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Social Desire Paths: A New Theoretical Concept to Increase the Usability of Social Science  
Research in Society

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Science Research in Society

Abstract

Social scientists are well-trained to observe and chart social trends, but less experienced at presenting scientific findings in formats that can inform social change work. In this paper I propose a new theoretical concept that provides a mechanism by which social science research can be more effectively applied for proactive policy, organizational, and program development. The approach is to use the metaphor of “desire paths” from landscape architecture to show how social scientists can identify and analyze **social** desire paths that appear on the social structural landscape. Social desire paths usually emerge because existing formal structures do not meet individual or group needs. Such paths are generally started at the individual level, followed by others through individual actions, and ultimately leave an (usually informal) imprint on the social structure, even though the motivations behind those actions are not usually social change. Using what we know about the sociology of interests and what we have learned from trying to apply social science findings to policy, I propose seven criteria for phenomena to be defined as social desire paths. I then apply the criteria to two case studies related to housing, and discuss social desire paths usefulness to social scientists involved in any research that captures interests, deviance, or innovation; and that also has the potential to inform formal structures such as policy, organizations, program development, and participatory democracy.

Keywords: Sociology of Interests; Sociological Practice; Applied Sociology; Public Policy;  
Housing/Homelessness; Innovation

When social structures no longer work for individuals, and alternatives exist, people often take other paths to meet their end goals. Social scientists usually capture such individual actions as aggregate behaviors driven by individual interests, and may even label the actions as deviant; however researchers are unlikely to discuss such persistent behaviors as influential on or instructive to formal structures such as policies, organizations, or programs, unless collective action through social movements ensues. This is a missed opportunity to apply social scientific observations and insights to create more responsive formal social structures. In a previous paper I introduce the idea of social desire paths and argue that its application in the social sciences allows for a very specific applied approach to capturing interests (Nichols 2014).<sup>1</sup> In this paper I illustrate more fully the theoretical potential of this concept by outlining the components necessary to identify and understand social desire paths. In particular I focus on steps to discover and name social desire paths so as to provide a theoretical approach that scientifically guides the application of social science research findings for structural change.

The term “social desire paths” is in reference to the analogous identification of “desire paths” by landscape architects. In landscape architecture desire paths are dirt paths that develop over time as individuals eschew the use of formalized sidewalks and create new paths. As depicted in Image 1, these “paths where people naturally walk” (Lidwell, Holden, and Butler 2010) are termed desire paths, “an informal path that pedestrians prefer to take to get from one location to another rather than using a sidewalk or other official route” (McFedries 2011). Desire paths on the physical landscape tend to signal that formal paths and sidewalks are not ideal for at least some pedestrians and that they want a different, better, and often more expedient route.

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<sup>1</sup> The approach taken in this paper to develop this new concept, social desire paths, is heavily influenced by the instruction in Swedberg (2012) about the process of theorizing in the context of discovery.

Urban planners and landscape architects respond in different ways when such paths crop up on planned landscapes. Some believe that desire paths are useful in guiding the redesign of such spaces; others think such paths are problematic and should be discouraged with the use of barriers and other means to impede their development and further use (Norman 2011).

[INSERT IMAGE 1 HERE]

The identification and use of desire paths by planners provides a fitting analogy in theorizing about the possibility of social scientists identifying and studying **social** desire paths in ways that can inform social structures. Following the advice of Swedberg (2012), who encourages theorizing and the development of new ideas as the result of observations of the social world and their expansion via the use of metaphors, analogies, or other means; the formulation of this new concept, social desire paths, is the result of applied research I conducted in 2007 (Nichols 2014). At that time I was asked by city officials and our local public transportation system to study the practice of homeless persons riding our county's only all-night bus route for shelter. Transportation officials were frustrated that persons choose to ride the bus rather than go to emergency shelters and asked homeless service providers to fix "the problem". The study involved spending nights on the bus talking to and collecting survey data from riders who identified as homeless (Nichols and Cázares 2011; Nichols, Cázares, and Rodriguez 2012).

In talking to riders who used the bus for shelter, it became apparent that their actions were not the result of a collective conscious or social protest, but rather that the bus fulfilled their individual needs and values better than the shelter system. They paid by ride and acted like riders, except that those riders who were homeless generally rode the same bus route over and over again throughout the night. No rules or laws were broken, riders simply used the existing transportation system in unintended ways. As a result I became aware that there is a need for

social scientists to be able to identify individual practices such as these that eventually make an imprint on systems and structures for the distinct purpose of using that information to create more responsive formal structures. In this way, social desire paths as a concept provides an opportunity to name a distinct sociology of interests that focuses on individual behaviors that are collectively patterned over time. The use of the bus for shelter is one such example of a social desire path at work and provides a template for further development of this theoretical concept in ways that can assist social scientists in identifying and understanding actions as expressions of desires in response to restrictive formal structures, creating the opportunity to more effectively apply research findings to create more inclusive policies and programs.

