

Reflections of a Latino in the Social Work Profession

Alejandro Garcia

Abstract: *This is a first-person account of seminal events that have helped shape the rich history and cultural heritage of the social work profession. In examining these events, the author has provided some personal history as a Mexican American growing up in South Texas that provides a historical and value context for his participation in these events. He also discusses his leadership experiences in serving on the national staff of NASW and volunteer leadership experiences in a number of professional organizations during critical times for the profession.*

Key Words: *Autobiography, Latino, Mexican American, diversity, guiding words, ethical perspective, professional associations, professional development, poverty, higher education, role models*

I was asked by the editors of *Advances in Social Work* to contribute to a special issue that would focus on first-person accounts of seminal events that have helped shape the rich history and cultural heritage of our profession. I am humbled by being asked to participate in this effort, as I am not sure that I have been instrumental in any seminal events that helped shape our profession, but I will let the readership be the judge of that. Personal history is a fleeting element unless it is recorded. One concern is that one's personal experiences are of no value to anyone else and, therefore, do not need to be recorded in any way. The problem with this kind of thinking is that the individual determines the value of such information, rather than allowing other interested parties to participate in that assessment.

Personal History

We never know which events will have the strongest influence on our life. I believe that my family was strongly responsible for influencing the shape of my character. I was raised in a poor Mexican-American family with six siblings. My first language was Spanish, and I did not speak a word of English until I entered public schools in South Texas. I spent a year in first grade and a year in "high" first grade to address my limited English fluency (I later skipped a grade because I was too advanced for the rest of the kids in my class and I was being disruptive).

The elementary schools that I attended in my neighborhood were composed exclusively of Mexican American children, and the only non-Hispanic whites were some of my schoolteachers. Both of my parents, who were immigrants from Mexico, had 3rd grade educations. Apparently, they were taken out of schools by relatives and they served as servants for family members or worked in the fields. Before bearing children, my mother worked at housecleaning jobs at the homes of non-Hispanic whites, whom we called "Anglos." After children started arriving, she kept the home while Dad worked a

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number of odd jobs, including shrimp fishing in the Gulf of Mexico and working at gas stations.

Development of Personal Perspectives

I began my studies at the University of Texas in 1958, at a time when it had just started to integrate in line with the *Brown v. Board* of Education mandate. While Mexican Americans were considered to be white for the purpose of integration, as was also the case in the city of Houston, they were still victims of discrimination in a variety of ways (see Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund [MALDEF], 2009; Ross v. Eckels (1970), cited in Rangel & Alcala, 1972). Coming from the lower Rio Grande Valley (Brownsville, Texas), which had very few Black Americans, to Austin, I was unaware of widespread discrimination against them. My only previous experience related to discrimination against Black Americans was going to a department store in San Antonio and finding two water fountains: one marked white and the other marked "colored." (Out of innocence, I should note that I drank out of both of them because I did not know whether I was white or colored. Needless to say, both tasted the same, although the one for whites was more aesthetically pleasing.)

My experience with discrimination against Mexican Americans was compounded by poverty. We lived in one of the poorest neighborhoods in Brownsville, Texas, and our street was unpaved. When it rained, we were lucky to live next to the railroad tracks that led to the cotton compress that created bales of the cotton that we helped to pick. The train tracks helped us to keep our shoes dry as we walked to the nearest paved road several blocks away. We were so poor that my school band uniform was the best outfit I had.

While my brothers and I picked cotton during the summer months, I sold newspapers after school and was obsessed with the Korean Conflict and the trial of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, and remember crying when I read that they had been executed. I also remember reading the want ads and noting that a number of them contained notices that "only Anglos need apply." I wondered why that was the case, but was told that that was simply the way things were.

One of my earliest recollections was having been taught by some Anglo teachers that Mexicans had no culture and implied that American culture was superior. This perspective was reaffirmed in the Texas history books that we were required to read. I learned that Mexicans were vicious killers who had massacred the heroes of the Alamo during the Texas War of Independence. The Alamo still stands today in support of that perspective. It was not until much later that I learned a different perspective of what happened at the Alamo from revisionist historian Rodolfo Acuna (1981). I learned that the heroes of the Alamo were interested in freeing Texas from Mexico and allowing it to become a slave-holding state. Mexico had freed slaves in 1829, and this left slaveholders in Texas in a precarious situation. Had I learned this as a child, I would have been proud of my Mexican heritage. Instead, I was embarrassed that I was a Mexican child who had internalized the Anglo-centric teachings and had become the recipient of a number of pejorative terms. In retrospect, I recall feeling disempowered during these formative

years. I had bought into a perspective that I was worthless and that I could not effect change. I was led to believe that there was nothing I could do that could possibly make a difference.

