

THE SYSTEMIC PROFESSIONAL
 DOMAINS OF ACTION AND THE QUESTION OF NEUTRALITY

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to offer some ways of thinking about the whole range of activities in which human relations professionals are engaged. We will be using and reflecting on the principles and practice of a systemic approach. For example, is it possible for activities such as investigative work, receiving children into care, diagnostic work, prescribing drugs, psychological testing, advice giving, and therapy or consultations to be seen and performed in a consistent manner within a post Milan Systemic framework? Or do we have to settle for using the Systemic Approach when performing the tasks of therapy or consultation and allow that other tasks lie outside the Systemic framework?

Many people have raised questions about the notion of neutrality (MacKinnon 1987) and its use in the different tasks which care professionals are required to perform. Social workers, psychologists, teachers, psychiatrists and others have to manage situations (eg sexual abuse, social control, anti racist and anti sexist procedures) which come into direct conflict with the notion of Neutrality (Selvini et al 1979). Professional responsibility and the agency contexts in which people carry out their professional tasks require that a clearly defined posture should be adopted and neutrality should be actively avoided in relation to many aspects of their work. At the same time many professionals are required to carry out therapeutic tasks (eg working to ensure that the future life of a family is free from pathology).

Others (Cade 1986, Gergen 1985, Speed 1984) have questioned how we conceive of Reality, Truth, or Moral standards, (which we might call the various realities of the world which we have agreement about) when using the notions of Systemic and constructivist thinking.

Our intention in this paper is more to be exploratory rather than definitive, in the hope that we may create further discussion. In this paper we hope to:

1. suggest a way to sort out different types of action in relation to the professional's role in any context and remain consistent with the Systemic viewpoint that lived experience is co-constructed by human beings co-ordinating their actions in relationship with one another;
2. introduce Maturana's concept of the domains of aesthetics, explanations and production (Maturana 1985), raise questions about ideas of neutrality and relate this to all the different aspects of a professional's work;
3. suggest that using a Systemic approach involves professionals in taking up a moral posture. This relates to what Maturana calls the aesthetic domain (Maturana 1985), wherein we take up a moral position in relation to what is, or is not, sanctioned, where and when you intervene, your choice of profession and context for work, what you are hoping to achieve and to your understanding of the relationship between theory and practice.

A SYSTEMIC OUTLOOK, DOMAINS OF ACTION AND THE CONCEPTION OF PRAXIS

The various activities that human relations professionals carry out can be viewed as integral elements in the maintaining, building up, transforming and creating of our societies and communities. They may be said to be actively engaged in the process of bringing about the good life that particular societies consider desirable for their members. For Maturana this process of work is part of what it means to be a living human being. The activities which we human professionals engage in have an irreducible moral dimension.

"Every human act takes place in language. Every act in language brings forth a world created with others in the act of coexistence which gives rise to what is human. Thus every human act has an ethical meaning because it is an act of constitution of the human world."

(Maturana and Varela 1987 p 247)

Maturana distinguishes human acts in language as taking place in three different domains. He calls these the Domain of Aesthetics, the Domain of Production and the Domain of Explanations. Maturana maintains that we exist in all three domains simultaneously, and indeed that these are not the only domains in which we exist. We could be said to exist in myriads of domains.

What distinguishes these different domains? The domain of production may be seen as that frame in which we conceive the world in objective terms. In the domain of production objectivity exists and we behave according to our understanding of that objectivity. Thus the domain of production is the world of established truth, or in Maturana's terms, the world of a 'universe' - one version of the truth. The domain of explanations is the domain of questions and questioning. Here objectivity is placed in parenthesis (OBJECTIVITY) to indicate a multi-verse, or many versions of reality, rather than a uni-verse. This multi-verse is brought forth through the eye of an observer in co-ordinations of action with other observers, such that all realities or perspectives are equally valid though not necessarily equally desirable. The domain of aesthetics refers to "the emotion in the happening of living you recognise as aesthetics" (Maturana 1985). Thus this refers to such notions as elegance, beauty, harmony, desirability, consistency, morality, ethics. The aesthetic domain is a frame which relates both to the domain of production and to the domain of explanations.

The notion that "every human act.....is an act of constitution of the human world" as Maturana uses it may be linked to the notion of "praxis" as described by Aristotle. Aristotle uses this notion of praxis to describe certain sorts of action in the community.

