Sociological Field Work Is Essential in Studying Community Values

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The author presents the method of field work, or participant observation, as an alternative to surveys and statistical measurement in the analysis of information about community values. With specific reference to the Brookline-Elm project in Massachusetts, the author demonstrates the value of the field work approach to information-gathering. The difficulties of the subjectiveness of this approach and the value of findings from the use of this method are compared to the limitations of more objective procedures and the value of findings from such studies. The conclusion is drawn that field work is most useful in developing an understanding of community values and that more objective methods are useful primarily in conjunction with the field work technique.

●IN A DAY when many social scientists struggle for mathematical precision in their work, it is understandable that people wishing to evaluate the impact of a planned highway on an area would turn to residential linkages, economic and movement measures, demographic data, and scalable answers to questionnaire items on surveys (2, 3, 4, 5, 12, 13, 17, 18, 22). It would be pleasant to be able to measure objectively the values of people in a neighborhood so as to be able to come to terms simply with the question of whether to take the neighborhood, to try to recreate it after a highway has been built, or to leave it alone. The impact of a highway on community values, structure, and activities, it is implied, is too complex, however, to reduce to simple formulas. Problems in the relationship of highway to the community through which it cuts are succinctly put by Thiel (23):

> For many people, the opening of a new freeway means gaining precious minutes driving downtown or perhaps a more convenient trip to a major city. It may mean a few more shows in town or a few more days at the shore each year. Each mile seems to bring us a little closer to the safe, efficient road network that today's automobiles demand. But to the people in residential areas adjacent to a highway or to the people displaced when right-of-way is acquired, a proposed highway may not seem to be such a blessing. These people may wonder whether the advantages from the easier mobility provided by the highway are sufficient to outweigh the disadvantages, particularly when the disadvantages may not be known for sure.
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> Are apprehensions about traffic noise and exhaust fumes justified? In areas that might be called "socially stable," should right-of-way payments reflect such intangible factors as friendships and social relationships? For displaced people who are unable to find comparable housing, is it enough to compensate for fair market value (or fair market value plus a nominal allowance for moving)? What comfort can we take from the fact that residents relocated from highway right-of-way typically improve their living conditions if this upgrading results because the relocated resident cannot find housing in the price range of his former home?

The thesis of this paper is that quantitative methods alone are insufficient for examining community values and that field work, the qualitative sociological and anthropological research method par excellence, is essential to such an enterprise.

THE FIELD WORK METHOD

Field work, in both sociology and anthropology, means extensive and intensive observation in the field itself of what is going on there. It is aimed at the attempt to get a "feel" for a whole, to discern major and general patterns of relationships, activities, life styles, values, traditions, goals, and aspirations, and to identify and understand details within the whole. Formal graduate training in anthropology requires the doctoral candidate to spend a year or more in a community small enough to comprehend. Although the candidate is free to focus on whatever problems of kinship, linguistics, trade, productivity, war, or anything else that especially interests him, he is expected to be able to describe and feel the "sense" of the community, tribe, or village that he chooses for study. In recent years, some anthropologists have selected urban American communities for their doctoral and post-doctoral field work, thus breaking with the tradition of studying esoteric non-Western, pre-industrial cultures.

An excellent recent example of urban anthropology and of field work at its best is Liebow's study (15) of a small number of black street corner men in Washington, D.C. In this remarkable book, Liebow challenges the assumption that poor people are "different" and enjoy their way of life. His evidence suggests that, for example, family and job instability common among the poor are functions of repeated failure to surmount extraordinary circumstances of prejudice and group expectations of failure. He demonstrates that ill-paying jobs with no chance of promotion work against plans and hopes for individual "betterment" and suggests that a decent wage at a decent job is a prerequisite for self-esteem, stable families, and steady employment.

Sociologists also do field work in urban settings. By now the similarities between their concerns and methods and those of anthropologists are far more striking and significant than the differences.

What is field work, then, and why do I recommend it for understanding community values? And what is qualitative analysis in social science?

