Resilience and unity: some philosophical remarks on methodological unification

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Abstract

Within sustainability research, as well as elsewhere, resilience is a concept of increasing popularity (Hackett and Parker 2012, Walker and Cooper 2011); its meaning(s) and usefulness a topic of heated debate (Davidson 2010, Hornborg 2013). A virtue often emphasized as central to this notion is its potential for bridging and unifying disciplines. Gunderson and Pritchard (2002) discuss resilience in the preface to their book as a "unifying concept in both ecological and social systems" (xxi). In a similar vein Holling et al. (2002) are critical of alternative "approaches" as they consider them too partial: "[t]hey are too simple and lack an integrative framework that bridges disciplines and scales" (8). One is thus inclined to ask the question: how is the concept of resilience supposed to bridge disciplines? And, is there anything one can say-from a philosophy of science perspective-about the kind of unification that can be expected to follow? This paper is an attempt to address these questions. We argue, in brief, that resilience considered as a behavior of different systems is radically multiply realizable. That is to say, many different underlying structures may give rise to the behavior. What this means is that the project of conceptual unification—that of clarifying its meaning, and predicaments of it's use—does not on its own imply a methodologically coherent empirical project. Studying resilience in the field—that is the actual structures and dynamics that determine the resilience of particular systems—will involve deploying a range of different methods, tools, and techniques. Methodological unification depends ultimately on the constitution of the systems actually studied and not only on the success of the project of conceptual unification.

Keywords: resilience, unification, methodological unification, integration, interdisciplinarity

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