In this paper I argue that identifying and understanding why such paths develop on the social landscape is an exciting area and process by which the on-going work of social scientists can be made more relevant to larger publics by capturing what could be. As Wright (2013) says, we need “a social science of the *possible*, not just of the *actual*” (p. 168, emphases in original). The labeling of phenomena as social desire paths and understanding why they form is a theoretical approach that allows empirically identified patterned behaviors, and the values behind why they form, to be made explicit. Adopting and developing theoretically the new concept of social desire paths and applying it to existing and emergent research provides a new label and approach that orients the work of social scientists for the express purpose of applying the findings for program, organizational, and policy development, necessary if a goal is to create responsive, concrete decisions about policy and the allocation of public resources as well as other types of structural change or formation.

To further develop the concept social desire path I organize this paper as follows: I first define the characteristics of desire paths in landscape architecture. I then use the metaphor to

consider how **social** desire paths could inform sociological practice and the work of social scientists by grounding the concept in theoretical work on the sociology of interests. Then, based on insights from landscape architecture, I propose some general properties of social desire paths and apply these principles to the bus as shelter and one other application of a social desire path related to housing policy. Finally, I briefly discuss potential challenges and the need for more empirical work to further test the utility of this new concept in orienting social science research more deliberately to inform and shape structural change.

#### Desire paths in landscape architecture

Desire paths are informal paths that develop on the landscape over time as a result of individuals bypassing built paths or sidewalks to form their own desired routes. Such paths are usually most noticeable in parks and on college campuses; places with large open spaces where people often feel free to bypass existing sidewalks and take the most expedient path to where they want to go. Desire paths are usually more practical and/or efficient than the ones offered by current structures of formalized sidewalks. With time, and repeated use by multiple independent actors, these individual actions begin to make noticeable, albeit informal, imprints on the physical landscape.

In the book *Two Degrees West*, Nick Crane describes such paths in south England: "... the imprints of 'foot anarchists', individuals who had trodden their own routes into the landscape, regardless of the intentions of government, planners and engineers. A desire path could be a short cut through waste ground, across the corner of a civic garden or down an embankment. They were expressions of free will, 'paths with a passion', and an alternative to the strictures of railings, fences and walls that turned individuals into powerless apathetic automatons. On desire paths you could break out, explore, 'feel your way across the landscape'" (p. 131).

While the intention of those who create desire paths is usually to meet individual goals (a quicker path to their destinations) and not to affect the overall the design of the physical landscape, the development of such paths over time has led to formal alterations in landscapes. For example, desire paths have been used in the redesign of formal sidewalks and paths in Central Park (Rogers 1987). In Finland landscapers have been said to wait to determine sidewalk placement after noting the desire paths that develop after a first snow. The concept of desire paths has also been applied to the development of public transportation routes and expressways in Chicago (Throgmorton and Eckstein 2000)<sup>2</sup>. In Chicago, planners first collected data on the use of existing routes and sideroads and then increased public transportation on these routes and/or built more sophisticated thoroughfares. Paying attention to desire paths and lines allows architects and urban planners to design space and allocate resources in ways that increase usability and functionality (Norman 2011). Similarly, the identification of social desire paths, whether imprinted on the social landscape through the unintended use of existing structures or as a new means of getting needs met, could help in the construction of more useful policies and structures for a larger public.

#### From landscape architecture to social science research: Social desire paths

Analogous to the dirt paths that people create and use, social desire paths typically capture the actions of individuals for whom the formal social structure is not working, but who are not collectively trying to create social change. For example, when people use emergency rooms in lieu of preventative medical appointments, or the slow but persistent trend in the U.S. of parents choosing schools other than their assigned neighborhood public school for their

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<sup>2</sup> In this study the term desire lines was used, defined by transportation planners as: “the shortest line between origin and destination, and expresses the way a person would like to go, if such a way were available” (Throgmorton and Eckstein 2000, p. 5). Planners alternate in their use of the terms “desire paths” and “desire lines”.



children. Paying attention to examples when individuals seek exceptions to current structures or form new opportunity structures is a useful way to understand individual needs and desires beyond that often prescribed or defined by “experts” or groups. Social desire path analysis also allows social scientists as well as policy makers and program developers to plan for the future by seeing utility in understanding instances when individuals go against traditional ways that society has been organized, allowing us to question the utility of both the traditional “paths of least resistance” and the alternative actions. For the purposes of this paper and the development of this applied concept, structures will be referred to as those formal parts of society that, like concrete sidewalks, are codified formal structures such as laws, policies, organizations, and programs. In contrast, social desire paths are informal structures that can then be used to inform formal structures.

To be usefully applied to inform formal structures such as policy, social desire path analysis requires two steps. First, social desire paths must be identified. Then we must understand why these paths have developed over time.

The identification of social desire paths first requires observation of new imprints, trends, and processes that point out where current structures are not working or need improvement. Much existing social scientific research already captures such practices. Alterations of current policies (asking for exceptions from current rules to attend a school not in one’s district for example) or the design of new structures (such as new curricula developed by parents that become the basis for new schools) are both examples of social desire paths that can be identified and tracked using social science methods. In many ways the work of marketers as well as emerging work on the identification of trends (or “paths”) in virtual space based on internet search terms (Choi and Varian 2011) are also attempts to capture human desires.

But identification of such paths is only part of the process, researchers must also study why such paths develop in order to link these patterned responses in ways that can eventually improve upon current formal structures. By understanding why actors are using alternative or creating new paths, researchers are tapping into the key values important to desirers. As policy is a reflection of values (Gates 2009), knowing what is behind the creation of social desire paths allows planners to determine which values they want to support through policies, programs, or resource allocation. Thus the identification of paths and the understanding as to why they have developed provides the information that policy makers need to decide whether to alter current structures to either make social structures more useable or to put up barriers so policies are used only in intended ways.

