Slide 1

THE CHALLENGE OF SERVICE SOCIOLOGY

A. Javier Treviño

Presidential Address delivered by A. Javier Treviño at the 61st Annual Meeting of the Society for the Study of Social Problems, August 20, 2011 in Las Vegas, Nevada.
Note: This is the spoken version and a set of slides accompany it.

I begin with the *premise* that the *central* concern of sociology is the *betterment* of society. And this goal is to be achieved through the resolution of the critical social problems of our time.

****

Due largely to the economic crisis of the Great Recession, we are today witnessing staunch opposition to tax increases, severe austerity measures, and deep cutbacks in social services. As a consequence, it's no longer tenable to believe that the most creative solutions to society's most vexing problems will come from government programs. Obviously the state has a duty to play a major role in addressing larger societal issues, such as unemployment and broad access to health care. But given the current political and economic climate, organized *non*-governmental effort seems the more realistic way to go.

The fact of the matter is that there are currently tens of thousands of citizens involved in *community service* throughout the country. This work is being done by many ordinary people who are picking up the slack for a city, a state, a nation unwilling or unable to attend to many critical matters that directly affect thousands, even millions, of people.

****

I contend that we're now entering a *new* era in this country; one characterized by a *culture of service*.

Slide 2 Consider that the 21st century has ushered in the age of philanthrocapitalism in which some of the richest people on the planet—like Bill Gates, Warren Buffet, and Richard Branson—have donated *billions* of dollars in their efforts to solve many of the biggest and most complex problems facing humanity today.

Slide 3 In addition, there are the *celebrity* philanthropists such as Bono, Angelina Jolie, and Oprah Winfrey who can grab the public's attention like no one else, and who have contributed their fame, time, and money to many worthy causes.

Slide 4 Then there are former world leaders like Bill Clinton, Nelson Mandela, and former president of Ireland, Mary Robinson, who are devoting their power and principles to addressing global issues such as combating HIV/AIDS, malaria, poverty, climate change, defending human rights, and improving education.

Slide 5 Also consider that the national *volunteer* rate is almost 27 percent, that over 63 million volunteers served in 2009, that these volunteers dedicated over 8 billion hours to volunteer service, and that the economic value of this service was nearly 170 *billion* dollars.

Finally, consider that 27 percent of *college students* volunteered in 2009, and that over 3 million of them dedicated over 300 million hours of service to communities across the country, primarily in activities involving youth mentoring, fundraising, and teaching and tutoring.

So if business leaders, politicians, celebrities, and our own students can be *actively* involved in addressing a myriad of social problems, why not sociologists?

****

Given the current situation, what we need today is a *new* sociology. One that creates opportunities for *all* of us—citizens, stakeholders, activists, and academics—to play active roles in the amelioration of social problems.

And so I'd like to propose a sociology, or better yet an *ethos* of sociology, characterized by good-will and benevolence that I'm calling *service sociology*.

Slide 6 Motivated by care and compassion, a service-oriented sociology is a sociology of *social problems* aimed at helping people meet their pressing social needs. As such, service sociology involves the application of sociological *knowledge* combined with the expression of humanitarian *sentiment* in neighborly service.

Contrary to the various sociologies of the past that have reified, rarefied, and transmogrified individuals into actors, subjects, and publics, service sociology relates to individuals as flesh-and-blood *people* with real and urgent needs. The core activity of service sociology, therefore, is to *help* people by meeting their essential needs and concerns through *service*.

The sociology of service believes that the personal needs of *one* individual are not so different from the *collective* needs of others in similar life circumstances. This is why service sociology treats individuals as *people in community* with each other.

But who exactly *are* these people in dire need of help? Typically they are *casualties*—of exclusion and subordination, of natural disasters and man-made catastrophes. They include people in physical discomfort, emotional distress, and in financial crisis. But I should say that the sociology of service is not *only* about meeting the *pressing* needs of individuals but also the

shared needs of communities—communal needs such as improving the environment and beautifying the land.

As I use the term here, *service* constitutes a variety of *practices* informed by sociological knowledge. These practices, or *facilitating-actions*, about which I will have more to say later, may be performed habitually, sporadically, or once-only.

Slide 7 The chief task of service sociology, then, is *to alleviate and ameliorate social problems by helping communities promote sustainability and helping people to achieve self-determination in order to better cope with their lives*.