It was only gradually that I became empowered with the help of people who believed in me more than I believed in myself. Some of these persons were a few of my teachers who selected me for the National Honor Society, the vice principal who had me attend a meeting of the Rotary Club, and my family, particularly my mother who would not let me quit school to help support the family. My affirmation of self was not independent of others, but a collective effort that helped me to celebrate who I was rather than who I thought others wanted me to be. That empowering belief was then transferred to others whom I believed had also been denied their rights. I discovered that the more I actively engaged in advocacy for the rights of others who had been similarly disenfranchised, the stronger I became. I had learned that I was not alone.

It was not until I was in the military that I had a chance to travel to the interior of Mexico. I was taken aback by the metropolitan area of Mexico City with its skyscrapers, colonial buildings, Aztec temples, and Teotihuacan pyramids. I felt a surge of pride in what I saw. I was angry that what I had learned in school was erroneous, ethnocentric, and misleading. I began to collect as much Mexican folk art as I could afford, and have continued to do so until this day. I consider it part of my cultural heritage, an essential part of my identity. I have also pursued photography as a hobby and have tried to capture Mexican spirit and culture in the photographs I take of people, culture, architecture and archeological wonders.

Decision to Pursue Social Work

Toward the end of my three-year enlistment in the Army, I was in an auto accident that left me hospitalized for 20 months. During that long period of time, 9 ½ months of which I spent bedridden, I had much time to consider my career path. I was concerned about the disconcerting limitations of my disability and the prospect that I may never be able to stand and ambulate for extended periods of time. My mood was one of despondence as I ruminated about my lack of movement and having to depend of others for my basic needs. I was in skeletal traction for several months and in a body cast for an additional period of time. This left me feeling depressed, and there were no social workers or other mental health professionals to whom I might have turned for help at the Army hospital.

During my non-ambulatory period, I had much time to read, think, and reflect on my personal life experiences and those of my fellow Mexican Americans. I began to think about Mexican Americans and their socioeconomic status in the United States. While I had not considered social work as a profession before, this extended period of introspection led me to enroll at Cal State Sacramento when I left the military, a decision influenced in part by the extent of my disability and its implications for my professional path. I thought that I would have difficulty standing or walking for extended periods of time. The initial courses that I took in the summer of 1967 convinced me that this profession would help me develop skills and knowledge in my chosen path. The formal

admission date for the fall semester had already passed, but the Director of the program, Dr. Alan Wade granted me an exception and encouraged me to follow through with my application and I was admitted to the program that fall. When I began my MSW studies, I discovered that there was much more literature on African Americans than there was on Latinos. To address my need for greater knowledge in this area, I attended a number of workshops that purported to provide information on minorities, but the discussion focused primarily on African Americans. I would raise questions about Latinos, but the experts leading the workshops were not able to answer them.

While I was not able to find books about Latinos and social work, I did find literature about Latino history in the United States and efforts to address civil rights concerns in organizing in the workplace, voting rights, and problems with immigration authorities and the administration of justice. The more I learned, the angrier I became about Latinos' conditions in Texas and elsewhere.

While a student at Sacramento State University during my MSW studies, I worked with a fellow social worker, Alejandra Ebersole, in founding a chapter of *Trabajadores de la Raza* (Social Workers of our Race – it literally translates to “workers of the people,” but the group was composed exclusively of social workers.). Our efforts were modest. We tried to influence the social work program in hiring Latino faculty and expanding the recruitment of Latino students, and we also tried to encourage social welfare agencies to become more sensitive and responsive to the needs of the growing number of Latinos in the Sacramento area.

Post-MSW Employment

After graduating with an MSW degree, I began working for a state agency that served mentally ill persons, many of whom had recently been released from state institutions in the California deinstitutionalization efforts under Governor Reagan. While the explicit intent of such actions was to return the mentally ill to the community, the implicit intent was economic. The result of such action was the release of thousands of chronically mentally ill persons into an environment that lacked any critical support systems, including adequate housing. Many of these individuals had been in state institutions for years and had developed what Goffman called “institutional syndrome” (Goffman, 1961). In other words, they had difficulty surviving independently without extensive supports. We worked with the Community Services Division of the State of California in Sacramento during that period of deinstitutionalization to help stabilize these vulnerable clients.

