

# 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.

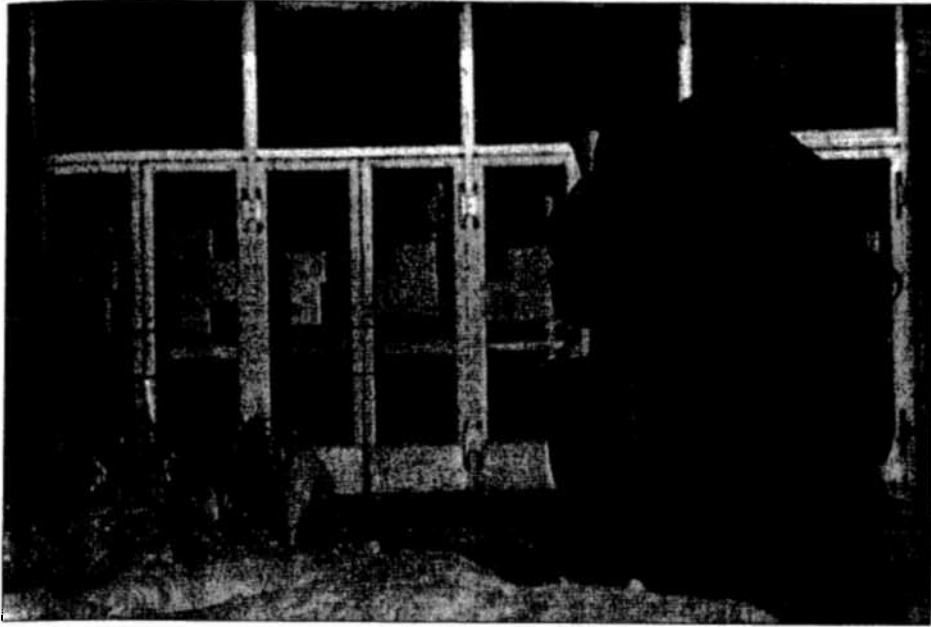
Marc's fascination with guns dated from his teenage years, when he spent summers hunting at an uncle's farm. The guns probably gave him a feeling of power and control. He came to see weapons as a solution to his problems.

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



*Women sought comfort in their grief over the senseless murders.*

answer this question based on the assumption that there are factors in the nature of society itself that encourage some men to act violently towards women. One cannot explain a single act of violence without looking at larger societal reasons.

*The method:* To find the answer, anthropologists would examine statistics and other evidence about violence in Canadian society. They would try to link together important information to see if a pattern emerges.

*The explanation:* Anthropologists would explain that Marc Lepine's murderous rampage was the ultimate act of violence against women in a society that has traditionally tolerated such violence. Figures show that one woman in five has been or will be sexually abused, while one woman in four has been or will be physically abused. Indeed, until recently, courts tended to impose much lighter sentences on men who assaulted their wives or girlfriends than on those who assaulted strangers. Movies tend to glamorize violence, particularly against women. Advertisements regularly exploit women as sex objects in order to sell beer, clothes, and almost anything else.

Marc Lepine's experiences were not unique. In fact, they were altogether too common. He got the same message at home as he did in society—that violence against women is acceptable. When his problems became too much for him, these two mes-

sages came together. His violent rampage was the inevitable result.

### A sociological explanation

*The question:* A sociologist trying to explain the reasons for Marc Lepine's behaviour would attempt to answer the question *What common factors are there in the lives of men who have acted with extreme violence towards women?*

*The assumption:* Sociologists would study this case based on the assumption that the significance of the acts Lepine

committed can only be understood when they are compared to those of others like him and of Canadian men as a whole.

*The method:* Sociologists would study the lives of mass murderers, especially those who chose women as their victims. They would then compare this group with a **control group**—a group of men randomly selected from society.

*The explanation:* Sociologists would offer the following explanation for Marc Lepine's murder spree: Mass killers as a group display a number of common characteristics. They are loners with few friends. They come from broken families, usually ones in which violence has played a major role. Most have been sexually or physically abused as children.

Mass murderers have difficulty dealing with their emotions. Frustration and anger frequently take control of their lives. Although they may appear calm on the outside, they are often tormented on the inside.

Marc Lepine was typical of this group. When he did not get what he wanted out of life—respect, freedom, and companionship—he blamed others. Virtually all convicted mass killers are male, and many of them blame women as a group for their failures in life. Lepine exploded into violence without warning, and fourteen victims lay dead as a result.

## Follow-up

### Focusing

- 1 a Make a timeline of events as Marc Lepine went on his rampage in Montreal.
- b Do you think anyone present in the classroom that day could have prevented this tragedy? Give reasons for your answer.

### Recording

- 2 Make a copy of the following organizer and complete it in your own words.

	<i>Psychological explanation</i>	<i>Anthropological explanation</i>	<i>Sociological explanation</i>
Question			
Assumptions			
Method			
Explanation			

### Assessing and evaluating

- 3 Which of the three explanations for Marc Lepine's crime do you find the most plausible? Give reasons for your answer.