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## How Sociologists Do Research

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Guesswork does not go very far in helping us to understand our social world. Some of our guesses, hunches, and ideas that pass for common sense are correct. Others are not. And we seldom know which is which.

Sociologists must gather data in such a way that what they report is objective—presenting information that represents what is really “out there.” To do so, they must use methods that other researchers can repeat (*replicate*) to check their findings. They also must tie their findings into what other researchers have already reported and into sociological theory. In this overview of *research methods*, Henslin outlines the procedures that sociologists use to gather data.

Renée had never felt fear before—at least not like this. It had begun as a vague feeling that something was out of place. Then she felt it creep up her spine, slowly tightening as it clawed its way upward. Now it was like a fist pounding inside her skull.

Renée never went anywhere with strangers. Hadn't her parents hammered that into her head since she was a child? And now, at 19, she wasn't about to start breaking *that* rule.

And yet here she was, in a car with a stranger. He seemed nice enough. And it wasn't as though he were some strange guy on the side of the road or anything. She had met George at Patricia's party, and everyone seemed to know him.

Renée had first been attracted by his dark eyes. They seemed to light up his entire face when he smiled. And when he asked her to dance, Renée felt flattered. He was a little older, a little more sure of himself than most of the guys she knew. Renée liked that: It was a sign of maturity.

As the evening wore on and he continued to be attentive to her, it seemed natural to accept his offer to take her home.

But then they passed the turn to her dorm. She didn't understand his mumbled reply about “getting something.” And as he turned off on the country road, that clawing at the back of her neck had begun.

As he looked at her, his eyes almost pierced the darkness. “It's time to pay, Babe,” he said, as he clawed at her blouse.

Renée won't talk about that night. She doesn't want to recall anything that happened then.

IN THIS PAPER we examine how sociologists do research. To better understand how they gather data, it is useful to focus on a single topic. Let's try to answer this question: How can we gather reliable information on rape—which is to say on both rapists *and* their victims?

### *Sociology and Common Sense*

Common sense will give us some information. From common sense (a kind of knowledge not based on formal investigation, but on ideas that we pick up from our groups, mixed with abstractions from our own experiences), we know that Renée's rape was a significant event in her life. And from common sense we know that rape has ongoing effects, that it can trigger fears and anxieties, and that it can make women distrust men.

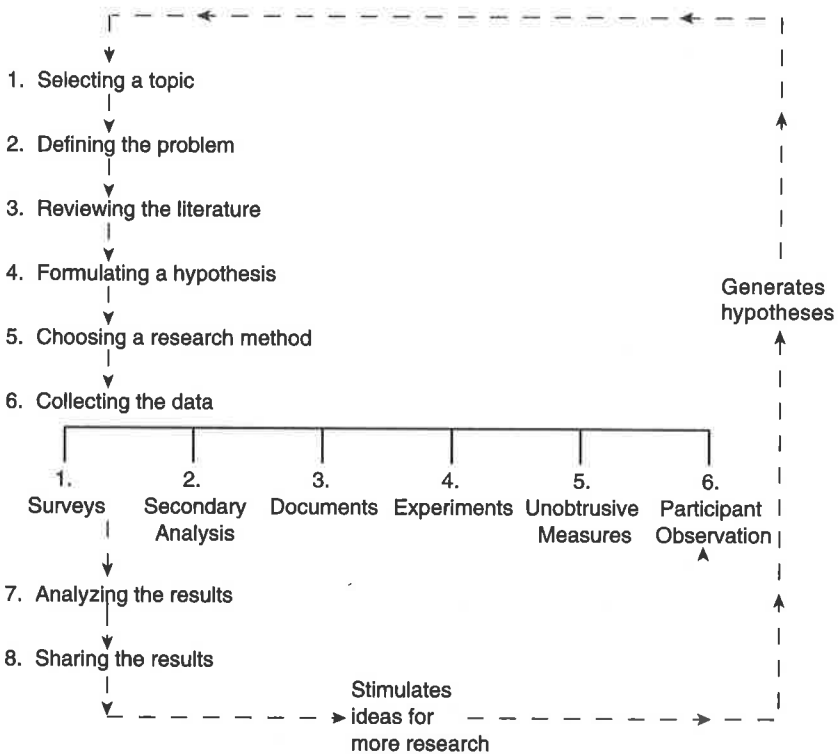
It so happens that these ideas are true. But many other commonsense ideas, even though glaringly obvious to us, are *not* true, and so we need research to test the validity and accuracy of our ideas. For example, common sense also tells us that one reason men rape is the revealing clothing that some women wear. And common sense may tell us that men who rape are sexually deprived. These commonsense ideas, however, are not on target. Researchers have found that men who rape don't care what a woman is wearing. Most don't even care who the woman is. She is simply an object for their lust, drives for power and exploitation, and, sometimes, frustration and anger. Researchers have also found that rapists may or may not be sexually deprived—the same as with men who do not rape. For example, many rapists have wives or girlfriends with whom they have an ongoing sexual relationship.

