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Incest: Self-Report Findings From a Nonclinical Sample

JOAN A. NELSON

Self-reports of incest experiences from a nonpatient, nonoffender sample of 100 individuals are described. The purpose is to document the wide range of incest types by correlating the negative-to-positive perceived outcome of the experience with sex, age, exploitation, and guilt. A 23-item questionnaire was administered to respondents contacted through nationally circulated classified advertisements. Respondents were categorized as perpetrators, victims, and consenting participants. Incestuous experiences with age peers, adult or child, constitute 42% of the accounts. Of the cross-generational reports, 33% are from adult males describing incest with children, and 63% are from adults retrospectively describing childhood incest with adult males. Both exploitative and nonexploitative experiences are perceived by some respondents as negative and by others as positive. There was no correlation between positive-to-negative outcome and type of erotic activity, consanguinity, or sexual orientation.

If incest research is to be comprehensive, comparative information describing all types or categories must be gathered. The assumption that all incest is problematic biases research efforts toward isolating factors (primarily exploitation and guilt) that cause the specific problems associated with incest. To broaden the perspective in this descriptive, comparative study, I categorized incest by type of activity, type of participant (perpetrator, victim, or consenting partner), age, sex, and presence or absence of exploitation and guilt. I specifically sought a broad range of data describing the outcome from negative to positive.

In contrast to those studies documenting the damaging effects of incest, a few clinical studies reveal nondamaging incest. For example, Sloane and Karpinski (1942), using interviews from five clinical cases, stated that it was the least harmful, psychologically, for younger children with risk increasing as the subject approaches adolescence. They stated further that if a "nonparticipating adult" is comfortable

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with the incestuous relationship, harm to the child is decreased (p. 666). Henderson (1975) said that such relations do not always seem to have a traumatic effect and that it sometimes even "diminishes the subject's sense of psychosis and allows a better adjustment to the external world" (p. 1,537). Yorukoglu and Kempf (1966) reported minimal, if any, short-term effects for one son in son-mother incest (p. 113). Bender and Blau (1938), utilizing the Stanford-Binet intelligence scale and interview data from four court-referred psychiatric patients, concluded that incest within an endorsing (supporting) family can be nontraumatic (p. 500). Fritz, Stoll, and Wagner (1981) found that 77% of adult women who had been victims of childhood incest had no difficulties with current sexual adjustment, had overcome negative consequences, or did not develop problems in the first place (p. 54).

In addition, a few surveys of nonclinical populations indicate that incest, even between adult males and female children, is sometimes nonproblematic. The Kinsey study of women (Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gebhard, 1953) indicated that 20% to 24% of the women questioned had been molested as children, about 4% having been approached sexually by adult male relatives before adolescence. The Kinsey researchers said "the contacts often involved considerable affection, and some of the older females in the sample felt that their pre-adolescent experience had contributed favorably to their later sociosexual development" (p. 121).

Gagnon (1965) surveyed 1,200 college females and found that 26% had been molested by adults before the age of 13. He concluded that most of the women did not appear to experience long-term consequences. Landis (1956), studying 500 college students who had sexual experiences with adults before puberty, said that only 3% were permanently damaged and that no harm, permanent or temporary, resulted for 81% of the males and 66% of the females. Schultz (1980), noting that incest research abounds in myths and clichés, states, "It may be useful for professionals to assume trauma is absent unless clear evidence contraindicates" (p. 1).

The present search for respondents was designed to augment the base of existing research by deliberately soliciting reports of nonproblematic incest so that comparisons could be made concerning specific social or interpersonal situational factors correlated with negative or positive outcome of the experience. In addition to isolating the situational factors associated with incest, the study was deliberately designed to describe the wide range of participant definitions of

incest. Previous researchers (Gilgor; 1966, Lukianowicz, 1972; Reimer, 1940; Weinberg, 1955), as well as those cited above, have considered penetrating copulation between blood relatives as the definition of incest. It was hoped that by allowing the respondents to define their own behavior, this heuristic study would document the noncopulatory, nonconsanguineous experiences that many people believe to be incest.

Method

Subjects

I prepared a classified advertisement, worded as follows: "RESEARCH PROJECT: Looking for people who have had incest experience (good or bad) for questionnaire and/or interview. Write P.O. Box ____." The advertisement was placed in local (San Francisco Bay Area newspapers) and also nationwide, in *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and *Psychology Today*. Subjects were also obtained through personal contact.