The field worker enters a situation new to him by spending as much time as he can there. Ideally, he moves to the field site and spends a year or so in full-time participant observation. Alternatively, he lives near enough to the site to visit it daily or almost daily and to find his way into many aspects of life there. He enters the field with some trained understanding of how to proceed and some awareness of how other field workers have observed, classified, and interpreted their data. But he tries as fully as possible to suspend his awareness of others' categories and to enter the field in an open frame of mind. He does not, in other words, begin with an elaborate set of hypotheses or expectations; he arrives, rather, with diffuse questions vaguely defined. Ideally, he keeps himself open, not oblivious to his and others' previous work on similar questions, but deliberately tries to minimize its effect on him. He wants to be as open as possible in his observations and interpretations.

THE BROOKLINE-ELM PROJECT

As I recently completed a major field work project related to studies of community values, I will use this project to illustrate the principles outlined here. In 1965, I became aware that the Massachusetts Department of Public Works intended to build an 8-lane Inner Belt expressway through parts of Cambridge, Somerville, Boston, and Brookline. I was not interested in highways or transportation planning at the time, but in protest movements. As some four to five thousand people lived along the Cambridge segment of the projected Belt, I wondered if some of them might organize into a movement to oppose the road. My initial concern was with the dynamics of social protest: Why do some people resist events that would disrupt their lives? Why do others stand passively by, observing only, or even oblivious to whatever movement is in process? With these general concerns in mind or, as I put it earlier, with diffuse questions vaguely defined, I decided to begin a field work project. I was living then (as now) about a mile from the pathway of the planned Belt. I did not move to the area, but for a summer I spent much time walking around and talking with people in a very informal way.

The first day of my work was simply a long, slow walk along the 2-mile corridor involved; I took notes when I could do so inconspicuously and typed up as full an account of my observations as I could afterward. On subsequent days, I stopped and talked to people who looked as if they had time to spare me—a grocer in a small store, a young married man on his front steps, an old lady on her porch, a withered, crippled fellow sitting on a wooden stoop, a lady locksmith, a cafe owner, a filling station operator, and so on. I talked with each about the neighborhood, how long they had lived there, what they liked and disliked about their homes and neighborhoods, their impressions of the likelihood of the Belt coming through, and who they thought was behind it.

Within a few months, a protest movement had started. Although I had assumed that somehow protest would get under way, I did not know how or by whom. It might never have happened at all. But as it did, I found that my familiarity with the ecology of the area and some of its people helped me understand references and feelings that arose commonly at protest meetings and rallies. The fact that people organized at all suggested some degree of cohesion and neighborhood involvement that I needed to know more about.

As my work progressed, I found myself paying more and more attention to people's ties to their homes, neighborhoods, local institutions, and nearby relatives and friends. I began to see these ties and the length of time people had resided in their home and neighborhood (often at more than one address) as criteria relevant to their strength of feelings about wanting to leave or not wanting to leave where they lived.

It became clear that for many the Brookline-Elm area (Brookline and Elm are the principal streets the Belt would replace in Cambridge) had significant characteristics of a village. Gans found that the old West End of Boston, leveled and its low-income population removed for luxury high-rise buildings, was an "urban village." For many residents, life's meaning and the day's events were concentrated almost exclusively within a few blocks of home. Gans' field study stands as a major indictment of urban renewal programs that displace stable low-income families housed in modest but sound structures and, along with the related work of Fried and his associates, appears to have influenced city planners at least sometimes to avoid the kind of disruption of coherent communities that characterized the West End renewal project ($\underline{11}$, $\underline{7}$, $\underline{9}$, $\underline{8}$, $\underline{19}$).

I found the Brookline-Elm people living lives intensely concentrated in Brookline-Elm, much in the manner of Gans' urban villagers in Boston.

With training, the field worker brings to his work concepts that allow him to make sense of his observations and to convey that sense to others. The difference between this method and that of sophisticated journalism is simply that the anthropologist or sociologist is more likely to discover clearly conceptualized parameters of interaction, institutional structure, and values by virtue of awareness of theoretical and empirical work others have done on these matters.

I discovered in my study that many people lived in what social scientists call an "extended kinship pattern." Relatives—often many of them—of a given family lived within a few minutes' walk and were visited frequently. This finding gave me the idea that planners usually consider the single household as the basic unit of relocation and by doing so ignore the possibility of its having important strong social ties to other households nearby. When I began my study, I was not looking for that information about families. Rather, my training in sociology, including familiarity with work like that of Gans, stored the concept of different kinds of family structures somewhere behind my consciousness. As I talked with neighborhood people and heard them discuss their relationships with nearby relatives, the concept occurred to me and I was able eventually to organize and interpret some of my information accordingly.

