



Exploring Gender and Subjectivity in Narrative Research

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In this article, Anna's occupational life history has been chosen to illustrate one woman's personal and professional struggle for purpose and identity. Subjective construction is an on-going process and roles and identities are in a constant flux of coping with the tensions between continuity and change. By partaking of private as well as professional experiences, strategies used to maintain Anna's personal integrity in changeable and often demanding contexts become clearer. Based on interviews, reflections, and discussions, Anna's story provides authentic insights into the ways in which one teacher has learnt to cope with the demands and challenges in her life.

Teachers' work is deeply embedded in teachers' lives, in their pasts, in their biographies, in the cultures or traditions of teaching to which they have become committed. Developing the teacher, therefore, also involves developing the person, developing the life. (Hargreaves, 1992, p. 233)

Ways in which teachers in general relate to aspects such as continuity and change and how this subsequently influences their teaching practice I believe to be of relevance and concern to all involved in teaching and educational processes. Tendencies towards continuity or change in education depend to a great extent on the ways in which teachers are able to critically reflect about how they think and what they do. Taking seriously what teachers have to say is, in fact, essential in order to understand the forces that, among other things, govern and sway teachers' thoughts and actions. Individual lives will always be influenced by the historical, cultural, and societal context of which they are a part. Life processes continue and individuals adapt and develop accordingly.

In an initial attempt at presenting authentic accounts of the lives and work of Montessori teachers (Malm, 2004, 2008), I chose a collaborative approach involving the researcher and the participant in a meaning-making process of interpretation and analysis, through the construction of occupational

life histories. I was interested in hearing about how teachers' conceptions of their professional roles reflect their own personal values, beliefs, and convictions; the underlying values determining their choice of profession; and their thoughts about the future. Our meetings were personal and open-hearted and we grew quite close during the duration of the study. That which had been intended as a collection of teachers' occupational life histories gradually became so much more. The stories developed into powerful emotional portrayals of women's lives in transition, often hesitant about the future and always influenced by the past.

From the original group of eight teachers who partook in the study, I here choose to present Anna's story. By so doing I hope to be able to illustrate some of the many ways in which teachers' conceptions of their professional roles reflect their own personal values, beliefs and convictions.

Theoretical Considerations

In a study based on the lives and work of female teachers in Sweden, Gannerud (1999) found that "gender differentiation in school follows the same patterns as in society" (p. 238). Based on the fact that "organisation of school work, views of knowledge and curriculum content provide an androcentrically biased view of the world (presented as gender neutral)," these factors perhaps "put the women teachers in a position where they contribute to reproduce, rather than change, the traditional gender patterns and the subordination of women" (p. 237). The teachers in her study expressed distinctions between their personal and professional selves:

They seem to develop a personal professionalism, related to building on both private experiences as women and professional experiences as teachers. They wish to develop personal and emotional relations to pupils and pupils' parents, but they do not want to create a private relationship. Their practical experience seems to be important in this process, but they also ask for more theoretical knowledge in areas such as psychology and social relations. (p. 237)

Gannerud also found that social relations with colleagues were of great significance:

Conversations and discussions between teachers take place everywhere and at every spare moment. These relations give emotional support in the conflicts and strains of daily work, and are also an arena for development of professionalism in the socio-emotional dimensions of work. Not the least, they create a common frame of reference in the teacher group, and a common professional identity. (p. 237)

Munro (1998) is interested in how women teachers construct themselves as subjects despite the fictions constructed about women teachers. She contends that the “negotiation of the gendered norms embedded in dominant discourses suggests that the subject is always in production” (p. 4). Significance lies in being able to recognise the various forms of “resistance” manifested through the continual construction of these women’s subjectivity:

By focusing on the personal narratives in the life histories of women teachers, how and why they tell their stories, as well as what they tell becomes significant in understanding forms of resistance. It was the life historians’ resistance to traditional notions of power, manifested in the continual construction of their subjectivity, which attuned me to the complex and contradictory ways in which women resist gender norms and name their agency. (p. 111)

Esseveld (1988) suggests that women’s efforts to create different forms of existence are limited and restricted by the possibilities of a particular time and place, although the past continues to be a significant factor. She writes that “for each woman there are things about the way she has lived her life, what she has or has not accomplished, how she has experienced herself and others, that focus as well as constrain her efforts” (p. 226). Skeggs (1997) refers to women’s temporal processes and the limited constraints of subjective construction, whereby women “deploy many constructive and creative strategies to generate a sense of themselves with value” (p. 162). Reinharz (1992) contends that feminist life histories “assist in a fundamental sociological task—illuminating the connections between biography, history and social structure” (p. 131).