Joining the NASW National Staff

While I was working with the Community Services Division, I participated in an NASW leadership conference, where I met some national NASW staff members. Shortly thereafter, I was invited to interview for the newly created position of National Student Coordinator in the national office. I was interviewed for the position in 1970 both by Chauncey Alexander, and then president, Whitney Young. After much consideration, I accepted the position and decided to make the move from Sacramento to New York City.

My primary goal was to work with the National Federation of Student Social Workers (NFSSW). Some social work programs had NFSSW chapters, but most did not. At this time of high student activism and opposition to the war in Vietnam, students were also disenchanted with NASW, and saw it as an agent of the status quo rather than as an agent for change in support of the poor. In my work, I attended a number of NFSSW conferences, and also met with student groups in a number of institutions. I tried to encourage students to join NASW and to provide valuable input from their perspective. My intent was to increase the credibility of NASW with students. A major concern at that time was a division between clinicians and community organizers, with each side claiming the higher moral ground.

Students were drawn to the more politically oriented community organizers, many of whom suggested that NASW only represented clinicians and was not interested in the broader macro issues, such as racism and poverty. Chauncey Alexander believed this to be a false dichotomy and suggested that both clinical practice and community organization were essential interdependent parts of the profession. In visiting campuses around the nation, I found many students alienated from NASW without fully understanding the historical evolution and nature of our profession. I worked with NASW as it moved to include student members on the national board of directors in order to give them a legitimizing voice and greater visibility.

Another major issue that arose during my four years on the national staff occurred when the American Psychiatric Association took action to remove homosexuality from its list of psychopathologies in 1973. The NASW board met and discussed this issue at length. Regrettably, NASW decided not to include any similar statement in its policy manual at that time due to some ambivalence about whether homosexuality belonged in the list of psychopathologies, although it would change its mind at a later date (National Association of Social Workers, 2014).

Diversity within NASW itself was yet another important issue facing the profession during that period. Although a number of us fought hard for greater diversity among the organization's leadership, there did not appear to be widespread recognition of the need for change. It should be noted that while NASW was composed primarily of women members, the majority (both men and women) tended to vote for male leaders. The first woman to become president of the association did so by ascending to the position when the former president died. The creation at that time of a presidential slate with two women candidates was intended to insure the election of a woman to that post. The election of a minority president posed similar difficulties. I ran for president of NASW in the late 1970s against a white male, and was defeated. My recollection is that, at that time, no minority had ever been elected to the presidency when competing with a non-Hispanic white male.

At the same time, NASW was concerned about the low number of persons of color in both its general membership as well as its leadership, and it formed a National Committee on Minority Affairs (NCOMA) composed of Latinos, African Americans, Asian Americans, and Native Americans. All of the individuals initially chosen were recognized leaders within their respective ethnic/racial social worker organizations. I was

asked to staff that body. It was a challenging experience in that NASW had never had this kind of a unit. The group initiated efforts to make persons of color more visible within the professional association and also worked in developing practice components in working effectively with these groups. At that time, the emphasis on minority groups was very limited, and there was a sense of alienation by a number of groups. Their perception was that NASW believed that social work interventions that had been developed were applicable to all groups. As a result, a number of persons of color preferred to work with their respective social work organizations rather than NASW. Minority membership in NASW was very limited for that reason, and NASW made efforts to increase its credibility with these groups through the creation of NCOMA and by hiring additional minority staff. In addition, great efforts were made to insure that persons of color and women were represented in leadership positions.

At NASW, the influence of Chauncey Alexander, Mitch Ginsburg, Alan Wade and Whitney Young was tremendous. Without direct lectures, they taught me through example. Chauncey, the executive director of NASW, was a strong civil libertarian and had friends from across the political spectrum. Whitney Young was executive director of the Urban League and, at the same time, president of NASW, when he lost his life in a drowning accident in Africa. Whitney's commitment to civil rights was strong and eloquent. His loss in the middle of his presidential term at NASW was a shock to all of us. Alan Wade, then director of the social work program at California State University at Sacramento and vice-president of NASW, assumed the NASW presidency with a strong conscience and high standards for the profession and a commitment to equality.

Following Alan Wade's tenure, Mitchell Ginsburg became the president of NASW. Mitch Ginsburg had been dean of the Columbia University School of Social Work and came to NASW with prior leadership experience in the New York City Welfare Department. His commitment to recipients of public assistance was well recognized to the extent that one recipient of public assistance even named a daughter after him: "Mitchellina." I had the opportunity to interact with Mitch regularly when I became President of the staff union at the time the national office was moving from New York City to Washington, DC. Despite occasional disagreements, he served as a valued mentor in relation to the importance of mutual respect and the complexities associated with the negotiation of difficult issues.