If it is neither provocative clothing nor sexual deprivation, then, what *does* cause rape? And what effects does rape have on victims? Phrasing the matter this way—instead of assuming that we know the answers—not only opens up our minds but also underscores the pressing need for sociological research. We need to search for empirical findings that will take us completely out of the realm of guesswork and well beyond common sense.

Let's see how sociologists do their research. We shall look first at a research model, and then at the research methods used in sociology.

### *A Research Model*

As shown in Figure 4.1, eight basic steps are involved in social research. As you look at each of these steps, be aware that this is an ideal model. In some research these steps are collapsed, in others their order may be rearranged, while in still others one or more steps may be omitted.



**Figure 4.1** The Research Model (*Modification of Fig. 2.2 in Schaefer and Lamm 1998.*)

## 1. SELECTING A TOPIC

The first step is to select a topic. What is it that you want to know more about? Many sociologists simply follow their curiosity, their drive to know. They become interested in a particular topic, and they pursue it. Sometimes sociologists choose a topic simply because funds are available. At other times, some social problem, such as rape, has become a pressing issue and the sociologist wants to gather data that will help people better understand—and perhaps help solve it. Let's use rape as our example.

## 2. DEFINING THE PROBLEM

The second step is to define the problem, to determine what you want to learn about the topic. To develop a researchable question, you need to focus on a

specific area or problem. For example, you may want to determine the education and work experiences of rapists, or the average age of their victims.

### 3. REVIEWING THE LITERATURE

The third step is to review the literature to see what has been published on the topic. Nobody wants to rediscover the wheel. If the question has already been answered, you want to know that. In addition, a review of what has been written on the topic can stir your ideas, help sharpen your questions, and help you accomplish the next step.

### 4. FORMULATING A HYPOTHESIS

The fourth step is to formulate a *hypothesis*, a statement of what you expect to find based on a theory. A hypothesis predicts a relationship between or among *variables* (factors thought to be significant). For example, the statement “Men who are more socially isolated are more likely to rape than are men who are more socially integrated” is a hypothesis. Hypotheses (the plural) need *operational definitions*—that is, precise ways to measure their concepts. In this example, you would need operational definitions for three concepts: social integration, social isolation, and rape.

### 5. CHOOSING A RESEARCH METHOD

The ways by which sociologists collect data are called *research methods* (also known as *research designs*). To answer the questions you have formulated, you will need to select one of these methods. I will explain what they are after we complete this review of the research model.

### 6. COLLECTING THE DATA

After you have selected a research method, then you gather your data. You have to take care to ensure that your data are both valid and reliable. *Validity* means the extent to which the operational definitions measure what you intend to measure. In other words, do your definitions or measures of social isolation and integration *really* measure these concepts and not something else?

The concept of rape is not as simple to define (or operationalize) as it may seem. For example, there are various degrees of sexual assault. Look at Table 4.1, which depicts a variety of forced sexual activities. Deciding which of these constitute rape for the purposes of your research project is

**TABLE 4.1 Date Rape and Other Unwanted Sexual Activities Experienced by College Undergraduates**

<i>UNWANTED SEXUAL ACTIVITY</i>	<i>WOMEN WHO REPORTED THIS HAD HAPPENED TO THEM (%)</i>	<i>MEN WHO REPORTED THEY HAD DONE THIS (%)</i>
He kissed without tongue contact	3.7	2.2
He kissed with tongue contact	12.3	0.7
He touched/kissed her breasts through her clothes	24.7	7.3
He touched/kissed her breasts under her clothes	22.6	13.1
He touched her genitals through her clothes	28.8	15.3
He touched her genitals under her clothes	28.4	13.9
He performed oral sex on her	9.9	8.8
He forced her to touch his genitals through his clothes	2.9	0.7
He forced her to touch his genitals under his clothes	5.8	2.2
He forced her to perform oral sex on him	2.5	4.4
He forced her to have sexual intercourse	20.6	15.3

These are the results of a survey of 380 women and 368 men enrolled in introductory psychology courses at Texas A&M University. Percentages add up to more than 100 because often more than one unwanted sexual activity occurred on the same date.