One danger of field work is that the observer can tend to select what impresses him as interesting and significant and, unwittingly, screen out the rest. If one is trying to characterize a community or a series of neighborhoods accurately, some random sampling procedure for interviewing should be used so that one does not inadvertently miss people who are not at home when he walks by or tend to favor people with interesting faces, appealing houses, extended families, or the like. In my study, I believed I could best avoid this kind of bias by conducting a systematic random sample survey of 120 people, or about 10 percent of the units that would be displaced by construction of

the Belt. The questionnaire sought demographic data, uses of homes and neighborhoods, and knowledge, opinions, and feelings about the Belt and about protest.

One clear and slightly startling finding that came from this combination of field work and survey would have been otherwise very difficult to come by. State authorities claim that the Brookline-Elm people are highly transient and number among them a large student population, transient by definition. In other words, they claim that little is there worth preserving. Interestingly enough, the state's relocation study for Brookline-Elm does not substantiate those claims, even though they are made within it. Yet it was unlikely, it seemed to me, that the state would have exactly the opposite impression to that I had gained in the field. I was aware of some problems with the questionnaire used by the state agency conducting the relocation survey (a technical critique of that survey is available): One was that the interviewers did not address themselves to questions that would yield information about residents' ties to each other and to institutions nearby. They were not even asked how long they had lived in their homes and neighborhoods.

My work revealed, nonetheless, that in some ways the state claim for high transiency was right. And in some ways it was wrong. To put it precisely, my sample revealed a striking bimodal distribution, with a population of about 35 percent (few of whom were students) who had lived in the area under 4 years and were clearly using it as a stopping place on their way to the suburbs. But my associates and I discovered another large group, about 48 percent, who had lived over 10 years in the Brookline-Elm area (37 percent had lived there more than 20 years) and whose lives were built around where they lived. In other words, an agency anxious to uproot an area might point to its least rooted people and conclude that the operation would be painless. But the deeply rooted would have to be considered too. My guess is that the state agency conducting the relocation study did not find this bimodal distribution because it did not know enough to look for the kinds of information, like duration lived in the area, that yielded that distribution. The questions it asked did not show anything approaching a full understanding of the population with whom the agency was dealing.

Another example of an important discovery that would have been unlikely with an investigative method other than field work: Public agencies are not likely to ask interviewees questions about race and ethnicity. It is all but taboo now to pry into such matters or even notice them, and anyway what would they possibly have to do with relocation? As a sociologist who happens to like human diversity, I could not help noticing almost immediately that people I spoke with along the Brookline-Elm route had Italian names, Irish names, Portuguese names, Puerto Rican names, Polish names, French Canadian names, and old American names. They had white faces and black faces, and the church-goers attended Roman Catholic churches, Lithuanian churches, Baptist churches, and others. I seemed to be in the midst of a microcosm of New York City. From field observations and from newspapers and reports of various kinds, I learned that the different groups in the area lived in harmony surpassing what one might expect in an urban setting. This appeared to be one of the most richly varied, heterogeneous areas of Cambridge or any other city. In a time of growing tensions among racial and ethnic groups, this appeared a rare area indeed, almost a model where minorities live peacefully side by side.

My observations and findings are that most of the people I was studying like their neighborhoods and want to preserve them, value their relationships with nearby relatives and friends, value their proximity to churches, schools, and shopping facilities, are pleased with the ethnic and racial diversity of their neighbors, and have strong feelings of attachment to the little piece of property they own or rent and have worked to improve over the years. All this merged with my strong impression that many residents find a comfort and security in day-to-day encounters with familiar faces, buildings, and streets. This led me to believe that if a highway were to destroy this area as it now stands, it could not be recreated there or elsewhere at a later time. A minority might wind up in circumstances more satisfactory to them, but no relocation program, not even an elaborate, phased-building, high-rise community over a depressed highway, would undo the destruction of what had been.

