

Quiet, Well-Behaved, Invisible: How Girls Experienced Primary School After Sexual Abuse by a Man From Within Their Family Ecosystem

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Abstract

Child sexual abuse is a global concern. However, recent national and international attention has focused on child sexual exploitation and sexual abuse which is technology assisted or that which happens between children, whereas a high proportion of victims and survivors were sexually abused as girls by men who were or felt like family. These victims are under-represented in research. Although primary school staff have ideal opportunities to support them, victims rarely disclose sexual abuse experiences at school. I led this research as an insider researcher using heuristic inquiry to provide insights into women survivors' experiences of primary school following sexual abuse by a man within their family ecosystem. Heuristic inquiry holistically investigates a social phenomenon for which the researcher and research partners share intense personal interest. Using a best-practice model with a trauma responsive and relational ethic of care, I invited women survivors to share memories and create meaning of what primary school was like for them. Twelve survivor research partners provided rich, nuanced details of how they experienced school, factors which were protective and what might have helped them disclose. Reflexive thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews and follow-up communications revealed individual responses to trauma, how they masked what had happened to them, their efforts to establish autonomy and needs to matter in contrast with the sense of not mattering instilled by sexual abuse and familial responses. The awareness and recommendations generated will inform educators, practitioners in other sectors and policy makers to drive enhanced responses for victims.

Keywords: intrafamilial child sexual abuse, primary school, heuristic inquiry

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Introduction

This research investigated memories of primary school with women who were survivors of intrafamilial child sexual abuse. Intrafamilial child sexual abuse occurs in the child's family environment and is carried out by someone who is or feels like family (Gekoski et al., 2016). It is important to note that boys and young men are sexually abused, and that girls and women can be the abusers. However, I focused on survivors who were sexually abused as girls aged 12 or younger by men aged 18 or above. This population is under-represented in research (Horvath et al., 2014) and the Department for Education (DfE) (2025) guidance shared with education practitioners in the United Kingdom (UK). This paper sets out the aims of the research; how I explored different ways of knowing and discovering the essence of living experiences; decisions made to combine phenomenologically aligned and ethnographical methodologies and the choice of heuristic inquiry (Moustakas, 1990). I outline a trauma responsive and relational ethical approach for researching with women survivors and also include some examples of how I used autoethnography (Ellis, 2004) to reflect while researching and to illustrate reflexive practices. The first stage of findings is explained and themes are shared to inform practitioners in education and other agencies involved in child protection, to raise awareness of the living experiences of victims and promote an attitude of: 'it could happen here' (DfE, 2025, p. 17).

I explain autoethnography further in the Methods section but offer a brief outline here of the layout of the paper. The nature and findings of my research were presented at the conference through an autoethnographic layered account, as developed by Rambo Ronai (1995). I included changing perspectives from analytical to personal throughout the account and provided additional information in the form of reflective writings to show rather than tell (Ellis, 2004) about this aspect of my work. In this written record of the presentation, to signpost examples of this work and denote changes in voice from academic researcher to reflective practitioner I have italicised my creative writing to differentiate it from other quotes:

*I sought to resolve imbalance,
Embraced encounters connecting with others
Approaching ceremony with decency, honesty,
While the ancestors waited.
I accepted sideways steps
And unplanned routes,
Told myself I was
Open to the Universe's revealings
With attempted cultural humility.*

While developing my research I considered what kind of knowledge we value and also how we know it. The style of research I chose reflects my belief that 'truth' about anything varies depending on your perspective. I use the term 'living experience' because the impact of child sexual abuse cannot be confined in the past, it continues throughout someone's lifetime (Breckenridge et al., 2024). During my studies, I was fortunate to be accepted to attend a summer internship at a LGBTQ+ project at the University of Toronto. There I explored indigenous, holistic world views as illustrated at the Indigenous Voices of Today: Knowledge, Trauma, Resilience exhibition (2023) at McCord Stewart Museum, Montreal. The exhibition modelled how knowledge is physically experienced, linked with emotion, thought and our spirit (or inner strength). It also showed how knowledge is tied to places that are important to us and to our spirituality or beliefs about the living things around us. This world view resonated