It is important to note that social desire path is a different concept than path dependency. Path dependency has been used often in economics and political science to explain sequences of events that have occurred over time resulting in “increasing returns” (Mahoney 2000; Pierson 2000). Path dependency focuses on the historical conditions that ignite a sequencing of events that ultimately can make changing course difficult (Brown 2010; Webster 2008). Mahoney (2000) argues that the concept has weaknesses from a historical sociological standpoint, particularly in defining when such paths begin. Policy analysts have found mixed utility in using the concept, particularly beyond its ability to explain why change is slow (Brown 2010).

In contrast, social desire paths focus at the micro level by examining what emerges because of actions propelled by individual agency at the same time that it considers the cultural meanings behind why actors choose alternative paths. As such, social desire paths, as both an idea and an approach, is bolstered by and brings together two areas of inquiry in sociology: the sociological concept of interests, and insights from attempts to make sociological practice more

central to the work of the core discipline of sociology. Although in this paper I use sociological principles and ideas to develop the concept of social desire paths, the identification and application of social desire paths to policy and programs could be useful to any social science discipline that struggles to connect research in ways that inform the public sphere. As understanding how to connect micro-level actions to structure is a necessary condition for social desire path inquiry to progress, before I move to proposing specific criteria that can help social scientists identify and understand social desire paths in their own work, I provide more theoretical background for this new concept by discussing existing work on the sociology of interests.

#### Sociology of interests, culture, and social desire paths

Social desire path inquiry captures individual actions that collectively, but independently, leave an imprint on social structures over time. As such, social desire paths are different from social movements, research on groups, or even Fligstein's (2001) idea of social skill, the means by which individuals get others to collaborate with them to create change. Thus social desire path as a concept provides a frame for research that captures individualized interests and desires that generally are expressed outside of, as well as in resistance to, current structures. And while social desire paths are the result of individual actions, to be identified as such they must be expressed by enough multiple actors to make a noticeable imprint on society. Because of the focus on individual actions, inquiry into the sociology of interests and theoretical insight already developed related to deviance can provide important theoretical grounding from which to explore whether the use of this new concept of social desire paths adds to and expands the work of social scientists in ways that allow for the better application of research findings to inform structural change.

The study of interests has been a focus of sociologists since the beginning of the discipline. Richard Swedberg (2005a, 2005b) provides a synthesis of this work, finding the concept of interest in the writings of Small, Marx, Ross, Weber, Coleman, and Bourdieu as well as others. For Albion Small, writing in 1905, interests were “the force and strength with which people pursue certain goals” (Swedberg 2005a, p. 364). Small even uses the word “desire” in his description of the relationship between interests and human action: “Every act that every man performs is to be traced back to an interest. We eat because there is a desire for food...” (Small 1905, p. 433). Small also writes about how interests are connected to the social structure, operating either “as obstacles to the interests or as channels for them” (as quoted in Swedberg 2005a, p. 366). In 1905 E.A. Ross also wrote about interests and spoke specifically about desires. For Ross interests were “great complexes, woven of multicolored strands of desire, which shape society and make history” (as quoted in Swedberg 2005a, p. 366). Swedberg cites Simmel as similarly seeing interests as a force that leads to the creation of social structures.

Swedberg (2005) succeeds in finding sociology of interest in the work of many prominent sociologists and also in showing that interest has been studied and found to exist beyond the typical study of interests as solely economically motivated. He accomplishes this by extending the work of Weber in recognizing that interests are indicators of culture in that they are expressions of value-rational goals (Spillman and Strand 2013). However, much is left to be understood about how interests are made manifest that can then be captured to inform formal structural change. This is especially the case especially given that interests are often described as derived and enacted by individuals within current structures. For example, Swedberg introduces Weber’s concept of “the switchmen” to show that Weber believed that interests were more instrumental in driving human behavior than ideas. As such, the sociology of interests appears

limited to examples of cases when individuals use interests to drive behavior and to choose one track over another; on already existing tracks. Although Weber uses terms like “freedom” and interests as a response to a “lack of feeling bound” (as quoted in Swedberg 2005a, p. 375), Weber and others still discuss these reactions as working within existing structures. In contrast, social desire paths move beyond “switching tracks” and instead are new paths or actions that rework existing structures to better meet individual needs or interests. Swedberg notes that in the literature there is very little discussion of the relationship between interests and social structure, leaving the argument of interests as a sociological (rather than a biological or psychological) phenomenon wanting.

Spillman and Strand (2013) also call for more analysis on the conditions under which interest-oriented action occurs. Their work argues for a sociology of interests that goes beyond the limitations of interests as rooted in rational choice or social exchange theories, making a case for including culture as part of the analysis, saying: “...cultural sociology offers an array of analytic approaches for systematic hermeneutic understanding of how interests become meaningful in particular contexts” (p. 5.14).

