

POLICY IMPLICATIONS FROM A STUDY OF MARGINALITY THEORY AND AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This study utilizes marginality theory constructs to examine experiences and feelings of racism among a population of African-American students at a mid-sized urban university. Specifically, this is a policy piece that incorporates an analysis of both social conditions that sustain marginality and individual factors that affect marginality. An extensive discussion of proposed interventions is offered. The larger implication is the application of sociological theory to sociological practice.

While academic integration offers distinct benefits, it sometimes produces difficult, even painful encounters for students brought together from different backgrounds. Frequently college and university officials do not prepare for issues involving racial bigotry (King & Ford 2003). When students perceive an environment as unwelcoming because of race, their desire to continue attending college diminishes and minority students are more likely than White students to report experiencing disrespect (Zea, Reisen, Beil & Caplan 1997). Through a discussion of the concept of *marginality*, this paper examines issues of academic achievement and proposed interventions for the African-American student population.

KEY CONCEPTS

Marginality theory offers several advantages to studying human behavior. First, this theory stresses the sociological components of behavior. The concepts investigated in this study are *social* products. Reactions to marginality are not formed in a vacuum. They evolve over time as the individual interacts with significant social groups, such as family, peers, and social institutions. Second, this theory offers a life course perspective on behavior. Marginality theory assumes that human development is a lifelong process. As the individual encounters new experiences throughout the life course, the opportunity for change and adaptation constantly presents itself. Development does not cease at the end of childhood or adolescence, but rather occurs each time that an individual experiences a significant change in the life course. College is only one major change; career patterns, marriage, parenthood, and retirement all offer substantial opportunities for personal development. Techniques and

strategies developed from earlier experiences may or may not be relevant. Marginality theory offers an additional approach to investigating success or failure in major life transitions.

The crux of this investigation is the individual's reaction to the conditions of marginality and its ramifications for successful adaptation and identity development (Fordham & Ogbu 1986). This assumes that the individual who is subjected to the conditions of marginality will develop a reaction to these conditions and that, in turn, this reaction can affect one's emerging sense of identity. The model suggests that factors within the various components serve to engender a reaction to marginality. The model proposes that there is a range of reactions to and interpretations of marginality. Each of these reactions has a differential effect on the behavior of the individual. Without this range, the theory could not exist. When first conceptualized for study, the marginal situation was theorized as producing a personality type (Park 1928; Stonequist 1935). However, recent research reveals that this "type" is only one of several reactions possible when faced with the conditions of marginality (Rimstead 1995).

Based on standing literature, it is conceivable to identify at least six distinct reactions that could be expected from individuals in a marginal situation and used as a starting point for investigation:

1. Affected

Increased sensitiveness, self-consciousness, and race-consciousness, an indefinable *malaise*, inferiority and various compensatory mechanisms, are common traits in the marginal person. (Stonequist 1935 6)

This is the original type of reaction that di-

rectly affects personality and behavior toward others. Symptoms would include displays of internal unresolved conflict, such as delinquency, crime, mental instability, or suicide.

2. Emulative

"To abolish marginality by psychic surgery" (Riesman 1951 122). The condition of marginality is so intolerable that people can take the stance of denial and "for them, integration is an unquestioned ideal..." (Riesman 1951 125). Emulation and identification with the dominant culture is sought at almost any cost, including rejection of the original culture. One extreme that has been suggested is that of "passing."

3. Defiant

People who feel uncomfortable in the world ...find comfort in explaining their discomfort by attributing it to an acceptable cause. (Riesman 1951 114)

These individuals become totally absorbed with blaming the system. Symptoms would be open hostility, acts of defiance, or angry withdrawal. The inability to resolve the situation hinders positive action for individual gains. Channeled, it can be a force for collective change, as occurred during the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

4. Emissarial

Using marginality as a social function, the marginal person sees him/herself as an emissary, an interpreter, or a go-between for both cultures. Riesman (1951) describes this reaction as carving out a specific social role and exploiting marginality for its usefulness. This type of reaction is closest to Simmel's original concept. It has a positive aspect in that the marginality of the individual is appreciated for the special skills and knowledge that the "stranger" can bring to another culture. Both cultures can use the reciprocal information to grow and avoid stagnation. This reaction is dependent on mutual respect and appreciation.