Aristotle divided the arts into three sets of discourses. One of those he called the arts of Praxis (Bernstein 1971). Aristotle uses this word in two ways. In one of the uses praxis can simply be translated as action. However he has a more technical use of the word that appears in the Nichomachean Ethics (11, 41b 8-10). There praxis refers to what free persons do together in a community that makes for a way of life. It has an irreducible moral dimension because the only reason to have such arts as rhetoric, political science and economics, is to produce the good life for people. Arts that fall under the heading of praxis are not concerned with the making of objects or with phenomena governed by deterministic forces.

While we do not endorse the Aristotelian analysis of praxis by reference to discreet movements or his famous four causes, we do endorse the idea that our primary concern is with the actions of persons who create communities and relationships together through their actions. Indeed, as systemic thinkers, we would go somewhat further than Aristotle and argue that in the course of our practice we also co-create

who we are. We not only create communities, relationships, institutions and cultures we also create our identities - our selfhood. We think that this process of the creation of social reality is best described in systemic terms. The main systemic terms which inform our thinking include the following ideas.

COMMUNICATION AND THE CREATION OF SOCIAL REALITIES

How do we create our identities and social institutions and the good life of communities? We do it through the primary social process - which we see as communication (Dewey 1929, Harre 1984) So, we see everything as existing in communication. This means that while we have no reason to doubt the reality of the world, our experience of that reality, the way it intrudes into the experience of living cannot be separated from the processes of communication of which we are a part. For example a social worker, therapist or professional is known by what they do.

"Action and speech are so closely related because the primordial and specifically human act must at the same time contain the question asked of every newcomer: "Who are you?" The disclosure of who somebody is, is implicit in both his words and deeds..." (Arendt 1958 p.178).

This action includes everything which we find in human interaction, exchange of objects, words, feelings and behaviour; artifacts such as buildings, roads, works of art. These latter are not only the products of human action, but also have a place in human action which becomes part of the process of the co-creation of realities.

If we look at what makes human communication distinctive we notice at once that the presence of language is a crucial dimension. We also observe that communication, as a process of co-creation, cannot be described as a mere exchange of messages.

"The traditional concept of communication holds that 'we' exist in a material world, and we use communication to express our 'inner' purposes, attitudes or feelings, and to describe the events and objects of the external world. Communication works well to the extent that it accurately expresses (or, when used by a cad, strategically distorts) inner feelings or external reality, and when it produces understanding (or deliberate misunderstanding) between the speaker and the audience(s) addressed.

"The alternative view is that 'we' consist of a cluster of social conversations, and that these patterns of communication constitute the world as we know it. In this view, communication is a primary social process, the material substance of those things whose reality we take for granted, such as our 'selves', motives, relationships, what we would otherwise describe as 'facts' and so forth." (Pearce 1989 p.11)

The meaning of any message is its use in the context of action, in the continuing conjoint action of people in the web of relationships of which they are a part.

There are four additional features of human communication that require comment for the purposes of this paper. First, there is the fact that much of what we do may be likened to a technology. By this we mean that when people together pursue various means to a consensual end or purpose e.g. the way a couple act together in a kitchen producing a meal, may be seen as a technology. (Note: By "a technology" we mean any set of routines designed to achieve preset ends or goals, e.g. techniques, skills, procedures, etc.)

However, the communication among bees, for example, will fit this definition of a technology; what is distinctive about human communication is, second, that technologies can be emergent; they can be elaborated and developed. For example the way we follow a particular recipe or process for preparing a meal may vary from time to time according to interest, inclination and mood. Thus we see elaboration and development of technologies or instruments as part of the process by which new possibilities emerge through our action in any particular situation.

A third and even more striking fact is that human communication can utterly reconstruct not only the technologies, including their ends, but also the cultures in which they emerge and the persons themselves who live those lives of culture. A fourth feature of human communication relates to the notion that all episodes in life require a form of consciousness as part of them. Thus, making love needs a form of consciousness radically different from the form of consciousness necessary to ride a bicycle, or to write a technical paper. Therefore, since all such activities are social, we may say that forms of consciousness are socially and culturally constructed.

