

The Impact of Emotions on Practicum Learning

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Nine mature aged, experienced practitioners enrolled to gain a BSW qualification in social work were interviewed regarding a course requirement to complete the first placement. At the time of interview no recognition of prior learning for previous experience in the field was made possible for these students. As educators we had experience considerable hostility from students who believed they should be exempt from completing this course requirement. This paper reports on interviews with the nine students, where we consider how student sentiment about completing the practice learning component might impact upon their learning experience. As anticipated some students expressed strong negative views about being on placement. However, others were much more positive about the experience. These mixed views prompted us to explore further the relationship between emotion and practice learning. The article begins with a review of the literature concerning mature student engagement with tertiary education, followed by an overview of theory and research related to the ways feelings and emotion influence learning. Using passages from the interviews, expressions of participant anxiety, anger and excitement about the practicum are discussed with the view to extending discourse about practicum learning to include consideration of emotional intelligence and investment.

Key Words: Emotions; Practice Learning; Student; Social Work;

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Introduction

It is increasingly recognized that students in higher education are not necessarily school leavers with little or no work experience. Such students are referred to as the *mature* student (Leder & Forgasz, 2004), the '*nontraditional*' student (Zosky, White, Unger & Mills, 2004), and the *adult* student (Home, 1998). During 2006, 24 % of the Australian wide undergraduate student population were aged 25 and over, with 14% aged 30 and over (DEST, 2007). Meanwhile 'X' University had 68% of students aged 25 and over enrolled in the social work Bachelors program during 2007, with 55.4% aged 30 and over. This disparity indicates the social work BSW student cohort have greater numbers of mature aged students than other applied disciplines in undergraduate study in Australia. These figures also signal the 'ageing' trend of the tertiary education population, evident in recent publications on the changing demographic profile of student numbers in both the United States (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007) and the United Kingdom (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007).

In recent years, as social work educators we have experienced increasing anger from students who have been unable to gain any recognition of prior learning for their considerable practice experience, especially from those who have held senior positions within welfare agencies. Given that at the time of interview we had no discretion to provide an exemption for practice learning, this research was designed to explore how university and agency staff could better manage and enhance the learning experience of students with an extensive practice history, who felt aggrieved about having to fulfill this course requirement. We anticipate this study would be of

interest to educators where some provision of prior learning is available, as we are not aware of any country which allows complete exemptions from practice learning requirements for students gaining initial social work qualifications.

With the exception of one study regarding emotion and tension in social work field education (Barlow & Hall, 2007), we could find little that acknowledged the way student emotional states impacted on placement learning. This area of consideration seemed particularly relevant for learning more about how to enhance learning for the mature aged, experienced practitioner student cohort, who expressed strong feelings about needing to complete the placement requirement.

The Relationship between Emotion and Learning

The educational psychology literature does provide clues about how student emotion might shape learning. In particular, the contention that emotional responses can only really be interpreted within the person-context interface (Efklides & Volet, 2005) is quite familiar to social workers, where the interrelatedness between micro, meso and macro systemic concerns are carefully considered in intervention (O'Donoghue & Maidment, 2005). In order to examine emotions in education it is considered necessary to locate their expression within the social-historical context from which these concepts emerge (Schutz & DeCuir, 2002). This approach reflects our research process in terms of examining the emotional responses of a particular student demographic profile (mature aged, female students, experienced in human service practice), within the specific context of undertaking their first practicum placement for the BSW.

An important distinction is made in the literature between feelings and emotion (Frijda, 1986 cited in Efklides & Volet, 2005). In this context feelings are considered to be accessible for

naming and reflection, while emotions are accompanied by an urgent action tendency and more likely to be unconscious. This is a meaningful distinction to make when examining the relationship between emotions and the engagement with the practicum learning context, since deeply held or unresolved emotional responses may remain hidden or unstated within the context of professional supervision, and potentially within our research interviews.

Recent research on the nature of individual responses to performance in achievement settings emphasizes the integral relationship between emotional responses, cognitive functioning and learning (Ruthig, Perry, Hladkyj, Hall, Pekrun & Chipperfield, 2007). The implications of this research are considerable for social work as a discipline, where the process of engaging in critical reflection on learning and practice is integral to fostering student and practitioner self awareness in the field (Fook, 1999; Gould & Taylor, 1996). It could be argued that *in the absence* of practitioner self reflection and awareness, the primary notion of constructive ‘use of self’ embedded within social work intervention is fundamentally flawed. For this reason, examining the impact of emotion on self regulation, learning and awareness is of considerable relevance to social work education and professional supervision.