with my living experience (and trauma) and reflected my values. I consider myself an LGBTQ+ ally, anti-racist, anti-ableist and anti-sexist, and have worked hard in my 35-year teaching career to promote nuanced, equitable practice. My mother is descended from the La Trobe family. Although in my family history it is known that La Trobes worked to eradicate slavery alongside William Wilberforce, I am nonetheless embarrassed by their potential contribution to colonialism. Of course, I agree with feminism but I also believe marginalisation is complex and intersectional (hooks, 2015). In my work I have embraced a posthuman perspective which is compatible with the indigenous world view and which attempts to challenge colonialism, disrupt marginalisation and create inclusion without privileging any group of people and without privileging humans over other beings or the environment. Please see Braidotti (2023) for a better explanation of posthumanism than I have space for here.

Philosophy

I approached the research from a constructivist ontology because I acknowledge there are multiple realities relating to any individual experiences. This was extrapolated to an interpretive epistemology because I wished to determine essential meanings associated with living experiences with the people who shared those experiences. To best explore these essential meanings I felt that, as Denzin and Lincoln (2003) described, a combination of qualitative interpretive methods would secure ‘rigor, breadth, complexity, richness and depth’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 5). While I also believed that by interpreting essential meanings with survivors of intrafamilial child sexual abuse from their memories of attending primary school, I could generate insight that would ‘make connections between lived experience, social injustices, larger social and cultural structures, and the here and now’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 309). My research aim was to support practices that prevent the silence and silencing that still accompany child sexual abuse (Gekoski et al., 2016; Taggart & Wright, 2026), that disrupt abuse and enable children to begin to recover as soon as is possible.

Background to the Research

Child sexual abuse is considered a global problem by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) (2020) and World Health Organisation (WHO) (2017) with prevalence estimated to be in the region of 8% for boys and 20% for girls (WHO, 2017). In the UK, the English and Welsh government have commissioned a number of inquiries including the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) which targeted institutional responses to child sexual abuse. The IICSA inquiry sought testimony from survivors, and of these, 5,862 participants gave consent for their data to be used. IICSA recognised globally acknowledged difficulties (UNICEF, 2020; WHO, 2017) in estimating prevalence of child sexual abuse because many victims do not talk to anyone about what has happened until much later, if at all (Jay et al., 2022; Manay & Collin-Vézina, 2021). IICSA reported prevalence drawn from Karsna and Kelly's (2021) estimates that in England and Wales 5% of boys and 15% of girls experience sexual abuse before the age of 16. The Children's Commissioner in England specifically investigated child sexual abuse in the family environment and found that two thirds of all child sexual abuse happened in and around the family home and that 75% of the victims were female (Longfield, 2015). Even though IICSA investigated institutional responses to child sexual abuse, 50% of the participants were sexually abused in their family environment (Jay et al., 2022). In relation to my research, it is also interesting to note that 79% of the IICSA participants were 11 years old or younger when first sexually abused. In spite of the higher proportion of children who are sexually abused within their family environment, the guidance for English and Welsh education practitioners (guidance for teachers and all other staff involved at schools

and colleges) (DfE, 2025) focusses on sexual activity between similarly aged children, child sexual exploitation and technology assisted sexual abuse.

My worry is that it is more palatable to focus on abusers who can be demonised, seen as different from us: as strangers or monsters. And I wanted to highlight the real experiences of hidden, ordinary girls sexually abused in their home environment, by family, neighbours and friends.

Ethical Approach

I adopted the ‘Survivors’ Voices: Survivors Involvement in Research Ladder’ best practice model (Chevovs et al., 2023) from the point of applying to carry out this research. This approach advocates for research that is led by survivors who hold responsibility for decision-making, data-collection, analysis, recording, disseminating and evaluating the impact the research has had. The model (Sweeney et al., 2024, Vision) aims to ‘constructively disrupt[s] harmful institutional approaches’ as well as to build ‘new approaches based on collective power’. It is underpinned by trauma responsive practice which should ‘support healing processes and translate into lasting practice, policy and societal changes that serve survivors and prevent further trauma’ (Sweeney et al., 2024, Vision). This is in line with the evidence based Handbook on Sensitive Practice for Health Care Practitioners produced by Schachter et al. (2009) and other resources produced globally (eg. Quadara and Hunter, 2016; SAMHSA, 2014) I was particularly keen to ensure ethical practices were ongoing throughout the research as described by Banks et al. (2013) and that the ethical approach was relational in line with Ellis’ (2007) concerns for autoethnography. This approach was crucial to protect friendships and family members of all concerned with the research.

