Agency, regimes, affordances: A case study look at cross-level system dynamics

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Abstract

The concept of linked social-ecological systems has enabled powerful insights into human-nature interactions but also obscured distinctions between social and ecological domains. Moreover, while cross-level inquiry – across spatial, temporal, and other scales – has been central to resilience thinking and practice, the individual-organizational-social scale that is particular to the social domain remains critically under-examined. With regard to self-organizing social dynamics, this scale affords an examination of individual and collective expressions of human agency, of individuals as embedded in the logics of inter-institutional regimes, and of regime stabilization and transformation as recursively engaged at multiple levels. Significantly, this "unbundling" of the social also reveals ways in which resilience thinking offers an additional view into cross-level dynamics such as identity formation, feedback, and path dependency.

From a resilience perspective, we reflect on a case study of work led by the nonprofit Ecotrust, in which a team of food systems researchers and practitioners consulted with a coalition of funders that sought to develop a vision, initiatives, and indicators for a sustainable food system in California, USA. The theory of change for this project was developed and described through a mapping of system dynamics archetypes, so as to explore the ways in which these archetypes illuminated, informed, and "mirrored back" the stated goal of food system transformation.

Based on these archetypes and experiences, we examine specific cross-level similarities and differences in various understandings of regime dynamics across organizational and social levels. Lastly, in order to re-link the ecological into our considerations, we propose as a boundary object an individual-organizational-social-ecological hierarchical description of state spaces as representing realms of affordance or "enablement" for novelty or ingenuity of human expression, individually and collectively manifested.

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