Decision to Pursue Doctoral Studies

In 1974, after four years with the NASW national office, I knew that I wanted to pursue doctoral studies and ultimately teach, but I was not sure about my area of study. One of my major mentors was Dr. Juan Ramos, who, when I met him, was conducting much organizing and training of Latino social workers on behalf of the National Institute of Mental Health. Dr. Ramos was an excellent role model for many Latinos and encouraged my pursuit of doctoral studies.

My initial foray into doctoral education at the Florence Heller Graduate School for Advanced Studies in Social Welfare, at Brandeis University, provided me with an opportunity to explore the demographics of an aging society that was ill prepared to deal

with the challenges associated with the aging process. More specifically, I was concerned about the compounding effect that such phenomena were having on an aging Latino population. Three of my role models at the Heller School were my dissertation chair, James Schulz, a welfare economist who made high academic demands of me; Robert Binstock, a political scientist; and David Gil, a sociologist with a strong activist orientation. An additional role model was Charles Schottland, who had been the founding dean of the Heller School and later the President of Brandeis University. I hope that some of their expertise, wisdom, and commitment to high academic standards, as well as commitment to the powerless, have left a powerful imprint on my conscience and actions.

There were also subtle changes occurring within the Latino society relative to the dominant culture. One such concern, especially among younger Latinos, involved the socialization process that seemed to be fostering a more individualistic orientation to life, one that honored filial piety less and less as our members became increasingly acculturated into the American way of life. Even if adult children wanted to help their elderly relatives, they had limited resources to do so. I was also concerned that Latinos were less financially prepared for retirement than other ethnic/racial groups in American society. The convergence of these various social concerns helped focus my scholarly interests around issues involving the economic resources available to Latinos and their ultimate impact on retirement. When I was a doctoral student, I gained a greater appreciation for social action, and I found myself participating in demonstrations in support of unionization of farm workers in the agricultural fields in Salinas, California. I also participated in picketing liquor stores who sold scab wine and grocery stores that sold scab lettuce in Waltham, MA, and the surrounding area.

After gaining my doctoral degree in 1980 and becoming a faculty member at Syracuse University, I learned that racism does not recognize doctoral degrees or professorial status. Some years back, when I was on an intercity bus in south Texas, a non-Hispanic stranger approached me and told me to show him my citizenship papers. He was not wearing a uniform and he had not shown me a badge or other identity. He assumed that because I looked Mexican, I could be ordered to prove my citizenry. He reacted angrily when I asked him who he was. He responded that he was an officer of the Immigration and Naturalization Service. Without thinking, I asked him for his identification, and he demanded my proof of citizenship. I took the first identification I could out of my wallet, and it was my military retirement identification card. He looked at it and tossed it back to me, telling me that the card did not prove my citizenship, as he walked away. Everyone in the bus looked at me as if I had committed an egregious error. At that time, I was unaware that there were many stories of Border Patrol beatings of Mexican Americans who “did not stay in their place.”

Post-Doctorate Involvement with Professional Associations

Over the years since obtaining my doctoral degree, I have had an opportunity to be active as a volunteer with a number of professional and advocacy organizations. Below I have focused primarily on these organizations’ involvement in human diversity issues and my role and perspective in those difficult discussions. Primary among those have

been the Council on Social Work Education and the National Association of Social Workers.

CSWE and Diversity

The Council on Social Work Education has been committed to addressing diversity for some time. Each new iteration of the Educational Policy Standards has incrementally called attention to issues involving ethnic and racial diversity, women, LGBT, and disability issues. The efforts have not been without their detractors. Highlighting this trend has been CSWE's commitment to addressing LGBT issues. Some years back, when I was serving on either the CSWE Board or the Commission on Accreditation, some religiously-based programs took exception to CSWE mandating non-discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and threatened lawsuits over the issue. Upon advice of legal counsel that it would be difficult for CSWE to hold its ground on this particular issue, since religiously-based programs had prevailed on other matters that they indicated violated their commitment to their religious dictates, the Council yielded on this issue, but still mandated that programs address LGBT issues in their curricula. This battle was agonizing in that we were dealing with an issue of discrimination to which we were deeply committed. The compromise satisfied no one, but it was an incremental step in the right direction.