OBJECTIVITY AND SUBJECTIVITY IN SOCIAL RESEARCH

At this point the reader might feel, with some good reason, that this account is becoming impossibly soft-headed and sentimental. Because someone has to sacrifice in order that an urban highway be built, some people often argue that it is well to get along with the business of how to minimize sacrifice. This leads to a crucial consideration in sociological and anthropological field work that I believe any planner or engineer must seriously consider: In research methods that attempt to quantify worth, attitudes, and values, one tends to dismiss sentiments and to maintain an objective, dispassionate stance toward the data of one's observation.

When the field worker encounters old ladies who weep that the block they live on is their "whole life" and men who bitterly complain that government does not care about them, he can either dismiss them with a wave of the hand or listen and incorporate their feelings in his report. If he does the latter, he is open to accusation by engineers, planners, and most social scientists alike that he has lost his objectivity. In other words, one is said to be objective if he ignores feelings, and subjective or sentimental if he includes them as crucial data in his investigation.

In social science research, I contend, the equation of objectivity with dispassion is not an objective or value-free position at all but rather a highly subjective and value-laden stance. As planners and social scientists move rapidly toward consideration of impact of proposed roads on communities, I have the impression that concern with people's use of money, motion, and time is considered rational and objective, while attention to people's feelings is considered sentimental and soft.

But why is it valid in planning to assume that human economic affairs are more real than human feelings? I submit that any investigator is more comfortable with unambiguous measures than with gestalten and impressions, however systematically and carefully they are gathered. To put it more extremely, a study suggesting that anticipated life earnings be used as a measure of human worth (20) is easier to handle than one that argues that the dignity of human emotions is as real as total life earnings or, indeed in some critical ways, more real.

The planner and engineer, like the sociologist, must admit that the wishes, fears, longings, and goals of people—all aspects of and expressed in their values if you will—cannot be measured in ways that yield precise discrete or continuous variables. Although survey questionnaires can raise questions of value and can even scale replies accordingly to continua like strongly agree, agree, slightly agree, slightly disagree, disagree, strongly disagree, they cannot combine such responses meaningfully into single indexes or locate them meaningfully into a complex of interactions, sentiments, and values.

Feelings and values, to put it bluntly, are as real in the study milieu as are money and time measures, but they cannot be quantified accordingly. To accept as true the ambiguity and complexity of values and feelings is difficult for a scientist because he must enter into areas that threaten to discomfort him and to push his thinking beyond where he expected to go.

What is possible and real is defined, after all, not by uninvolved observers suspended in the cosmos but by people, with interests of various kinds, in bureaucratic and political positions of authority. The very definition of a road plan as an unalterable "given," for example, sidesteps the all-important issue of whether in some cases the issue might properly be not where to locate a highway but whether to build it at all, or whether to look for alternative transportation systems. One can even argue that the planner who decides not to think planning issues out to these kinds of ramifications is responding too much to feelings—the feelings of political authorities and economic interests that grand visions of elaborate highway networks must not be altered too much. The planner automatically takes into account the values and feelings of people who support and build highways. It is fully logical and rational also to take into account the values and feelings of any people the highway would affect. If the planner allows himself to face the complexity of the lives his plan would disrupt, then he must attempt to understand those lives from their point of view.

One common response of planners to the problem of whether low- and low-middle income people ought to be moved is, "I myself would not mind it." Indeed, one highly intelligent government official pointed out to me that his family had moved to Washington not long before and not only did not suffer the move but enjoyed the new part of the country and the new life they found there. I pointed out that his family's move was voluntary (there is an enormous difference between moving of one's own initiative and being forced against one's will), was connected with a move upward in income and prestige (rarely the case for low- and low-middle income urban displacees), was probably to a better house and neighborhood (also seldom true for those forced out by highway construction or urban renewal), and was likely to a better job (another highly unlikely chance for a displacee). These are all consequences for upper-middle class people whose moves are connected with career and status aspirations. None of them applies to most people displaced by highway development.

THE FIELD WORK PROJECT

The trained field worker suspects that the social reality of a community lies in people's day-to-day activities there and in the human relationships that surround and comprise those activities. Not all planners can engage in field work, but they can read the reports of those who do. (I would argue that all planners and engineers should have some personal familiarity with areas they would affect. Regardless of whether it is work done "under orders," a planner or engineer whose work would disrupt others' lives has a grave human responsibility. It ought not to be sidestepped by refusing to see—literally—the people involved.)

