A Multiple Case Study of Rape Victim Advocates’
Self-Care Routines: The Influence
of Organizational Context

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This study assumes that rape victim advocates who provide community outreach services to victimized women must adjust to a heightened awareness of sexual violence to do their jobs. Using qualitative methodology, this multiple case study explored rape victim advocates’ strategies for incorporating repeated exposure to sexual assault into their daily lives as well as ways that organizations can support such endeavors. Findings suggest that advocates’ self-care routines draw upon various personal resources (i.e., cognitive, physical, social, spiritual, verbal), and serve 2 roles for coping with rape-related pain: (a) cathartic releasing of traumatic material, and (b) improving capacity to integrate the traumatic material into one’s life. Additionally, over 20 organizational characteristics that workers perceive to be supportive (e.g., weekly meetings, flexible hours) were identified. Nonparametric and categorical statistical analyses were used to analyze the relationship between organizational support and self-care routines, finding that advocates working in organizations...
higher levels of support utilize more strategies that are integrative in nature. Implications of these findings are discussed.

KEY WORDS: rape victim advocates; self-care; context; organizational support; multiple case study.

INTRODUCTION

The rape victimology literature has documented many of rape’s direct effects on victims. Over 30 years of solid empirical evidence suggests that up to one in five American women will be raped in her lifetime (see Koss, 1993), that after the assault she is likely to suffer psychological distress (Hanson, 1990; Neville & Heppner, 1999) and physical health problems (Golding, 1996; Koss & Heslet, 1992), and that she may employ several types of coping to deal with these experiences (see Burt & Katz, 1988). Additionally, research indicates that although a sizable number of rape victims are likely to stay silent about their experiences, other victims may turn to family, friends, or service providers for help and support (George, Winfield, & Blazer, 1992; Kimmerling & Calhoun, 1994; Ullman, 1996). As victims share their experiences of sexual assault, the number of individuals exposed to, and impacted by, negative effects of rape increases exponentially.

A fairly recent trend in the victimology literature explores the vicarious effects of sexual assault on family members or therapists of rape victims (see McCann & Pearlman, 1990). Empirical research suggests that those who are in close contact with rape survivors can experience quite a bit of distress, with female significant others usually being more affected than males (e.g., Davis, Taylor, & Bench, 1995). Despite potential negative outcomes, some women do choose careers that involve daily exposure to rape. The current work explores the assumption that rape crisis work requires employees to engage in various types of self-care (Stamm, 1995) in order to perform their job duties effectively and responsibly. Trauma researchers offer the notion of self-care to distinguish strategies and routines employed by those who work with trauma victims from more traditional models of coping. A key tenet of self-care theory is that organizations can be instrumental in facilitating workers’ use of such strategies (see Rosenbloom, Pratt, & Pearlman, 1995). To gain a better understanding of the strategies women use to deal with a heightened awareness of rape, as well as the ways organizational context influences such processes, this exploratory study employed qualitative and quantitative methodologies to describe the subjective experiences of a small number of rape victim advocates working in diverse settings.