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A Grounded Theory of the Role of Family in Recovery
and Healing from Child Sexual Abuse

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for a degree of Master of Arts in Psychology
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ABSTRACT

This thesis presents an exploration of therapist perceptions of the role of family in recovery and healing from Child Sexual Abuse (CSA). Consistent with the individualistic focus of Western society, the international body of literature tends to focus on intrapsychic effects and processes of CSA rather than emphasising the ecological and systemic influences which interact with CSA events. Consistent with the New Zealand Ministry of Health's calls to be more inclusive of family in mental health issues, this investigation attempted to provide new understandings of CSA from an ecological and systemic perspective.

A grounded theory methodology was utilised. This incorporated the analysis of therapist data collected from a combination of focus groups, key informant interviews and a national survey.

The core social process which emerged was "Belonging, Estrangement and Reintegration". This model of recovery and healing in sexually abused families recognises the impact that abuse and neglect has across generations of a family, the evolving nature of their relationships before, during and after the sexual abuse event(s), and the impact these relationships have on the healing journey.

Parallel to the core social process were a number of contextual variables which interacted with therapist practices. These factors influenced how practitioners conceptualise and work with sexually abused families. For the most part, these variables were barriers to including family in the recovery process.

It is hoped that the themes which emerged from this investigation will further inform practice in the field by identifying ways in which therapists can successfully incorporate and address contextual family factors to facilitate recovery and healing. It is also hoped that this investigation will alert organisations to the ecological barriers which therapists encounter and which hinder their ability to incorporate family factors in their practice.

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