The construct of emotion is understood as comprising of interrelated psychological responses including affective, cognitive, physiological and motivational component processes (Pekrun, Goetz, Titz & Perry, 2002: 95). ‘Emotions serve the functions of preparing and sustaining reactions to important events and states by providing motivational and physiological energy, by focusing attention and modulating thinking, and by triggering action-related wishes and intentions’ (Pekrun, et al. 2002: 96). Recent research focused on the impact of emotion on learning leaves no doubt that emotional responses can be considered as both outcomes and

predictors of learning, while fluctuations in student emotion produce differing responses that can only really be understood within the situated learning context (Sansone & Thoman, 2005).

We found in the work of Krapp (2005) several clues to help explain the emotional responses of the experienced practitioners towards their first practicum placement. She argues that self determination in learning is fostered through the expression of three basic needs: *competence*, *autonomy* and *relatedness*. Competence refers to the ‘desire to feel efficacious, to have an effect on one’s environment, and to be able to attain valued outcomes’; autonomy refers to the ‘desire to be self initiating and to have a sense of acting in accord with ones own sense of self’ (Deci, 1998: 152 cited in Krapp, 2005: 385). Relatedness refers to the ‘desire to feel connected to and to be accepted by significant others’ (Krapp, 2005: 386). We could find in our interview transcripts a number of passages where student views of self competence, autonomy and relatedness to others were impacted upon by the requirement to undertake practicum placement, despite having worked in the field prior to beginning the BSW.

The practicum component of tertiary studies is frequently cited as the most memorable aspect of professional education (Edmond, Megivern, Williams, Rochman & Howard, 2006, Kadushin, 1991), and much has been researched and published on factors that influence student satisfaction with supervision and learning in the field, across a range of disciplines (Maidment, 2001; Fernandez, 1998). Although providing valuable information about methods to enhance workplace learning and supervision practice, previous research into the social work practicum has not addressed the impact of student emotion on the learning process.

During 2007 we conducted interviews to gauge how students who had already been employed in the human service sector, anticipated and experienced placement learning. We found intense

levels of emotional expression articulated in these interviews, and subsequently explored the social work literature to find out more about student emotional responses to practicum education. Through broadening our search to include educational psychology we have been able to make links between the data from our interviews with theory and research in this field. These connections provide clues about how student emotion is likely to shape student attitude and subsequent pedagogical outcomes during field learning.

The impetus for our study emerged from the claim that ‘little is known about field placements of growing subgroups of students, particularly older, part time and field employment based’ (Hopkins, Holtz Deal & Dunleavy Bloom, 2005: 573). We therefore were intent on interviewing students who were studying for the Bachelor of Social Work part time, and had previous experience of working in the human service sector. By definition, these students were older than those who entered the degree program straight from high school, with five out of the nine interviewed undertaking the first placement in the agency where they were also employed. As noted in the Introduction, this subgroup of the social work student cohort represents growing numbers of mature aged students entering the tertiary education sector. Of particular significance to this research, is that this subgroup is seeking qualifications in a field (social work and human services), where they have already sought and held positions of responsibility. Examination of earlier research and literature on mature aged student populations enhanced our understanding of the interview data.

Mature Students in Tertiary Education

A complex mix of factors have been found to influence the decision to re-enter the education system, with the transition to tertiary learning requiring a complete re-orientation of lifestyle for

most mature aged students (Davies & Williams, 2001). Recent research analysis from interviews with 110 such students in the United Kingdom resulted in the development of a six category typology to help explain the positive and negative influences for adults choosing to return to study. These categories or 'subgroups' of students include:

