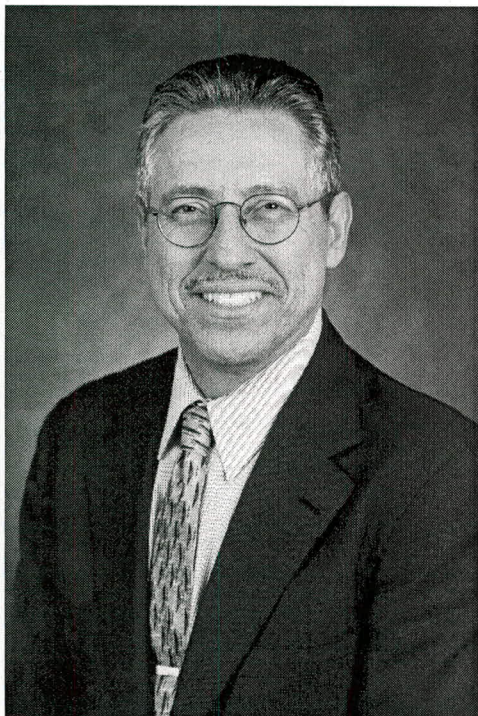


THE MAKING OF A LATINO GERONTOLOGIST: DR. FERNANDO M. TORRES-GIL

Rebecca A. Lopez, Ph.D., California State University, Long Beach

There are few better exemplars of minority aging scholars than the subject of this interview. For over thirty years, Dr. Torres-Gil has contributed to the shaping of aging policy, programs and research agendas on many levels. He reveals the circumstances of his entry to the field of aging, and recalls the pivotal moments and the diverse individuals which have all contributed to his career as a pre-eminent gerontologist.



Dr. Fernando Torres-Gil has long been an unwavering voice in the promotion and investigation of minority aging issues. From his early participation in the White House Conference on Aging of 1971, to his current leadership role as a renowned expert in the fields of health and long-term care, politics, social policy, ethnicity, and disability related to aging populations, he has played a key role in bringing to light the unique issues that confront elder members of ethnic minority groups. He has been a prolific researcher and author in exploring aging issues and has written or contributed to over

80 articles, books, or book chapters on these topics. His accomplishments also include extensive government and public policy involvement at the federal and state levels. He currently serves as Professor and Associate Dean for Academic Affairs in the School of Public Policy and Social Research at the University of California, Los Angeles; as Associate Director of UCLA's Center on Aging; and as Director of the Center for Policy Research on Aging at UCLA. The author first came to know Dr. Torres-Gil as a fellow student and colleague at Brandeis University's Heller School for Social Policy.

The author had an opportunity to discuss with him, at his home, his personal views about his introduction to gerontology and his professional development as a pre-eminent scholar in the field. In this interview, he comments on the important influences throughout his life that created and sustained his passion for gerontology with a special interest in the political structures and meanings of being a minority elder in America.

R.L.: I want to thank you for taking the time to share your unique story with the readers of *Reflections*. As a maverick in the field of minority aging, is it possible to identify an early recollection that may have been the starting point for your interest in the elder population?

F.T-G.: My grandmother is the first one who motivated my interest in intergenerational activity that, in turn, propelled my career in gerontology. My grandmother played a special role in my life. Having contracted polio at six months of age, I spent many years—from 6 months to 18 years—in and out of hospitals, primarily Shriners Hospital in San Francisco. After each time in the hospital, which would range from three to six months, I would be sent home for follow-up therapy and rehabilitation. It would fall on my grandmother who was staying with us in Salinas in the housing projects to do what we later came to call physical therapy and rehabilitation; except in her day, treatments were more indigenous and

culturally based. She would boil and cook up different herbs and plants and come up with her own medicine. She would do the rehabilitation, the massage, the physical therapy and all of this without calling it by those terms.