Eighteen of the initial 118 respondent subjects failed to complete either a questionnaire or an interview. In addition, four questionnaires were discarded as unusable. This decision was based on flagrant contradictions in fact or extreme fantasy and pornographic description combined with failure to reply adequately to the specific questions asked. The four eliminated responses were replaced by the next four available accounts, to bring the total number of respondents to 100.

Of the 100 individuals in the final sample, 33 were adults (age 21 or over) at the time of their initial incest experience, 38 were adolescents (ages 13-20), and 66 were children (under age 13). The San Francisco Bay Area provided 41 of the respondents. Geographic response distribution outside the Bay area was as follows: Midwest 19, Northeast 13, Southwest 10, Southeast 9, Northwest 8.

Forty-six women and 54 men comprised the final sample. Of the 100 respondents, 8 had obtained or were earning doctoral level degrees, 23 master's degrees, and 17 bachelors; 24 had some college; 30 had completed high school; 8 did not complete high school; and 1 provided no education information. The primarily white middle-class sample included three Orientals, two Blacks, and two Hispanics.

Instrument¹

The instrument, tested and refined in a preliminary administration to first-year psychology students at the University of California, contained 23 yes-or-no, multiple choice and open-ended essay questions designed to identify respondents by the following: (a) status (education, religion, socioeconomic level, sex and age at time of initial experience, older or younger partner), (b) degree of consanguinity or kinship with partner (biological or surrogate parent-child, sibling or other cross-generational or peer liaison), (c) sex orientation (heterosexual or homosexual at time of response and whether incest liaison was with same- or opposite-sexed person), (d) degree of exploitation (victim, perpetrator, or consenting partner), and (e) attitudes and feelings about the partner and about the overall experience.

Additional questions allowed the respondent to characterize the experience itself by type and duration of erotic activity, use of force, whether or not it was revealed to third parties, and whether the respondent would deliberately repeat the experience given the same choice again.

An independent evaluation team of three people (a statistics professor, a social worker, and a graduate student pursuing an internship at the Santa Clara County Child Sexual Abuse Treatment Program) rated the respondents as perpetrators, victims, or consenting partners. They also classified the respondents' perceptions on a negative-to-positive, 10-point scale. To do these tasks, the evaluation team, uninformed of the purpose of the study, worked together using (a) the respondents' choices of nine emotion/attitude words provided in the questionnaire, (b) the respondents' own phraseology in response to the open-ended essay questions, and (c) items listed in response to the questions "What are some of the bad (good) things about incest?" Each evaluator provided an overall reaction to the words and phrases on the 10-point rating scale indicating respondent perception of negative-to-positive quality of experience. Then all three evaluators discussed each account and reached a consensus of opinion. The 10-point scale of overall ratings went from *very negative* (1) to *very positive* (10). Ratings of 1-4 were categorized as *negative*, 5-6 as *intermediate*, and 7-10 as *positive*.

¹A copy of this questionnaire is available from the author.

Positive emotional reaction was determined by the frequency of explicit or strongly implied references to closeness, pleasure, joy, shared bonding, or positive attitude toward partner or situation in general. Negativity was considered indicated by trauma, shame, guilt, sexual dysfunction/dissatisfaction, negative attitude toward partner or situation in general, need for therapy, promiscuity, problematic termination of incest relationship, and whether respondents would repeat the experience knowing what they knew at the time of the response. This scaled evaluation technique was similar to that used by Finkelhor (1979), who also categorized overall outcome. Finkelhor's subjects, however, rated their own experiences from negative to positive, and these subjective self-ratings were used as a measure of trauma.

A second evaluation team, this time made up of three child-abuse hotline volunteers, also uninformed of the purpose of the study and unaware of the first evaluation team, rated the questionnaires. This team also characterized respondents as victim, initiator, or consenting partner and, again by consensus, each experience was given one rating on a negative-to-positive scale. Ratings of 1-4 were categorized as *negative*, 5-6 as *intermediate*, and 7-10 as *positive*.

