RECOVERED MEMORIES: SEEKING THE MIDDLE GROUND

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INTRODUCTION

Graham M. Davies and Tim Dalgleish

Recovered memories refers to the recall of traumatic events, typically of sexual abuse in childhood, by adults who have exhibited little or no previous awareness of such experiences. The controversy over the reliability and veracity of such memories has not only split families, but also the psychological profession. The debate has continued, as much in the sober pages of scientific and professional journals, as in the public arenas of press, television and popular books. In the 1980s, this debate was characterised by proponents taking up extreme positions: either all such memories were, by definition, inevitably false or, alternatively, any move to question such memories was a cynical attempt to deny victims their belated right to confront their abusers. By the mid-1990s, the terms of the debate began to change. The controversy remained fierce and the issues for its victims just as real, but it was now more reasoned, assisted by the availability of more and better research evidence. This seemed an appropriate moment for a book which would draw together the researchers and professionals in an attempt to look at the evidence from a balanced perspective. Recovered Memories: Seeking the Middle Ground is the result.

If the terms of the debate have changed, recovered memories continue to be the cause of much stress and dissent for patients, families and their therapists. By 1996, the American-based False Memory Syndrome Foundation (FMSF), founded by a couple who believed themselves wrongly accused by their daughter of sexual abuse, had received over 7,000 enquiries and reported that there were some 700 repressed memory suits at trial level and a further 200 had reached the appeal stage (Johnston, 1997). FMSF has inspired similar organisations in the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere. The anguished parents and carers who contact such organisations complain that they are the victims of memories, which are not true fragments of the past, but rather