The last feature of human communication that we need to discuss for our present purposes is that all utterances and actions that make up communication are at once both social and unique. Communication must be social or there would be no reason to have it. New born babies enter into the process of communication that pre-exist them and learn, by co-ordinating their actions with others, the patterns and processes that make up the reality of the world. However no two persons enter the process of human communication from the same position and thus uniqueness will

be a feature of each person's participation in the communication process. The extent and kind of uniqueness that is encouraged differs depending upon the patterns of communication in which the individual participates. The uniqueness is also related to cultural patterns through which the forms of uniqueness are co-created. (Note: The authors are well aware that they are arguing that individual creativity is always social.)

DOMAINS OF PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

While praxis is primary it can take a number of usefully distinguishable forms. We want to talk about domains of professional practice. Maturana introduced this idea by identifying three domains which were those of aesthetics, production and explanation (Maturana 1985). While we will retain this vocabulary and much of the import of Maturana's position, what follows is a reconstruction of the concept of domains in the light of our foregoing ideas about communication. We are producing this reconstruction as a heuristic device to enable professionals in the field of human relations to integrate a Systemic way of thinking to the whole of their practice.

The Aesthetic Domain of Praxis

We are concerned here with the way that professionals working with human beings in relationship guide their practice. Overall the domain of aesthetics is given a position of primacy; the choice to be a Systemic worker rather than some other form of worker is related to the aesthetic domain of praxis. In the aesthetic domain professionals in human relations are also conscious of the ethical dimension of their activities. Thus we would claim that a Systemic professional is necessarily playing out a particular moral commitment. This includes the management of the notion of neutrality as the Systemic professional carries out a task. While there is an ethical dimension to all praxis we need not attend to the relationship of ethics to practice to theory in many other situations. As professionals we learn, not only theory and new technologies but, we also learn a form of consciousness. We learn a way of managing the relationship between, and implications for each other, of our theory, practice and ethical position. Managing this becomes part of the way we carry out our practice. Theory, practice, ethics and a form of consciousness are in a recursive relationship with each other.

One of the characteristics of thinking in the domain of aesthetics is that we give attention to the intimate relationship between theory and practice. The professional in the human services is usually engaged in a unique form of praxis. Its distinguishing feature is that the professional has been trained in a developing theoretical orientation as well as in a set of emerging technologies, practices or techniques, within that orientation. This presents a condition in practice that is not the experience of two friends having a casual conversation. Unlike the casual conversation the professional in this domain attends to the fit between practice and theory while carrying on a coherent conversation. This is done so that practice and theory are constantly in a process of modifying and developing each other.

This is a kind of relationship that one has with a client wherein one maintains a sense of one's personal and professional moral and ethical position, and its articulation to the moral and ethical position embedded in the theory of Systemic thinking.

Neutrality and Aesthetics

While systemic theory often calls attention to its employment of neutral positions within episodes of consultation and therapy, it contains a readily identifiable moral and ethical stance. It argues that a distinctively human life is one that holds open the possibility of creative elaborations of our "lived experience" (Dewey 1934) and the radical reconstructions both of our "stories lived" and of our "stories told" (Pearce 1989). Systemic theory argues that our professional practice requires constant creative elaborations (Cecchin 1987) and radical reconstruction. This is characterised at one level by the popular dictum, "Never fall in love with your hypothesis". Systemic theory also holds that the ability to elaborate and reconstruct radically is not the peculiar province of any subclass of persons but is distinctive of human life itself. All human beings do it. A child can interact with its parents in such a way that what the child does influence the patterns of activity of the parents and vice versa. The patterns they create through their interactions may both close off as well as create possibilities for the future.

The abused child is part of the pattern of social interaction, but in such a way that the possibilities and choices that the child has for action are severely limited by the ab-use of power exercised by the parent involved. Consequently the kind of identity which is created for the abused child is substantially affected by the action of the abusing parent. This entails not only the immediate episodes and abuse but

potentially includes problems in creating relationships, emotional experience, and the like. Thus the morality of any action is determined by the affordances and constraints which are created both for the present and the future by the events of any episode.

The Systemic position is that persons have the opportunity to participate in the elaboration, maintenance or change of diverse patterns of living through the ability to co-create a multiplicity of stories in action. We are not claiming that more change is always good, nor do we maintain that this is an individual right. If you construct episodes which close down certain episodes of choice for action then this is contrary to the Systemic moral position.