Suppose a highway planning agency were to hire one or more trained field workers to examine an area it thought might be convenient for highway location. The field worker would ideally move to the area for a few months to a year; at the least, he would visit it daily, or nearly so, for that period of time. He would write up elaborate, careful notes on what he sees and hears and on conversations he has. In the field he would familiarize himself first with surface data. Where are the houses, the stores, the professional and service facilities, schools, and churches that involve the people who would be displaced by the highway? He would examine through observation and interviews their relationships with the residents and with each other and begin to get some idea of use patterns: Do people in the area use nearby facilities for much of their needs, or might they be oriented beyond the perimeters of the immediate neighborhoods where they live? To put it yet another way, To what extent are people tied to their immediate surroundings?

Second, the field worker would investigate interrelationships and interactions. By spot intensive interviewing he would get some idea of how many people depend for emotional and other sustenance on relatives and on friends living in the vicinity. If it indeed turns out that much social life is based on relationships with people living within a short walk of the typical resident, he would have to explain the difficulties of potential relocation of family and friendship units, and of breaking up such units by forcing some people to move away while others remain behind.

Third, the field worker could gain some idea of depth of ties to the area by learning how long people have lived in their present homes and in the same area. (It is common in working-class neighborhoods, for example, for people to move from one apartment or house to another, just a few steps or blocks away. All significant relationships with people and institutions remain essentially unchanged.)

Fourth, the field worker, by talking with many people about many things and by observing people at churches, PTA meetings, bars, bazaars and dances, laundromat, and grocery store, gets a "feel" for the area of investigation, for the strength or brittleness of people's ties to places and other people, and for all manner of special events and problems that cannot possibly be foreseen or discovered by survey research methods.

Conceivably, after this kind of investigation, a field worker's data would indicate that a given area is not particularly worth preserving. It might, for example, turn out to be a set of neighborhoods of high transiency rates; residents might see the place they live

as a brief respite from a move upward or downward and have no strong attachments to it. Or it might be a place where people bed and board but do little else, i. e., their friends, relatives, shopping, churches, schools, and other facilities might be located such that walking convenience is not an issue in their lives. Houses to be demolished might be ones that residents want to see demolished. One could well imagine a group of residents leaping at the chance to move away from a block they do not like and helping design new quarters elsewhere.

The point is that one cannot very well determine these attitudes and feelings by questionnaires alone or by demographic data. The kinds of information yielded by those techniques are helpful (I used both kinds in the Brookline-Elm study) but are best used in combination with field methods.

ADVANTAGES OF FIELD WORK

The field study enables the investigator to portray to the agency hiring him an area as a living complexity. He can move beyond simple statistics of length of residence and value of home to style of life and its meaning for residents. The very notion of community values suggests that individual interviewing is insufficient for what I am talking about here. Individuals can be interviewed about their values, but the community (whatever it is) cannot. Field work is, in a manner of speaking, the closest we can get to interviewing a community. This is not to imply that a geographically and socially specific area exists as a "community" but simply that relationships, activities, attitudes, and loyalties within a given area can be described at a level more complex and general than the individual.

Field work is one of the most difficult social science research methods. It cannot be reduced to mechanical procedures and, most significantly, engages the whole person of the field worker. He must not only have experience in observing, recording, and interpreting what he sees, he must also have the willingness to open himself to his data in such a way as to bring his own personal intellectual and emotional reactions to play as part of his method. For instance, he must be willing to hold open to question his concepts of upper-class or middle-class or working-class or lower-class behavior. He may find dignity and strengths where he did not know they existed. I found in my study of a predominantly working-class area that at the beginning my sensibilities were offended by certain smells and sights. Kerosene heating units leave a trace of foul odor months beyond the end of the winter heating season. Unkempt house exteriors offend the middle-class eye (these are characteristics that describe a minority of sights and smells encountered, but they hit me powerfully). Little neighborhood stores where people lounge around and chew the fat unnerve the citizen accustomed to making his trips to modern shops and stores quickly and in a strictly businesslike fashion. But I found, as any investigator can if he is willing, depths of meaning and feeling for which I was unprepared.