Focus of Publications

My publications include journal articles, op-ed pieces, and three co-edited books. Two of the books focus on Latino elderly on which I worked when I was a member and then chairman of the board of directors of the National Hispanic Council on Aging. The co-editor was the late Marta Sotomayor (Sotomayor & Garcia, 1993, 1999), who was the executive director of that organization. Our concern in developing these two books was to address an area of study that was underdeveloped. Our sense was that older Latinos had been ignored in the gerontology literature and that we needed to address that need through encouraging experts on Latino aging to contribute to these books.

The third book was a co-edited book with a former colleague, Susan Taylor-Brown (Garcia & Taylor-Brown, 1999). She had created an annual camp for families with HIV/AIDS to provide them with a weekend in which they would be able to enjoy themselves and be free from discrimination, harassment, and fear. This led to the two of us discussing the needs of young, vulnerable individuals, many of them in families already affected or infected by HIV/AIDS. We were able to recruit a number of colleagues who were interested in the topic to contribute to our volume in hopes of a better understanding of young, vulnerable persons growing up in the age of HIV/AIDS.

Conclusion

As I reflect on my life in the social work profession, I have realized that our imperfect society is a work in progress and that we need to continue to address the issues that continue to affect our society negatively. My ongoing question is whether I did as much as I could to help others, to change opinions, to change policy outcomes. Our

ethical responsibility to society is clearly enunciated in our code of ethics. This code mandates us to promote the general welfare of society. It mandates us to prevent and eliminate discrimination on the basis of race, gender, sexual orientation, age, handicap, and other criteria. It mandates us to advocate for changes in policy and legislation to improve social conditions and to promote social justice.

We have heard Pope Francis talk more about the poor in the brief time that he has been in office than we heard either of the presidential candidates discuss the issue during their prolonged campaigning. Perhaps we are retreating to a time of Michael Harrington's invisible poor – out of sight, out of mind. But we must make our society aware that one out of six of us is poor and not able to afford the basic necessities of life. We need to stop blaming the poor for their dilemma and examine ourselves as a society that continues to permit this serious inequality among us. While the overall poverty rate approximates 16 percent, the poverty rate for African Americans and Latinos is over 25 percent. We cannot tolerate this disparity! The great farm worker leader, Cesar Chavez, noted that we were involved in a battle in which “the poorest of the poor and weakest of the weak are pitted against the strongest of the strong.”

In spite of all the social issues I have enumerated, these concerns have met resounding silence as each of us goes about his or her own way rather than confronting these social injustices. Many years ago, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., reiterated this sentiment when he said, “History will have to record that the greatest tragedy of this period of social transition was not the strident clamor of the bad people, but the appalling silence of the good people.” Unfortunately, this indictment of our society still applies today. The social in social work must remain. Our work with the poor, the oppressed, and the disadvantaged must be directed at multiple levels.

The late Harry Specht, the former dean of the School of Social Welfare at the University of California at Berkeley characterized social workers as unfaithful angels. His perception was that the social work profession has abandoned its traditional mission. Have we abandoned our traditional mission? Are we now more interested in working with middle class, walking wounded than in addressing the larger problems of the poor? Are Jane Addams, Whitney Young, and Mother Jones historical artifacts now considered irrelevant?

Our late colleague Reuben Bitensky suggested that the social work profession has tended to vacillate in how it has related to American society. He said that at times the social work profession has been society's conscience. At other times, the social work profession has been society's apologist.

I suggest that there has never been a greater need for the social work profession to be the conscience of society. Now is the time to be heard: to reiterate our commitment to those who cannot care for themselves, to condemn an era of narcissism and ethnocentricity, and to re-establish the spirit of humanitarianism that has been an essential ingredient of American society.

We must be heard. We must speak and be guided by the spirit that emanates from the depths of our hearts and the wisdom of our minds. We have guiding principles that speak

to the dignity of the individual and advocacy for the downtrodden. With our voices in unison, we can be heard and we can work toward effective change. We can regain our place as the conscience of American society.

- We must keep our priorities clear: We have a responsibility to those who cannot provide for themselves.
- We have responsibilities to continue aggressive efforts toward the eradication of poverty, racism, sexism and homophobia.
- We cannot allow our society to capitulate to narcissistic, self-serving interests.
- We cannot allow what Carl Rowan calls "a spirit of meanness" to pervade this country.
- We have to make certain that terms like compassion, commitment, social justice, and equality continue to be an integral part of our essential vocabulary and focus.

Only then can we reaffirm the meaning of our profession.

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