Source: Based on Muehlenhard and Linton 1987:190.

an example of the difficulties of developing operational definitions. Certainly not all of these acts are rape—and, therefore, not all of those who did them are rapists.

*Reliability* means that if other researchers use your operational definitions, their findings will be consistent with yours. Inadequate operational definitions will prevent reliability. For example, if other researchers want to replicate (repeat) your study but your measure of rape is inadequate, they will exclude acts that you included, and include acts that you excluded. In that case, how can you compare the results?

## 7. ANALYZING THE RESULTS

After you gather the data, it is time to analyze them. Sociologists have specific techniques for doing this, each of which requires special training. They range from statistical tests (of which there are many, each with its own rules for

application) to *content analysis* (examining the content of something in order to identify its themes—in this case perhaps magazine articles and television reports about rape, or even diaries kept by women who have been raped or the recounts of rapes in novels). If a hypothesis has been part of the research (and not all social research has hypotheses), it is during this step that it is tested.

## 8. SHARING THE RESULTS

Now it is time to wrap up the research. In this step, you write a report to share your findings with the scientific community. You relate your findings to the literature, to show how they are connected to what has previously been discovered. You explain your research procedures so others can evaluate them. This also guides researchers who may want to *replicate* your research—that is, repeat the study to test its findings. In this way science slowly builds, adding finding to finding.

Now let's look in greater detail at the fifth step to examine the research methods that sociologists use.

### *Six Research Methods*

Sociologists use six *research methods* (also called research designs). These *procedures for gathering data* are surveys, secondary analysis, documents, experiments, unobtrusive measures, and participant observation.

#### SURVEYS

Let's suppose that you want to know how many women are raped each year. The *survey*—having people answer a series of questions—would be an appropriate method to use.

Before using this method, however, you have to decide whom you will survey. What is your *population*; that is, what is the target group that you want to learn about? Is it all females in the world? Only U.S. or Canadian females? The females in a particular state, county, or city? Only females above a certain age? Or only women on your college campus?

Let's suppose that your research interest is modest—that you want only to know the extent of rape on your campus. Ideally, you would survey all women students. But let's also suppose that your college enrollment is large, making this impractical. To get the answer, then, you must select a smaller group, a *sample* of individuals, from whom you can generalize to the entire campus. How you choose your sample is crucial, for it will affect the results of your study. For ex-

ample, you will get different results if you survey only freshmen or seniors—or only women taking introductory sociology or advanced physics classes.

What kind of sample will allow you to *generalize* to the entire campus? The best is a *random sample*. This does *not* mean that you stand on some campus corner and ask questions of any woman who happens to walk by. *In a random sample, everyone in your population (the target group) has the same chance of being included in the study.* In this case, since the population is all women taking classes at your college, all such women must have the same chance of being included in your research—whether they are freshmen, sophomores, juniors, seniors, or graduate students. It also means that such factors (*variables*) as a woman's choice of major, her grade point average, or whether she is a day or evening student cannot affect her chances of being a part of your sample.

How can you obtain a random sample? First, you need a list of all the women who are enrolled in your college. Then you assign a number to each name on the list. You then use random numbers to determine which particular women will become part of the sample. (Random numbers are available on tables in statistics books, or they can be generated by a computer.)

Because a random sample represents your study's population (in this case women students enrolled at your college), you can *generalize* your findings to all the women students on your campus, even if they were not part of your sample. This means, for example, that if 5 percent of the women in your sample have been raped, then about 5 percent of the women on campus have been raped. There is always some variation. It could be 4 percent or 6 percent, for example.

