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ABSTRACT

Using insights from landscape architecture on how pedestrian-driven "desire paths" inform the design of public landscapes, I offer in this article a new concept for sociologists to consider—**social** desire paths. Recognizing social desire paths in concrete behaviors provides an orienting frame for sociological research to shape policy as well as program creation and improvement at the organizational level. The social desire paths metaphor puts attention to instances when there are disconnects between formal structures and then what individuals actually do in the course of action. Conscious or not, such paths which commence at the individual level, often become collective and leave an imprint on social structures. When recognized, the paths then become informative to applied social science. As a result, social desires paths as an orienting concept offers a distinct sociological approach to capturing interests while also providing a means by which social science research can more directly inform policy and program development. I offer two examples in this regard, and conclude by discussing the benefits of sociologists focusing on behaviors that result in desire paths—behaviors that are suggestive of viable alternatives to existing social structures.

SOCIAL DESIRE PATHS: AN APPLIED SOCIOLOGY OF INTERESTS

A social desire paths orientation, I assert in this article, offers a theoretically distinct sociology of interests while simultaneously increasing the utility of social science research findings to policy and organizational development. Uncovering independent but patterned individual behavior as social desire paths helps move beyond existing academic and sociological practice impasses– impasses that limit the application of research findings. In the applied context, social desire path analysis provides a means to uncover the interests of stakeholders in ways that illuminate both the limitations of existing structures and point the way towards potential solutions. Social desire path analysis is also a helpful metaphor in connecting interests to Sewell's (1992) description of the means by which agency, fueled by schemas, transform structures as dynamic social entities.

Social desire path is based on and inspired by the term "desire path" as used by landscape architects. In landscape architecture desire paths are dirt paths that develop over time as individuals independently bypass formal sidewalks and imprint new paths on the physical landscape (Lidwell, Holden, and Butler 2010). The existence of desire paths tend to signal that current, formal sidewalks do not work for pedestrians and that they want a different, better, and usually more expedient route. Urban planners and landscape architects are mixed about what to do when desire paths become part of planned landscapes. Some argue that desire paths provide helpful information in determining the usability of space and should be taken into account in future designs or used to modify existing landscapes. For example, in Copenhagen urban planners are observing the behaviors of bicyclists and plotting their desire lines to redesign intersections and create a more bicycle-friendly infrastructure (Episode 2013). In contrast, master plans and urban planners can also take the view that such paths are problematic and use barriers and other means to impede their development and further use (Norman 2011).

Social desire paths, more broadly, describe instances wherein individual interests and desires collectively, but independently, make imprints on the social landscape over time. For example, when parents one-by-one move their children out of their neighborhood public school or when employees find ways to get around workplace regulations. In short, social desire paths reflect emergent phenomena that occur when individuals interact with formal social structures that are not working for them. When multiple, independent actors react to social structures in this way, desire paths are formed on the social landscape. Social scientists discover these new paths and work to understand why such paths have developed.

Considering social desire paths, and bringing them more explicitly into sociological consideration, helps bridge the gap between academic sociology, much of which already captures interests as patterned responses to constraints in formal structures, and what Burawoy (2005) refers to as "policy sociology," or research questions that are often defined by clients. Social desire path analysis provides an opportunity to reorient current academic sociological work that captures interests in resistance or innovation and, in the applied realm, to move beyond discrete problem analysis often defined by non-scientists. As such, a social desire path orientation allows for an expanded application of existing research and a more comprehensive applied approach, both of which can be employed to improve programs, organizations, and policies. In short, the metaphor of desire paths itself, and its current use in landscape architecture can both advance theoretically a distinct sociology of interests as well as enhance the applicability of social scientific research to policy and program development.