Spillman and Strand (2013) furthers the theoretical development of interests by considering the different systems levels from which interests (and desires) emerge and the subsequent effects of such actions on these same systems. Inquiry into the role of interests from the differing perspectives of rational choice, social exchange, and cultural theories provides a more refined look at what a social desire path approach and analysis can add to existing theoretical conceptions of interest-oriented action. Rational choice theory focuses on the micro-level, and social exchange theory adds to rational choice by moving micro-level processes in discussion with macro-level structures, but social exchange theory makes the connection via

group activity and interactions, losing some of the micro-level agency recognized by rational choice theorists. We need a theory that supports a scientific approach to connect the micro-level actions of individuals to macro structures in ways that can capture persistent independent individual actions that are both a potentially meaningful response to and an action against macro realities for the purpose of informing social change. Social desire path analysis ties culture together with these two systems levels.

On the surface much sociological research, such as studies on deviance, answers the need for an approach that captures micro-level actions that go against cultural norms. However, as in the case of rational choice theory, research on deviance does not show how its findings can subsequently inform social structures despite the fact that the earliest sociologists noted that observing and understanding deviant behavior is functional for society (Durkheim and others). Indeed, much sociological research captures, in the aggregate, ways in which individuals work outside of existing structures to get their needs met. Social desire path analysis allows social scientists to move beyond only labeling behaviors or actors as deviant, to also considering how persistent non-normative actions can inform social structures and particularly, formal programs and social policy. Thus, social desire paths as both a concept and a research strategy could help move social science research forward to more consistently be used to improve societal functioning.

So where do we begin? Coleman, influenced by assumptions inherent in economics, theorizes that “the sociologist should start with the idea of interest, more precisely with the notion that the actor always attempts to maximize her self-interest, and go from there” (as summarized by Swedberg 2005a, p. 371). Social desire paths then are concrete means by which these interests are realized. In short, social desire paths form at the micro level when people look

at the structural opportunities available and if they do not serve their interests or needs and there is freedom to explore, they find an alternative. As such, social desire paths either use existing social structures in unintended ways or create entirely new paths/social structures. And at the same time that social desire paths represent micro-level processes, for the existence of paths identified to be useful for social change work, they also must be understood culturally. A pragmatic approach to understanding the development of social mechanisms (Gross 2009) may be helpful in further comprehending why social desire paths develop over time.

#### Characteristics of social desire paths

Now, using these insights from landscape architecture and theoretical work on the sociology of interests, I present seven characteristics that I consider endemic to all social desire paths. I define the criteria to be considered a social desire path rather narrowly, using as the foundation the principles of landscape desire paths. The approach used to identify and understand social desire paths is developed in such a way so as to maximize the potential usefulness of the findings to organizational, programmatic, and social policy development or change. To illustrate the characteristics of social desire paths more fully, I then apply the seven principles to two cases related to housing. I propose that social desire paths typically have the following interconnected seven characteristics:

First, they already exist in the social world. Social desire paths are not first constructed by social scientists, planners, developers, marketers, or other “experts” who aim to put a frame around something and define it as real.<sup>3</sup> In identifying social desire paths social scientists are pointing out patterned behaviors by users of formal structures that have existed for some time.

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<sup>3</sup> Thus I am not talking here about the “if you build it they will come” phenomenon of entrepreneurs creating something new that becomes embraced by the masses.

Second, social desire paths originate from the acts of individuals (or perhaps small groups) that are ultimately followed by others. Social desire paths rely on pioneers—people who are the first to make the paths for others to individually join. But there must be a significant enough group of independent actors engaging in the same behaviors to make an imprint on the social structure. It is important to emphasize here that the actions that may create social desire paths are not generally enacted by individuals who see themselves as pioneers with the intention of changing the social structure, they are simply individuals trying to get their needs and desires better met. Thus, social movements as typically defined by sociologists are not in and of themselves social desire paths, although movements may originate from such individualized desires.

Third, for something to be considered a social desire path the individual actions must be tied in some way to formal structures that are not working for some individuals. Social desire paths are formed from actions born out of motivations (or combination of motivations), interests, or needs that are not being met by the current social structure that when enacted by enough people the desire is codified, albeit informally, on the social landscape. As Jacobs (1992) says, they are “clues” to the workings of phenomenon.

Fourth, social desire paths are not formed because of formal rule breaking, but usually are the result of the use of existing structures in entirely new or unintended ways. Although, as discussed earlier, deviant behavior captured by social scientific research could potentially meet the criteria for social desire paths, for the purposes of the early development of this new theoretical concept I focus on those actions that may break norms, but do not break laws.

Fifth, social desire paths must be noticeable in some form and thus able to be studied. They are rooted in behavior not attitudes. While we can survey people about what they want in a



community, organization, product and then form structures based on these responses, it is important to note that these are abstract ideals and desires. Social desire paths are observable paths already under construction based on individual actions that point toward collective desires.

Sixth, the development of social desire paths often cause problems for or put stress upon existing social structures and institutions. Thus the identification of social desire paths allows us to understand something both about failures or deficiencies in current structures at the same time that the paths point the way towards potential solutions. This leads to an opportunity to both ask questions about the unsuitability of existing structures, or the gaps between formal structures and comprehensive needs; those missing parts within society.

Finally, social desire paths are connected to values. The behaviors that drive alternative use of formal structures that create social desire paths are rooted in a prioritization of values not represented or supported in existing structures. The questioning that takes place in characteristic six above allows publics to consider what values are being promoted by the existence of particular formal structures and if other societal values might well be supported by a change in or development of new structures. As the values being prioritized in social desire paths may not be apparent to researchers or desirers, after identifying such paths scientists must work to understand the values that propelled the development of the new paths.