Procedure

Respondents were guaranteed anonymity and promised a copy of the study results upon request. They were given a convenience option of responding to the questions by audio cassette tape, by telephone interview, or in person (when geographically feasible). Twenty-two interviews (15 in person and seven on the telephone) were conducted. The interview format carefully adhered to the content in the questionnaire, but allowed for more extensive verbal probing. The interview data, along with data from five respondent-recorded audio tapes, were transferred to the standard questionnaire form and included with the remaining 73 completed questionnaires for coding.

Results

The frequencies of kinship relationships reported by respondents as children, adolescents, and adults are reported in Table 1. Intrafamilial relationships included consanguineous parents, children, siblings, uncles, aunts, and grandparents. Step and foster relatives were also perceived as family figures. Twenty-five percent of the incest experiences reported were nonconsanguineous. A statistical analysis breakdown of consanguineous versus nonconsanguineous relationships

Table 1
Frequency of Kinship Relation Reported by Respondents as Children, Adolescents, and Adults

Respondent age at time of experience	Kinship relation					Total
	Father Son	Father- Daughter	Mother- Son	Other Adult-Child	Siblings & other peers	
Adult	1	24	1	5	2	33
Adolescent	0	12	1	1	24	38
Child	5	25	1	3	32	66
Total	6	61	3	9	58	137

revealed no identifiable differences in the perceived outcome of the experience. The ratio of positive to negative experiences for blood relatives was 54 to 49; for nonblood relatives, it was 18 to 16.

Of the 100 respondents, 22 reported more than one incest liaison, bringing the total number of accounts to 137. Unless otherwise indicated, the findings presented are based on the 137 relationships rather than the 100 respondents. All respondents were 19 years of age or older at the time of the report; the oldest, a 75-year-old man, reported an incident that occurred with his brother when he was 15. The 46 women reported incest with 65 different individuals, and the 54 men with 72 individuals. Women reported initial incest experiences from age 3-32 ($M = 15$) and men from age 6-50 ($M = 20$).

The multiple incest reports included three by fathers or surrogate fathers who had some form of erotic experience with more than one daughter or surrogate daughter; three by daughters or surrogate daughters reporting sequential experiences with fathers, stepfathers, or foster fathers; and one woman who was raped by her father and two brothers in a single episode. One man, as an adult, had sexual intercourse with his mother, adult sister, and grandmother. Six men and four women reported group sex play or gang rape situations in childhood or adolescence. A man who reported incest with a son and four men who had experiences with daughters reported having been incest participants as children themselves. Six people voluntarily reported knowledge of other incest experiences in their families of origin or in their current household setting.

Seventy-six percent of the reports (104) dealt with pre-adult experience, two thirds of which occurred before the age of 13. Sixty-seven father-child liaisons were reported, six of them between father or

father figures and sons. Only three mother-son unions were reported; there were nine between other adults and children. Sibling and other peer relationships were of the second highest frequency ($n = 58$) after father-child.

Eighty-eight percent (40) of the female respondents identified themselves as heterosexual; 13% (6) as lesbian or bisexual. One lesbian reported incest with a female, and the other four lesbians and one bisexual reported heterosexual incest. Twenty-six percent (14) of the males described themselves as homosexual, seven having had incest experience with males and seven with females. Of the remaining 74% (40) of the males who were heterosexual, 11 had experienced homosexual incest.

For purposes of subsequent analysis, the categories of father-son, father-daughter, mother-son, and other adult-child or adolescent were combined and were compared to sibling and other peer relationships.

Activities and Perceived Outcome

Fifty-three percent (73) of the reports fell into the positive range, 39% (54) were negative, and 8% (10) were intermediate. Individuals with multiple incest partners were more likely to report positively than were individuals with only one partner: The 73 positive experiences were reported by only 43 respondents. Thus, 57% of the respondents reported predominantly negative experiences.

Respondents experienced a wide variety of heterosexual and homosexual erotic activities. Fifty-four percent (75) of all the incest reports were based on noncoital activities; 16 people described fondling alone, and 59 described fondling in combination with other noncoital activities. Shown in Table 2 are the range and frequency of report for the most often reported combinations of erotic activities enumerated in the questionnaire and those added by respondents under the category "other." Activities are compared with the overall rating of the negative-to-positive character of report in an attempt to discover any relationship between extent of participation in sexual behavior and perception of experience.