5. Withdrawn

Complete rejection of the marginal situation can lead to total withdrawal, including moving to another country. It can also involve a retreat into the original culture and refusal to participate in activities that are not part of the sub-culture (Riesman 1951). Louis Far-

rakhan has voiced this position quite adamantly.

6. Balanced

Goldberg (1941) suggests another reaction that stems from the amount of time that the sub-culture has existed within the dominant culture. Conditioned since birth to the existence of both cultures, shared experiences of dealing with both cultures during development, and presence of role models that ease the task of balancing the demands of the two cultures, creates a marginal person who exists in a marginal *culture*. "For the individual concerned, however we must remember that it is not marginal, but normal" (1941 57). The conditions of marginality are not transient, but permanent, and we are likely to find a stable and normal person participating in an integrated manner in the activities of a "unitary" culture. It is implied that this person does not perceive a dichotomy, but a normal situation that relies on institutional and associational proximity.

The mechanism of differentiation identified by this study is racism. Racism, in turn, affects the social conditions as discussed by Germani (1980). The economic-social includes the availability and accessibility of funds for college. The political-social is distinguished by the ability of African-American college students to affect change with regard to institutional practices and procedures. Demographics apply to the numerical size of the minority group and its ability to create cohesion as a collective voice within the institution. In addition, sheer size can also determine the amount of consideration given to a particular minority group's needs and concerns. Cultural dimensions are represented in this study by behavioral patterns and beliefs that are unique to African-American culture. The concern of this aspect is the amount of disparity between the African-American culture and the Anglo-American culture with special regard for the customs and norms of academic life (Grant & Breese 1997).

In this study of marginality and African-American college performance, differentiation impacts all areas of social life and creates the conditions of marginality. This, in turn, elicits a personal reaction to marginality that can be altered or solidified within a particular realm of social activity. The context of college demonstrates how institutional factors and individual factors interact with the

reaction to marginality to influence the individual's ability to succeed in a college program.

Several socialization processes are critical to successful academic performance. The study reveals that the African-American student, while attending college, may also be struggling with the issue of developing a black identity. For several respondents, attending a predominately Anglo-American university served as a catalyst that triggered this process. A second process that is specific to this study and is similar to the process of organizational socialization incorporates the ability to learn and accept the system of college participation. Participation instills over time a sense of belonging and purpose for the successful college student. Finally, the college experience can assist or hinder the development of a sense of competence. A sense of competence acts as motivation to continue in the face of challenges and demands of the academic system.

Socioeconomic status deserves attention if only for the resources that it provides to members of each status in a society. The quality of schooling, the aspirations generated from significant others, and the knowledge of the dominant culture are all affected by this factor.

All of these elements combine to create and sustain the conditions of marginality. Institutional factors specific to the academic environment and individual academic factors attenuate or magnify these societal conditions, producing a reaction to marginality. Key institutional factors impacted this study, including: Financial aid, activities that promote cohesion, academic support services, and procedural processes. Individual factors that are identified by this study as affecting successful college performance include: Experiences with racism, exposure to the dominant culture, social support, participation in school activities, and individual attention. Standing literature addressing Black students at predominantly white institutions demonstrates that these students do not fare as well as White students in persistence rates, academic achievement, postgraduate study, and overall psychosocial adjustments (Gossett, Cuyjet & Cockriel 1998).

The reaction to marginality emerges from the interaction of all of these factors. Marginality theory offers a concatenated approach since it is not limited to one context, but of-

fers the opportunity to explore this concept over multiple levels of analysis and situations that would provide a chain of support for its assertions (Gossett, Cuyjet & Cockriel 1996).

METHODS

As researchers, we both come into this study with the consciousness of being White middle-class sociologists, charged with instructing students in the areas of Minority relations and social inequality. We are both cognizant of the current racial climate in academia and are attempting to introduce both our students and colleagues to the heterogeneity of experience found among contemporary African-American students. The central educational implication to this approach is a strong awareness of white spokespeople for minority conditions (Bettis 1996; Tatum 1994). We agree with Ballantine, who notes that

some of the ideals sociologists support are most successfully achieved through participatory research and application of knowledge such as challenging inequality. (1995 219)

The data in this study was obtained by interviewing respondents using a pre-set series of questions, the interview guide. The interview guide was constructed with three goals in mind. First, the chronological order of the interview was meant to reflect the process of deciding, entering, and sustaining participation in a college program. The only exception was the first section. The section titled "Decision to Attend College" was used before, rather than after, childhood experiences in order to focus the respondent on the topic. Consequently, the order of the topics was as follows:

- Demographics
- Decision to Attend College
- Childhood
- High School Experiences
- Entering College
- Attending College
- Stay or Leave
- Goals
- Skills
- Problems and Coping
- Racism
- Self-Concept

The second goal was to include questions that were meant to tap both institutional factors and individual factors within each topic.