Drawing on Systemic theory we may summarise certain forms of thought that we think are desirable. We do not universalise any judgements. We are constantly interested in a multiplicity of perspectives and positions. We see that the line you take about anything is related to the context. We affirm the value of curiosity, defined by Cecchin (Cecchin 1987), as an active stance which questions all views in order to create a multiplicity of views. We object to any effort to close down permanently the possibilities for elaboration or transformation in systems. We object to blaming the individual without equal attention to the social order. Thus all responsibility is at once social and personal.

Elaborating further aspects of the domain of aesthetics we see that you try to do whatever you are engaged in elegantly and gracefully. This involves maintaining a sense of respect for the people with whom we are engaged in relation to their pains, joys, sufferings and creative potential in the social world.

The Productive Domain of Praxis

Human life would not be possible were it not for the fact that there are a number of episodes which we enact without self reflection, taking for granted the usefulness of the rules that hold these things together. A world of perpetual change and perpetual re-evaluation would not be livable. The conventions of life are constructed and maintained socially, culturally and contextually. The way these conventions arise is through interaction in the social order whereby consensuality is achieved as a form of action.

A number of the conventions are technologies (Angus 1984) e.g. diagnosis, testing, court work etc. The use of these technologies is related to questions of compatibility (Bernstein 1983 pp. 82ff). By compatibility Bernstein refers to questions like, "Who is right or who is wrong?", or two professionals might have a difference about a case eg this should or should not be referred for investigation. However they are agreed upon yardsticks or criteria for carrying on the disagreement. For example, compatibility relates to the fit between criteria for making a judgement and the evidence which has been collected in relation to being able to make judgements. In this domain criteria for making judgements, or procedures determining action are usually well established. They constitute the routine aspects of the professionals life. Examples of these could be investigative work in the life of a social worker, diagnostic work in the life of a medical professional, psychological testing in the life of a psychologist.

All professionals, social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists etc. join with such established systems. In the Productive Domain the human relations professional carries out his,her task according to the conventions which are required by the context of their profession and the agency in which they operate. Those conventions join with the conventions of clients, community and the social order. The context of the role in which the professional works provides constraints and affordances for the fulfilment of that role. The constraints and affordances come from interaction in the social order. This is not to say that such work is uncreative rather it calls for a particular kind of creativity in which professional conventions are applied to and elaborated within certain episodes of interaction. Certain aspects of the context are taken for granted eg as a social worker in the case of a report of possible child abuse - investigation has to take place. Similarly, a doctor faced with certain physical conditions decides to pursue a course of action necessary to arrive at a diagnosis. Thus some stories about the social order are given a privileged position.

The creativity of the worker relates to principles of elegance and ideas of the recursive relationship between theory practice and ethics. Through the process of the doing and living of the role-in- context it is possible to creatively develop the enactment of these conventions, while the conventions and rules stay generally stable.

As we said earlier, it is distinctive of human action that people participate together in elaboration of ways of doing work, telling stories, or creating explanations. For example there is a difference in the relationship between a professional and client when a professional may carry out an assignment simply following the conventions and rules by comparison with the relationship where client and professional act

together to elaborate creative ways for the performance of both the professional and client role. For some professionals, all they can do is to enact their job and move on to the next client or piece of work. Creativity involves making choices about how you enact your role in the context in which the task needs to be carried out.

The enactment of role has to do with social convention. For example a school psychologist, children, families, teachers, all have an understanding or view of the convention of psychological testing, such that the task is carried out according to consensual conventions and criteria. The doctor patient relationship contains both constraints and affordances in relation to ethics, professional standards and diagnosis according to certain procedures which are socially created. The social worker-client relationship is established and constrained through the way in which the role is set up through the legal framework of child protection. For example social services' departmental procedures and the knowledge of the press and public reaction to certain events, are all elements in the employees process by which professional roles and tasks are established in the context of a social order.

In all domains of praxis it is customary and desirable for the consent of the client to be gained. In the productive domain there are certain conditions under which moral or legal conventions may require or permit action without the full consent of the client involved. Saving life when it is threatened is an example of a situation where obtaining consent may not be necessary. In Britain when an allegation of child abuse is made social workers are required to investigate the situation and need not obtain the consent of those involved to proceed with the investigation. Thus all communities have conventions which specify the conditions under which the necessity to obtain consent may be waived.

