

Pauline Bart, feminist sociologist who studied violence against women, dies at 91

Feminist sociologist Pauline Bart taught at the University of Illinois at Chicago for more than two decades. November 2, 2021 at 10:14 a.m.



(photo by Dorothy Teer)

Pauline Bart, a sociologist whose pathbreaking studies of women's depression, gender inequality and violence against women made her a bridge between second-wave feminism and the historically male-dominated academy, died Oct. 8 at a hospice center in Raleigh, N.C. She was 91.

The cause was Alzheimer's disease, said her daughter, Melinda Schlesinger. A self-described radical feminist, Dr. Bart said she sought "to demystify the world for women." She launched her academic career at a time when female sociologists were far outnumbered and often marginalized by their male peers, and was part of a group of researchers who helped originate gender studies as an academic field. "As sharply witty as she was formidable, intensely empathetic and caring, outspoken and tenacious, Pauline Bart was likely the first sociologist to apply and research the insights and questions of the women's liberation movement in formal scholarship," feminist legal scholar [Catharine A. MacKinnon](#) said in an email. Dr. Bart's research, she added, "was a form of taking women seriously that had just never been done."



Dr. Bart in 2017. (Family photo)

Dr. Bart was a longtime professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago, where she was based in the medical school's psychiatry department but ranged widely, teaching classes in sociology, nursing and public health. Her work combined a wry and lively writing style with a mix of statistical research and intensive interviews, including with rape victims and underground abortion providers. "Everything is data," she often said, describing her methodology, "but data isn't everything."

Much of her research was inspired by her own life, including her mother's struggle with depression in middle age. For her dissertation, she examined the hospital records of more than 500 middle-aged women being treated for depression and other mental health issues, focusing on Jewish empty-nesters. "There is no bar mitzvah for menopause," she wrote, noting the "extreme feelings of worthlessness and uselessness" that many women felt after their children grew into adulthood.

Her interest in the Jane Collective, an underground group that offered clandestine abortion services for women in Chicago, was sparked by her own illegal abortion while in college, some 25 years before *Roe v. Wade*. Dr. Bart, who documented and analyzed the group in an article titled "[Seizing the Means of Reproduction](#)," underwent the procedure to stay in school and finish her degree. When she was hospitalized with complications, she was told that she would not be treated until she revealed who had performed the abortion.

"My personal and my sociological lives are joined at the hip, heart and head, like Siamese twins," she wrote in an autobiographical essay published in the 1996 collection "Radically Speaking: Feminism Reclaimed." "They cannot be separated. I turn my personal life into sociology and use sociological analysis to cope with my personal life." Fellow feminist sociologist Judith Lorber said that Dr. Bart "helped set much of the critical feminist agenda of the 1970s," especially with her work on violence against women. She studied domestic battery, rape and femicide — the killing of women or girls

simply because they are female — in addition to areas where violence “would be least expected,” as Lorber put it.

A 1973 study she co-wrote with Diana Scully, [“A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Orifice,”](#) analyzed more than two dozen gynecology books and concluded that they were biased toward men, with physicians encouraged to attend to the sexual happiness of husbands rather than the reproductive needs and desires of wives. Arguing that women’s bodies were being treated as mere objects, or “orifices,” Dr. Bart wrote that gynecology was “practiced (some say perpetuated) on women by men and for men.” “Critiques like Pauline’s led to the patient-directed and midwife-led birth movements of the ’70s,” Lorber said in an email, “and [helped make] medical treatment more responsive to patients.”

Dr. Bart later spoke out against pornography, which she viewed as harmful to women, and focused her research on rape, partly because students who had been sexually assaulted came to her for help. She began starting her UIC classes with an anonymous survey, asking students whether they had been sexually abused or assaulted, and said she sought to cultivate a supportive atmosphere for survivors.

But in 1992, she was stripped of her sociology and women’s studies classes at UIC after a Black social work student said she had called him a “potential rapist.” She denied making the remark but said she had described him as “a believer in the rape myth,” in which women want to be sexually assaulted. As she told it, the social work student had taken a hostile tone that caused some women to stop showing up or participating in class. She retired three years later.

“What I study — violence against women — is something people, including women, don’t like to talk about,” she told the Chicago Tribune, noting that if people didn’t like her class they shouldn’t take it. “It deals with the harm men do to women, and it’s not symmetrical — there are not as many female rapists as male rapists. It gets men where they live. They find this very threatening. I said I would not let male speech silence women.”

The older of two children, Pauline Bernice Lackow was born in Brooklyn on Feb. 18, 1930, to Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. Her father manufactured leather goods, and her mother was a homemaker.

She married Max Bart, a chemical engineer, at age 19, and trained in sociology at the University of California at Los Angeles, where she received a bachelor’s degree in 1950 and a master’s in 1952. She was raising two young children when she got a divorce and returned to school, receiving her doctorate in 1967.

While struggling to find a tenure track job, Dr. Bart helped organize a 1969 caucus of female sociologists to promote the work of women in the field. The gathering spurred the creation of [Sociologists for Women in Society](#), an international feminist organization. “She did all she could to create feminist spaces in sociology,” said [Myra](#)

[Marx Ferree](#), a former president of the group and sociology professor at the University of Wisconsin at Madison.

Dr. Bart launched her teaching career at the University of California at Berkeley, where she taught some of the school's first gender studies and sociology of women classes. She joined UIC in 1970.

One of her first books, "The Student Sociologist's Handbook" (1971), was written with a former Berkeley student, Linda Frankel, whom she insisted on crediting as co-author. "She was asked by the publisher to have a male co-author, and she said, 'Forget that,'" Frankel recalled in a phone interview. The book was so successful that a revised fourth edition was published in 1986.

Dr. Bart also co-wrote "Stopping Rape: Successful Survival Strategies" (1985), in which she and Patricia H. O'Brien concluded that shouting and fighting back were especially effective tactics at resisting rape. Her other works included articles about lesbian issues, beginning with a 1984 piece about research ethics and sexuality in which she acknowledged she was gay. She wrote that she kept it off her CV "because of homophobia."

"In my experience, everything I have put into the establishment has been money dropped down a well," she said, "and everything I have put into students has come back to me."

In addition to her daughter, of Cary, N.C., survivors include a son, William Bart of Oakland, Calif.; a sister; two granddaughters; and four great-grandchildren. Dr. Bart acknowledged that she could be confrontational and controversial at times, and a difficult cocktail party guest given her focus on violence against women. She liked to quote the radical activist [Andrea Dworkin](#) in saying, "I'm a feminist. Not the fun kind!" Still, she maintained a sense of dark humor, including in poems that referenced her feminist activism (one ended, "The Medea is the message") and in letters to friends and colleagues, many of which are preserved with her papers at Duke University.

"Dear Diana," she began one letter, according to the [Jewish Women's Archive](#). "I hope everything is going wonderfully well with you or at least as well as is possible under patriarchy."