In some surveys, *questionnaires*, a list of questions, are mailed to people. Although such *self-administered questionnaires* allow a large number of people to be sampled at a lower cost, control is lost. For example, under what conditions did people (*respondents*) fill them out? Who might have influenced their answers?

Other surveys use *interviews*: Respondents are asked questions directly. This is usually done on a face-to-face basis, although some interviews are conducted over the telephone. The advantage of this type of survey is that the researchers bring control to the situation. They know the conditions under which the interviews took place and that each question was asked in the same way. Its disadvantages include not only the more limited number of questionnaires that can be completed, and the increased cost, but also *interviewer bias*, the effects that interviewers can have on respondents that lead to biased answers. For example, although respondents may be willing to write an anonymous answer, they may not want to express their opinions to another person directly. Some respondents even try to make their answers match what they think the interviewer wants to hear.

Sociologists sometimes use *closed-ended questions*, called *structured interviews*. Each question is followed by a list of possible answers. The advantages are that these are faster to administer, and make it easier for the answers to be *coded* (categorized) so they can be fed into a computer for analysis. If you use closed-ended questions, you will have to be careful to make sure that they represent people's opinions. For example, if you were to ask, "What do you think should be done to rapists?" and the only choices you provide are to castrate or kill them, you would not be taking accurate measurements of people's opinions. Similarly, if you begin a question with, "Don't you agree that" ("rapists should be locked up for life"—or whatever you want to add), you would tilt the results toward agreement with a particular position.

Questions, then, must be worded carefully so they do not slant answers—because biased findings are worthless. It takes a great deal of training to construct questions that are free of bias, and sociologists are extremely critical of both how questions are worded and how they are administered (given).

To better tap the depth and diversity of people's experiences and attitudes, you may choose to use *open-ended questions*, called *unstructured interviews*, that allow people to answer in their own words. The primary advantage of this type of interview is that it allows people to express their full range of opinions. The major disadvantage is that it is difficult to compare people's answers. For example, how would you compare these answers to the question "What do you think causes rape?"

"They haven't been raised right."

"I think they must have had problems with their mother."

"We ought to kill every one!"

"They're all sick."

"I don't want to talk about it."

The research topic we are considering also brings up another significant item. Let's suppose that you want to interview rape victims. Would they really give honest answers? Will a woman even admit to a stranger that she has been raped, much less talk about it? Wouldn't all your efforts be futile?

If you were to simply walk up to a stranger on the street and ask if she had ever been raped, you can guess the results—and they certainly would give little basis for placing confidence in your findings. Researchers must establish *rapport* (pronounced ruh-pour), a feeling of trust, with their respondents. When it comes to sensitive topics, areas about which people may feel embarrassment, shame, hostility, or other deep emotions, rapport is all the more important.



Once rapport is gained (often through building trust by explaining the significance of the research, assuring anonymity, and asking nonsensitive questions first), victims usually will talk about rape. For example, each year researchers conduct a national crime survey in which they interview a random sample of 100,000 Americans. They find that most rape victims will talk about their experiences. These national crime surveys show that rape is *three* times higher than the official statistics, and that most rape is committed by someone the victim knows (*Statistical Abstract of the United States* 2006: page 192).

#### SECONDARY ANALYSIS

In *secondary analysis*, a second research method, researchers analyze data already collected by others. For example, if you were to examine the basic data gathered by the interviewers who did the national crime survey just mentioned, you would be doing secondary analysis.

Ordinarily, researchers prefer to gather their own data, but lack of resources, especially money, may make this impossible. In addition, data already gathered may contain a wealth of information not pertinent to the goals of the original researchers. It simply lies there, waiting to be analyzed.

While this approach can solve problems of access, it also poses its own problems. Since you didn't do the research, how can you be sure that the data were gathered systematically and recorded accurately, and that biases were avoided? Knowing this may not be an easy task, especially if the original data were gathered by a team of researchers, not all of whom were equally qualified.

#### DOCUMENTS

The use of *documents*, written sources, is a third research method employed by sociologists. To investigate social life, sociologists examine such diverse sources as books, newspapers, diaries, bank records, police reports, immigration files, and records kept by schools, hospitals, and other organizations. Although they are not commonly called documents, also included here are movies, television programs, videotapes, computer disks, CDs, DVDs, and other digitized records.