I later came to think of her as practicing *brujeria* [indigenous Mexican folk medicine]. And I give her a lot of credit for my having recovered enough strength to be able to walk, albeit with assisted devices. If not for her, I would probably still be in a wheelchair. She used her own peculiar medicines and prayers and exercises, and she would do all the regular treatments on my legs that we now call wellness. But in her day, it was just part of her culture. And of course always with tremendous love and compassion. So I became very close to her. Sadly, she passed away when I was a teenager, but she played a crucial role in my early years in helping me bounce back and recover from paralytic polio. That influence, and the role she played, stayed with me, even during the years when I had no professional interest in aging. It stayed with me all the way until I went to the Heller School [Brandeis University] where I was introduced to the field of gerontology.

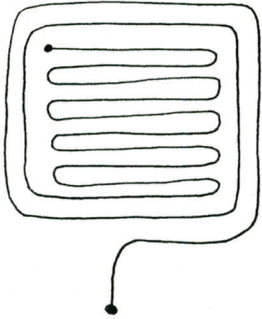
R.L.: So your first professional foray into gerontology was at the Heller School at Brandeis University in Massachusetts?

F.T-G.: Yes, at the Heller School. It was quite by accident—serendipity is the word I would use. By the time I arrived at the Heller School, my interests were in public administration, public policy, and politics. Having been born and raised in the Salinas Valley, I became very involved with the United Farmworkers Union, especially while I was in college. Our family lived in the only housing project in Salinas and my mother was an activist in the 1930's when there were early attempts to unionize workers in the Salinas Valley. These attempts failed and there are actually details about them in John Steinbeck's

(1936) book, *In Dubious Battle*. But then, of course, I got involved at San Jose State in the Chicano Movement and the UFW (United Farmworkers Union.)

When I applied to graduate schools back East, I had many choices: Princeton, the Woodrow Wilson School, NYU, UCLA, USC. I remember I had all these great schools inviting me, but I remember I picked the Maxwell School at Princeton. But the more I learned about how it was isolated, primarily male, out in the middle of nowhere I decided that I didn't really want to be there. And I started getting calls from the Heller School and from Joe Rivera, a student who was already there. And he kept calling and he encouraged me to go because the only Latino Ph.D. student that had come out of the Heller School was Juan Ramos. But what finally got me to go was that the UFW offered me a job working with them where I could stay at the UFW house in Dorchester. So for free room and board, I could go to school and work with them part-time on weekends and evenings.

So my first year I would be on the picket line organizing activities and getting up at 4 or 5 in the morning to picket their produce terminal. And then I would head to campus for a full day of classes. Come my first winter, I had never seen snow before. I thought nothing of getting up at 3 or 4 in the morning when it would be, like, 10 or 15 [degrees] below zero. We would be out there in the cold and the wind, and by the time I went to the Brandeis campus it would be 10 or 15 degrees above zero. I would be wearing my California clothes and people would think I was crazy because I thought it was warm compared to working in the morning. But, anyway, after about a year it became clear that I couldn't do both. Working full-time for the Union and going to school full-time meant that something had to give. I stayed involved with them, but I moved to campus as a resident counselor.



By my second year, [Professor] Jim Schultz mentioned to me that there was a conference in Washington, D.C., and he asked if I would like to be a member of an evaluation team at that conference. They were going to pay me to go; and so, of course being a starving student, I jumped at the chance. That turned out to be the 1971 White House Conference on Aging. My very first introduction—and what an introduction!—I met all the luminaries that went on to become famous in the field: from Jacqueline Jackson and Hobart Jackson, to Maggie Kuhn, to Tish Sommers—every big name in the field over the next 20 to 30 years—they were all there.

Now, I went there as part of Professor Schultz's evaluation team, but when I arrived, there were protests by a number of minority activists. They were protesting the almost total exclusion of minority concerns in the White House Conference on Aging. So of course, being a union organizer, I kind of gravitated to them. And I remember we went to a church and this elderly lady, who was so incredibly charismatic, got everybody to march to the White House to have a 'counter conference on aging;' those were Maggie Kuhn's words. We all marched into the office of the chairman of the conference and made all our demands known. And there I came upon the legend, Dr. Arthur Fleming, and I was amazed at how he handled the unruly crowd in his office. I remember it so clearly. We laid out our demands and he said 'Well, tell me. What is it that you want from us to be a part of the conference?' We shouted out, 'We want everything written in Spanish and English.' He said 'Fine, you'll have it.' Then we said we wanted more sessions and workshops on minority concerns. 'Fine, you'll have it,' he said. And then somebody in the group said, 'We want minority delegates to this conference.' And he looked around and he said, 'I hereby appoint each of you a delegate to the 1971 White House Conference on Aging.'

