side of harm to be a useful project for research or policy. I also agree with Schinkel's claim that society needs to be better theorised to move beyond organicist logics of parts and wholes. While I am still left with minor questions about how Schinkel arrives at these two points,[2] I hope that other commentators will debate this part of Schinkel's analysis.

My response focuses on Schinkel's suggestions for eventually discarding immigrant integration (imaginaries). This should be in the cards if one is, like Schinkel, 'against immigrant integration'. Or should it not be? My subsequent critique notes how Schinkel's roadmap for future work evades going that far. My response will start with analysing Schinkel's assault on superdiversity. My aim is not a critique of his critique. Instead I suggest that Schinkel is presenting us with a straw figure argument to strengthen his subsequent claims about how to move forward. I am positioned as a researcher of urban diversity who, after reading Schinkel, still considers superdiversity to be a useful thinking tool. In questioning Schinkel's straw figure by the name of superdiversity, I ultimately raise a general concern I had in reading Schinkel's article: His limiting descriptions of how to navigate the road ahead.

In the final part of my response, I therefore examine the broad sweep of a brush that Schinkel applies in delineating permissible practices for thinking society against the grain. To me, this reflects some less cogent ideas about the critical capacities of other approaches to data analysis. Crucially it also does not address how nowadays people are constantly being monitored (arguably migrants in particular). Data is accumulated even if this is not done for the purpose of monitoring immigrant integration. If we apply our imagination to post-integrationist thinking we have more work to do than leaving a 'hiccup' behind us. We need to put in the extra effort of making immigrant integration fade away as a clearly delineated object of inquiry. How we deal with and shape the data and analysis that will inform our futures is crucial – ignoring that it is there, by declaring just very particular types of data to be sufficiently unspoiled, seems an awkward solution which calls less for change and re-imagination but for unhelpful divisiveness.

Attacking a straw figure by the name of superdiversity

For Schinkel superdiversity is "the continuation of immigrant integration by other means" (2018, p. 10). Let me spell this out, according to Schinkel: if *immigrant integration = policy* then *superdiversity = armed, violent conflict (aka: war)*. This is a strong statement. I here simply presume this rhetorical move was chosen in reference to Clausewitz rather than Kissinger.[3] In either case, with this sentence Schinkel suggests a (functional) equivalence between immigrant integration and superdiversity. Superdiversity is taking over where immigrant integration left off and it is making things worse. This attack, for me, is a

reminder that superdiversity is a malleable concept requiring debate to continuously challenge researchers to question their presumptions (Meissner, 2015). I start by noting why I cannot follow Schinkel's claim about an equivalence between immigrant integration and superdiversity and show that Schinkel's assault may have a secondary role. Superdiversity in Schinkel's article is attacked via an integrationist logic. His assault hinges on a single problematic example gesturing towards superdiversity. With this example Schinkel discredits superdiversity without having engaged with its premises or wider interpretations and applications – its multiple performative possibilities. The representation of superdiversity thus becomes a straw figure that is relevant for how Schinkel frames thinking society against the grain and being against integration.

To a degree, Schinkel may have a point. It has been noted that nowadays one will have a difficult time publishing in migration and ethnic studies journals without mentioning superdiversity (Foner, Duyvendak, & Kasinitz, 2019). If everyone has to use it, superdiversity can only be a hollow notion, an empty signifier tied to common sense concepts. I refuse to accept that this is what good scholarship is about (or that peer-review should be used in this way). Writing from my very specific perspective, wedded not to the term itself, but to the kind of re-imagining that thinking about multidimensional reconfigurations calls for, I maintain that superdiversity is not and cannot be a common/non-sense concept – it requires thinking work, changed methodologies and it certainly requires going beyond asking questions exclusively about ethnic or origin diversity. Those are the basics – beyond that the term is indeed used in different ways. Superdiversity has been exceptionally successful in spurring on research that has actively moved on from a previously pervasive ethno-focal approach. There has been a notable shift over the past decade in how research is done and the kinds of questions that are being asked.