Horsdal (1999) is particularly concerned with life histories as a context for the acquisition of greater insight contributing to personal development. She adheres to Schafer’s (1981) view of psychoanalysis as a hermeneutic discipline and that psychoanalytical dialogue (in this case between the researcher and the participant teacher) can have significant consequences for the construction of life histories in connection with individual development. She contends that when we describe ourselves to others through the use of narrative we are at the same time undergoing a process of self-construction. At the same time however, individual stories of identity transcend individual perspectives because the plots are influenced by the cultural stories each individual life is involved in (Horsdal, 1999, p. 76).

Tarule (1996) found that the women interviewed in her study “emphasise that the roots of their thinking are nourished by conversation and that dialogue is how they apprehend new understanding and reinterpret their thinking and their ideas” (p. 285). They asserted the importance of relationships “in their framing of their worldview, their values, their ethical stance, their view of themselves” (p. 281).

The life histories of women have been found to differ from those of men in regard to the strategies used to consciously organize as well as tell their lives (Passerini, 1989). Conventions and symbols used by women and men in telling their stories often reflect and make visible the cultural implications they are a part of. Women's life histories are often less consistently structured; the same ideas are varied (even contradicted) at different levels (Salminen-Karlsson, 1994, p. 30). The life history method has proved valuable to feminist research because it acknowledges the private and the personal; it diminishes the distance and inequality between the researcher and the researched; it gives the research object a chance to describe her reality with her own words; and it stresses the influence of the researcher's personal views and characteristics on the research results (Salminen-Karlsson, 1994, p. 62).

Walkerdine (1999) stresses the need for researchers to trust as well as recognise aspects of their own "subjectivities" and personal histories that are "telling" them something, and to build on these aspects. In a personal context this signifies awareness of how "I" is produced as a "subject." The researcher needs to consider the implications of questions such as: What part of me is the participant talking to? What part of me is interpreting/reacting? Walkerdine advocates working with, not against, subjectivity in research: i.e., using subjectivity as data. One of the fantasies of objectivity, she claims, is to believe that the researcher can leave out her/his own subjectivity from the research process. She writes: "No matter how many methodological guarantees we attempt to provide in an attempt at producing objectivity, even in what is seen as the most rigorous research the subjective always intrudes" (1997, p. 123). Walkerdine (1990) refers to femininity as "a performance" and describes girls stepping "out of one fiction and into another" (p. 123). The positioning of "fictions" in discourse is a relevant factor in qualitative research where the focus is often on subjectivities and normative values. In collaborative research this positioning becomes more complex when two subjects (the researcher and the participant) are involved in the production and analysis of research data over a longer period of time. Walkerdine advocates a psychoanalytical approach in trying to understand what she refers to as "the contradictions and emotions" involved in subjectivity. Helpful insights can thus be gained towards understanding the contradictory positioning in discourse, as well as how these contradictions are socially, culturally and historically constituted. As Walkerdine (1997) stresses, in the social sciences and in cultural studies the researcher is always an issue (p. 76).

Life history research involves collaboration on a very personal level. From the researcher's point of view, approaching another's life story often provides us with a deeper understanding of our own lives. As Atkinson (1998) points out, "the degree to which another's life story teaches us something depends on how open we are to learning from other people" (p. 71). The aim and general tendency, he continues, "is to find meaning in the story of another's

life from the meaning we carry within us” (p. 71). The ‘transaction-reaction’ (between the researcher and the narrator) in collaborative research Pamphilon (1999) believes to be one of the central issues in social science today.

The role of the life historian is to offer a narrative interpretation of someone else’s “text” or “story,” based on what that particular person has chosen to tell of his/her life at any specific moment in time. As such, the construction of narrative is a creative process and consequently life history research can be presented in many different ways, depending on the intentions of the researcher and the overall nature of the research. Goodson and Sikes (2001) do not believe that there is only one “proper” way of doing life history research. They write that “different projects will have their own features and requirements and each researcher is likely to have their own personal style and a unique engagement with any particular project” (p. 19).