But what is meant by *help*? Well, it means providing, in some cases, the *material* relief necessary for physical survival. In *most* cases, however, it means providing *non-material* services, such as dispute resolution, education, and professional consultation.

Today, this kind of charitable effort is no longer threatening or stigmatizing to the discipline as it once was. The more social crises we have to confront, the more people need assistance, and the more urgent is the task of service sociology.

****

Let me now say a few words about the *place* of service sociology. **Slide 8** To begin with, service sociology cuts a *middle* path between scholarship and social activism, between social science and social reform. It cuts a narrow but extensive swath between clinical sociology and the helping professions, between public sociology and academic sociology. Between case work and social theory lies the sociology of service.

Slide 9 The main goal of service sociology is to render help to those who need it in a way that is more efficacious than can be done either by folk wisdom, speculation, or by simple charity. If it is objected that this is the task of the social worker, the therapist, the priest, or the philanthropist, I say that it requires all of these efforts and others.

Now, it's not advisable, or even desirable, that the service sociologist displace the physician, the psychiatrist, the psychologist, or the social worker. But the service sociologist should contribute sociologically informed interventions in alleviating problems of human suffering. Service sociology *complements*, not substitutes, and the best way to ensure more, and better-targeted facilitating-actions requires working in tandem with other like-minded people and organizations.

Service sociology provides a vital check and balance to erroneous or ill-informed conventional wisdom, common sense, and organizational policy. Informing the facilitating-action that service sociology provides are the methods, the themes, and the theories that come from *academic* sociology.

All this, however, begs the question as to whether the service sociologist has anything to contribute to mitigating social problems that is not already adequately provided by the social worker, for example. The answer will, of course, depend on the resourcefulness, the imagination, and the specific training of the social workers and the sociologists in question.

While psychiatry, social work, and sociology have very different *cognitive* orientations, when it comes to implementing concrete practices in the world of the here-and-now, they're all basically the same. The differences between them have been based on a traditional and authoritative arrangement rather than on actual differences in concrete practices of technique. The approaches that the various disciplines and professions contribute to addressing social

problems are frequently less a matter of technique, than of conceptualization. Having said this, however, there's no question that the *sociological* approach, to a greater extent than the others, considers the individual in the context of social structure.

Service sociology is part of a broader division of sociological labor that also includes, academic sociology, public sociology, and clinical sociology. It also can learn much from sister disciplines like sociologically-informed social work, applied anthropology, and restorative justice practices. But *unlike* its sister fields, service sociology is not so much *patron*-focused as it is *people*-focused. Not so much practiced in *clinical* settings as in everyday *social and community* settings. In its mandate to help people through various interventions, service sociology navigates a path between, *on the one hand*, serving patrons, the task of clinical sociology, and, *on the other hand*, talking to publics, the task of public sociology.

Between patrons and publics we find *people*.

****

As for the *strategic* approach of the sociology of service, I should say that it tends to implement piecemeal *democratic* changes over against top-down *structural* reform. But let me be clear: I'm *not* saying that service sociology does not address the structural conditions that give many social problems their perennial character. But structural conditions make such problems exceedingly difficult to *root* out. Getting to the root causes of the problem requires making major transformations in social structures that have existed for centuries if not millennia.

It may be objected that gradual improvements in the lives of people treat only the *symptoms* and do not get to the root *causes* of the problem. But service sociology is *always* about

redressing gross injustices and inequalities. Service sociology is also about altering factors such as the repression of human rights and civil rights that *exacerbate* social problems.

Many, perhaps most, sociologists *reject* mico reform, seeing it merely as a stopgap measure—perhaps necessary, but not really effective in resolving the major problems of modern life. They argue that such an approach postpones people's total emancipation from the exploitative social arrangements. Service sociologists do not know if occasional, small-scale victories will bring about a just and non-repressive society in the ethereal future. We *do* know, however, that these beneficial services *can* provide for people's needs in the *concrete* now.

Service sociology, with its more *modest* agenda, first attempts facilitating-actions on a small scale. But it must also have the ability to quickly scale up solutions that work. Progressive reformers try to move toward better systems that are sensitive to *local conditions* and that liberate the dynamism of individuals. The fact is that the dynamism of the people at the *bottom* has much more potential than plans at the *top*. A *bottom-up approach* is more democratic and contributes to community self-governance.

