

Harold Bershady, Sociology

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Harold Bershady

Harold Bershady, a professor emeritus of sociology in the School of Arts and Sciences, died on February 18 after a brief illness. He was 93.

Born in Toronto, Canada, Dr. Bershady moved to Buffalo, New York, when he was six years old. His family had left Ukraine, and he grew up speaking English and Yiddish. As a child, he was captivated by his father's stories about Moses, Egypt, and the promised land. He earned bachelor's and master's degrees at the University at Buffalo and a doctorate in sociology and philosophy at the University of Wisconsin in 1966.

After earning his doctorate, he joined Penn's faculty as an assistant professor of sociology in 1968, and in 1973, he was promoted to associate professor. While at Penn, Dr. Bershady was an active member of the faculty community, serving on the University Council, the Faculty Grievance Committee, and the Faculty Senate Executive Committee (as well as the Senate committee on the publication of *Almanac*). In 1987, he spoke out in favor of a Black cultural center on campus. Within his department, he served as both undergraduate and graduate chair, and taught courses in sociological theory, urban studies, and the dynamics of organization. Dr. Bershady became a beloved professor at Penn, eliciting a letter of protest (https://www.thedp.com/article/1992/04/letter_deserving_prof) in *The Daily Pennsylvanian* in 1992 when he was not selected for a Lindback Award for Distinguished Teaching that year. He received a Lindback award the following year (*Almanac* April 20, 1993 (<https://almanac.upenn.edu/archive/v39pdf/n30/042093.pdf>)), and his citation quoted glowing reviews from students: "I do not hesitate to say that Professor Bershady played an extremely important role in my intellectual development and my later academic and professional development," one said. A faculty member added, "When I recommend that my extremely bright undergraduates consider Penn for graduate work, it is with the prospect of working with Harold that I do so." It is estimated that he taught nearly 10,000 students during his tenure at Penn. He was influential as a teacher of sociological theory, dealing with classical and contemporary works.

"Bershady conducted his classes in a somewhat unique style," wrote his former colleagues Victor Lidz, Elijah Anderson, and Jerry Jacobs. "He generally arrived in the classroom with a copy of the assigned book but without notes or a specific plan for just what class discussion should cover. He opened the class with a series of questions for the students. His intent was not to establish a Socratic dialogue, but to 'diagnose' what the students had understood and especially what they had not adequately understood from the assigned reading. When he had made a first diagnosis, he would give a ten-minute or so 'mini-lecture' addressing the essential matter. He would then return to asking diagnostic questions in order to discern a next topic for a mini-lecture. And so the class would proceed. When he co-taught a class, his colleague might join the questioning and mini-lecturing. But after a mini-lecture, the colleague would sometimes find Bershady asking, 'Do you really believe that?,' a probe intended to turn discussion to deeper foundations of the points at issue."

Dr. Bershady was promoted to a full professor in 1991. He retired eleven years later, but continued to teach graduate-level courses at Penn and engage with the sociology department until 2005.

Dr. Bershady's interests in sociological theory included the integration of theory and qualitative methods of research. He published his first book in 1973—*Ideology and Social Knowledge*, an attempt to overcome the relativism and subjectivism of the social sciences. The book stirred departmental debate through its assessment of the basic concepts in Talcott Parsons' theory of social action from the perspective of Kantian philosophy. Dr. Bershady later collaborated with Dr. Parsons during his stint as a visiting professor at Penn.

Dr. Bershady continued to turn out chapters, peer-reviewed articles, and edited volumes for his entire career. Along with Elijah Anderson, the first African American sociologist appointed to be a member of the Penn's standing faculty, Dr. Bershady sponsored a series of discussions on the works of Georg Simmel and W.E.B. Du Bois. Dr. Bershady's last book, *When Marx Mattered: An Intellectual Odyssey* (2014), was an "erudite, poignant, and historically insightful" (in the words of a reviewer) memoir that described how his fear of persecution for his Jewish faith as a child led him towards his academic studies. His son, Matthew, noted that the sociology department at Penn was the center of Dr. Bershady's intellectual life for 40 years.

He is survived by his wife, Suzanne Kottek Bershady; his son, Matthew Bershady; his daughter-in-law, Amy Stambach; and his grandson, Isaac Henry Stambach Bershady.