Within educational research I have found teachers’ life and work histories to be the most complete and integrated approach to understanding the life of the individual in relation to his/her contemporary world. Life histories make it possible for each individual teacher to be presented in the light of his/her own personal attributes and unique qualities as well as in relation to a wider (historical, cultural) context.

One can never tell the “whole” story of a person’s life. Anna’s story presented here is based on my understanding and interpretation of the way in which she has told and interpreted her own life.

Anna’s Story

I met with Anna three times during my research study and this is an extract from her life story, as she experienced it during the time of our collaboration. She began by telling me about her family background and present status, and other interests in general.

She is in her early forties and has a younger brother. Her mother was at home during most of her childhood. She left home at the age of twenty and started studying to become a pre-school teacher. During this time she met her future husband and was expecting their first child when she was offered employment as a pre-school teacher. Today she is divorced and lives alone with her children. Being a mother of three, she feels, has inspired and helped her develop as a person. Being both a mother and a teacher, however, has been time-consuming. Outside school her family and friends have played an important part. She enjoys being out in nature and has a cottage by a lake. She enjoys reading and would like time left over to paint and learn to play the accordion. She feels she would like to be more active physically, but feels that at the moment she doesn’t really “have the time for it.” She has worked as a pre-school teacher for sixteen years and as a Montessori teacher (at the primary

level) for the last four years. She works in an urban municipal school and is the teacher of 31 students, 6-9 years old.

This Was Exactly What I Had Been Missing

Anna was working at a pre-school when the principal there suggested she attend a course in Montessori pedagogy. She had read about this pedagogy previously while working as a teacher-trainer for pre-school children, but then “it had not made any impression on me.” However, when she started the course she felt that “this was exactly what I had been missing! The holistic perspective and all that.” After this course Anna continued studying to become a Montessori teacher.

Starting to study again after some years in the profession has given her new insights; she feels that her teaching experience has been an asset. She feels that Montessori pedagogy has given her new and different possibilities she otherwise wouldn't have had.

Anna enjoys developing herself through relationships with the children and stresses the importance of feeling “whole” as a person and of having the ability to understand:

Everything is connected. How one sees the child has influenced me a lot. It is something that develops with age. In our profession a lot depends on experience. Things one did previously one becomes more aware of and thinks more about now. It's a process.

Anna believes that there is status connected to Montessori; that there is respect, curiosity, and that she is asked many questions from others regarding the pedagogy:

I feel it has more status today than previously. I think that the national curriculum complies in many ways with Montessori, although it's not made explicit. I don't think everyone realises this. But those who ask, those one speaks to, they have some insight into it. And even if one doesn't know exactly what Montessori is, one realises that it has to be something special. I'm happy to be a Montessori teacher.

Anna believes that she still has a lot to learn, especially in relation to the materials and their use. She can find it difficult motivating certain children, especially if they have difficulties, although she feels that she is good at “seeing” the children. She expresses concerns about different interpretations among teachers in regard to implementing the Montessori method of education.

A good teacher should be able to maintain the right balance in relationships with the students. Anna finds it difficult “when a power situation

is created between the teacher and a child”. A good day is when one has time to observe the children and feels satisfied that “one has contributed something to their development . . . when there is a balance; when one has done something satisfying. This includes both colleagues and children.”

I Feel There’s No Balance between My Professional and My Private Life

Anna mentions time as her main source of dissatisfaction and regrets never being able to be alone:

That’s what I feel most—that I don’t really get any time to myself. Neither at home nor at school. When I’m at work there’s something to do all the time, with no breaks. I feel there’s no balance between my professional and my private life. My professional life demands too much. I never get time to reload. I’m not the only one who feels this way. Most feel this after a while. Newly trained teachers start out thinking it’s fun, but they also end up there.

Anna has positive relations with her students. She feels that the children are able to come and talk to her. “I’m the type of person who wants to help those who have difficulties”.

In relation to Huberman’s (1993) career cycles, she says she sees a clear pattern in her life. She is still adapting to having gone through a divorce and sees herself in the “self-doubt” period. However, she says “I don’t want to be bitter.”