To further explore the potential application and usability of the concept of social desire paths I apply the seven criteria of social desire paths discussed above to two case studies related to housing: one from the example introduced earlier based on my own research on the use of public transportation as shelter (also applied to social desire path analysis in Nichols 2014), and a second on the development of cohousing communities as an alternative to private home ownership.

### Case Study #1: A social desire path that is an alternative to formal shelter systems

As mentioned in the introduction, in 2007 I was asked by city officials and our local public transportation system to study the phenomenon of homeless persons riding our county's only all-night bus route for shelter. The study was under-taken as part of an undergraduate class I was teaching on Applied Sociology and 11 students and myself ultimately undertook the data collection, spending three nights riding the bus and talking to and collecting standardized data from riders who identified as homeless (Nichols 2011). In talking to riders it became apparent that the use of the bus for shelter is an example of a social desire path at work (Nichols 2014).

To further develop the seven criteria presented earlier, I will apply each to the example of the bus research and discuss how this phenomenon meets the definition of a social desire path. Later in the paper I will discuss the implications of the identification of this desire path for program and policy development.

1. *A social desire path exists already in the social world.* The phenomenon of individuals riding the bus for shelter had been going on for many years, chronicled a number of times in local newspaper articles.
2. *The social desire path originates in the acts of individuals.* Riding the bus for shelter was an individual, not a collective action. While some bus riders had received the idea to ride the bus from others, most thought of the idea on their own or saw others doing it and then followed suit. There was no organized, collective attempt to ride the buses and the presence of riders on the multiple buses throughout the night diffused any potential organized or collective effort by this group of riders.
3. *The individual actions in proposition two above have an effect on formal systems or structures and/or are a reaction to limitations in existing structures.* In the case of the bus,

transportation officials began to complain to city and county officials that the bus riders were causing problems for their operators and that some (presumably housed) riders complained about odor and crowdedness. Transportation officials noted many times that “we are not a shelter provider” and asked for government intervention into the “problem”. Riders themselves talked about their actions in response to problems with the current emergency shelter system as well as necessary when other public spaces for sleeping (such as public parks) were policed and no longer allowed.

4. *Social desire paths are formed not as the result of formal rule breaking, but often by using existing structures in unintended ways.* Riders did not break any laws by riding the bus at night. Most riders who were homeless had a monthly bus pass or paid for two all day bus passes (any bus rides after midnight required another bus pass). Said one rider “I pay \$10 a night to ride the bus, it’s much cheaper than a motel”.
5. *Social desire paths are observable using social science methods.* The behavior of riding the bus for shelter was noticeable (although largely invisible to the general public mainly because it happened at night) and able to be documented by researchers. Our methods of observation and interviews as well as surveying allowed us to get a sense of the numbers of folks using the bus for shelter as well as their stated reasons for doing so. We were also able to observe that most riders did not interact with other homeless riders, further supporting proposition two, that riding the bus for shelter was the result of individual, not collective acts.
6. *Social desire paths are often conflictual, causing problems or challenging existing structures.* Transportation officials complained that the practice was hurting their business and was not in their official purview as a transportation provider in the county.

Transportation administrators tried to put up a variety of barriers in an attempt to discourage

persons who were homeless from using the bus for shelter. These included reassigning bus operators considered “too sympathetic” to homeless riders, changing the final stop location, and requiring that continuous riders disembark at the end of each route and then reboard again at the end of the layover to continue riding<sup>4</sup>. In addition, the practice also challenged the very nature of homeless service provision: much of which was geographically defined by city boundaries, while the transportation route was county-wide, encompassing numerous cities. Further, staff in existing homeless outreach programs worked during the day, providing no formal means by which workers could reach this population at night.

7. *Social desire paths are connected to individual values.* While riders who used the bus for shelter did not necessarily enjoy trying to sleep while riding the bus all night, many chose the bus over existing shelter options because they valued other benefits it offered that they felt the emergency shelters did not including feeling safe and freedom from restrictive shelter rules. Riding the bus was also cheaper than other shelter options such as hotels.

#### Case Study #2: Cohousing communities

The second case study, cohousing, is an example of how small groups of persons can also create social desire paths as the result of wanting to live differently than current residential laws allow. The cohousing model mixes privately owned units within a deliberately formed community where public space and some resources (such as gardens, play structures, guest houses, some meals) are shared. As Sreenivasan (2008) describes it: “Cohousing was developed to meet the needs of people who want more interaction and cooperation with their neighbors, but do not want to share finances or a common ideology, as is common in other utopian communities” (p. 91).

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<sup>4</sup> The layovers were longest in the middle of the night, sometimes requiring people to wait up to an hour or longer while the bus sat by empty and idle.

Cohousing has been prevalent in Europe since the 1970's and such communities have been growing in the U.S. since the late 1980's (Benfield, Terris, and Vorsanger 2001). Because cohousing mixes communal and private ownership it typically challenges residential zoning laws and formal financial loan practices. As such, individuals who wish to live in such communities must find their own means to find one another, set up special financing arrangements, and work with city or county officials to obtain exceptions to zoning regulations. While these groups have not formed to change laws, they must engage with current policies in order to accomplish their desire to live in this "alternative" way, one not supported by current structures. As such, the development of cohousing communities provides an example of how studying individuals' utilization of exceptions to laws can be another means by which social scientists can capture the existence of social desire paths.