- *Delayed traditional students* comprised of students in their 20s who met university entrance requirements at the time of completing secondary school, but put off enrolling for a range of reasons including having a break from study; lack of confidence; lack of encouragement to undertake university qualifications
 - *Late starters*, those who have undergone a significant life event such as redundancy or divorce and are looking for 'a new start'
 - *Single-parents* (predominately women) seeking initial or additional qualifications in order to join the paid workforce
 - *Careerists*, those currently employed and seeking to upgrade their qualifications for career advantage
 - *Escapees*, those currently employed who seek qualifications as a way out of 'dead-end' jobs
 - *Personal growers*, those undertaking education for its own sake, demonstrating a 'love of learning'
- (Osborne, Marks & Turner, 2004: 296)

A major motivating factor for participants in the above study to re-enter the education system was to advance personal prospects in the job market (Osborne, Marks & Turner, 2004: 305). Other factors contributing to the increase in numbers of older female students, engaging in

higher education include the changing government policy initiatives geared towards encouraging adults currently not in the paid workforce to return to employment (Millar & Rowlingson, 2001), along with recent trends towards organisational down-sizing and restructuring impacting upon career trajectories (Zosky et. al, 2004). We therefore surmise that one possibility to consider is that individual attitudes and emotion towards practice learning maybe associated with the motivational factors for entering tertiary education as a matured aged student. In the context where future job security has been threatened through organizational restructuring, or experienced workers have been encouraged to ‘upskill’, these pressures are likely to impact on how students feel and approach the process of learning.

Research on the experiences of mature aged student cohorts in tertiary education cite multiple obstacles experienced while studying. Factors such as lack of access to affordable child care; the need to earn a living alongside studying; role conflict and overload; the cost of study; lack of confidence, and fear of long term debts are issues frequently discussed in the literature (Hopkins et al. 2005; Fox, 2004, Osborne et al, 2004; Marshack, 1991; Marlow, 1990). As such, reports of students in this cohort experiencing anxiety in relation to juggling work, study and family roles and responsibilities, financial commitments while being time poor are not uncommon (Davies & Williams, 2001). Home, commenting on the additional role strain experienced by women in this situation, writes the ‘Demands of the university and the family conflict the most, as both ‘greedy institutions’ demand constant availability, exclusive loyalty, and high flexibility’ (Home, 1998: 86).

Research Process

Participants: This research was conducted with third year students from a four year undergraduate social work degree program from X University. The program is located within the Faculty of Health, Medicine, Nursing and Behavioural Science. The majority of the BSW students in this degree are located off campus students and can live anywhere in Australia.

While it is possible for students to receive advanced standing (cross crediting) from previous qualifications, at the time of interviewing no recognition of prior learning was awarded towards the practicum component of the program (AASW, 2000). In recognition of the centrality of experiential learning in an applied discipline such as social work, all students were required to carry out the full complement of practicum days (140 days practice) to successfully complete the degree. Students were made aware of this requirement prior to commencing their studies.

The participants who volunteered to be interviewed were all female, aged between 31 and 45 years, with between four and twenty years of prior working experience in the human services sector. All identified as being either “Australian”, “first-generation Australian” or “Anglo-Saxon”, and none identified themselves as an Indigenous Australian. Seven of the nine had undertaken placements as part of a previous professional qualification. Five of the students were undertaking placements in their agency of employment. Of the remainder, two were undertaking part-time work in addition to their placements, and one was on paid long service leave from her usual position. The remaining one participant, who had been caring for young children, was not employed.

Interviews: During the course of the research the nine mature aged social work students were interviewed using a semi-structured interview schedule at the beginning and end of their first practicum placement for the Bachelor of Social Work qualification.

Each interview took approximately 45 minutes to an hour to complete and all were audio recorded. The interviews were conducted by an independent researcher who held no responsibilities within the BSW for teaching or assessment. A schedule of questions was developed for the pre- and post placement interviews which included ...

How does your placement differ from your paid work role?

To what extent had you thought about moving from a worker to student status during the placement?

What has been most challenging for you on this placement?

What advice would you give to other students in your position going out on placement?

The questions for the pre and post placement interview schedules were developed out of our experiences of working with these students, informed by key issues identified in the literature about mature aged student engagement with learning. The interview questions sought factual information from students about their learning experiences, which are reported elsewhere (Crisp & Maidment, 2009). Upon reading the transcripts however, we were struck by the vehemence with which students expressed their views and were able to identify a set of key issues that generated considerable feeling amongst those interviewed. This article explores the relationship we found between emotion and learning in more depth.