Another example of personal unexpected changes is that an honest field worker may find himself on occasion questioning the methods and wisdom of planning agencies and officials, public and private. After I was well into my Brookline-Elm study and started learning how highways were designed and by whom, I wondered whether public transit options had been fully considered by the agencies responsible for the Inner Belt design. When I discovered that public transit and highway construction were handled by different state agencies, so that it was not to the advantage or the custom of the highway planning agency to consider an overall transportation system as its proper field of concern, my mind reeled. Whether at this point in the development of metropolitan Boston other forms of urban transportation might be developed in place of just another highway had never, apparently, been considered by the state planners. (A federally sponsored restudy currently under way takes this issue into account at least partially.) My mind continued to reel.

The field worker might find some common notions of a political process in a democratic society subject to reconsideration in the course of his work. In my study, to continue to use it as my prime example, I found gradually that I had to face the fact that people who chose not to engage in protest did not thereby signify their endorsement

of a highway plan or their indifference to it, as state officials claimed and I also had once assumed. Rather, my field work and allied questionnaire study informed me that most nonparticipators felt absolutely impotent, hopeless, helpless. Convinced by experience that planning agencies gave not a damn about their lives and would not respond in any meaningful way to their cries, they simply sat back and waited for what they considered the inevitable. As respondent after respondent put it, "Once the government makes up its mind what it is going to do, nothing can make it change its mind or stop it." Feelings of bitterness, the classical "alienation from the political system" that political scientists and political sociologists write about, hit me in the face wherever I turned (1, 10, 11, 14, 16, 21). I will try to work out the implications of this finding in a forthcoming book and have attempted to begin to deal with them in another article (6).

The good field worker allows his field experience to be intense, emotionally and intellectually, and allows himself to grow and change as one does in any intense situation. His sponsors ideally also allow his work to affect them. That is, they do not hire him to prove anything about the nature of the area they send him to study. They allow the data to unfold and demand that the field worker make explicit as many as possible of his assumptions.

It is one of the complicated by-products of field work that the investigator may be tempted to become an advocate for the people he studies. The agency may be committed to a "broad" view and eschew such advocacy, but if it hopes to give all views a fair shake, and not allow the broad view to obscure the limited view, then it ought to encourage work that will allow it a glimpse at complex local and personal meanings it otherwise never can learn.

CONCLUSION

In sum, the strongest contention of this paper is that human feelings are inseparable from values and are not the proper province only of therapists, ministers, and social workers. In the matter of highway planning, the planner can and must sensitize himself to the subtleties of people's living patterns, beliefs, opinions, values, and feelings. These are as real in the planning environment as are any economic goals and criteria of evaluation. The fullness and richness of the human issues cannot be quantified, cannot be fed into a multiple regression analysis, cannot be programmed into a computer; they can be reached only by intensive qualitative study in the field. Demographic and survey methods can valuably supplement but cannot replace sociological field work.

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Discussion

HAROLD HANDERSON, Office of High Speed Ground Transportation, U.S. Department of Transportation—The title of this paper disturbs me. Field work is an appropriate means for developing an awareness of the complexity of relationships that might characterize a social group or for checking on existing value hypotheses and survey research results. It is also one means for increasing the communication and the understanding that should exist between the analysts and planners, the analyzed and planned-for. One way to foster this latter objective might be to provide field work experience for graduate sociology, social psychology, and anthropology students in neighborhoods and in planning groups.

Surveys may not be based on a solid structure of hypotheses as Dalkey (24), among others, has noted. The idea of routinely relying on relatively time-consuming field work to do nothing more than develop a single researcher's feel for a neighborhood, however, strikes me as awfully inefficient. I agree that increased understanding that may result from unobtrusive field work is valuable, but it seems to me that much more could be gained, more rapidly, by having one or more social researchers informally attached to existing citizen-participatory programs like those under the Model Cities legislation to observe or participate or both in the development of the required neighborhood analyses and improvement programs. The U.S. Department of Transportation and Department of Housing and Urban Development ought to be able to encourage local universities throughout the country to provide a carefully designed combination of

field work, training, and research in the milieu. Such a line of action would appear to provide several benefits: (a) more personnel experienced in social analysis and reporting, and an increase in the research capability available in this area; (b) improved conditions for communication among the groups that should be involved in local improvement programs; and (c) timely development of relevant, acceptable local improvement programs.

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