Here is how the case of cohousing stands up to the seven criteria of social desire paths:

1. *A social desire path exists already in the social world.* Cohousing communities have been in existence for a number of years in the United States. Raines Cohen, a cohousing consultant and board member of the Cohousing Association of the United States, reported in 2010 that there were approximately 120 communities built and another 100 or so forming (Takoma Village 2012).
2. *The social desire path originates in the acts of individuals.* The first recognizable cohousing community began when an architect and a few friends in Denmark bought property with the intention of creating a mix of private and public space. Since then a number of models have been developed, but most cohousing begins with a small group of individuals who work to form the structure of the community as well as put up financial capital. At least in the United States, cohousing communities develop on a case-by-case basis.

3. *The individual actions in proposition two above have an effect on formal systems or structures and/or are a response to current structures.* Forming cohousing communities is typically challenging and takes many years. The key challenges with current structures include city zoning laws, lenders who are not familiar with the concept, and the lack of policies or programs in the U.S. to support such housing arrangements all of which slow the development of communities (Fromm 1991). Because many city zoning laws define residential neighborhoods by limiting the number of “unrelated individuals” who can live together, current structures do not allow for cohousing models. Thus individuals seeking to form such communities must ask for exceptions from zoning officials or use current zoning rules in unintended ways, such as zoning intended for rental properties.
4. *Social desire paths are formed not as the result of formal rule breaking, but usually by using existing structures in unintended ways.* Cohousing communities must sometimes get around existing zoning laws by asking for various variances and/or in using a variety of financing options set up primarily for condominium developers as well as limited partnerships.
5. *The creation and existence of cohousing communities are observable using social science methods.* Finding cohousing developments is extremely easy using internet search engines and most are very open to outsiders learning more about their communities.
6. *Social desire paths are often conflictual, causing problems or challenging existing structures* and 7. *Social desire paths are connected to individual values.*

Criterion six and seven are related and best discussed at the same time. The first cohousing communities in Denmark in the 1970’s faced tremendous difficulties financing their projects. However, in 1981 the passage of the Cooperative Housing Association Law made it easier and less expensive to finance cohousing. Since then, most Danish cohousing communities

have been structured as limited equity cooperatives financed with government-sponsored loans (McCamant and Durrett 1994). The formalization of policies that directly supported the desire paths for cohousing development in Europe has encouraged the growth of these types of housing communities. No such formalization of laws to support cohousing have yet to be formed in the U.S., although cities are becoming more aware of their existence and their potential for curbing sprawl and contributing to sustainable communities (Benfield, Terris, and Vorsanger 2001). Those places where the policy has been changed have allowed for the value of collaborative community living to be recognized in formal structures.

#### Cases and the usefulness of a social desire paths concept

These two case studies provide an opportunity to further tease out the potential theoretical and practical usefulness of the adoption of the new concept social desire paths. First, it is important to reiterate that the identification of social desire paths is something that many social scientists have already been doing. Indeed, noticing patterns and identifying the interplay between agency and structure are at the heart of most sociological endeavors. What social desire paths as a concept adds is the ability to concentrate on particular instances when these patterns and paths are in direct response to (and therefore may have direct implications for) inadequacies in existing formal structures. Both the practice of using the bus for shelter and forming cohousing communities were in direct responses to individual values that were not being supported by current structures. In the case of the bus, individuals adapted a current structure, an all-night bus route, to meet their needs for a safe place to spend the night. In the case of cohousing, individuals formed groups who then worked to get exceptions to and, in some countries, ultimately changed existing structures (as rules and policies) to allow for the creation of new kinds of private/public housing arrangements.

In the first case, the bus as shelter was deemed by users as an inadequate (but better than existing options) way to get one's shelter needs met. The identification of the path allowed for a further elaboration of the values underlying the practice of using the bus for shelter as a relatively inexpensive way to provide the safety and freedom of movement without harassment that riders said they could not find in shelters or on the streets. The discovery of both the practice and the values underlying the social desire path of the bus as shelter pointed towards new structures that could be developed based on knowing that some people who are unhoused will pay (albeit of course small amounts) for shelter options that support their values of safety and freedom.

In the second case individuals had the resources and the ability to work within existing structures to make the rules and policies allow for a different ownership structure that fulfilled the values of private ownership and communal living. While in the first case individuals adapted a current structure in ways that can inform the creation of new structures, in the cohousing example individuals have been able to make existing rules work to accomplish their interests.

There are many questions left unanswered about the ways in which such paths develop and how the identification of such paths can be best used to inform policy, organizational, and programmatic change. In many ways the further development of social desire paths as a concept is consistent with the empirical agenda set out by Gross (2009) in creating a pragmatist theory of social mechanisms, "sociology should aim to identify the main social mechanisms by which cause and effect relationships in the social world that are of moral, political, or intellectual importance come about" (p. 375). A pragmatist approach to understanding social mechanisms could be a next step for theorists in testing the potential usability of social desire path analysis.



Particularly, understanding under what conditions social desire paths are enacted via habits as well as when the cultural responses that result in similar paths are heterogeneous.

