Update on Current Research Findings on CouchSurfing
Press Release

Over the past year our team has established a significant research partnership with CouchSurfing.org, an international hospitality network with close to 3 million current members worldwide. Since the *CouchSurfing* organization has collected detailed information about the interactions between its users studying this network presents a great opportunity to better understand relationships that involve trust and trustworthiness. We analyzed the available data on American *CouchSurfing* members from the founding of the organization in 2003 to the fall of 2009. In this press release we briefly report on our current findings in four key areas of inquiry, with the caveat that we are still in the preliminary stages of analyzing the data and that none of these results have yet been published.

(1) CouchSurfing - a social space that connects people who are different

It is widely known that people tend to be friends with people who are similar to them. Social scientists label this phenomenon, "homophily." When investigating *CouchSurfing* data, however, we uncovered what appears to be a world with strikingly less homophily than commonly expected. We have established this effect with respect to age and we hope to expand our research to explore other social characteristics that might be linked to the choice of a host or guest on the site.

Whereas young people typically interact with those of very close age to themselves, American *CouchSurfers* between 18 and 35 years of age engage in hospitality interactions (hosting or being hosted) with one another without regard to age difference. For example, a 20-year-old-CouchSurfer is equally like to interact with an 18-year-old, as she is to interact with a 35-year-old. The same was true for individuals between the ages of 35 and 50 as well as for people 50 and older. This finding has two caveats: (1) overall there are fewer exchanges between members of different age groups than would be expected and (2) older members of the organization are less likely to cross age-group boundaries. Thus, a 36-year-old is less likely to interact with somebody younger than 35 or older than 50 and somebody who is 55 has a strong preference for interacting with somebody of the same age.

(2) Understanding Trust in Others

CouchSurfing operates on the possibility that complete strangers will host or be hosted for a night or two in their homes. What appears externally as a complicated act of balancing trust is a matter of routine for members of the *CouchSurfing* community.

While it is likely that those who join *CouchSurfing* may be predisposed to "trust" strangers, understanding how these people manage risk and how trust flows between them remain important research questions. *CouchSurfing* collects confidential ratings about their users' trust in each other. We analyzed a sample of such ratings that were recorded after users engaged in the act of hosting or being hosted by a stranger (referred to as a hospitality exchange).

We discovered that, holding other things constant, women tend to be more cautious in their interactions, but also to be seen as more trustworthy. Furthermore, we find that previous experiences have an effect on current inclinations to trust, even if these experiences were completed with users unrelated to the current partner. Thus, positive previous experiences with *CouchSurfing* make some more inclined to trust now, whereas negative previous experiences, as might be expected, make one more cautious.

A similar result emerged with respect to the reputation of one's potential partner, communicated on *CouchSurfing* through a system of "references." Positive references obtained by the partner prior to the exchange increase the likelihood of being trusted, whereas negative references have the opposite effect. Reputation plays a role in trusting interactions, only when a host considers a potential guest, but not vice-versa**.** This suggests that hosts scrutinize the web profiles of their potential guests more than the reverse, indicating an asymmetry in how the two roles are interpreted by members.

All of these variables play a role in trust-based interactions, but the most important determinant of interpersonal trust on *CouchSurfing* remains, unsurprisingly, the direct experience between users. Furthermore, negative information of any kind (prior experience, reputation, direct experience) has a disproportionately greater effect than positive information.

(3) Specialization of roles

In hospitality exchanges, CouchSurfing users can play either of two roles—that of a host and that of a guest. A question arises as to what extent the two roles are segregated, and to what extent this role segregation remains stable over time. Our preliminary analysis suggests that indeed the majority of users play almost exclusively either one of the two roles and that fewer people are both hosts and guests. We found this level of role specialization in the community to be a stable trait of *CouchSurfing* during the time period we examined.

(4) Local Networks

Ethnographic work across several countries also reveals that *CouchSurfing* has created very strong local communities in many places around the world. We suspect this fact helps strengthen the organization. By looking at a number of local networks in the United States our investigation uncovered rather surprising results. During

the first few years after the organization was founded, local networks were formed primarily by friends joining the organization together. As a result every city we examined with network analysis during this early time period shows disconnected clusters of pre-existing friendships. However, three to five years after the founding of the organization, friendship ties formed within the organization proliferated in some cities, connecting the myriad separate clusters present in the local networks. An example of this phenomenon is illustrated in the attached network movie compiled for San Francisco.

The Research Team (listed alphabetically):

Karen Cook
Ray Lyman Wilbur Professor of Sociology
Dept. of Sociology
Director, Institute for Research in the Social Sciences
Stanford University

Rense Corten
Visiting Scholar
Institute for Research in the Social Sciences
Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology / ICS, Utrecht University
Stanford University

Diana Dakhlallah
PhD Student
Dept. of Sociology
Stanford University

Paolo Parigi
Assistant Professor
Dept. of Sociology
Faculty Fellow, Institute for Research in the Social Sciences
Stanford University

Bogdan State
PhD Candidate
Dept. of Sociology
Stanford University