SOCIAL DESIRE PATHS AND THEORY

Social Desire Paths as a Distinct Sociology of Interests

Although interests are and have been fundamental to the approach and work of many

sociologists, interests in sociology have been hidden or ignored as a proto-concept (Swedberg

2005a, 2005b). In contrast, economists and political scientists have been deliberate in identifying

and framing interests in discrete ways for their respective disciplines. Many theories in

economics place interest at the center, positing that economic self-interested behavior is the

driving force and value that propels action from which structure is presumed to adapt (Connor

2011). On the other hand, political scientists focus on interests solidified in the formation of

interest groups, describing how interests and power merge in the formal creation of groups that

can directly challenge and change existing social structures.

I propose that sociologists describe sociological research that captures expressions of

independent, individual interests that collectively develop into patterned responses over time as

social desire path analysis. This promotes theoretically a sociology of interests that also moves

the study of interest in the ways that Swedberg (2005b) suggests: "interest is something that

people are doing, not only in their minds but also in activities that involve their whole being" (p.

105). A sociology that captures how people behave in response to formal structures has direct

application to policy and organizational decision-making in ways that can advance our

understanding of the relationship between agency and structural transformation that Sewell

(1992) describes.

Relationship of Interests to Agency and Structure in Social Desire Path Analysis

Social desire path analysis allows for an examination of what behaviorally emerges in the course

of individual agency (desires or interests) while also taking into consideration the cultural

meanings and values behind the creation or choosing of alternative paths. This extends Weber's

classic insight that interests are indicators of culture and often expressions of value-rational goals (Spillman and Strand 2013). Social desire paths are formed by individuals or small groups who are trying to meet needs, not always with explicit contemplation or some intent to create social change. One might find, however, that such paths are replicated over time and with repeated use by a number of independent individuals. To the degree that this occurs, it may indeed reflect visible, collective interests.

Recognizing social desire paths as reflective of both structures on the social landscape and the values that drive emergent paths in the course of individual agency allows for direct application of social desire path analysis to the theoretical aim and need to better articulate the interplay of structure and agency. Sewell (1992) notes that structures in society are supported by schemas, making "structure dynamic, not static….the same resourceful agency that sustains the reproduction of structures also makes possible their transformation—by means of transformations of schemas and remobilizations of resources that make the new structures recognizable as transformations of the old" (Sewell 1992: 27). Desire paths are these new structures. While agency is employed in reproducing existing structures, social desire paths capture instances of agentic adaption to better meet interests or to re-imagine existing structures. As described by Black (1962), it is the interaction within the metaphor of social desire paths between agency and structure that collective desires may be realized, new structures may be created, or existing structures transformed.

A proposal for how to identify and analyze social desire paths is described in more detail in my prior work (Nichols 2012). For reasons of brevity, I will not lay out such detail here but instead will highlight what social desire paths are not. Social desire paths are not social movement behavior influenced by a critical mass (Schelling 1978). Social desire paths start as

the result of individual, independent actions without regard by the actors as to the potential of these actions to create structural change. These behaviors might eventually result in collective social change work, and the development of interest groups, but at that point such research is no longer the reflection of a social desire path at work.

Social desire path analysis is also clearly distinct from path dependency, a term used often in economics and political science to explain event sequences over time (Mahoney 2000; Pierson 2000). Those using path dependency focus on the historical conditions that ignite a sequencing of events as well as the inertia that can result once such paths are enacted, making changing course difficult (Brown 2010; Webster 2008). In contrast, social desire path analysis aims to capture individual behaviors that collectively indicate ways in which formal structures are not working for individuals. For the proactive policy-maker or organizational leader, social desire path analysis can be used to identify areas for improvement or innovation—desire paths can be formalized through new policies or programs. Or, in cases of structural strain, social desire paths indicate ways that rules and policies may need to be changed to accommodate the interests inherent in new paths.

APPLICATION TO ORGANIZATIONS AND POLICY

Beyond contributing theoretically to the sociology of interests, social desire paths as a conceptual and orienting framework has a direct connection to, and can be further enhanced by, applications to program and policy development. It is important to note that the utility of social desire path analysis rests on the assumption that power-holders want to not just understand problems, but want to improve social structures (as codified in policies or programs). To the degree that this is true, then social scientists can take a wide view and proceed with two steps: identifying social

desire paths and then determining what interests current structures do not meet that caused the new or altered paths.