R.L.: An incredible turn of events.

F.T-G.: Yes. So, if you look at the delegate listing under the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, I am listed as one of the delegates. And that really got me interested in aging. Of course, I violated every fundamental rule of objective evaluation research by having become so deeply involved. But, be that as it may, that was my first entrance into aging, and I went back to the Heller School very excited about the topic. So when it came time to do my master's thesis with [Professors] Norm Kurtz, Jim Schultz, Frank Caro, and Bob Binstock, I had a real dilemma. I wanted to do something on politics and organizing. I wanted to do something on Hispanics. But I now had this newfound interest in aging, and I remember sitting in Frank Caro's office saying 'Oh my gosh; I don't know what to do. I don't know which of these three to pick; I like them all equally.' And it was Frank Caro who turned me around and said, 'Why don't you do something on the politics of aging in the Hispanic community?' So the rest, as they say, is history. I did my Master's Thesis, my doctoral dissertation, my first book was on that topic and I immediately became the expert in this area. So that was my introduction to aging.

R.L.: Did your family or culture play any role in supporting your decision for this career direction?

F.T-G.: Well, here I would like to say a word about [Professor] Larry Fuchs. Because my Master's and Ph.D. increasingly looked at political involvement of the Hispanic elderly, it got me in touch, once again, with the role of culture, traditions, values, and intergenerational relationships. I had left these behind temporarily from the time I was with my grandmother. During this time I became heavily involved with the Chicano Movement, which I increasingly found to be a very age-

ist/youth-centric movement. And in my surveys of Hispanic elderly in East San Jose, known as *Sal Si Puedes* [literally translates to 'Get out if you can.'] I came to meet legendary figures such as Ernesto Galarza. I started asking the elders if they were interested in politics, if they had been involved, or were involved now. I came to find in my surveys and interviews that Hispanic elderly were *very* interested in politics and political activism; but they felt under appreciated and shunned by younger Chicano activists. In fact, many of these elders had been heavily involved in organizing and community activism in the 1920's, 1930's, 1940's and 1950's.

R.L.: I can say that this was also a surprise to me, because when we were in the midst of the Chicano Movement, we felt that we *alone* invented activism. And yet our elders have an entire unrecognized history of activism that they didn't talk about all the time.

F.T-G.: Yes. In the 1960's we actually thought we had discovered political organizing. We thought that there had been nothing before us. My dissertation, which laid all this out, made it very clear that, in fact, the young Chicano activism was simply a continuation of a long, colorful story of activism among Hispanics; and that it was the elders who organized in the 1930's and 1940's and who had paved the way for us. Many were World War II veterans who came home and became involved in civil rights. It's just that we, as younger Chicanos, were quite ageist about what we thought we were doing. In fact, the data clearly show, when you look at registration and voting rates in the Hispanic community, it is always far higher among older segments of our population. Which was the case then, in the 1960's, but we didn't pay attention to that.

So, by recognizing the intergenerational links that we as young people were ignoring, I started taking a greater interest in our ethnic

traditions that influenced the sense of political culture. Larry Fuchs, by the 1970's, was one of the nation's foremost experts on ethnicity and immigration, having done some of the landmark, pioneering research on ethnicity in Hawaii. He brought me back in touch with understanding the traditions and cultures of the countries of origin and how they shape how immigrant groups view their role in their new country—the United States. He made me understand that one reason the Latino elders of the 60's were reticent about bragging about what they did in the form of political activism was because they came from another culture—a more authoritarian culture where visibility and promoting yourself was not only frowned upon, but could get you in trouble. They came from places where you had to do things within the community or within the family, and it had to be hierarchical and it had to be as under the radar screen as possible. Because in Mexico and Latin America you could get into trouble by being too visible. But we Chicano activists came from a civic culture where we were fortunate enough to be born in the U.S. where we were socialized from a very young age to be involved, to take credit, to be visible, to exercise public leadership without any concerns about safety or social ostracism. The long and short of it is, Latino elders had a different political style. It was just as effective, but it was more quiet, more low key, more stoic, more under the radar screen.