She says that she has good contact with most of the parents but mentions that one meets certain parents more than others. She has one parent who is “rather critical”; whether it’s of the teachers or the pedagogy she isn’t quite sure. However, as this parent’s “very negative as a person as well one has to take it for what it is. I don’t pay any heed.”

Now I’ve Started Questioning Things

Regarding collaboration with her colleagues, Anna feels that she can’t voice her opinions and that she’d like to be able to take more responsibility for her work:

I feel I have to be careful. I’ve been here a year now. First there’s the honeymoon phase and then the critical phase. That’s the one I’m in now and have been in for quite a while. At first I thought everything was wonderful. But now I’ve started questioning things. On the whole I like my colleagues, but I feel that I’d like to be able to take more responsibility. We

are four strong-willed people. I feel strong, but am probably quieter. I felt the same way when I started working as a pre-school teacher, that same phase.

She prefers working alone:

I think there are many teachers who'd prefer . . . it's still the case that many teachers have difficulty collaborating with each other. So I don't really know. When one reaches a certain age one prefers doing things alone. Or if there are two who move in the same direction. I can imagine being two. But four . . . It's difficult getting things to work. They split into two teams.

She feels her colleagues can become "aggressive, hard and irritated," and says "I don't enjoy being here." There is no longer any joy in working; she feels that she puts on an act, plays a part, "there's no real dialogue between us." She feels she wants something more. She can't "adjust" any longer; it was easier when one was younger. "Now it's more difficult because one wants to do that which one believes in."

I Don't Want To Continue Working Here

Anna believes in a positive future for Montessori, that the pedagogical base—the holistic viewpoint—will remain. Personally she feels that she is not yet finished with Montessori, even though she also feels that she is heading in another direction.

I have just started developing my role as a Montessori teacher and need to develop much further. I have developed as a person, in my attitude to life. It's a philosophy one partakes of, which to me has become clearer.

Regarding her own future she expresses a wish to do something else: "I don't want to continue working here." She says that even though she enjoys working with children, she "often feels inadequate." Her dream is to work in a bookshop, preferably her own. Much has happened to her lately; she feels that now she would like to "take a break in life."

Analysis of Anna's Situation

Anna told me that our collaboration over time had awakened many new thoughts in her. She thought a great deal about what we discussed between our meetings and felt that these new insights had helped her grow and develop as a person.

Anna demonstrates a clear awareness of her situation. She is able to identify conflicts and tensions and articulate reasons for them, although she is uncertain of how to tackle and solve them successfully in practice. The emotional tension between cognitive and emotional perspectives in the lives of teachers can be explored by identifying particular emotional regimes within school cultures. According to Zembylas (2005), some teachers are able to constitute their own spaces for emotional freedom in order to make their situation tolerable or meaningful; others are not, and their emotional suffering often results in teacher burnout. The fact that she is still working at the same school a year after our collaboration, albeit with older children and other subjects, and still feels that she wants to do something else, illustrates the difficult and time-consuming process of development that she finds herself in.

Regarding her professional role, she feels uncomfortable with her situation as a whole and expresses this by saying that she doesn't want to continue working at this particular school. She displays uncertainty, disliking power situations with the children, and often feels inadequate in her role as pedagogue. At the same time she enjoys the responsibility of taking care of and helping children with difficulties. Teacher commitment has been found to be a crucial predictor of teachers' work performance and is one of the most critical factors for the future success of education and schools (Crosswell and Elliot, 2004). It is considered a key factor as it heavily influences teachers' willingness to engage in cooperative, reflective and critical practice (Day, 2002).

However, relations with her colleagues are strained and to counter this Anna prefers situations where she can work alone. This can have serious consequences if one considers conversations with colleagues essential in order to create a common frame of reference as well as giving emotional support and being an arena for professional development (Gannerud, 1999). This is in line with Helsing (2007), who contends that "without an agreed upon knowledge base, the profession is beset by multiple and competing role expectations" (p. 1318). There is a need for teachers to address their uncertainties by forming relationships through collaborative practice.

Anna feels that she has to take unnecessary regard of other adults, that she has to be careful of what she says and feels and that she is not given enough space for her own initiatives or for taking responsibility. She longs for a certain kind of independence, where she can be herself.

