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# **Breaking another Silence**

## **The Long-term Impacts of Child Sexual Abuse on Committed Lesbian Couples**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in Social Work at Massey University, Auckland, New Zealand.

Sue Hanna  
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## Breaking another Silence

### Abstract

This qualitative research enquiry sought to develop an understanding from forty-four women, comprising twenty-two couples in committed lesbian partnerships, of how they managed the long-term impacts of child sexual abuse, both on themselves and on their relationships. This is an area that is under- theorised in the literature.

A number of key findings emerged from the analysis.

- The sexual abuse that women had experienced had impacted their adult lives in various ways. Of these the personal aspect featured most highly, with feelings of self-blame, shame and low self esteem commonly reported.
- Those women who reported physically invasive sexual abuse also reported a wider variety of effects, and in proportionately greater numbers, than women whose abusive experience had not encompassed that particular dimension.
- Just as the survivors were impacted in a variety of ways by their abuse, so too were their partners, although the effects upon the partner varied over time and in intensity depending on the length of the relationship and the degree of resolution experienced by the survivor. Despite challenges the over all view of couple relationships was positive, and couples were able to articulate coping strategies they felt would be useful to others in similar circumstances.
- Partners were able to identify with many of the relationship issues outlined by heterosexual male partners of female survivors, although lesbian partners had more a positive view of counselling. The emotional support and commitment of a caring partner was clearly valued although in these partnerships both women wanted their relationship to be based on more than the reparative needs of one member.

- Finally, being lesbian was no barrier to seeking counselling assistance. A large proportion of the participants had used counselling as a way of working through their experiences of child sexual abuse and had found this to be valuable.

These findings have implications for social work practice with child and adult female survivors. They emphasise the long term impacts of sexual abuse, the important contributions made by partners and counsellors in supporting women sexually abused as children and the levels of inter-sibling sexual abuse perpetrated by brothers. The research findings also contain information from the women themselves on what facilitated their ability to cope with the effects of child sexual abuse from the varying perspectives of survivor, partner and couple. This will be essential information for counsellors and social workers wishing to employ strengths and evidence-based approaches in their work with this client group and others, particularly heterosexual women and heterosexual couples.

## Preface

Much has been written about the personal effects of child sexual abuse but less is known about the secondary effects of such abuse on intimate partners of people sexually abused as children, in particular partner populations comprising gay men and lesbian or heterosexual women. This enquiry sought to develop an understanding of how lesbian women managed the impacts of child sexual abuse, both on themselves and on their relationships, in respect of five research questions.

- What are the personal and flow on effects of child sexual abuse in adult life?
- What are the effects of physically invasive child sexual abuse on intimate relationships?
- How important is the ongoing emotional support of a committed partner in the process of healing from child sexual abuse?
- What are the effects of child sexual abuse on lesbian relationships given the value that lesbian couples attach to communication, equality and emotional intimacy in their relationships?
- What is the relationship between being lesbian and accessing professional help? Does being lesbian compound the effects of child sexual abuse, and present a barrier to seeking professional help?

This is a non random qualitative research project which through the use of face-to-face interviews with participants acquired information about the impacts of child sexual abuse on mutually committed lesbian couple relationships of at least one years duration, where one or both partners had experienced contact child sexual abuse before the age of sixteen. A qualitative research methodology was used which also sought to express the principles and values of feminist research and social work in the construction and implementation of the project.

Couples were recruited through advertisements and word of mouth. The researcher conducted a semi structured in depth interview with each couple and the data collected was later transcribed and analysed through a process of content and thematic analysis. This enabled a focus on the richness of individual experience within a research paradigm that has a commitment to reporting experiences of groups about whom relatively little is known, yet it contained sufficient structure to enable comparison between the responses of different participants.

While information was sought specifically from women around the broad areas of interest outlined above, other aspects of women's experience were also explored and valuable information acquired as a result. These concerned relationships with families, and experiences and decisions made in respect of disclosure. The relative frequency of serious sexual abuse perpetrated by male siblings and the complex, multi faceted and individual process that constitutes "recovery" or "healing" from the experience of child sexual abuse were also addressed.

So, consistent with my own private question of the data, is love the answer to facilitating healing from this type of childhood trauma? The scope of this thesis will provide an appreciation of not only the impacts of child sexual abuse for both survivors and partners but also what informs and supports the process of "healing" and what couples have learnt about themselves and each other, as a result.

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Quite apart from the bravery of survivors it has taken the efforts of other researchers and practitioners to bring the abuse of power and the injustice that represents child sexual abuse to public attention. I have benefited greatly from the valuable work of others.

Finally, a year ago Jill returned a draft to me with the words "Someone has already had a go at this, someone who calls you 'Suey'. Their comments are pretty good too." For all the editing, the proof reading, and the encouragement, for all those things and much more, thanks Dad.





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