*When I was thirty
I wanted them there
For proof that they cared?
And they didn’t come.
I was a hurt wild thing
Wailing to the mountain.
Noone knew the darkness within.*

Methods

In many ways my aspirations for the research aligned with phenomenology. I wished to gain understanding of how survivors interpreted the ‘meaning, structure, and essence’ of their living experiences and to explore ‘how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others’ (Patton, 2015, p. 115). However, I did not want to reduce the interpretation to an essence of the phenomenon itself, which would exclude the survivors from the final findings and I also felt that bracketing out my own experience would be counterproductive. I wanted to be authentic and honest with participants in line with trauma informed practice (Perôt et al., 2018; Quadara and Hunter, 2016; Schachter et al., 2009) and felt that my insider perspective was a valuable addition to the research.

Autoethnography

I planned the use of autoethnography to explore and represent epiphanies associated with my experience and the progress of the research. Denzin’s description of an epiphany as ‘the sting

of childhood memory' (Denzin, 2014, p. 28) aptly described some of the epiphanies I had been having. Conceiving ways to illustrate snapshot moments in prose, poetry and painting proved an effective way of both processing and inciting epiphanies about my experiences: as I tried to represent them more memories were released. Autoethnography has the following aims outlined by Holman Jones et al.:

Purposefully commenting on/critiquing of culture and cultural practices,
Making contributions to existing research,
Embracing vulnerability with purpose,
Creating a reciprocal relationship with audiences in order to compel a response.
(Holman Jones et al., 2013, p. 22)

These aims are delivered through three strands, where 'auto' reflexively interrogates personal lived experience, 'ethno' seeks understanding of a social phenomenon and 'graphy' records the systematic analysis undertaken (Holman Jones et al., 2013). The researcher is expected to demonstrate vulnerability through accounts which show rather than tell about the experience and these accounts must deliver 'verisimilitude' (Ellis, 2004) which Denzin (2014, p. 70) explained as 'it evokes a feeling that the experience described is true, coherent, believable, and connects the reader to the writer's world.'

*It's little things that speak to you: something about a phrase
That chimes, hooks a memory and draws it forth
'In my head I can do anything.'
I'm resignedly cross I didn't write that reference down.
But from the prompt I felt myself soar.
From the back of the garden, I'd lift off, clear the house and be gone.*

(I re-found the reference later in Katz et al., 2020, p. 5, speaking about dissociation).

My research was interrupted in 2024 for medical reasons when I suddenly found out I needed and was given a double heart bypass. Ischemic heart disease has been linked to childhood trauma (Felitti et al., 1998; Schachter et al., 2009). When I returned from my leave of absence, I came across the method of Heuristic Inquiry in Patton (2015). At this point, heuristic inquiry stood out to me and matched my aspirations for the research so well that I could not ignore it.

Heuristic Inquiry

Heuristic inquiry was conceptualised by Moustakas (Moustakas, 1990; Sultan, 2019). It is driven and reflexively informed throughout by a researcher's living experience of the phenomenon. It balances looking inwards with looking outwards and explores the essential nature of living experience with ten to fifteen co-researchers or research partners. Unlike in phenomenology, which reduces the essence of experience to a phenomenon and brackets out the individuals who experienced it: the individuals remain an important part of heuristic inquiry findings which generate 'shared understanding of the core phenomenon, how it is sensed and experienced, and its significance to oneself, to others, and to the world' (Sultan, 2019, p. 9). I chose to use the heuristic inquiry method for the data collection part of the research because it seemed a natural fit for the relational approach to researching with survivors that I wanted to use.