When working in the productive domain of praxis in a situation that necessitates action without necessarily obtaining the client's consent, the systemic worker tries creatively and elegantly to perform the necessary task eg investigation in such a way that the client's autonomy continues to be respected. This may involve, amongst other things, clarifying with the client the reasons for an investigation and the legal constraints under which a social worker is operating that necessitates the action being taken, whilst at the same time respecting the rights of a client to refuse an investigation with the consequences attendant upon such a refusal. Thus for

example, when a social worker takes a child from a family into residential care the worker tries to do this elegantly. The worker's creativity involves attention not only to what is done but to the manner in which it is done such that a client's autonomy and rights are respected within the conventions of a particular society.

Curiosity in the productive domain takes the form of investigation; the investigation, both in form and content, fits with the conventions and criteria which are consensually established either professionally, or through departmental procedures or through all the components that constitute the context in which an action takes place. There are some professional contexts within which the role provides for and requires that judgements are made as part of the action. These judgements may involve various punctuations eg the decision that a child's reading age is above or below what might be expected; that someone is suffering from this or that malady; that in a particular situation child abuse has or has not occurred and that certain persons are or are not perpetrators of that action; that further investigations need to take place; that a child may need to be removed for the time being from the family for the sake of its protection. Thus professional expertise in this domain may partially be defined as knowledge of criteria and information necessary to make a diagnosis or judgement in relation to future patterns of action.

The judgements that people make have meaning like anything else. They emerge from a role that has a place in the social order and thereby a story which is emerging through time; judgements also exist in the life of the person in relation to their agency, the client, their professional autobiography, and are also meaningful in terms of the consequences that are invoked by the judgements that are made. In the productive domain an aspect of the creativity of the professional includes the elaborations of forms of judgement seen in the light of possible consequences of particular judgements. Thus there may be a variety of solutions in any situation. The context of an agency and the role in which a professional is employed provides constraints and affordances, duties and responsibilities. These create the conditions in which professionals exercise judgement. No one judgement necessarily leads to a particular outcome. From a systemic perspective a professional makes judgements which are consistent not only with the requirements of their role in the productive domain but also in relation to judgements in the aesthetic domain and the domain of explanations. The systemic professional constantly questions how to make a judgement such that the possible outcome will allow for greater opportunities for the future in terms of change and growth through elaboration and reconstruction. This will involve making judgements about whether or not to attempt to work in the domain of explanations.

The Explanations Domain of Praxis

This domain is associated with what people commonly call therapy. It is not only related to therapy. Managers, for example may choose to work in the domain of explanations in the process of their work in order to bring about some change or other in their organisation. In this domain the primary focus of the Systemic therapist or worker or manager is the elaboration of many different stories and perspectives relating to the action of all participants involved in any situation. Therefore a very different technology guides the practice of the Systemic worker in this domain. In the production domain certain stories (eg guilty, or not guilty) are given a privileged position which relate to the conventions of any society or culture. When working, in the explanations domain, to elaborate and co-create many different stories through therapy sessions, conversations, telephone calls, interviews, circular questioning etc, the worker adopts a "posture" (Karl Tomm 1984) of neutrality (Selvini et al 1979). This neutrality relates to various aspects of therapy.

The technologies involving neutrality are used in the service of a overall moral position of Systemic therapy that is not neutral; one that gives preference to the capacity for creative change and for enhanced curiosity (Cecchin 1988). Adopting the stance of neutrality is a way of facilitating the development of multiple stories and radical reconstructions of stories. Even in the explanations domain the higher context marker is always change of some sort. It may mean a substantial change in behaviour, beliefs, actions; it may mean seeing what was conceived of as a problem as being non-problematic and that therefore no action need be taken; it may mean nothing more than that some reassurance is required.