To apply this method to the study of rape, you might examine police reports. They may reveal what proportion of all arrests are for rape; how many of the men arrested go to trial; what proportion is convicted, put on probation, sent to prison; and so forth. If these are your questions, police statistics could be valuable.

But for other questions, police records would be useless. For example, if you want to know about the adjustment of rape victims, such records would tell you nothing. Other documents, however, may lend themselves to this question. If your campus has a rape crisis center, for example, it might have records that would provide key information. Or you may obtain diaries kept by victims, and search them for clues to their reactions—especially how their orientations change over time. If you couldn't find such diaries, you might contact a sample of rape victims and ask them to keep diaries. Locating that sample is extremely difficult—but, again, the rape crisis center could be the key. Their personnel might ask victims to keep the diaries. (To my knowledge, however, no sociologist has yet studied rape in this way.)

I am writing, of course, about an ideal case, as though the rape crisis center is opening its arms to you. In actual fact it may not cooperate at all, refusing to ask victims to keep diaries and not even letting you near their records. Access, then, is another problem researchers constantly face. Simply put, you can't study something unless you can gain access to it.

#### EXPERIMENTS

A fourth research method is the *experiment*. This is the classic method of the natural sciences. Sociologists seldom use it, however, because they are more likely to be interested in broad features of society and social behavior, or in studying a social group in a natural setting, neither of which lends itself to an experiment.

The basic purpose of an experiment is to identify cause-and-effect relationships—to find out what causes what. Ordinarily, experiments are used to test a hypothesis. Experiments involve *independent variables* (those factors that cause a change in something) and *dependent variables* (those factors that are changed). Before the experiment, you must measure the dependent variable. Then, after introducing the independent variable, you again measure the dependent variable in order to see what change has occurred.

Let's assume, for example, that you want to test the hypothesis that pornography creates attitudes that favor rape. The independent variable would be pornography, the dependent variable attitudes toward rape. You can measure a group of men's attitudes toward rape and then use random numbers to divide the men into two subgroups. To one group, the *experimental group*, you introduce the independent variable (such as violent pornographic videos). The other group, the *control group*, is not exposed to the independent variable (that is, they are not shown these videos). You then measure the dependent variable in both groups. Changes in the dependent variable (in this case attitudes toward rape) are due to what only

the experimental group received, the independent variable (in this case, the pornography).

Because there is always some chance that unknown third variables have not been distributed evenly among the groups, you would need to retest your results by repeating the experiment with other groups of men.

#### UNOBTRUSIVE MEASURES

The fifth research method is *unobtrusive measures*: observing people's behavior when they do not know they are being studied. For example, social researchers have studied the level of whiskey consumption in a "dry" town by counting empty bottles in trash cans; the degree of fear induced by ghost stories by measuring the shrinking diameter of a circle of seated children; and the popularity of exhibits at Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry by the wear upon tiles in front of the various displays (Webb et al. 1966; Lee 2000). Researchers have also gone high tech in their unobtrusive measures (Hays 2004). To trace customers' paths through stores, they have attached infrared surveillance devices to shopping carts. Retailers use these findings to place higher profit items in more strategic locations (McCarthy 1993). Casinos use chips that transmit radio signals, allowing casino operators to know exactly how much their high rollers are betting at every hand of poker or blackjack (Sanders, 2005).

Unobtrusive measures could also be used to study rape. For example, you could observe rapists in prison when they do not know they are being watched. You might arrange for the leader of a therapy group for rapists to be called out of the room. During his absence, you could use a one-way mirror to observe the men's interactions, and video cameras to preserve what they say and do. You might even have a stooge bring up a certain topic. Such an approach would probably tell you more about the men's real attitudes than most other techniques.

Professional ethics, however, probably would disallow such a study. And I know of no research that has applied this method to the study of rape.

#### PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION (FIELD WORK)

Let's turn to my favorite method, one that involves the researcher in the most direct way. In *participant observation* (or field work) the researcher *participates* in a research setting while *observing* what is happening in that setting.

How is it possible to study rape by participant observation? It would seem that this method would not apply. If one considers being present during

rape, it certainly does not. But there are many other questions about rape that can be answered by participant observation, answers that cannot be gained as adequately by any other method.

