



Risk and Resilience: Exploring the Ecological Factors that Impact Rape Recovery

Lucca Olivia Munnik¹, Dr. Thandi Davies¹, and Prof. Petal Petersen Williams^{2,3,4}

¹Alan J Flisher Centre for Public Mental Health, Department of Psychiatry and Mental Health, University of Cape Town, South Africa

²Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drug Research Unit, South African Medical Research Council, South Africa

³Institute for Life Course Health Research, Department of Global Health, Stellenbosch University, South Africa

⁴Department of Psychiatry and Mental Health, University of Cape Town, South Africa

Abstract

Sexual violence (SV) is increasingly prevalent with the World Health Organization reporting that one in three women have experienced it globally. Women exposed to SV are at risk of developing poor health outcomes, including mental ill-health. This risk, compounded by the increasing prevalence of SV, demonstrates a significant need for psychosocial interventions. However, SV survivors often experience challenges when receiving assistance which worsens their likelihood of recovery. This research explored how factors on Campbell et al.'s (2009) Ecological Model contributes to resilience and recovery amongst rape survivors in the Western Cape, South Africa (SA). In-depth interviews with 11 survivors and two focus groups with eight healthcare workers were conducted at two counselling centres. Findings highlighted that survivors experienced mental health problems, such as depression and anxiety, and used coping strategies to manage these, including creative expression and substance use. Positive factors contributing to recovery and resilience included therapy, hearing other survivors' experiences, and social support. Findings also highlighted the importance of demystifying rape myths and raising awareness through education. Conversely, negative factors, such as internalised stigma and insensitive interactions with professionals, worsened mental health. Additionally, ignorance about rape in families, rape characteristics, and maternal history of SV hindered the recovery process. This study recommends improving psychological interventions, developing training programmes, and conducting further research to strengthen resilience and recovery outcomes for rape survivors. By understanding which factors improve or worsen recovery in a South African context, recommendations on incorporating positive factors in other global contexts can be made.

Keywords: ecological model, recovery, sexual violence, therapy, women's mental health