If seen as a concept of multidimensional reconfigurations, a claim to equivalence between superdiversity and immigrant integration does not hold. Any familiarity with the wider superdiversity literature shows that Schinkel's benchmark of furthering "the complexity with which the discipline grasps the social world" (2018, pp. 10–11) is a core principle in thinking through and with superdiversity – but benchmarks are movable, we know. Complex descriptions of the workings of multidimensional, temporally shifting and spatially configured differentiations are central and as some note superdiversity "discards […] old binaries of national culture versus minority cultures, natives versus migrants, and local versus global" (Arnaut & Spotti, 2015, p. 1453). The notion was termed by a scholar who does not subscribe to multiculturealism (Vertovec, 2010), it is not about estimating degrees of membership and in terms of its functions, superdiversity is not "purified of race and class". Without a capital S, so to say, it discourages the presumption of a cohesiveness of ethnic groups – groupness, if anything, is an object of inquiry (Brubaker, 2003). Differential access to resources is increasingly central in writing that developed its research design drawing on superdiversity. This is specifically evident in work discussing changes in the regulation of migration and migrants – not by reinventing the wheel – but by bringing migration regimes into the focus. A superdiversity perspective includes thinking about power, politics and policy (Meissner & Vertovec, 2015) a point that Hall's (2017) impassioned call to 'moor superdiversity to brutal migration regimes' only underscores. Finally, in recognising the situational and contextual complexities migration entails, paying attention to emergence and

uncertainty, superdiversity, if taken seriously, is not a very good bedfellow for those wanting to insist on objectivity or positivist truth claims – while it is not a theory in itself, it is not an everything goes concept.

This account of superdiversity does not line-up neatly - if at all - with what Schinkel considers when he writes about superdiversity as "a form of applied demographics" (2018, p. 9). Schinkel never clearly defines superdiversity or for that matter diversity. Given the severity of his assault, I find his conceptual looseness where it fits his argument problematic. This certainly contributes to our very different takes of the notion and the kind of work we can envisage for it. Schinkel quotes Ndhlovu (2015) whose critique of superdiversity as a post-multiculturalist *theory* certainly provides valuable food for thought. His reasoning however works based on assuming a particular theoretical framing. Superdiversity was never intended as a theory and it matters what kinds of theoretical readings inform a researcher's engagement with the concept. This point gets obscured when the notion is portrayed as a priori being hyper-individualist and/or co-opted by neo-liberalism.

Ndhlovu takes as his starting point a report by a policy think tank (Fanshawe, Sriskandarajah, & Dhananjayan, 2010) equating superdiversity with 'more diversity' to then continue an account of hyper-individualised identity politics. This starting point helps to situate Ndhlovu's critique. He notes three relevant criticisms – a certain romanticism surrounding the notion, discussing something new, and not being able to accommodate nested identity conceptions. The last point highly depends on one's theoretical position – maybe this is Schinkel's point that he only wants to deal with concepts that are locked into a particular paradigm - my hunch is that there is always slippage. As a participant-observer of work invoking superdiversity, I note that, if there was ever a romanticism, it has faded with a renewed toxicity of debates surrounding diversity. That there is something new going on, I think, is the actual crux at hand – particularly if we disagree on whether appealing to something new (most evident in the modes of governing migration and migrants) makes one blind to that which was there before. It may be framed as a cop out, but I think the newness question is an empirical one (and therefore requires a relational positioning to the past).

Arguably, Schinkel's assault on superdiversity is based on a very specific development in the Dutch case. In the Netherlands talking around superdiversity has contributed to abandoning the distinction between autochthonous and allochthone – for the past decades the Dutch version of measuring people into place by reproducing colonial hierarchies. To fill the vacuum, a report was produced for the Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR) that outlines a 'multiple migration idiom'. The application of this idiom is indeed worrisome to observe. The report presenting the new approach aims at assessing "when and how [the WRR] classify according to origin" (Bovens, Bokhorst, Jennissen, & Engbersen, 2017, p. 1). Asking the question *when* already precludes first asking *if* origin 'classifications' need to be emphasised at all (Prewitt, 2013) and it also limits how origin based analytics are used. The report does not query at a deeper level why we presume that there is something about the dynamics of migration-driven diversity that can be better understood through quantitative data analysis. Questions about, for example, differential access to rights or possible proxies for migration rather than individual migrant focused differentiations, are a priori not part of the debate. Yet, those are the differentiations that origin statistics so

easily mask. The summary version of this report does not reference superdiversity. The report Schinkel refers to and that uses the new idiom mentions superdiversity five times in a 219 page report, never really elaborating on the term (Jennissen, Engbersen, Bokhorst, & Bovens, 2018). Schinkel's assault on superdiversity is thus based on a relatively weak link.