Because social scientists already have the methods needed to find social desire paths as well as examples of desire paths that have already been uncovered, we now need to increase our ability to connect social desire path discovery to scientifically informing social structures.

Lessons learned from the attempts of sociologists to institutionally incorporate applied work into the academic disciplines can help inform this process and complete the application of the metaphor as applied social science.

#### From social desire path identification to changing formal structures

While identifying social desire paths is possible using current social science methods, applying the findings to formal structures for policy and program improvement or development may prove to be the most challenging aspect of this concept. This is where previous attempts to make sociological practice central to the work of sociologists can provide insight into how to effectively apply social desire paths to the public realm.

In 2004 Michael Burawoy, then the president of the American Sociological Association (ASA), pushed sociologists in the United States and the ASA to embrace a sociology that better engaged publics and played a more active role in the political sphere (Burawoy 2005, Burawoy et al. 2004). Critics feared that such a change would devalue the disciplines' adherence to objectivity and the pursuit of high-quality science, becoming instead a biased mouthpiece for paying clients and liberal ideologies (Tittle 2004). Since then the initiative has bogged down and there has been little change at the institutional level. More recently, Wright (2013) has argued that we need a social science of the possible: "The task is to combine theoretical analysis of

normatively desirable institutional designs with the empirical study of real-world cases that prefigure emancipatory alternatives beyond existing institutions” (p. 168).

The development of this new theoretical concept and approach, social desire paths, provides one way to accomplish a more engaged social science that is in line with our scientific and academic roots. Social desire path makes available a concept that values the scientific approach at the same time that it allows for a tangible way to apply these observations and findings for the public good. While it is true that many social scientists engage in evaluation and policy-based research for the purpose of program or policy development or improvement, this “policy sociology”, as defined by Burawoy (2005), is “sociology in the service of a goal defined by a client” (p. 9). In contrast, the application of social desire paths broadens this definition of policy sociology beyond that driven by clients or even social scientists, to one that is rooted in a theory and approach that insists that social scientists start first with identifying patterns that have developed organically in the social world and then studying their scope, as well as the rationale (or social mechanisms) that led to their formation. Then the research findings can be used to inform the creation or alteration of social policies and programs.

Understanding how desire paths emerge and are used to inform the work of landscape architects provides helpful guidance for the application of social desire paths to sociological practice.<sup>5</sup> Just as desire paths in the landscape point to the needs and desires of individuals, social desire paths can similarly help us understand the paths that people have created to get around current limitations in social structures or the need for new structures. Following the call of Jacobs (1992), social desire path analysis allows us to get beyond expert design to recognize the organized complexities in cities and social life as a whole. Analogous to the footpaths created on

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<sup>5</sup> The use of spatial metaphors in the social sciences has been a helpful means of developing new ideas and concepts (Newman and Paasi 1998; Silber 1995).

the physical landscape, social desire paths on the social landscape can point the way to discovering how best to alter or construct society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century using a more inclusive process. Such an approach becomes even more necessary with an increase in the number of rationally-based societies with highly bureaucratic structures. In this context, social desire paths may be another means by which participatory democracy processes can be practiced and realized. In that social desire paths point to occasions where individual interests are reflections of collective desires, the application of the concept of social desire paths may help to include the perspectives and needs of previously ignored or invisible actors in a democracy. Social scientists are already well-trained to identify, understand, and describe such paths in ways that could have an effect on development of future policy and social structures that better serve the needs and wants of publics (Adut 2012).

Social scientists have long argued that we need to find ways to get beyond the limitations of relying solely on experts for program and policy development and instead find participatory ways to include people's desires and needs as starting points (Jacobs 1992, Nichols 2002, Throgmorton and Eckstein 2000). "Some scholars also argue that the rise of large-scale, national organizations—government, media, manufacturing, and commerce—undermined average Americans' sense that they could control events in their local communities" (Fischer 2010, p. 187). Social desire paths are a counter to this trend as desire paths are at home with the imagination (Bachelard 1964), a place to tap into what we can imagine for our society. Social desire paths provide a means to go beyond the constraints of our current structures to a place of tangible imaginings. Further, these paths allow us to move from objective, structural realities to the meanings behind actions (Münnich 2011), and social desire paths provides a form from which to bring these meanings into lived realities through better program and policy

development. And social desire path analysis encourages social scientists to actively connect findings at the micro-level in ways that inform macro structural realities. To successfully connect social scientific findings to practical applications to inform policy, organizational, and program change requires that researchers fully use social desire path analysis as theory that guides the application of findings.

### Challenges

Despite social desire paths potential as a theoretical concept to organize existing research that captures individual actions that can ultimately influence formal structures, there are a number of challenges to implementing the idea of social desire paths in ways that could influence policy and our future work as social scientists.

First and foremost, how is defining social desire paths different from what we do every day as social scientists? Is not making the implicit explicit our main purpose and ambition? Many more examples exist of sociologists bringing to light individual actions that become patterned responses to formal structural limitations. Labeling this work as social desire path analysis provides the opportunity to use the results of research to inform social policy and organizational as well as program development. The point in delineating social desire paths then is to ask us to consider looking for those paths already operating, and figuring out the challenging task of using the findings to shape future formal structure development.