Moustakas (1990) outlined six phases for heuristic inquiry which are: initial engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, explication and creative synthesis. These are flexible and iterative and can progress in any direction, although the initial engagement, with a socially and globally significant research topic, must originate from personal experience that the researcher feels compelled to investigate. A learning mindset is then required to immersively explore it. Stepping back from immersion for a while, or incubation, enables subconscious growth and the development of tacit knowledge. While self-reflection and empathic dialogue with research partners enable new insight to emerge in moments of illumination (or epiphany). Meanings are explicated into reflexively explored and refined themes and are represented through individual then composite depictions which retain the essence of individuals' experiences. Finally, creative synthesis is required to portray overall interpretations (Moustakas, 1990; Sultan, 2019).

The practicalities of my project were that I initially attempted to recruit through a charity gatekeeper. Only one member of staff from the charity volunteered for the research but in the meantime, chance meetings and my engagement with wellbeing and survivor networks had generated an opportune, information rich sample (Patton, 2015). With updated university ethical approval, I was able to approach these additional contacts and overall twelve research partners contributed to the research. I invited survivors to engage with in-depth semi-structured interview conversations, through written feedback and with follow up meetings. These conversations were intentionally relational and reciprocal and included self-disclosure with the aim of achieving: congruence, through open, honest, authentic interaction; unconditional positive regard, by valuing and accepting individuals as they are; and empathy by seeking meaning from each other's perspectives (Rogers, 1980).

Telling a survivor they are safe may make them feel more at risk and watchful (Schachter et al., 2009). I attempted to enable the research partners to feel safe by showing them that they were in control of whether to and how to engage with the research; giving them clear accessible information; encouraging them to ask questions and take time to decide whether they wished to be involved in the research. I also tried to keep the tone of our (mostly emailed) conversations informal and kind. These measures were intended to counter experiences of betrayed trust and restricted autonomy inherent in child sexual abuse (Schachter et al., 2009; Sneddon et al., 2016).

Results

Relating to Literature

In many cases the research partners agreed with existing literature, including the UK independent inquiry final report (Jay et al., 2022), for example, by giving similar reasons to the inquiry participants for why they were unable to tell anyone about their experiences (pseudonyms chosen by research partners):

It wasn't safe to say anything really.

You're naughty if you do, so ... you shut down your real voice, don't you? (Becky)

I wouldn't have been able to tell a teacher what had happened to me because I wouldn't have known, I'd have packed it away. (Hazel)

I just used to think. Well, there's no point trying to fight my case or tell anybody, because they'll blame me. (Lara)

I was told not to tell anybody else. Because nobody will believe you. So don't tell anybody else. (Isla)

I was absolutely terrified of being cau[ght], found out ... I do wonder if he would have killed me if he felt I'd betrayed him. (Jane)

The UK government guidance (DfE, 2025) signposts education practitioners to a UK child protection charity's (NSPCC, 2026) information on signs of sexual abuse, but research partners described few occasions when they felt they might have been noticeable in line with NSPCC guidance. These were as follows: one attempt at suicide, two experiences of enuresis, a few unusual patterns of eating and some whose physical appearance changed.

Essential Meanings

My main focus was to ask the research partners what they were like at primary school after they had been sexually abused. The following are the key points that were repeated throughout the interview transcriptions and written feedback shared by the research partners:

Good, quiet, well-behaved, calm, polite, helpful, doing best, working really hard, never in trouble, people pleasing, perfectionist, timid, compliant, appeasing, shy, unheard, unseen, independent, avoiding attention, self-sufficient, introverted, lonely, afraid, waiting to be noticed, invisible, unable to ask for help, confused, withdrawn, anxious, not really present, hyper-vigilant, struggling to remember, struggling to concentrate, a misfit.

