

How do social scientists study the human species?

Key words and terms

control group

A chilling story

In the first two features of this unit, you learned about species, in particular the human species—the subject of social scientists' work. In this feature, you will examine a horrible incident that took place in Montreal, and three social scientists' explanations for it.

The incident

Just after 5:00 p.m. on Wednesday, 13 December 1989, a man carrying a semiautomatic rifle entered a classroom in Montreal's École polytechnique. There were about twenty students in the engineering class. The intruder ordered all of the women to sit on one side of the room and all of the men to leave. Thinking that it was a prank, no one moved. Then the intruder fired two shots into the ceiling. This was no joke.

Once the men left, the intruder spoke calmly but menacingly to the ten women who remained. Claiming they were the type of people who had ruined his life, he took aim and began shooting. Within seconds, six of the women lay dead or dying. The others lay still on the floor, pretending to be dead for fear that the killer would shoot them, too.

Leaving the classroom, the man walked calmly around the building, shooting any

women he saw. Twenty-seven women were shot; fourteen eventually died. The killer turned his weapon on himself and pulled the trigger. He died instantly.

The killer

The killer was twenty-five-year-old Marc Lepine. Although he had enrolled in several educational programs, he had never finished any of them, and he was now unemployed.

Lepine had tried to join the Canadian Armed Forces, but was rejected because his personality was considered unsuitable. He was a loner, with few close friends. He lived in an inexpensive apartment in Montreal with a friend he had known since childhood. He had difficulty establishing close relationships with females. He was dominating with women, which usually drove them away.

Lepine had a keen interest in guns and ammunition, but nobody expected him to use these on other human beings. He had no criminal record, and in fact had never been convicted of even a minor offence.

Little was known about Marc Lepine until this tragic day when he exploded in a murderous rage. After the shootings, social scientists tried to answer the one question on everyone's mind: Why?

A psychological explanation

The question: Psychologists attempting to explain the reasons for Marc Lepine's behaviour would examine his life in detail in order to answer the question *What factors in his personality led Lepine to commit this crime?*

The assumption: Psychologists would examine the evidence based on the assumption that an individual's personality is moulded by his or her prior experiences. Understanding the significance of key events in Lepine's life will help in understanding his personality.

The method: Psychologists would interview the subject (impossible in this case) and his family and friends. They would also examine documents relating to his prior life, particularly his early years.

The explanation: In the case of Marc Lepine, psychologists would offer the following explanation: Marc Lepine's father was a brutal man. He openly expressed his opinion that women were inferior to men.



Emergency crews rushed victims to the hospital.

He regularly beat Marc's mother and Marc himself. The parents separated when Marc was seven. Testimony at the divorce hearing revealed a long history of physical abuse. Having suffered much physical abuse himself, Marc came to regard force as a viable solution to life's problems. When his difficulties began to overwhelm him, he resorted to the only "solution" he really understood—violence.

Marc's fascination with guns dated from his teenage years, when he spent summers hunting at an uncle's farm. The guns probably gave him a feeling of power and control. He came to see weapons as a solution to his problems.

Like his father, Marc came to believe that women were inferior to men. Unable to establish close female relationships, Marc came to hate women and to blame them for his problems. By walking into an engineering class, he chose a traditionally male course which had only recently included a growing number of female students. His murderous rampage allowed him to act out his hatred.

An anthropological explanation

The question: An anthropologist trying to explain the reasons for Marc Lepine's behaviour would look for answers to the question *Why do some men act violently towards women, particularly to the point of murdering them?*

The assumption: Anthropologists would