Observing and plotting patterns are methods that can be used to discover social desire paths. Further investigation of the reasons why such paths have developed will then be warranted. Especially important will be understanding the values that individuals prioritize and draw from in forging alternative paths. In this way, the identification of social desire paths provides important information about the functionality of and problems in organizations, structures, and policies. At the same time, the paths signal potential solutions.

The most challenging aspect of such analyses, as in all policy-making endeavors, is to balance the typically distinct, often competing, values that may drive the creation of the same path. This point has also not been lost on social theorists, who recognize that different interests may drive similar behaviors. In social desire path analysis, the same patterned responses formed into a path may indeed reflect a variety of values or schemas. Because policy-making is fundamentally about balancing different values (Gates 2009; Pedriana and Stryker 1997), as much as possible it is necessary for social scientists to capture and describe what individuals are valuing in creating and using social desire paths. This is no less true when values conflict with one another.

In landscape architecture, the worn desire paths on the physical landscape typically signal pedestrians adapting the physical landscape for themselves in ways that prioritize the values of efficiency and expediency. If planners choose to prioritize these values in their design then they will build sidewalks that pay attention to these values, perhaps having flexible options if these values are ever compromised because of changes in the overall space such as the creation of new buildings or other destinations. A more or less parallel social desire path example, for instance,

could be the practice of investors moving capital to other countries to reduce taxes. Such interests are often driven by the value of increasing profit. In response, policy-makers who want policies that encourage more capital to stay in investors' home country can block the social desire path by enforcing stricter regulations, or change current rules to allow investors to keep more of their earnings. At the organizational level, a social desire path may be evident in recognizing an increase in the codes that health providers use to diagnose patients in ways that provide the greatest access to insurance coverage. In such instances, organizations can recognize such practices as a need not being addressed and either figure out another means to provide these services or work to change policy to allow for greater flexibility.

Social desire path analysis would also be extremely useful in the growth of participatory democracy initiatives such as participatory budgeting, community design based on participatory decision making (Toker 2012), as well as the work of grassroots political organizations that mobilize communities whose interests are typically under-represented in government (Swarts 2008; Walker and Shannon 2011). Such initiatives are growing around the world; especially at the local level. Social desire path analysis in this context would likely involve observing and mapping existing individual behaviors to inform future initiatives. Social desire path analysis would arguably add to these projects, and in a less expensive and time-consuming way. This is because social desire path analyses uses evidence of behavior that has already patterned responses (rather than collecting new data on preferences or attitudes).

EXAMPLES OF SOCIAL DESIRE PATHS

Social scientists are already describing the existence of social desire paths when they discover patterned, emergent behaviors relative to or against existing social structures. However, these

findings are often not used to inform policy or program improvement. There are also many such paths yet to be discovered. Thus there are two general starting places for social desire path analysis: the first involves describing existing social science research findings that are evidence of social desire paths in ways that make the research more usable for policy/program alteration or creation; the second launching point is to look for evidence of social desire paths that already exist, but have yet to be brought to light. Examples of both approaches are evidenced already in the literature, and I discuss two here.

Phyllis Moen and coauthors (2013) provide a pertinent and compelling example of how existing research can be recast as social desire path analysis. Their work describes the strategies that professionals employ in response to increasing time demands at work. The strategies could be conceived as social desire paths because all but one of the 53 employees interviewed saw themselves as independent actors reacting to private troubles. Yet, the researchers were able to identify common patterned responses. One such path entailed the practice of "time shifting," or "moving work to times and places more convenient to them or informally taking 'comp' time after working long weekends" (p. 103). While continuing to value their role as successful employees, workers also knew from experiences that such practices were necessary to maintain their health and the balance they desired in their family lives. Seeing these strategies as social desire paths provides an opportunity to better understand the structural constraints of 21st century work. At the same time, these agency-driven "work arounds" (Moen, et al. 2013: 104) provide clues as to the kinds of programmatic and policy changes that may be necessary (and effective) in the future.