The research process was approved by the 'X' University Ethics Committee, and the interviews took place between March and July 2007. Each of the nine students interviewed had volunteered their participation after an invitation was extended to all third year students completing the

placement that semester (n=47). Approximately half of this total class population would have fitted the research criteria of having worked in human services prior to the commencement of the BSW, entering tertiary education as a ‘mature aged’ student.

Analysis: Analysis of the data was carried out independently by both authors identifying the issues that evoked emotional expression, and coming to a consensus as to the meaning of the interview data in context. We used thematic analysis of the transcripts as this technique does not depend on the presence of *a priori* categories for coding (Kellehear, 1993). The passages both authors identified from the transcripts were then subsequently considered in light of the findings from previous research and commentary on learning and emotion (Efklides & Petkaki, 2005; Krapp, 2005; Sanson & Thoman, 2005).

Limitations: *The small sample size of nine mature aged students participating in this research could be considered a significant limitation. As such there are no grounds on which the findings from this qualitative study could be generalized. A second limitation is that potentially ‘hidden or unstated’ emotional responses referred to in the literature review, were not delved into during the research interviews.*

Findings

The findings from this analysis are reported below. Pseudonyms are used to identify individuals, while the reported age and years of human service related work noted for each participant is authentic information.

Student Expression of Emotion about the Practicum

Anger & Excitement. Students interviewed expressed a diverse range of sentiments about having to do the placement. Although all students were cognizant with the requirement to complete placement prior to undertaking the degree a number of students interviewed expressed anger and frustration about the mandatory nature of having to do so. Two were particularly angry and frustrated ...

I felt that I should have been eligible for an exemption (from placement) given my ten years in the field and that I did two placements in the welfare Diploma. I didn't learn anything...

(Shirley, 42. Ten years experience)

I wasn't allocated my placement until March and it didn't really match the requirements I listed on my forms or discussed with the university. I needed a placement where the hours were shorter and I thought I would be able to take off school holidays as part of the placement...

(Miriam, 31. Ten years experience)

Later in the first interview with Miriam she commented that she *'just wanted to get it (placement) out of the way'*, and there was *'nothing good'* about the placement. When interviewed at the end of placement Miriam was still angry about having to do placement and her placement allocation and noted the only highlight was *'the day I finished placement... when I look back at placement I do not think I got anything out of it at all'*.

In the passages above both students demonstrate a limited sense of 'perceived academic control' (Ruthig et al, 2007), where Miriam did not get to go to the placement setting she desired, and Shirley was required to complete the placement despite her previous experience. Lack of perceived academic control has been shown to compromise cognitive elaboration, creativity,

achievement and motivation to learn. Both women felt they had not engaged with any learning despite having been in the field for 70 days.

In contrast, enjoyment has been shown to enhance motivation (Pekrun, 2002), and this was also evident in the transcripts where students who demonstrated significant motivation for learning also expressed positive sentiments about the placement...

I'm excited as there was enough new stuff for me to get my teeth into and I am in with a brand new team that I have not worked with before...

(Helen, 43. Six years experience)

In the second interview with Helen at the end of the placement she commented on advice she would give other experienced workers undertaking practicum...

Open up and relish the placement, as it is not about turning up for work each day but learning new things...

(Helen, 43. Six years experience)

Phyllis' comments during the second interview make a clear connection between good learning outcomes and enjoyment of the work completed on placement.

I learnt a lot; what the social work team actually does exactly within this organization, we discussed theories and interview technique. I learnt a lot about how other agencies work...I learned I really love working with this group of people and that it is really rewarding working with a community (specific ethnic community) (Phyllis, 45. Fifteen years experience)

Explanations offered by Krapp about notions of competence, autonomy and relatedness being integral to student engagement with learning helped explain the stark contrast of views about the practicum held by the different students.

Competence. When asked about how they felt in the early days of the placement a number of students who had worked in the field for some considerable time reported differing degrees of anxiety and stress. These sentiments appeared to be related to the notion of demonstrating competence. Although she has worked in the field for twenty years, in the new practicum setting Jill felt well outside her comfort zone, while Shirley wondered if she could once again manage the casework. Tanya was juggling her part time work with the practicum and had become stressed by the workload.