R.L.: A very interesting distinction that has application for many diverse immigrant groups.

F.T-G.: Exactly. And so it was Larry Fuchs who helped me understand that culture and where you come from and your traditions are all very important parts of one's political socialization. And so I started to go back to thinking about why my grandmother and my aunts and uncles were the way they

were. Why they seemed more quiet and low key and why they never bragged about what they had accomplished. This was my reconnection to culture.

R.L.: As you began to build your professional body of work in a little known or little appreciated field at that time, was there a prevalent attitude you encountered in the course of your gerontological and cultural pursuits?

F.T-G.: Yes. And I would entitle it: 'poetic justice.' [*laughter*] Back in those early 70's as I pursued this passion for aging, the other Chicanos and Latinos, the few of us who were in the Boston area schools, started to question why I would get into this field. And without malintention, they would try to discourage me from making it a career, or at least my primary area of study. They would actually ask me, 'Why are you in that field? It's so depressing. You'll never get a job.' Now keep in mind this is the early 70's and I was involved in recruiting Latino students from the Southwest to Boston area schools. For those I recruited who were brave enough to go back east, the whole incentive was a prestige profession: business schools, law schools, schools of education, medical schools. Anything but this field of gerontology. Not only that, gerontology was so new. Most people didn't know what it was and didn't even know how to pronounce it. I had no encouragement from my Latino peers. If anything, they were turned off. They just felt I had made a mistake. They would say things like: "...but Fernando you're smart enough to go into law school, or business or medical school." But I had absolutely no interest in those areas, and I figured, well I might never get a job in this field—but at least I was doing what I believed in. It turns me on.

Well, fast forward 30 years later. Now, whenever I run into any of these folks, invariably they're asking me how they can get into

this field. If they are lawyers, they want to get into the areas of trust, probate, and elder law. If they are in business or have MBA's, they want to get into that huge elderly consumer market. If they are in medicine or the health professions, of course, that's their clientele. If they are in education, it's about life-long learning. So that's why I call it 'poetic justice.' I came into it at a time when there was no career track; there were no clear professional opportunities. But I learned from mentors that you must follow a path that gets you excited when you get up in the morning. Not a path where you feel obligated, or because you feel it's prestigious. So I just did what I felt excited about, and the rest is history. So there was virtually no encouragement back then. The only encouragement came from people like Jim Schultz, Bob Binstock, and Frank Caro and the few students that were interested in the field. We essentially had to be self-motivated.

R.L.: Since the time of the White House Conference on Aging, our society has become much more ethnically and culturally diverse. From your multi-cultural experience, have you perceived cross-cultural differences in how populations approach aging or the aged?

F.T-G.: Yes; even more so today than 30 years ago. Let me answer that this way. Los Angeles is probably the best place to study cross-cultural differences in aging because the southern California region has the largest population of a number of ethnic minority groups outside their countries of origin. It has the largest populations of Mexicans, Central Americans, Armenians, Persians, Koreans, Japanese. In addition, it has the largest population of elders in those groups. And the reason that's a critical issue is that Southern California tends to attract elders who have been brought here by their children. And so the elders here are totally unacculturated to our country. So I often say



that if you want to know what it is like to be an older person in Korea, or Armenia, or Mexico, and what the traditional values are of those countries, you don't have to go to Korea or Mexico. Go to Los Angeles, California, and spend time with those elders.

Each group has their own view of what it means to be an elder, how they view their relationships with younger generations, how they want to be treated as elders. Just as I learned from my grandmother, each of those minority groups has a different view of aging that is heavily influenced by their cultures and countries of origin. This is also a source of great tension and can create real mental health problems among elderly immigrants. Another concept I learned very well from Larry Fuchs, who is one of my all-time heroes, was the concept of assimilation and acculturation. Assimilation is giving up your culture to be like someone else. Acculturation is keeping your culture, but yet being effectively involved in another culture. And that's where I learned the importance of acculturation over assimilation. And I learned to admire the Jewish community because they are highly acculturated, very influential and effective in this country and yet maintaining their religious and cultural traditions. I think Cubans have done that well, also.