Forty-five percent (24) of the negative reports came from subjects who did not cite genital penetration. Most of these (75% or 18 individuals) were younger partners in cross-generational liaisons with adult males.

Table 2
Frequency of Perceived Outcome by Type of Activity^a

Activity	Outcome		
	Neg.	Ind.	Pos. ^b
Fondling, manual-genital	9	1	11
Fondling, manual-genital, oral-genital	6	0	11
Fondling	6	2	8
Fondling, manual-genital, vaginal penetration	8	0	6
Fondling, manual-genital, oral-genital, vaginal penetration	7	1	5
Fondling, manual-genital, anal penetration	6	0	4
Fondling, voyeurism and/or exhibitionism	2	1	6
Fondling and one miscellaneous activity	1	1	3
Fondling and two miscellaneous activities	1	0	2
Fondling and three or more miscellaneous activities	1	0	1
Did not report fondling (did report coitus)	0	0	4
Total	46	6	64

^aOnly those activities reported more than once are included here.
^bNeg. means negative, Ind. refers to mixed outcome, and Pos. refers to a positive outcome.

Type of Participant and Perceived Outcome

Members of the first panel of judges also categorized respondents' perception of themselves as perpetrators, victims, or consenting participants. As indicated in Table 3, 15% (20) of the reports could not be categorized into any of these categories by the judges. Over half of the total reports fell into the consenting partner category. Those who saw themselves as consenting partners were three times more likely than those who saw themselves as perpetrators and victims to report positively. Of those who saw themselves as perpetrators, seven reported negative outcomes; two reported positive outcomes. Those who saw themselves as victims reported 19 negative outcomes and 11 positive outcomes.

Table 3
Frequency of Perceived Outcome by Type of Participant

Type of participant	Negative	Intermediate	Positive
Perpetrator	7	5	2
Victim	19	2	11
Consenting partner	17	2	52
Indeterminate	11	1	8

Table 4

Frequency of Perceived Outcome by Sex and Age at Time of Experience

Age (N = 137)	Negative		Intermediate		Positive	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Π 10 (33)	1	25	0	1	4	2
10-12 (38)	6	14	0	2	15	1
13-15 (20)	1	3	2	2	7	5
16-19 (13)	1	0	0	1	4	7
20+ (33)	3	0	2	0	26	2

Sex and Perceived Outcome

Overall, men, 77% of whom described positive experiences, were substantially more likely to evaluate their experiences positively than were women. Only slightly more than 25% of the experiences reported by female respondents were evaluated as positive. Except for three women reporting positive experiences with older men, all of the positive reports from women were in the peer-age category.

Age and Perceived Outcome

Table 4 shows a relationship between respondent age at the time of incest and assessment of the experience. Only 18% of experiences prior to age 10 were evaluated positively. For pre-teens, 42% of the experiences were evaluated positively; for young teenagers the proportion rises to 60%, and among older teens and adults, it is 85%. An exception to the general rule that more men than women reported positive experiences is also revealed: A higher proportion of the experiences of late-teen women were evaluated positively.

Related to the trend toward more positive reports from older males, male respondents were, on the average, older than the female respondents at the time of the incest.

Another distinction between sex/age and the character of the report is revealed breaking out adult-child and peer relationships separately (Table 5). Exactly half of the younger partners in peer relationships saw their experiences as positive; only slightly more than 25% of younger partners in child-adult situations did so. For both types of relationships, the older partner was more likely than the younger partner to regard the experience as positive.

Table 5
Frequency of Perceived Outcome by Sex and Relative Age of Partners

	Cross-generational relationships (n = 79; 58%)					
	Negative		Intermediate		Positive	
	M	F	M	F	M	F
Respondent's role						
Older partner	2	0	2	0	22	0
Younger partner	4	32	1	2	11	3
	Peer relationships (n = 58; 42%)					
	Negative		Intermediate		Positive	
	M	F	M	F	M	F
Respondent's role						
Older partner	2	0	0	1	18	0
Younger partner	4	10	1	3	5	14

In only one case was a female respondent the older partner. Therefore, it is not possible to separate out the relationship of the sex of the respondent from whether the respondent was the older or younger partner. Looking at the data from males only, a smaller proportion of younger partners reported positively (62%) as compared with males who were the older partners (87%).