Laursen (2004) defines authenticity as being the state of acting in accordance with one's own underlying values, a kind of teacher expertise closely related to the quality of teaching. He identifies the following competences related to authentic teachers: personal commitment, embodiment of the task, realistic intentions concerning teaching, working in contexts where these intentions can be realised, respect for students, intense co-operation with colleagues, and a continual striving towards personal and professional development. In Anna's case, there is frustration over being in a context where

her intentions cannot be realized and the fact that, as mentioned earlier, she has problems collaborating with her colleagues.

Maintaining one's personal integrity is a keystone quality of authenticity. Integrity is defined by Juul and Jensen (2003) as being "the individual's actual experience of the complementarities between inner and outer responsibility . . . it is a relational experience undergoing constant change and—ideally—growth" (p. 42, my translation).

When teachers do not feel in control of what they consider to be valued working conditions, they experience vulnerability. The basic structure in vulnerability "is always one of feeling that one's professional identity and moral integrity, as part of being 'a proper teacher,' are questioned and that valued workplace conditions are thereby threatened or lost" (Kelchtermans, 2005, p. 997).

Avoiding conflicts, however, can have negative consequences. When teachers work together, "they value appreciation and acknowledgement as well as personal support and acceptance, but tend to avoid disagreement and conflict, whether they regard themselves as close friends or as more distant colleagues" (Hargreaves, 2001, p. 503). This, the author argues, significantly impedes opportunities for improvement.

The ways we speak about our lives has significance, and it was evident during our conversations that Anna's private life played an overwhelmingly large part in the way she experienced and implemented her professional role. Her oft-times lack of self-confidence could, in retrospect, be traced back to her personal experiences with her parents, her husband, and her children.

The fact that she is still adapting to having gone through a divorce can possibly account for the uncertainty she feels in her professional accomplishments, with contradictions and wavering between wanting to and at the same time not daring to; of being careful in one's dealings with others, taking others into account, at the expense of one's own wishes and desires. Perhaps she feels that she is not "worth" the attention, although her heart tells her otherwise. It seems that, over the years, she has adapted and got used to putting herself in second place.

It is obvious that Anna feels she has always been trying to live up to the expectations of others. The ways in which gender roles have been defined within the family have been of great significance to her life. In regard to her mother, who was at home during most of her childhood, Anna says she would have preferred it had her mother worked instead:

It wasn't her own choice. It has made me think about my own situation. How important it is to do the things one feels like doing.

When she was younger, her father wanted her to be a nursery-school teacher, so she could be home during the summers. “He never considered the fact that I could have been a teacher instead.” Her mother wanted her to go to art school. “Looking back I should have listened to her, but I didn’t have enough self-confidence.” Today the relationship with her mother is strained. “I can’t speak to her about anything.” She thinks this is because her mother was against her divorce, mainly due to the fact that there were three children involved. She felt there were certain expectations:

Anna: That I should sacrifice myself for my children and remain here. That my time would come when the children were grown. I feel that I have to be careful that I don’t end up there again. So much is happening around me.

Interviewer: If you’d remained in your marriage, what do you think would have happened?

Anna: I’d have gone on sacrificing myself. [My husband] was King. I was the one who was working. I’ve supported the whole family. I took care of the farm, even though I was studying half-time. I’m scared of it happening again. I know that I have that kind of behaviour inside me, that which I have gained insight into, now. Why I felt drawn to it the way I did, for example.

Interviewer: Have you been able to speak to your daughter about it?

Anna: Yes, I have. I put [my husband] on a pedestal and she put her father on a pedestal. Now everything has collapsed and her reality feels all wrong. Even though I understood what was going on, what he had done, I just couldn’t get myself to . . . (*long pause*).

Interviewer: How has this made you feel?

Anna: I’ve been bitter. But right now I don’t have any hate left, for him. He’s started becoming rather neutral.

Interviewer: Are you happy that you’ve been through this now, instead of perhaps in ten years’ time?

Anna: I'm very happy for it. I'm still able to understand why I remained in my marriage. I've felt that I have allowed this to happen to me. The children were quite big when it happened. At least they've had a family for many years. Getting divorced when the children are small and letting them grow up with a step-mother, not being able to speak to one another in the same way, that I wouldn't have been able to The time hasn't been right before now.

Anna's reflections and insight show that she has come to some kind of acceptance and understanding of her life. An ethic of care is also evident in her comment about not being able to split a family if the children are very young. She has come to terms with why she stayed in her marriage as long as she did, what it was that went wrong, and how she intends to continue her life.