All of the research partners were deliberately hiding at primary school. They were trying to stay “under the radar” (Angela; Becky; Isla) or “not putting my head above the parapet” (Sarah). They wanted to be noticed but were desperately avoiding being noticed at the same time. Harriet summed it up perfectly. “It's kind of like how to be not seen, really, isn't it? (laugh) The lived experience of not being seen. Trying not to be seen.” (Harriet)

In some cases, school was a safe space, a sanctuary, preferable to being at home, and it could be a place that provided hope and warmth. However, there were complex layers of fear: of being found out, of getting things wrong, of being bullied and of getting told off. Some of the survivors struggled with social situations. Some felt awkward, different, dirty, weird and disgusting. They internalised shame and some of the research partners developed a sense that their experiences were somehow their fault. The following table shows how key points which were repeated across the transcripts contributed to the themes drawn from the research:

Themes

Table 1

How Key Points From Transcripts Contributed to Theme

Key points from transcripts	Conceptual topics	Themes
Being good Being quiet Internalising impact Being independent Patterns of eating	Autonomy Control	How the survivors consciously or subconsciously attempted to assert some autonomy in their lives.
Escaping Body awareness Friendships	Being authentic self Invisibility Connection Freedom	How much they were able to identify and present as their authentic selves .
Early maturity Being noticed Friendships Being dismissed	Invisibility Being good enough Othering Mattering	How much they felt they mattered to the people around them.
Academic impact	Experiencing flow	Action points for school staff.

Although some of the research partners explained experiences of dissociation and/or hypervigilance, even small acts that enabled them to have autonomy supported their survival. The research partners were able to forget the trauma for a while through activities that enabled them to be authentic and that generated flow, for example through creative arts and writing, using imagination in play, reading, singing in harmony, through movement in dance, while running, swimming and in other sports. Achieving through self-determination in these areas was also supportive. And when the research partners experienced kindness and a sense that they mattered the impact of trauma was reduced. Many of them felt that if they experienced this sense of being nurtured at school, over time it could have built enough trust for them to talk about their experiences, if the right questions were asked.

To finish this report, I am sharing quotes from the research partners from the advice they would give to education practitioners. The first group answer the question:

What could teachers or staff at school have done?

Be more aware of looking out for the quiet one, that is trying to not be noticed and seen. (Becky)

I don't know if it's too young at primary school age, but I didn't know what was appropriate and what wasn't appropriate. (Laura)

Education, school is a massive opportunity, should be a massive opportunity to really an holistic event ... not even 'added value' - an appalling phrase. It's that extra bit about being human. (Harriet)

If only somebody had been brave enough to say well, you know? Knowing the right question to ask? (Lara)

It would be good if teachers would look beyond the initial label they've got on a child. And think: is there something else going on? (Nina)

A child ... might talk about or frame it as a, like, this is a game. (Olivia)

And these are recommendations for practitioners:

If there'd been a space, somewhere to go with these headaches or ~ upsets. That could have, in time, perhaps ... if people had asked the right questions and framed it in the right way? (Jane)

I would need a teacher to notice and I would have needed to have them build the safety and the trust with me. (Hazel)

Curiosity in people that are offering children support ... that would be great, wouldn't it? (Becky)

Teachers in school could be those people, you know, somebody who notices you, somebody who checks in with you: How are you doing? ... be that person who ... looks happy to see you, who, you know, knows you? (Nina)

I suppose school gave me hope, really, at one level, that stuff can be different ... most of my teachers were nice people ... it kind of gave me hope that, that there might be warmth in people. That warmth was possible ... those are lifesaving qualities, really. (Harriet)

Conclusion

The choice of heuristic inquiry in this research facilitated rapport between researcher and research partners and helped to avoid power imbalances in the research relationships. Combining heuristic inquiry with autoethnography enabled the researcher's reflections to contribute to a layered account of the living experience of surviving intrafamilial child sexual abuse and show as well as tell about the impact of these experiences. These methodologies were enacted meticulously to determine nuanced meanings and generate thick description of the essence of experiencing primary school for girls that had been sexually abused by men who were or felt like family. These results were not designed to be generalisable but the transparency and accuracy with which they have been reported should enhance their credibility and trustworthiness.