Let's suppose that your interest is the adjustment of rape victims. You would like to learn how the rape has affected their behavior and their orientations to life. For example, how has their victimization affected their hopes and goals, their dating patterns, their ideas about men and intimacy? Participant observation can provide detailed answers to such questions.

Let's go back to your campus again. Assume that your campus has a rape crisis intervention center. This setting lends itself to participant observation, for here you can observe rape victims from the time they first report the attack to their later participation in individual and group counseling. With good rapport, you can even spend time with victims outside this setting, observing how it affects other aspects of their lives.

Participant observation has the added benefit of allowing you to study whatever happens to occur while you are in the setting. In this instance, you would also be able to study the operation of the rape crisis center. As you observe counselors at work, you could also analyze their statements and study *their* attitudes and behaviors.

As you may have noticed, in participant observation the personal characteristics of the researcher are important. Could a man, for example, conduct such research? Technically, the answer is yes. Properly introduced and with the right attitudes, men could do this research. But granted the topic, and especially the emotional states of females who have been brutally victimized by males, it may be more appropriate for women sociologists to conduct this research. Their chances of success are likely to be higher.

In conducting research, then, sociologists must be aware of such variables as the sex, age, race-ethnicity, personality, and even height and weight of the researcher (Henslin 1990). While important in all research methods (for example, in surveys men who are being interviewed may be more talkative to young, shapely women than to unkempt men with bad breath), these variables are especially important in participant observation.

Participant observers face a problem with generalizability. Although they look for principles of human behavior, it is difficult to know the extent to which their findings apply beyond the setting in which they occur. Consequently, most participant observation is exploratory in nature: The findings document in detail what people in a particular setting are experiencing and how they are reacting to those experiences, suggesting that other people who face similar situations will react in similar ways.

I find participant observation the most exciting of the methods. It is the type of sociology that I like to do and the type I like to read about. From

these studies, I gain a depth of understanding of settings that I want to know more about but for whatever reason am not able to study, and in some cases am not even able to enter. If I were a woman, for example, I might have volunteered for work in my campus's rape crisis center—a technique often used by sociologists to solve the problem of access.

### *Conclusion: A Note on Choosing Research Methods*

As you have seen, a crucial factor in choosing a research method is the questions you want to answer. Each method lends itself much better to answering particular interests or questions than do other methods. You also have seen that access to subjects is crucial in deciding which research method to use. Two other factors are also significant in this choice: the resources available to the researcher, and the researcher's background or training. For example, a researcher who prefers to conduct a survey may find that finances will not permit it, and instead turn to the study of documents. The researcher's background is similarly significant in making a choice. Researchers who have been trained in *quantitative research methods* (an emphasis on measurement, numbers, statistics) are more likely to use surveys, while researchers who have been trained in *qualitative research methods* (an emphasis on observing and interpreting what people do and say) lean toward participant observation. The particular training that sociologists receive in graduate school, which sometimes depends on capricious events, orients them toward certain research methods. They feel comfortable with those, and tend to continue to use them throughout their careers.

# 5

## “Riding the Bull at Gilley’s”: Convicted Rapists Describe the Rewards of Rape

DIANA SCULLY  
JOSEPH MAROLLA

As we saw in the previous reading, sociologists can choose from a variety of research methods. Rape was used as the example to illustrate the ways in which sociologists collect data. In this selection, you can see how two sociologists used the research method known as unstructured interviewing to gather data on rape. What prompted their research was a question that many people wonder about: “Just why do men rape?”

Scully and Marolla interviewed a sample of men who had been sent to prison for rape. In what was a difficult interviewing situation, they established enough *rapport* that the men felt free to talk about their motives. From this selection, you should gain an understanding of the reasons why men commit this violent act. To determine how widespread (representative) these motives are, we need more studies, preferably with both convicted and unconvicted rapists. Perhaps you, now a student reading this book, will become a sociologist who will build on this study.

OVER THE PAST SEVERAL DECADES, rape has become a “medicalized” social problem. That is to say, the theories used to explain rape are predicated on psychopathological models. They have been generated from clinical experiences with small samples of rapists, often the therapists’ own clients. Although these psychiatric explanations are most appropriately applied to the atypical rapist, they have been generalized to all men who rape and have come to inform the public’s view on the topic.

Two assumptions are at the core of the psychopathological model: that rape is the result of idiosyncratic mental disease and that it often includes an