The higher context marker for all therapy is change in the "lived experience" (Dewey 1929 p.8) at some level or another. The technology of neutrality involves something radically different within this higher context maker of change. It involves taking up a stance of curiosity whereby the therapist attempts to understand the coherence and the fit in the action or behaviour of any person in the system. So the therapist uses processes like hypothesising, circular questioning (Palazzoli et al 1980, Penn 1982), (which we prefer to call spiralling questioning), to link together actions into a pattern and provide a description of fit between these actions in pattern and contextual beliefs which suggest that these actions make sense. The actions may be morally reprehensible but through this process they take on a different meaning. This process of creating different meanings is done in order to facilitate change. So all behaviour in this sense is seen as a perfect fit with the stories in the system co-created through hypothesising and circular questioning.

Within the context of hypothesising and the co-creation of radically different stories from those the clients come with, we seek both to understand and co-create elaborations of stories which become radically different forms of action.

The posture of neutrality involves being neutral to the pace and time of change. Clients are left to make the change in their own time; thus the frequently used technology "now is not the time or do not change for the time being". Neutrality also refers to the posture of the therapists in always accepting the direction of change as making total sense in terms of the coherence of the system as it presents itself from session to session.

The notion of coherence and fit of the system has a pragmatic effect which elaborates the idea of blame and responsibility such that this is not the only story which is told. Action is still seen in the moral domain as good or bad but the story which the therapist co-creates is a story of the form that though the behaviour may be morally at odds because of its constraining nature it can be seen as making sense in relation to certain beliefs or contextual stories with which it fits.

Working in the explanations domain the therapist's curiosity is that of the explorer, map maker or story elaborator and co-creator. This is particularly seen in the use of circular questioning, messages in sessions and the like.

Whereas in the Production Domain consent may not always be necessary, work in the domain of explanations can only be carried out with the informed consent of the clients. This relates to the Systemic position that you can only work with people in the context of change when they give their consent, both morally and ethically.

PRAXIS AND TIME: WHICH DOMAIN WHEN

The question of which domain when is related to the management of consciousness in time as well as the management of the technology which you use. This involves an understanding that communication is both consciousness and a technology which gets beyond both in order that new stories can be created. It is within the frame of aesthetics that the choice is made about which domain is primary at any point in time.

The position of this paper is that everything exists in communication and that the delineation of domains is subsumed under the unitary view of communication. Thus we exist in all three domains simultaneously. In the process of professional activity the participants (social workers, clients, doctors, patients etc) in any form of action together co-create a context in which the co-ordinated action has

particular meaning. It is not possible for the professional worker to be constantly aware of all the domains in which action is taking place. This is why we have found it useful to delineate different domains as a way of making sense of the work being done at a particular point in time.

Creative management of work involves the worker in clarifying from time to time with clients or patients which domain is the main context marker for the particular episodes of work which are taking place at any point in time. This particularly needs to be articulated as a worker that makes it clear whether consent and understanding is required or not in a way that is coherent for the client, and other professionals or patients involved in any piece of work. Thus it is necessary to ensure that clients give assent to an understanding of the work being done. In episodes when this has not been clarified, unfortunate consequences frequently ensue. Similarly, action in one domain e.g. the investigation of child sexual abuse may involve a client or group of clients requesting that work done in the domain of explanations be done by someone other than the person involved in the investigation. In the experience in our culture it is almost universally devastating if you do not have consent to move across domains e.g. from investigation to therapy.

Both the production and explanations domain have as a higher context the aesthetic domain.

Domains and the Question of Confidentiality.

The agency context, professional role, code of ethics, legal framework of a society are all determinants of the range and limits in which confidentiality can be exercised. In the British context and probably in most other legal systems there may be no such thing as absolute confidentiality, eg unexpected disclosure of sexual abuse in a therapy interview necessitates the suspension of the confidentiality agreement to enable child protection action to be taken. Therefore a move from the domain of explanations to the domain of production takes place in such an episode. We find that it is a decision in the domain of aesthetics to establish the that of confidentiality at the outset of a piece of work with any group of clients. This attempts to ensure that the choice to make a disclosure of a particular sort which may entail action outside the limits of confidentiality is made within a clear understanding of this possibility.

SUMMARY

We have offered a view of communication and a way of systemic action in practice for human relations professionals encompassing all institutional roles including that of therapist, social controller, advisor, investigator, teacher etc. Human life and our "lived experience" is richer and more varied than anything which we have attempted to describe. It is our hope that beginning to think about systemic practice and the systemic professional using these ideas respects some of the complexity of the work which takes place in the meeting between those called professionals and those called clients.

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