Second, how do we know when a social desire path has made enough of an imprint on the social structure to rise to the level of important to consider for social change work? Is this a matter of numbers of people, duration of time, enormity of impact, or some other factors? The advice and instruction of investor Benjamin Graham may prove helpful here: “As Graham liked to say, in the short run the market is a voting machine, but in the long run it is a weighing

machine” (Zweig 2006, p. 477). It may indeed be that it is not just a critical mass of people using an alternative, but it is the weight of multiple people using a different path **over time** that solidifies individual actions into true social desire paths. As in the case of the bus as shelter, the practice had been going on for many years but then reached a point where the strain on existing structures was perceived as too great and caused transportation officials to begin to make structural changes to their routes and practices in ways that discouraged riders who were homeless from using the bus for shelter. Certainly, social scientists could have documented the phenomenon earlier (journalists already had) and perhaps made suggestions before it reached this critical point. Here, the research on the roles of users and non-users in technological development may prove useful (Oudshoorn and Pinch 2003). These scholars have been struggling to define the roles of designers versus consumers, specifically if users should be defined as a social group, movement, or some other configuration and force of influence. Indeed, this is the challenge from which we could more readily define the role of social scientific research in representing the interests of those often left out of the political and resource allocation process.

A third challenge is understanding if desire paths are simply just examples of the use of loopholes through which some go against the existing social structure of formal rules and laws. This indeed could be another way to define social desire paths. As demonstrated in the two housing case studies presented earlier, social desire paths can help in the identification of interests not supported in current social structures. It is important to note however that the creation or refinement of policy as the result of social path identification and analysis still depends on “experts”, stakeholders, and political actors who have the power to determine which values should be privileged over others. For example, those who forge a path through tax

loopholes perhaps are valuing keeping more of their individual wealth. After the identification of this path, and analysis as to why actors are using this alternative to the current tax structure, policymakers could then decide on if they want to construct policies and structures that better support such values, or barriers to restrict their enactment (Nichols 2014). Thus, the potential benefit of social scientists defining such paths is that in addition to identifying the paths, we have the methods to understand the values and interests behind those desires (or use of loopholes) which is useful for program and policy makers as well as those balancing competing interests for limited resources, in deciding which values or interests to support.

Further, there needs to be more consideration of the implications of social desire paths for social science methods. Even though new technologies such as video and mapping allow for more refined systematic social observation (Sampson and Raudenbush 1999), ethnography appears to be the best way to identify and begin to understand social desire paths. This may require that social scientists be out and interacting with social spaces to a much larger extent than most of us typically are (anthropologists could perhaps best lead this effort). Yet, to understand the why and value orientations of those who are using such paths, the full and appropriate complement of methods typically employed by social scientific practitioners will likely be needed.

Finally, the new concept of social desire paths needs more empirical testing to determine its durability in many different contexts. This is where this concept must grow and develop and will benefit immensely from the input of social scientists across the disciplines. What are the challenges to the use of the new concept of social desire paths and is there enough useful, new information here to move us forward into the future as more responsive, theoretically-driven, scientific practitioners?

## Conclusion

Identifying social desire paths and understanding why they develop will be a useful addition to the work of social scientists as the need to apply scientific findings to policy and organizational change becomes more urgent in our globalizing societies. Sociologists have the opportunity to move a new concept like social desire paths forward using the theoretical grounding provided by long-standing work on the sociology of interests (Swedberg 2005a, 2005b) and social mechanisms (Gross 2009) combined with our vast array of social science methods and recent learning on the pitfalls of applying sociological findings to policy (Clawson et al. 2007).

The addition of social desire paths into our complement of theoretical approaches provides another means by which we can look for possibilities within current shortcomings in the application of research findings to shape the practice of social sciences actively influencing social structures. The desires of individuals are imprinting paths on the social landscape and the identification of these paths can lead to actions that have direct policy implications. The use of social desire paths to enhance the work of social scientists may provide simply a larger umbrella under which to name the type of work that many have already been doing, or it could inspire a theoretical approach that reorients research towards understanding for the sake of application. More needs to be done to empirically test and play with this new concept to determine its true utility and potential durability.

If social scientific findings are to be relevant in our current global, information technology, data-driven societies, we must continue to find ways to grow as applied disciplines, being careful not to become too mired in arguments and debates within the disciplines (Clawson et al. 2007; Jenness, Smith, and Stepan-Norris 2008) that the relevance of the social sciences

becomes lost at the very time it is most needed. The addition of the concept of social desire paths is a theoretically-driven, concrete approach that allows social scientists to both capture scientific work at the micro-level at the same time that we provide the type of information necessary for the findings to be useful to society as a whole.



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## Intellectual Biography

Laura Nichols is Associate Professor of Sociology at Santa Clara University in California, North America where she works with students to conduct applied research that can be used to improve the work of non-profit organizations and policy makers. In her early work on participatory program planning, published in *Journal of Evaluation and Program Planning* (2002), she argues that program users should be brought into the planning process. More recent work focuses on the needs of first generation college students, people who are unhoused, and college students in the U.S. who live without documented citizenship status. Social desire path analysis is an expanded attempt to bring more people into the policy and program planning process so that formal structures work with and for people, especially those typically left out of such processes.

Image 1. Example of Desire Path



From: <http://kevinwebber.ca/blog/tag/desire-path>