Resilience from a sociological perspective

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Resilience is becoming a master concept in the study of social-ecological systems and is applied within a wide range of natural and social scientific disciplines. This success is both a blessing and curse. It is a blessing since truly interdisciplinary scientific concepts are in high demand, but unfortunately in short supply. Resilience seems to be one of these rare concepts able to cross the divide between the natural and the social sciences. Its success helps to further this integration, needed to make human development sustainable in the long run. At the same time it is a curse, since its success threatens to dissipate the heuristic value of the concept. The wide scientific appropriation of resilience has led to a stretching of its original meaning and definition. The uncritical and uninformed use of resilience for the study of social phenomena in particular has contributed to this loss of heuristic value. It comes therefore as no surprise that the use of resilience in the social sciences is currently criticized. This paper reconsiders these objections to explore what resilience is, or can be, from a sociological perspective. By defining resilience sociologically in clear and limited terms, it aims to elucidate its value for theory development and empirical research in the social sciences.