Exploitation and Perceived Outcome

Another factor related to positive evaluation by older males and negative evaluation by younger females is found in the answers to the question, "Was force used?" If so, "who forced whom, and how?" Finkelhor (1979) has defined exploitation either by use of force, or, arbitrarily, by a large age disparity between partners. An appraisal of the answers to the force question, along with other statements made in response to the open-ended questions, reveals a wide spectrum of reported exploitation from subtle psychological seduction and abuses of power (promises, threats, and entrapment) to out-and-out physical violence and rape.

The second panel, made up of child abuse hotline volunteers who were uninformed of the first panel's assessments of respondents' evaluations, was asked to use their own judgment in identifying exploitation by the description of even subtle abuses of power as well as objectification of the partner as seen in such statements as: "She let me do anything to her I wanted," or "I had her under my spell." Respondents were categorized by the presence or absence of exploitation. In Table 6 they are identified as exploiters, victims, or as participants in nonexploitative incest.

Table 6

Frequency of Perceived Outcome by Presence of Exploitation

Subjective evaluation of role of respondent based on scale of exploitation	Overall rating of negative-to-positive character of report		
	Negative	Intermediate	Positive
Victim in exploitive relationship	17	1	8
Initiator in exploitive relationship	14	5	9
Unable to determine presence of exploitation	9	2	4
Nonexploitive relationship	14	2	52
Totals	54	10	73

The second panel's judgments of exploitation paralleled the first panel's categories for perpetration and victimization. The panel labeled 26 respondents as victims; and 32 defined themselves as victims. The panel labeled 68 consenting partners; 72 defined themselves as consenting partners. The notable exception occurs in the perpetrator category. Whereas the panel identified 28 exploiters, only 2 respondents seemed to see themselves as perpetrators. This finding is consistent with clinical reports of perpetrators' denial and rationalization.

Of those who self-reported overall negative experiences, 66% (31) described exploitation, whereas 30% (14) reported no element of exploitation or coercion, and 17% (9) were uncertain. Of those who self-reported overall positive experience, 12% (17) indicated the presence of exploitation. Nine of those 17 whose reports were positive in spite of exploitation were perceived by the second panel as initiators of coercive behavior. However, only three of them were the same respondents categorized by the first panel as perpetrators. The remaining six (all older males) reported positive experience in conjunction with behavior the evaluators identified as exploitation.

Eight of those reporting positive experience in spite of exploitation were receivers of physical, verbal, or psychological abuse who cited reasons for the overriding positive character in their accounts, including strengthening of shared emotion/interest bonds, some love being better than no love at all, and the experience of pleasure.

Guilt and Perceived Outcome

No force of any kind was found in 49% (68) of the reports. Yet 30% (14) of these no-force experiences were described as negative. The individuals described their otherwise consensual experiences as affected

negatively by guilt or fear of social or parental disapproval, an issue which emerged repeatedly in the interviews and written responses, both positive and negative. Approximately half of the female respondents and 4% of the male respondents stated that they continued to experience conflict in regard to their incest experiences, usually associated with, if not a direct result of, guilt, even though many of the relationships had terminated many years before the report. One respondent commented, "I went crazy trying to understand how anything so good could be so bad."

Of the nine attitude/emotion words provided in the questionnaire, "guilt" was selected 64 times. It was the second most frequently selected word, after "warmth," which was checked 90 times. Here we find another factor that correlates with the preponderance of positive reports by male adults and negative reports by female children. "Guilt" was almost always reported by those who reported exploitation. Since it was women who were most often exploited, it is not known whether the guilt was a function of being female, being exploited, or both. Only one initiating older partner, perceived as an exploiter and a perpetrator, checked off the word "guilt." He clearly stated that his guilt was based upon breaking the taboo against incest rather than upon exploitation of a younger partner. The 31 respondents who reported no feelings of guilt included all but one of the 22 initiators of exploitation, and 14 of those victims who perceived exploitation or had been identified as indeterminate. Only three who were regarded clearly as victims failed to report feeling guilty.

Table 7 shows a relationship between outcome and guilt. Sixty-eight percent of the negative experiences but only 45% of the positive experiences were associated with guilt.