Service sociology is *not* a panacea. We will *not* have a better society because all homeless people are housed and all hungry people are fed. Service sociology *will*, however, *save* community because it implies *hope*. It gives us a sense of *efficacy*, of being able to make a *difference*. It inspires *confidence* in the human condition and in the goodness of those people who are truly in need and deserve help.

****

Slide 10 We may identify two types of sociological service. First there is *fast* sociological service. This is typically involved with facilitating-actions that provide emergency aid, usually in cases that require immediate relief of suffering. This means that the sociology of service be involved with disaster preparedness and relief. It requires us to be ready when calamity strikes. A portion of sociology must therefore be designated as being on standby to intervene in humanitarian crises.

In contrast, *slow* sociological service involves gathering and organizing all the facts of a case before making an assessment of the real needs and concerns of the community, and formulating a plan to meet those needs. Here the service sociologist provides the means through which the social and biographical facts of a person or community can be made available to all those interested in helping.

****

Slide 11 Let me now, very briefly, turn to the *historical roots* of service sociology. The word *service*, and indeed its very notion and practice, are not at all foreign to our discipline. This is particularly true given the fact that early American sociology was simultaneously a scientific, reformist, and religious endeavor. It was *scientific* in that it was empirical and practical. It was *reformist* in that it sought to make a better world for human life. And it was *religious* in that it tried to integrate society through the social-organizational network of churches.

Slide 12 These scientific, reformist, and religious characteristics of early American sociology took the form of three types of *elementary* service sociology. These are the *social gospel*, *settlement sociology*, and *charity sociology*.

Slide 13 The social gospel movement was important to early American sociology in two ways. First, it rejected an individualistic approach to the problem of social reform. Indeed, the social gospel movement got its name because it argued that individuals must come to God, not as discrete *atomistic* individuals, but in *neighborly relation* to each other.

Second, despite supporting an ethic of charity, most social gospel sociologists—like Albion Small and Charles Henderson—advocated for more than philanthropic amelioration. Indeed they looked to larger issues of economic and social injustice that contributed to poverty, vice, and social dislocation. But they preferred *volunteerism* rather than government intervention in social welfare. As such, the social gospellers endorsed a gradualist, ameliorist strategy of problem solving.

Slide 14 Concurrent with the development of the sociology department at Chicago, between 1885 and 1930, a unique, active, and engaged sociology was being implemented in many of the settlement houses that had been founded in major cities throughout the U.S. Some settlement-house workers saw themselves as sociologists involved in the practice of sociology as the *science of reform.*

By taking the *urban neighborhood* as their primary social unit, the settlement sociologists played a key role in improving the lives of people and communities in two ways. First, they provided their neighbors with various needed services through kindergartens, adult clubs, clinics, civic organizations, and so on. Second, and just as important, they conducted research on the plight of the poor immigrants in the community. This research was implemented with the explicit goal of shaping policies to promote a more just society and to solve urban problems.

In 1889 Jane Addams co-founded the most famous and successful of the settlement houses—Hull-House—in Chicago's desperately poor 19th ward. Addams explained the settlement as an experimental effort to aid in the solution of the social problems of the modern city. Settlement sociology built its theory of social problems on the assumption that people are motivated by an ethical need to be in *neighborly* relations with each other. Addams made Hull-House a clearinghouse for every kind of social service.

Slide 15 Much like the social gospel and settlement sociology, *charity sociology* was also based on reformism and social welfare. However, it underscored a couple things the others did not. One, a pointed focus on *efficiently organized charity* in the form of personal service. And, two, *self-reliance* through character building. One of the main purposes of charity sociology was to eliminate the increase in pauperism that had arisen in many U.S. cities by restoring individuals to *self-sufficiency*. This was to be done, not through almsgiving or the redistribution of wealth, but by recreating a sense of community. One of the leading advocates of charity sociology was Charles Ellwood who saw charity as an expression of the spirit of social solidarity.

I propose that we can learn much from these three *early* types of service sociology: from their experiments and methods of amelioration; from their success and failures.

****

Slide 16 But there are also *three*, more *current* sociologies that can also contribute to the development of a *mature* sociology of service. These three contemporary forms are humanist/liberation sociology, communitarianism, and public sociology.

Slide 17 Alfred McClung Lee is the social scientist most directly credited with developing the notion of a *humanist sociology*. He's also perhaps best known as the co-founder of two professional associations—the SSSP and the Association of Humanist Sociology—both of which espouse humane values in their efforts to bring about a more egalitarian and participatory society. According to Lee, the SSSP came into existence as "an effort to bring sociological research and theorizing closer to pressing human concerns of the day."

