

THINKING CRITICALLY

Are Rapists Sick? A Close-Up View of Research

Two sociologists, Diana Scully and Joseph Marolla, whose research was mentioned earlier, were not satisfied with the typical explanation that rapists are “sick,” psychologically disturbed, or different mentally from other men. They developed the hypothesis that rape is like most human behavior—learned through interaction with others. That is, some men learn to think of rape as acceptable behavior.

To test this hypothesis, it would be best to interview a random sample of rapists. But this is impossible. There is no list of all rapists, so there is no way to give them all the same chance of being included in a sample. You can't even use prison populations to select a random sample, for many rapists have never been caught. And as we know from DNA testing, some men who have been convicted of rape are innocent. Scully and Marolla confronted the classic dilemma of sociologists—either to not do the research or to do it under less than ideal conditions.

They chose to do the research. When they had the opportunity to interview convicted rapists in prison, they jumped at it (Marolla and Scully 1986; Scully 1990; Scully and Marolla 1984, 2012). They knew that whatever they learned would be more than we already knew. They sent letters to 3,500 men serving time in seven prisons in Virginia, the state where they were teaching. About 25 percent of the prisoners agreed to be interviewed. The researchers matched these men on the basis of age, education, race-ethnicity, severity of offense, and previous criminal record. Their sample consisted of 98 prisoners who had been convicted of rape and a control sample of 75 men convicted of other crimes.

Because the sex of the interviewer can bias research results, Scully and Marolla each interviewed half the sample. It took them 600 hours to gather information on the prisoners, including their psychological, criminal, and sexual history. To guard against lies, they checked what the individuals told them against their institutional records. They used twelve scales to measure the men's attitudes about women, rape, and themselves. In order to find out what circumstances the men defined as rape or when they viewed the victim as responsible, they also gave the men nine vignettes of forced sexual encounters and asked them to determine responsibility in each one.

Scully and Marolla discovered something that goes against common sense—that the psychological histories of the rapists and the nonrapists were similar. The rapists were neither sick nor had they been overwhelmed by uncontrollable urges. These men raped for a variety of reasons: to “blow off steam” over problems they were having with others, to get sex, to feel powerful, and to hurt women (Monahan et al. 2005). Some men raped spontaneously, while others planned their rapes. Some raped as a form of revenge, to get even with someone, although not necessarily their victim. For some, rape was a form of recreation, and they raped with friends on weekends.

Scully and Marolla also found support for what feminists had been pointing out for years, that power is a major element in rape. Here is what one man said:

Rape gave me the power to do what I wanted to do without feeling I had to please a partner or respond to a partner. I felt in control, dominant. Rape was the ability to have sex without caring about the woman's response. I was totally dominant.

To discover that most rape is calculated behavior—that rapists are not “sick”; that a motivating force can be power, not passion; that the behavior stems from the criminal pursuit of pleasure, not from mental illness—is significant. It makes the sociological quest worthwhile.