Table 7
Frequency of Perceived Outcome by Presence of Guilt

Subjective evaluation of role of respondent based on scale of exploitation	Presence of guilt and character of report		
	Negative	Intermediate	Positive
Victim in exploitive relationship	17 (14G, 3NG) ^a	1 (1NG)	8 (4G, 4NG)
Initiator in exploitive relationship	14 (1G, 13NG)	5 (5NG)	9 (9NG)
Unable to determine presence of exploitation	9 (7G, 2NG)	2 (2NG)	4 (2G, 2NG)
Nonexploitive relationship	14 (7G, 7NG)	2 (2G)	52 (27G, 25NG)
Totals	54 G 25 NG	2 G 8 NG	33 G 40 NG

^aG = Guilty; NG = Not guilty.

Of the 100 respondents, 55 listed both good and bad things about incest. Twenty reported only bad things and 23 only good things. The notable consistent variable in the all-good category was the absence of guilt. Although two of the all-good reports were from daughters in father-daughter incest (one was 17 and one was 18), it should be noted that the all-good reports were mostly from consenting peers or (probably) selectively perceiving adults in adult-child or adult-adult interactions.

Other Findings

Sixty-eight percent of the reports (93 of the 137 liaisons) dealt with relationships lasting 1 year or longer. For about half (43) of all long-term incest liaisons the respondents were classified as either victims or perpetrators. Of the 63 relationships lasting 2 years or longer, the ratio was 52% positive (24 males and 14 females) to 42% negative (6 males and 25 females). This inverse correlation suggests that women are far more likely to remain in negatively perceived situations than are men. Of the 28 respondents who described 31 long-term negative experiences, only six sought help from outside sources, including friends, relatives, or professional counselors. The reasons given for maintaining unpleasant experiences included maintenance of family equilibrium or stasis, the experience of intimacy, warmth and love, and inability to refuse.

Only one of all the cases was ever reported to the police. Nine had been reported only to friends or relatives and 20 only to psychiatrists or professional counselors. Seven respondents said they had told both friends or relatives and professional helpers. At least 53 of the 100 respondents had never sought help, either professional or from a friend, nor had they told spouses or other intimate partners of long standing. Ten never told anyone until this survey. Consensual experiences were least reported prior to this survey.

Of the 87 respondents who had opinions regarding incest laws, 58% (51) thought that laws should be changed to allow consensual experiences. They also felt that there need not be laws against incest as such because rape and abuse laws could account for criminal or abusive incest. Stiffer penalties for child abuse were recommended by 25% (22), and 16% (14) recommended both allowing consensual experience and increasing penalties for abuse. However, it appeared to the evaluation panel that some of those who favored decriminalizing adult-child sexual relationships were, in fact, child abusers. This conclusion was

based on respondent objectification of their partners and descriptions of behavior which the evaluators perceived as exploitative.

Discussion

In beginning this study of self-reported incest experiences, I asked why incest is perceived negatively by some and positively by others. A wide range of behavioral and relationship categories is documented. It appears that attitudinal/emotional perceptions of positive and negative are highly correlated with exploitation, which seems to be a function of sex, age, and guilt. These perceptions seem not so highly correlated with consanguinity or type of activity. It seems safe to assert that incest is much less favorably viewed by the younger partner than by the older one, regardless of sex. This relationship in the data is confounded, however, by the fact that the average age of the younger partner is also a function of the type of incestual relationship. For example, the average age of girls reporting incest with fathers or father surrogates was only about 7½, whereas the average age of those reporting incest with brothers was nearly 10.

The tendency for incest experience to be reported positively more often at higher ages, when the subject is the older of two partners and when the subject is male, is consistent with more conventional sexual behavior, with the initiative usually presumed to be taken by the male and by the older partner.

The data in this study are skewed by deliberate solicitation of accounts in the "good" as well as "bad" category in order to have a basis for comparison. Further skewing occurs with the inclusion of separate individual multiple liaisons bringing the number of cases from 100 to 137. The self-selected middle-class sample does not represent the population at large. In spite of these limitations, compared with the conventional treatment-based research focus, this study reveals a pattern that may serve as more realistic evaluation guidelines for research, counseling, and legal disciplines.

Future research on incest should include all categories of intra-familial sex. Ideally, it would include broad-based, long-term, longitudinal, controlled samples rather than solely retrospective anecdote.

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