
The Reification Trap, or "Following the Data Around" -- Resilience and the Sustainability Hangover,

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Abstract

Resilience theory, as is the case with many other perspectives, may suffer from what I refer to here as the "reification trap", where one's notion of the core meanings of a construct are overly affected by the kinds of data and measures invoked as empirical indicators of the construct. Researchers and practitioners invoke broader constructs such as resilience, sustainability, and dependence base, but do so based on (necessarily) partial measures and indicators. Quite simply, we forget that our indicators are partial, and subsequently conflate our particular indicator with the broader construct itself. This can impede the exchange between data and theory, especially if scholars prematurely converge around particular indicators. As part of the "Tips or Traps" session submitted by Tidball et al., I make the case that resilience theory has suffered from this problem in a number of key ways. Foremost to this analysis is a particular lack of attention to the role of active human agents in resilience analyses. Although resilience differs from sustainability in a number of crucial ways, I argue for the existence of a "sustainability hangover," where analyses based on arms-length census-type data have dominated analyses (and subsequent conceptions) of sustainability and resilience. The origins of resilience within systems ecology may have contributed to this issue as well. Such conceptions have come at the expense of serious engagement with the subjectivity of individual and collective human agency: the perception of social-ecological change, the active interpretation of such change, perceived capacity to act, and the myriad other elements that define human subjectivity in social-ecological systems. As such, resilience and related perspectives have not been sufficiently populated with elements that fundamentally engage agency. This, in turn, is likely to undercut researcher and practitioner understandings the processes of regime shifts and other core elements of resilience.

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