Slide 18 Lee at times equates humanist sociology with what Joe Feagin calls *liberation sociology*. According to Feagin, liberation sociology sees as a central sociological problem the *oppression* of various groups in society. As such, the sociology of liberation identifies and empathizes with groups that have traditionally been oppressed: women, people of color, the poor, gays and lesbians.

Slide 19 As for *communitarianism*, that began in 1990 with the premise that the U.S. was in need of bolstering its moral, social, and political environment. A group of politicians and intellectuals came together at the invitation of Amitai Etzioni. Adopting the name "communitarianism," they began a movement to restore civil society in two interrelated ways.

First, communitarians called for a restoration of community through *shared substantive values*. These basic values include, among other things, treating others with love, respect, and dignity, and the notions of hard work, responsibility, and cooperation. In essence, there must be some measure of caring, sharing, and being our brother's and sister's keeper.

The second communitarian approach requires *voluntary participation* in activities that are reflected in the shared moral values and that are done for the common good: from organizing neighborhood crime watches to becoming volunteer fire-fighters, from a greater willingness to assume the responsibilities for paying taxes to running soup kitchens.

Slide 20 Then there is *public sociology*. In 2004 Michael Burawoy posed the rhetorical question, What is public sociology today? His answer? Most simply, it is taking sociology to publics and engaging them in *dialogue* about public issues. Put another way, public sociology brings sociology into a *conversation* with publics, understood as people who are themselves involved in conversation.

But what is this conversation about? It's about the values and goals of importance to civil society. Ultimately, for Burawoy, public sociology is intended for the purpose of *expanding* civil society and *defending* it against market privatization and state authoritarianism. Thus, in the type of public sociology that Burawoy promotes, the sociologist enters into an unmediated dialogue in certain pockets of civil society, such as, neighborhood associations, with communities of faith, with labor movements, with prisoners. In sum, the core activity of public sociology is the *dialogue* between sociologists and their publics. **Slide 21**

****

I would now like to offer a few bullet-points inspired mainly by the three *early* sociologies and three *contemporary* sociologies just discussed. These bullet-points can serve as a starting point for developing more rigorous theoretical principles for the sociology of service.

Slide 22 • **Service sociology is about helping people help themselves**. The idea is for the service sociologist to provide expertise and opportunities through which people may solve their own problems as autonomously as possible and in their own ways. All people, no matter

how disadvantaged or handicapped, should take some responsibility for themselves. For the sake of their own *dignity*, they should be expected to do for themselves the best they can.

Slide 23 • **Service sociology is inter- as well as intra- community oriented**. Every member of a community is a stakeholder in that community. It's therefore imperative that every person, family, business, and organization have some connection and involvement with the problems afflicting their community as a whole. What is more, each community must be expected to reach out to members of *other* communities that are less well-endowed and thus less able to deal with their own problems.

Slide 24 • **Whenever feasible service sociology endeavors to first work through benevolent institutions and alongside other professionals dedicated to social welfare activities**. Service sociologists should provide *fast* sociological service to provide immediate relief. But they should also team up with *other* organizations that are effective at *longer-term* problem alleviation.

Slide 25 • **Except in emergency cases that require fast sociological service, facilitating-actions that provide momentary relief should always be eschewed in favor of those that affect a more permanent or longer-lasting cure.** The idea is to focus on *short*-term improvements with constructive *longer*-term implications. Temporary emergency relief is only a *preliminary* step in a carefully thought-out and often long-continued course of treatment. As the emergencies recur with greater frequency and increase in scope, larger, more far-reaching strategies need to be employed.

Slide 26 • **Service sociology is proactive and preventative**. As with physical maladies, *prevention* is the cure to all social problems. As such, service sociology engages in educating

society about ways to *forestall* problems: for example through conservation, using public transportation, recycling, mediation, deterrence, and so on.

****

Slide 27 Let me now turn to those *practices* informed by sociological knowledge that are the *province* of service sociology and that I mentioned earlier.

Service sociology offers services that *facilitate and assist* recipient-partners and communities in solving their own problems. Here I'm referring to a variety of sociologically informed practices in neighborly service. I call these practices *facilitating-actions*.