Yet, for Mexicans of earlier generations, we became assimilated—able to effectively deal in this country, but giving up many of our cultural traditions. Although that is less so with later generations of Mexican Americans. The point is that I now find that those twin issues of assimilation and acculturation play out constantly as a series of tensions within each of these immigrant ethnic groups. And it is the elders that face the greatest tension, because their children come here and are working hard to become acculturated and eventually assimilated. But the elder comes here with thoughts of how they would be treated as elders in their countries of origin; and now they are generally left alone, isolated, having to

cope as individuals in a very individualistic society. This is without having the acculturation skills of the language, knowing the system, knowing how to get benefits and how to get around. So we find high levels of stress, tension, depression among immigrant elders because their children and grandchildren are so different from them that the intergenerational bonds between them begin to fade. So that's how cross-cultural differences begin to play a role here.

R.L.: All of these dynamics would suggest there would be higher levels of depression among immigrant elders, and yet there are so few studies that seek to disclose these levels.

F.T-G.: This is true. There are so few studies that honestly and objectively study mental health issues. It means doing studies that are objective and are not over-romanticizing immigrant or ethnic cultures. But the second thing is that in immigrant cultures, whether it's Mexican or Chinese or Armenian or whatever, there is a science, an art, to how you uncover what is actually occurring. Immigrant elders are loathe to admit that there is a tension, a problem. There is a great deal of denial and shame by the elders and by their children. So on the surface, unless you really know how to get into the underlying dynamics of a particular ethnic community, they won't open up. It's not easy for them to admit that their children have been ignoring them, or have been emotionally abusing them, or that they feel alone and let down. It is not an easy topic to uncover; yet it's very, very real.

R.L.: For decades now, we have heard the portent of 'The Graying of America.' Yet, this also means the Graying of 'Minority' America. What do you foresee for our population from the perspective of a Latino gerontologist?



F.T-G.: Therein lies a great question which I hope to pursue in the next 10 to 20 years through my research and professional activities. The Graying of America and the graying of ethnic and minority populations is creating a whole new social and political dynamic. It is what David Hayes-Bautista has coined, in part, the 'age-race stratification.' As a gerontologist, I now realize that the world has become a far more complex place than when I started doing my studies. I am now focusing on those complexities which involve certain variables. The first is that the proportion of each ethnic minority group will increase as we, too, enjoy higher life expectancies. That is to say, there will be many more ethnic minority elders, so we have to better understand the many and complex needs of each group and find a way to integrate that information into the system of services and public benefits that now exist.

The next issue is the aging of the younger population—the 'age-race stratification.' There we find that for the next 10 to 20 years, we have a peculiar dynamic where the older population in California and the U.S. will still be predominantly White and English speaking. Yet, the young population will increasingly be young, ethnic minority, non-English speaking. So, to put it simply, we will have an increasingly ethnic minority work force supporting an older, White, retiree population. And we see that in California, where the bulk of the electorate is White, English speaking; but, increasingly, the majority of the working population and the Kindergarten through 12th grade population are members of ethnic minority groups. And those interests don't always come together when there is a mismatch of political power. You may have one group overly influencing the electoral and political systems, and not always on behalf of that younger group, which is increasingly diverse. We have to find a way to reconcile that 'age-race stratification' because it can and is al-

ready creating political controversy and tension.

The third element in this is how we prepare a young, ethnic minority population for a longer life expectancy. What should we be doing to enable them to have a greater probability of a good old age, a good retirement security? Therein I have my greatest concerns, because when you look at the educational attainment and job prospects for ethnic minority populations, they are not good. When you look at retirement and pension investing, the levels are extraordinarily low for the younger ethnic population. When you look at this country's political willingness to sustain public entitlement programs 30 years from now for, what will hopefully be, many more minority elders, that is in question. When you look at such issues as a global economy, minorities are less able to play a role in the way the global economy is playing out. It ultimately has a huge impact on the countries of origin, whether it be Asia or Latin America. And that plays out in many complicated scenarios that affect cross-border migration from those countries to the U.S.