Claiming to describe the 'new diversity of the Netherlands', the empirical report at one point uses the term superdiversity to point to the relevance of migration motives but analytically this is not expanded on. Indeed, it is difficult – given the consistent focus on origin diversity – to see any attention being paid to a "super-diverse chaos of movements, trajectories, backgrounds and origins" (Schinkel, 2018, p. 10) – a chaos that would have to bring into its picture dynamics of change across the population (as well as time and space) rather than a depiction of a hermetically sealed off migrant populous. The Dutch are not as absent from the report as Schinkel makes it seem, but their role is hidden in an index. The report is in part the work of 'pie-charts gone mad' (sometimes with an orientalist aftertaste when represented as a three dimensional spekkoek). Such charts are not just perceptually difficult to grasp,[4] they are also not very useful for analysing social dynamics. They can only represent cross-sectional data about one variable. They also instinctively tell a story about parts of a whole and do not allow representing multiple and shifting categorisations. There is an argument that in breaking open aggregate categories, their presumed stability is put into question, but so far as I can follow the report, this is not done here. Instead, given how the pieces of the pie are aggregated and disaggregated, their presence indeed seems to work as a legitimation of dubious lumping-together. Concern in developing grouping categories is, for example, with getting the 'cultural distance' right. Overall, the report reflects little engagement with superdiversity and the dynamics of a simultaneity of different aspects of migration-driven diversity. This underlines the only weak link to a more concerted engagement with superdiversity. Regardless, it is this example that Schinkel locks onto, to show how superdiversity is nothing but a continuation of immigrant integration and an exercise of ostracising.

Being 'against immigrant integration' and neocolonial measuring, it would have sufficed to note that changes in measurements are only reproducing immigrant integration / (neo) colonial logics. Schinkel, however, very clearly paints superdiversity as the villain. As Vertovec (2017, p. 3) notes: "it is disingenuous if not outright wrong to suggest […] that 'super-diversity scholars' mean such-and-such". The assault needs to be on a continued integrationist logic wearing the cloak of superdiversity, to counter this specific performative possibility – but Schinkel's assault does not aim at this. If we ask why, we note that it needs to be a general assault for Schinkel's argument to work (as strongly). If I read his argumentation correctly, then Schinkel constructs superdiversity as a small step forward but one that is only taking over and working alongside immigrant integration as a form of social hygiene. This takeover mutes the very specific types of work that Schinkel values and that he sees as a way out of integration's quagmire. In part 'shooting down' superdiversity and equating the notion via immigrant integration with neocolonial knowledge production, allows Schinkel to underline that any (quantitative) measuring and analysis is already pathologising and thus needs to be excluded from academic practice. This shows the integrationist logic I alluded to before. His 'assaults' use examples that are worthy of criticism but he also suggests that

therefore nothing good can come from anyone using certain terms, or working with certain types of data, or asking questions that do not align with the priorities he delineates and the knowledges he presents to us as permissible, as pristine enough for moving on – for being inside the 'against integration container'. I understand and recognise the urgency some of his points carry – yet if I can identify two points in Schinkel's article that I am reluctant to go along with, it is the totalising representation of a larger and more varied field and the very narrow delineation of how academic work needs to be done to remain valuable. In the final section of my response I briefly turn to these wider concerns.

Migration (without immigrant integration) in times of multi-stakeholder monitoring

As I am writing, people with a presumed 'migration background' in German cities (and villages) must fear being chased in the streets like prey. Not too long ago the Dutch minister of foreign affairs, ostensibly to provoke, ranted about genetics causing social conflict[5] – without consequences for him! Narratives that normalise inside-outside society divides cannot be perpetuated by academia – the mirror Schinkel holds up for migration scholars does not show a pretty reflection. Recent shifts in tone, absurdity and destructiveness of debates outside and sometimes within academia leave me gobsmacked and less certain what the best ways forward are – or what role academia actually plays. I agree with Schinkel, that efforts need to be enabling ones, but I am opposed to the prescriptiveness in his tone. Schinkel's aim of thinking against the grain to "undo, or to actively work against, the existing imagination about what happens when people move and settle in another country" has to be a project that can be tackled from multiple angles. It also has to be one that in the very least allows thinking about what happens if immigrant integration is no longer accessible as an object of analysis – as noted I do not think that Schinkel is taking this step.