Finding and describing new paths that have not yet been studied—the second beginning point for social desire path analyses—requires researchers to actively uncover social desire paths

that exist on the social landscape, denote the attributes of the new paths including density and

duration, and determine the values behind why the paths were created. This might entail looking

for exceptions that people have requested in response to existing policies that do not work for

them. Some examples could include: permission to attend unassigned public schools, waivers to

zoning laws, or the unintended use of public space. Other means of finding social desire paths

include studying behaviors and practices often first captured by journalists or artists or paying

particular attention to changing data trends that suggest desire for, or behaviors reflective of,

alternative pathways. For example, our applied research looking at the use of public

transportation as a form of shelter (Nichols and Cázares 2011), could be conceptualized as a

desire path created by homeless individuals who were prioritizing distinct values and interests

not supported by the formal policies and procedures of the emergency shelter system. The

practice of using the bus for shelter was brought to public attention first by journalists. We were

asked to look at the issue as a problem to be understood and solved. A social desire path

orientation allowed us to proceed in a manner that uncovered how the limitations of other shelter

options, the desire for freedom and safety, and a willingness to pay a small amount (in this case,

bus fare) created a visible alteration to and the unintended use of a public good. The findings

thus held implications for both the current practices of organizations such as homeless shelters as

well as policies that defined and funded acceptable services based on a narrow understanding of

interests and needs.

Both the recasting of past and current research as well as the active hunt for new paths

allows social desire path analysts to present research findings in ways that can be more useable

to policy makers and program designers. Creators and implementers can then, by looking at the

values inherent in the paths' creation, determine if they want to propose, create, or alter policies

to support or dissuade these values. Notable as well, current technological advancements in mapping software also expand social scientists ability to find previously undetected patterns and desire paths. Many fields such as public health are using such software to map the spread of disease (Koch 2011). The ability to map incidents of individuals actively but independently choosing alternatives to existing structures allows previously hidden interests to come to light in the form of social desire paths.

CONCLUSION

As rapid structural change occurs at the global level, the ability to identify how actors are responding to these changes provides an opportunity to better use social science research to inform policy and program creation. Paying attention to examples such as how individuals use "work arounds," seek exceptions to current structures, or form informal new structures is a useful way to understand individual needs and desires beyond that often prescribed or defined by "experts" or social movements (Nichols 2002; Throgmorton and Eckstein 2000). Social desire path analysis also allows social scientists, policy makers, and program developers to plan for the future by seeing utility in understanding when individuals follow their interests and go against traditional ways that society has been organized. In this way, social desire path analysis also provides an apt metaphor to theoretically realize the goal of Swedberg (2005a, 2005b) for a sociology of interests that is distinct from the ways in which other social science disciplines approach the study of interests. Social desire path analysis also has the potential to inform theoretical work on the interrelatedness of structure and agency.

Identifying and understanding why desire paths develop on the social landscape is an exciting area and process whereby more innovations that occur at the individual level can be

captured by social scientists and made relevant to larger publics (Zietsma and Lawrence 2010). As Erik Olin 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 such paths form provides a means wherein culture, as behavior driven by values, can be made explicit. Such a process allows interests to inform concrete decisions related to organizations, policies, and the allocation of public resources based on collective desires.

To be sure, much work remains in terms of wrestling with and teasing out the complications within and potential applicability of social desire paths to the work of social scientists and policy-makers. And, to be clear, social desire path analysis does not fix existing intransigent barriers and dilemmas in the policy realm, especially the power dynamics involved when there are competing values driving dissention. Yet social scientists, with our history of studying the theoretical and empirical bases of interests and our ongoing grappling with agency and structure, are uniquely poised to directly inform these debates and more widely apply our work if only we reorient or re-imagine our work in this way.

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