And then lastly, one of the topics I hope to write about is the issue of America's involvement as the global policeman and its involvement in the many wars we will have to fight. When you look at who's going to serve and protect this country, increasingly the military is realizing the soldiers will have to come from young, immigrant minority communities.

R.L.: Because immigrant groups increasingly constitute the younger segments of our society?

F.T-G.: Yes. The whole point of this is that the Graying of America and the Graying of Minority America is going to create a much more complex demographic mosaic for our country where we will increasingly have to confront the nexus of aging and diversity. I have several articles out on this already. This

is the great challenge for the next 10 to 20 years. That is why I am still really excited about still being in the field of gerontology.

R.L.: These are exciting times. It is amazing to see how the field of gerontology that you started with has literally exploded into so many critical areas beyond narrow concern about public services and has provided a wealth of opportunities to explore so many complex issues and dynamics.

F.T-G.: Let me say that I was, fortunately, very lucky. If I did anything that was smart, it was that I followed my passion. I was able to motivate myself, but I was also able to acquire wonderful mentors along the way who helped me open the doors to places I needed to go that would further my ability to be effective in this field. I was lucky in that I was a Latino who got involved in the field early on. And so the fact that I am into aging and I am Hispanic puts me in the middle of two huge trends that are playing out now and in the future. A third area of luck, which may sound kind of strange, was that I grew up with a disability. And now one of the newest areas and trends happens to be aging with a disability. So I am able to play a leadership role and to have credibility in all those three areas: aging, disability, and ethnicity. Of course, for most of this, it was just the luck of the draw.

I also learned, early on, the importance of accumulated experiences. This is something I always advise my student and mentees about. That early on in one's career, you should not get pigeonholed and stuck in one career path because, ultimately, to address social issues, you need an interdisciplinary set of skills and experiences.

R.L.: This certainly speaks to the eclectic nature of social work and social policy.

F.T-G.: Eclectic is a good word. It helps to be eclectic, and it also helps to not get too comfortable in one area. For me, I became involved not just in aging or Latino issues, but I also moved into public policy, public administration, into social work, into health care; and not just as a scholar and an academic, but also as a public servant and a political activist. And now, increasingly in my old age, people come to me and ask 'How were you able to balance out and handle those different roles?' It seems most of us are encouraged to become either an academic or to go into a different career and just stay with it. The ability to move in and out of different interests is not easy, sort of like building two or three careers at the same time. If I give credit to anyone for 'enabling' me to do that it's Elvira [*wife*.] It's hard to do it as an individual. It takes a really strong system of supportive friends and family. And in my case, Elvira has been my number one fan and, as she puts it, my number one enabler. She has enabled me to put in the tremendous amount of time and energy to do all those things that have given me those accumulated experiences.

Plus, I have always remained close to my family. My grandmother passed away, but I remain close to our extended family and my siblings [9 in this country and 2 in Mexico City.] I find that I have taken on my grandmother's role in the family. My grandmother was the center of her family. She had ten children, and they all had from five to ten kids all scattered up and down California. So while my grandmother was alive, everyone came to her. When she died, the family felt like they were going to drift apart. So my mother and an aunt, twenty-three years ago, started an annual family reunion in order to keep the connection. We just completed our 23rd annual reunion which brought together about 200 to 250 people, and every year we alternate between northern and southern California. It brings us all together; but most importantly it brings in the 3rd, 4th, and 5th gen-

eration of kids. And I find that I am becoming more and more like the patriarch of the extended family that people go to and ask what it was really like, and how did our family get here, and what were our grandparents like. And I am enjoying this at a reasonably young age of 55, of being a patriarch and being called by some "Don Fernando." It all goes back to my grandmother and the values she showed us.

R.L.: Fernando, I would like to thank you for sharing, albeit just a snapshot, of those values and of a remarkable career. From Washington, D.C., to local efforts, you have played a critical role in the direction our society has taken in exploring aging issues. You have often stood alone in giving voice to the unique qualities of the minority aging experience and we are indebted to you. Thank you.

Reference

- Steinbeck, J. (1936). *In Dubious Battle*. New York: Covici-Friede Publisher.