In personal discussions such as this, it is important that the participant feels that he/she is being understood, especially at critical points in the conversation:

Anna: I find it difficult expressing what I really mean. What you said about "harmony," that was exactly what I was trying to express. And when you said "borderlands," that was exactly what I meant.

The interviewer's intuition is important in such instances in order to allow an authentic dialogue to continue, i.e., creating a platform for collaborative understanding. This coincides with Horsdal's (1999) view of life histories as a context for the acquisition of greater insight, i.e., a process of self-construction influenced by the cultural stories each individual life is involved in.

Describing the process of continuity and change in women's roles and identity, Esseveld (1988) suggests that women's efforts to create different forms of existence are limited and restricted by the possibilities of a particular time and place, although the past continues to be a significant factor. This is evident in Anna's description of her situation. Although each particular time and place has its own influences, Anna carries the past with her and learns to cope with the present by constantly revising the past. New insights should thus be able to lead to further growth and development. This is not always easy to do by oneself; critical friends or critical incidents are often necessary to spark off new initiatives leading towards change and hopefully also to improvements of one's situation (Tripp, 1993). Munro (1998), for example, found that change need not be revolutionary; that resistance and working towards change can manifest itself in many different ways, depending on the continual construction of the teacher's subjectivity in relation to different realities. As Hargreaves (1996) suggests, there needs to be a genuine desire for change, "based on personal choice and related to each teacher's own private understanding and

creativity in regard to strategy, courage of conviction and direction of values” (p. 18). Not all teachers are prepared to implement changes in their lives even though their desire for change may be strong.

Concluding Comments

A year after our final meeting, Anna wrote the following letter to me:

Since the beginning of the autumn term I’ve been working as an assistant teacher at the upper primary level in a team consisting of three teachers with children in Grades 4, 5 and 6. I’ve arranged it so that I’m in each class one day a week. In addition to this I give lessons in science, music and art. These are three traditional classes, but in one of the classes the teacher is interested in Montessori pedagogy. At the moment I’m busy producing grammar material so I haven’t let go of Montessori education. Working with older children is fun and stimulating, but also strenuous. One develops a lot. It’s also instructive being able to observe how three teachers work. I can accept certain ways of working and discard others. But my dream is to be able to work with something else, become more independent. Having to show consideration and adjusting to so many relationships drains one of strength. In my private life my oldest child has moved away from home. Life is ok—with its joys as well as its setbacks.

The stories we tell of our lives reveal that which we feel to be of relevance or significance to us at a particular instance in time. Subjective construction is an on-going process; roles and identities are in a constant flux of coping with the tensions between continuity and change. When I started meeting with Anna to discuss her professional practice, I did not expect to be drawn into conversations of such a profoundly personal nature. Relationships are complex and build on life experiences. Good relationships are also fundamental to teaching which, as Hargreaves (1998) contends, is “an emotional practice” (p. 835).

Dinan Thompson (2001) maintains that the emotional connectedness of self and others in interactions and dialogical relationships is the key to the exploration of teacher change. In what she calls “the quest for authentic teacher change,” Dinan Thompson argues that developing emotional understanding in all interactions between teachers, administrators and change agents is important in order for teaching to become “open” practice (p. 7). It aims to construct a supportive, collaborative culture that provides the context for sharing emotions, beliefs, values, ideologies and pedagogies. It also encourages teachers to be lifelong learners, to look inward as well as outward for growth, to make mistakes and learn from them. This should hopefully lead to teachers creating and reconstructing the culture rather than receiving it (p. 7).

Having given Anna the opportunity of describing and understanding her reality demonstrates the value of using life histories as a context for the acquisition of greater insight. When distance and inequality between the researcher and the participant are diminished, new paths towards deeper understanding and insights are revealed. By acknowledging the private and the personal we are at the same time acknowledging the significance of the whole person and as such the crucial part played by the emotions in our daily lives. Pedagogical encounters are relational encounters and the fundamental significance of the emotions cannot be ignored (Malm, 2009). Through meaningful dialogue, as here in collaboration between the researcher and participant, new apprehensions of understanding are formed, thoughts and ideas reinterpreted, and personal development enhanced.

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