I wasn't sleeping very well, I was anxious about it and I couldn't figure out why. It was scary. I was going outside my comfort zone (Jill, 41. Over twenty years experience in the field)

I felt apprehensive. It was new going from being a team leader back into a caseworker role, where there was an expectation that I had the skill and experience to manage the cases that I would be allocated (Shirley, 42. Ten years experience)

I thought I had conquered my ability to manage stress but I haven't. I wasn't expecting a sudden demand in my part time work and this has been stressful for me. The workload is huge (Tanya, 37. Sixteen years experience)

We suspect that doubts about competence were fuelled by the need for the students we interviewed to manage the role transition on placement from being an 'employed practitioner' to 'student on placement'. This changing identity links with the notion of **relatedness** discussed earlier, where relatedness refers to the desire to feel connected to and accepted by significant others (Krapp,2005 386). In relation to this construct students were clearly ambivalent about moving into a student role...

I don't like this. I like being in control. I am a professional who is looked upon and respected in my field, even asked advice. (Jill, 41. Over twenty years experience in the field)

I have worked in the field for a while and done quite a few things and I didn't want to go back to the role where I was an unknown entity and go back to being a student. I wanted to be nurtured but not treated like a student... (Linette, 35 years: 4.5 years experience)

The literature on adult education provides a comprehensive commentary on the different nomenclature that may be used to describe being an adult consumer of education, (see Brookfield, 1986), suggesting that use of terms such as student, or learner influence the way adults engage and identify themselves in the educational environment. Comments from Jill and Linette suggest that for them being identified as a student impacted on their sense of relatedness with others in the agency, where they appear to equate the student role with a loss of control and status. The rejection of the student role may also be related to a sense of compromised freedom of action and autonomy.

In contrast, Helen gave this advice to future students about going out on placement...

Be open to the experience, allow yourself to learn, workplaces love students and they value them. Don't become cocky; make the most of this, the freedom to be a student! There is a lot of negativity about having to do placements but it is best to make the most of the opportunity and get back in touch with why you entered the field in the first place...

(Helen, 43. Six years experience)

Helen, far from constructing the student identity as one of disempowerment and loss has conceptualized the role as a rare freedom. This reframing of the student identity contributed to how she experienced her time on placement.

Autonomy and Agency. Krapp makes the connection between an elevated sense of personal autonomy with enhanced learning. In this regard she describes autonomy as having the feeling of being independent from undesired external and internal pressure (2005: 385). Clearly Shirley's comments above about feeling she should be eligible for an exemption from doing placement, suggest that she felt aggrieved about having to complete this time in the field, and by implication, subject to the external pressures of the BSW course requirements. In contrast Sarah comments...

I was quite excited about starting my placement because it was my choice to do this degree. I am doing it for my own reasons and from my own interest. No one told me to do this. If I had been told I had to do it I wouldn't be enthusiastic about it at all... (Sarah, 37. Five years experience)

Sarah sees the placement as a means of fulfilling her own personal goals, with goals being an 'important organizing processes for thinking, acting and emoting...and acting as a transactive point for understanding cognition, motivation and emotion' (Schutz & DeCuir, 2002: 127). While Sarah felt she exercised personal agency about going out on placement and this positively impacted upon how she viewed the experience, Miriam clearly did not feel she had a great deal of autonomy in the process at all...

I knew I wouldn't enjoy (name of agency). I was so limited in the choices that were given to me (for placement)...In the end I was given no choice. (Miriam, 31. Ten years experience)

Much of the research related to the impact of emotion on academic learning has focused on the influence of achievement related anxiety (Pekrun, et al. 2002). While the women in our research did refer to experiencing performance anxiety, (see comments earlier from Jill and Shirley), domestic pressures contributed significantly to generating anxiety.

Feeling Over-Burdened

As identified in earlier research (Home, 1998), juggling domestic, paid work and study responsibilities created significant tension for the women we interviewed. Most of the students also talked about the additional financial burden experienced as a result of undertaking placement. In addition to cutting back on paid employment, six students in our cohort mentioned they also had key care giving responsibilities for dependent children. Previous research on the experience of mature aged students re-entering education (Osborne et al, 2004; Home, 1998) reported stressors related to the cost of the course and additional childcare while juggling the competing demands on time.