Twelve research partners from across England gave strikingly similar accounts of their school lives. They were all well-behaved and quiet. They had autonomy but they used it to actively hide what had happened to them. They began to thrive when they could express themselves authentically through physical and creative activities and they had desperate needs for connection and recognition consistent with mattering. The conditions constructed within trauma-informed schools which nurture all individuals could act to break down shame and rebuild trust for victims even if they remain hidden. School cultures which value individuals and encourage children to thrive as their authentic selves may reduce the impacts of

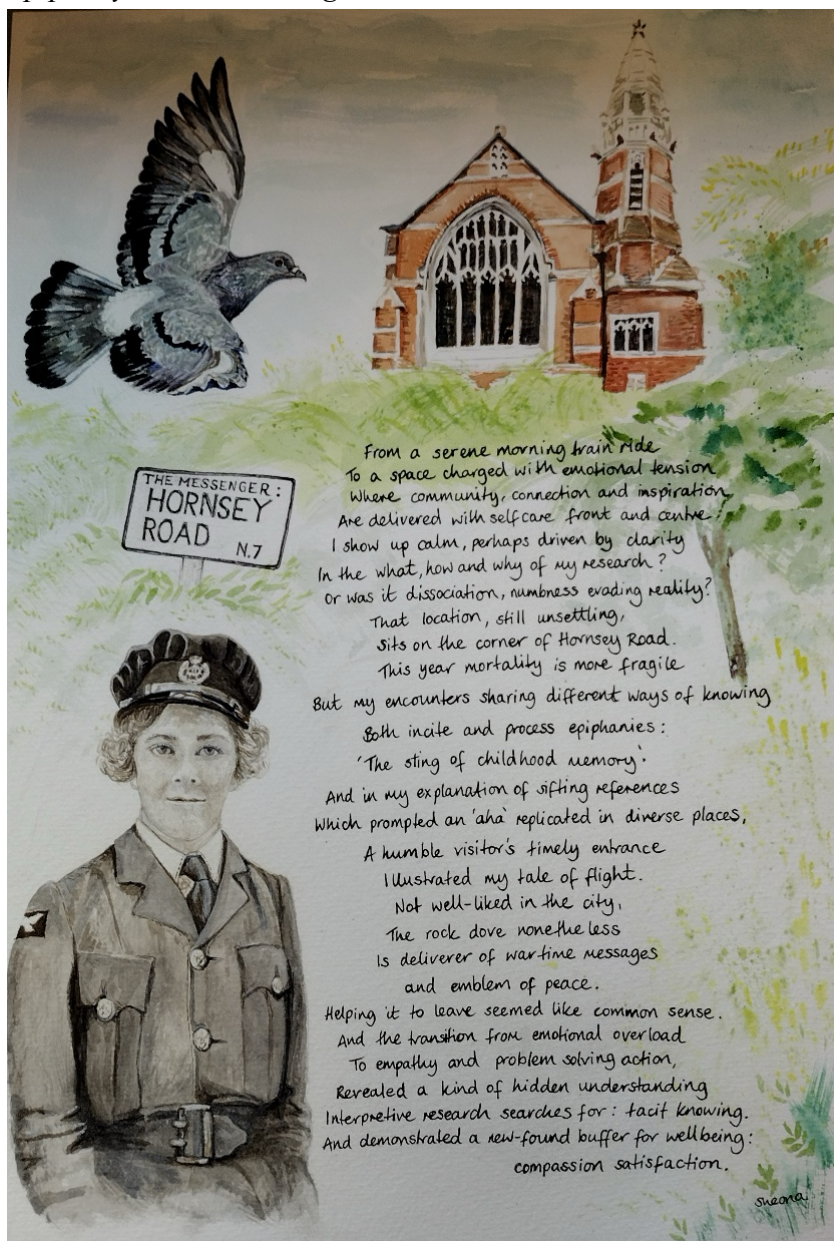
intrafamilial child sexual abuse and perhaps even create the conditions where victims are enabled to tell someone about it.

These results have been presented as a layered account (Rambo Ronai, 1995) in the hope that questions will linger to promote ongoing conversation and thus enhance the research's impact. I would like to finish with an example of illustrated reflective writing and a final quote to indicate that researching with survivors can be a positive experience. Sarah told me that since she began talking about her experience, she is living life in technicolour for the first time, she said:

I've been *existing* for 54 years of my life and now I'm beginning to *live*. In *technicolour*, rather than black and white. (Italics represent Sarah's emphasis)

Figure 1

Epiphany 4: The Messenger, 2025



Note. Number 4 in a series of illustrated pieces of reflective writing undertaken during research by Sheona Goodyear

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that no AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate, refine, or correct the content in the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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