This last point is important not because I want to know about specific alternatives, but because it should raise questions about how the neocolonial measuring that Schinkel describes in relation to immigrant integration is more generally morphing and being effected by an increasing datafication and the multi-stakeholder monitoring that this entails (Taylor & Broeders, 2015). Measuring migrants begins much before integration language takes hold.[6] Such considerations cannot be accommodated by the debilitating and sometimes not fully accurate picture Schinkel paints of migration research more generally – meaning not just those invested in measuring immigrant integration. For example, reading Schinkel, one might think that there are no fine-grained qualitative studies. There are plenty; how they translate to policy practice and theorise society is a different question. One might also think that quantitative analysts are but puppets to the tyranny of categories; however, there is no reason to think that categories need to simply be accepted as given (White, 2008). In debating migration and its implications we need to pay attention to the fact that the difference that makes a difference is often in the information that is communicated (Bateson, 1987). Choices of how data are used and analysed matter for everyone setting out to re-imagine society against the grain – for those using more qualitative and those using more quantitative data. Data is never innocent and I am not sure how much is won in separating – the way Schinkel seems to – the data from the process of its analysis. As Dourish and Gómez Cruz (2018, p. 8)

note in relation to data-driven scholarship "data makes sense only to the extent that we have frames for making sense of it."

If we do abandon current ways of measuring integration and re-imagine society in line with Schinkel, but also follow his call to severely limit our methodological repertoire, we may risk creating an island of practice that stifles intellectual exchange (Purcell, 2003). This is not the time for unlearning how different methodologies may be enabling, for engaging with how to make analysis pay attention to its error. I am arriving at this conclusion, for two reasons. One, I ask how and when policy-driven categorisations and measurements such as integration come to matter. Immigrant integration imaginaries may well be contributing to what Noble (2018) recently referred to as algorithmic oppression. Two, considering multidimensional differentiations suggests that immigrant integration is only a part of a wider practise of othering migrant subjects. New and old forms of monitoring have important implications for the kinds of data, analysis techniques and actors that will shape future debates. Smith (1999) notes that one (of many) projects in decolonising methodologies is 'connecting' - building good and enabling relations across different fields of practice. This is also why, in moving forward, I can only imagine a polyphonic but responsible migration and diversity studies. Schinkel suggests that issues of positionality and reflexivity are neglected. Instinctively, the whiteness of migration studies matters – not least because the field is political! If self-reflexivity is not yet considered in your seminars, what are you waiting for? We cannot invite young scholars to the field and dictate which theoretical framing they should adopt, but we can foster a field that does not get away without a heightened self-doubt. I want to imagine a field that first asks what harm it can do and that, in traversing its ridge, fosters institutional change, provides for sufficient academic and societal cross-fertilisation and an effective communication about knowledges within and beyond the academy. Last but not least, this includes engaging with various different ways of doing analysis, if nothing else to be able to effectively criticise them. Who we tie ourselves to in our traverse is important and we should not all be tied to each other. One risk-mitigation strategy might be to point out loose rocks and scouting out alternative paths as we are moving forward (always remembering to look back). This is not an idealist position but a necessity.

Endnotes

[1]Yes! This terminology is problematic!

[2]e.g.: Does Schinkel overemphasise an uncritical stance towards national integration regimes?

[3]If the reference is in relation to Kissinger then *immigrant integration = war* and *superdiversity = policy (in times of cold war)*

[4]cf. https://eagereyes.org/techniques/pie-charts [Accessed: 13 Feb 2019] and https://eagereyes.org/blog/2016/an-illustrated-tour-of-the-pie-chart-study-results [Accessed: 13 Feb 2019]

[5]https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/07/dutch-fm-fire-making-discriminatory-remarks-180718174215063.html [Accessed: 13 Feb 2019]

[6]An example a proof-of concept study tracking of 'may be' migrants using satellites is described at: https://www.cbs.nl/en-gb/corporate/2018/09/mapping-migrant-flows-with-satellites [Accessed: 13 Feb 2019]

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