The financial challenge is big. I will probably have to do a part time placement (for second placement). I live out of town with two young children so it (doing placement) is not a straight forward thing... (Linette, 35 years: 4.5 years experience)

Being on placement generated additional costs for some of the women, and worries about the quality of care their children may receive in a crèche.

I had to get a crèche placement which is very hard to secure for just three months, except for in (name of one centre) which I didn't really want to go to. In the end I got a place there because there was no other option. I then had to organize after school care for the other children who go to two different schools. Financially it is a big cost... (Sarah, 37. Five years experience)

Feeling 'time poor' was a further contributing factor to the sense of being overburdened, as Phyllis describes below...

The most challenging aspect is time. It isn't much further to travel but the extra half hour a day was hard, and trying to juggle all that you do... there's after school care and family to organize and many things. It's more a personal thing, not necessarily about the work but it is related to being at work... (Phyllis, 45. Fifteen years experience)

Discussion and Conclusion

We believe that having a person outside of the BSW program undertake the interviews for this research enhanced student self disclosure of emotional intensity during the course of the data collection. Had we conducted these interviews ourselves, the participants may have felt constrained by the fact we oversaw their assessment for placements even though we had stressed that participation in this study would in no way affect assessed outcomes. As it was, the participants knew that the contents of the interviews would only be fed back to university staff once it had been made anonymous with the removal of any identifying data. Furthermore, the 'outside' interviewer appeared to be considered as someone 'safe' to disclose negative feelings, given there was no need to maintain any ongoing relationship with her after the research had been completed (Minichiello et al., 1995).

The challenge for social work educators is to help mature aged students to appreciate the value of undertaking practicum education, rather than regarding the placement as an obstacle or an exercise in simply serving time. The transcripts from the interviews with different students demonstrated that while a number of students were positive about their placements from the outset, the majority expressed frustration and anger at having to complete the practicum. These

emotions appeared to be generated out of anxiety about the additional cost associated with placement, along with significant levels of performance anxiety; a sense that the practicum would not offer new learning, and annoyance about not being eligible for a waiver for the BSW practicum requirement. Certainly, as a tertiary institution our University needs to be cognizant of and acknowledge the multiple pressures experienced by this sector of the student population. Taking responsibility for seeking out practical ways to ameliorate the significant impact of the placement requirements upon student welfare and learning potential is critical to fostering the best possible practicum outcomes. Since undertaking this research the requirements for social work education in Australia have been revised and now allow for students with extensive practice experience to be credited with up to 70 days practicum (2009). Had the students in this research been eligible for this waiver of placement time they would nevertheless be required to undertake the second placement 70 day placement within the BSW.

Those students who expressed positive sentiments about their practicum from the beginning were also able to identify significant learning at the conclusion of their placement. Conversely, those who focused on the negative aspects of undertaking placement at the beginning were likely to say they had learned nothing or very little after the 70 days in the field. These findings support those from earlier research that suggest the feelings students associate with the learning transaction will impact on the degree to which learning actually occurs (Sansone & Thoman, 2005; Efklides & Petkaki, 2005).

In addition these findings remind us that students expect the university will facilitate placements that meet their multiple commitments to family and work, while sourcing quality practicum learning experiences. However, it is often difficult to meet all of these expectations, particularly in rural areas where there may be limited services available in any one locality. Therefore as

educators we need to consider ways to work with those whose placement expectations are not able to be met.

Being able to flourish despite disappointment signals emotional intelligence (EI), and there is now a growing literature that suggests a keen sense of EI can enhance outcomes in teaching, learning and service delivery (Chermiss, 2000; Jaeger, 2003). Of particular significance in this context is that emotional intelligence incorporates the 'ability to sense, understand, and effectively apply the power and acumen of emotions as a source of human energy, information, trust, creativity and influence' (Cooper, 1997: 32). In this regard those involved in student practicum preparation and supervision may find engaging with the concept of emotional intelligence could assist in the process of examining strongly held student sentiment by considering how both positive and negative emotion can potentially enhance or hinder opportunities for learning during the placement.

Advancing understanding about the impact of emotion on workplace learning and practice has the potential to help social work educators and practice teachers work effectively with students undertaking placement. We believe further, more focused research on the relatively unexplored relationship between emotion and learning during the practicum, could potentially make a new and substantive contribution to the social work education knowledge base.

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