Slide 28 The facilitating-actions of service sociology include a broad range of activities aimed at serving the needs, interests, and concerns of people in community: from providing charity, to rendering solace and relief; from civic engagement and volunteerism, to philanthropy. They include activism, grassroots organizing, and various forms of community service. They also involve more *technical* forms of intervention such as consultation, service-need assessment, program evaluation, and grant writing. The *direct* facilitating-actions of the sociology of service include counseling, organizing, planning, teaching, and mentoring.

****

We may, at present, be a long way from formulating practical guidelines for service sociologists to employ when faced with a specific social problem. Social science does not yet

have a standardized format, a *handbook* as it were, to instruct service sociologists. But we *do* have a vast body of available theory and research to at least make an initial go of it.

In the spirit of moving toward a standardized format of *knowledge and practice*, I'd like to propose a few principles **Slide 29** that can guide service sociologists in implementing facilitating-actions. These principles are *not* intended to be strictly instrumental, they are *also* meant to reflect service sociology's *moral* ethos.

Slide 30 **The right way to render the facilitating-actions of service sociology is with care and compassion.** As a consequence of the *caring and compassionate* aspect of facilitating-action, service sociology is *empathetic* to the needs of people. An illustrative example of facilitating-action, endowed with *empathy*, is that of the counselor whose explicit role in the therapeutic relationship is to *listen*—interestedly, closely, and non-judgmentally—but most importantly, with care and compassion.

Slide 31 **Always perform facilitating-actions with caution**. Facilitating-actions can harm or unsettle a recipient-partner if given or withheld without due diligence. The *prudent* implementation of facilitating-actions typically comes from intimate knowledge of people's life situation. As a consequence of the *caution* aspect of facilitating-action, service sociology is *anticipatory*. This means that it is alert to unintended and undesired consequences.

Slide 32 **The facilitating-actions employed must have maximum efficiency and efficacy**. It's important to recognize that a particular facilitating-action that may be beneficial for one person or group is not necessarily beneficial for another person or group, or for society as a whole. The service sociologist must be cognizant of the *beneficial, neutral, and detrimental* consequences of each facilitating-action.

Slide 33 **Facilitating-actions must be flexible and adaptable to the changing exigencies of the social situation.** The social situation under consideration is *complex* and the service sociologist recognizes that even the most basic social problem is a complicated tangle of political, social, and historical factors. We must come up with *creative* responses to specific problems. The service sociologist must be *flexible* enough and *resourceful* enough to have full effect.

Slide 34 **The facilitating-action given must be adequate and sustainable**. Facilitating-action must be dispensed adequately or not at all. Nothing is more demoralizing to those in need as the giving of doles or pittances and the distribution of aid in dribs and drabs that alleviate suffering for the moment, but leave them uncertain and insecure as regards their future prospects. It's far better to assist a *few* and assist *adequately* than to assist many and help none permanently.

Slide 35 **Abide by the principle of non-maleficence**. As every good medical student knows, "do good" and "do no harm" are basic principles of medical ethics. Likewise, service sociologists also have a duty to do no harm. An intelligent and responsible service sociology considers whether it's sometimes best to *withhold* aid rather than provide it. Indeed, intelligent giving and intelligent withholding are both equal measures of true service.

Slide 36 **Do not implement facilitating-action that is unwanted**. People are free agents. Often they will vote against their own self-interest and they should be allowed to do so. While service sociology is motivated by moral conviction it is *not* a type of moral entrepreneurship. It involves helping people who *want* to be helped. This rule needs to be balanced against the fact that, in some cases, those who need help may not be able to articulate their desire for help, as in the case of minors and incapacitated victims.

Slide 37 **Do not implement facilitating-action that is unneeded.** Help the people who need help. Find out what the intended recipient-partners of your services actually want and need. By conducting a service-needs assessment the sociologist can determine the type and level of service needed. At the same time, realize that it can be difficult for people to admit, to others and even to themselves, that they are in need of help. To be helpless and in need is not a feeling many people want to have.

****

Slide 38 In conclusion, let me just say that 35 years ago, SSSP's co-founder, Alfred McClung Lee, raised anew the recurrent question, "Sociology for whom?" He stated that we should answer the question in this manner: Sociology for the *service* of humanity. "This answer," said Lee, "refers to the need to develop knowledge of direct *service* to people as citizens, as consumers, and as neighbors." Let us take up this challenge and reach out to our fellow human beings in neighborly service.

Thank you.