Each topic served as "sensitizing categories," which were the basis of data analysis. The goal was to maintain some organization of the data as it was gathered. The average time for the focused interview was two hours. Although the interview guide contained formal structure, it still allowed ample opportunities for probing and open-ended responses.

Sampling and Sampling Procedures

The literature review provided a basis for the initial sample. Schatzman and Strauss (1973) refer to this approach as "selective sampling." A calculated decision to sample specific types of respondents is made according to a preconceived, but reasonable, set of dimensions (such as time, space, identity) that are worked out in advance. This approach is similar to that identified by Patton (2002) as purposeful sampling.

Sampling procedures were also modified by procedures from grounded theory developed by Glaser and Strauss (1965, 1967). This procedure is called "theoretical sampling." Theoretical sampling dictates that the researcher constantly scrutinize data as it is collected in order to identify areas that have not been covered in the initial phase of sample selection (Patton 2002).

Restricting the sample to the selection of African-Americans is appropriate since this study examines temporal conditions of marginality, performance comparisons within the minority group, and gender comparisons *specific to* the experiential world of the minority group under investigation.

Given the theoretical objectives of this study, the selection of students from an urban, public university seems best suited to this investigation. In contrast, private and segregated schools offer only extreme cases that would not serve the objective of this study, which is to generate principles under normative conditions of marginality. The norm for the majority of African-American students is to attend a state-supported school in an urban setting close to home. In the mid 1980s, 16 percent of African-American students who attended college selected a predominant African-American school (Thomas & Hill 1987). By 1999, the percentage was at 14.6 per-

cent. This figure was derived by comparing total enrollment of African American students at all institutions to those at historically black colleges and universities (National Center for Education Statistics 2003). The elite schools present financial and competitive academic standards that may offer insurmountable barriers to admission for the "average" African-American or Anglo-American student.

Two other considerations guided the sampling. The decision was made to only include full-time students (12 credits or more), since part-time students often have even more factors that impinge on college achievement and this would make a completely different study that might be useful in comparison to this study. In addition, only "traditional" students were included in this study. Traditional is defined as ages 18 to 23. There is a substantial body of literature (Breese & O'Toole 1995; Gigliotti & Huff 1995) that emphasizes that non-traditional students, again, have factors that are not relevant to the student who has made the transition to college directly from high school or a short time thereafter. The intent was to tighten the scope of this study in order to avoid extraneous factors that might confound the findings of this study.

The first respondents were initially solicited by a flyer that explained the intent of the study and requested volunteer participation. Faculty members were asked to distribute these letters to likely candidates in their introductory classes. Since only six students responded to this request, who, in turn provided two referrals, the decision was made to offer \$10.00 for participating and a second flyer was distributed. This generated five volunteers, who also provided three referrals. A third approach was used to obtain participants. The flyers were then distributed at a central gathering point in the student union where African-Americans habitually congregate. This led to three additional participants.

Twenty-three students from a Midwest state university volunteered to be interviewed for this study. The mean age of this sample was 20. The average grade point average for the sample was 2.35. The average number of college credits taken during the interview semester was 12.9. Our sample reflects the disproportionate number of female students who attend college as opposed to male students. Eight males were interviewed, as op-

posed to fifteen females. The sample was evenly divided between those students who worked and those who did not.

This university is very much in line with the overall percent of African-American students statewide (10%). The other two major universities in the same general area report 6.8 percent and 17.5 percent of the student population being African-American, with the higher percent located in a major metropolitan area. A more telling portrait of the composition of the African-American undergraduate students (2063) at the university where this study was done illustrates the pattern of more females initially attending college and the rapid attrition of male students over the course of a college program.

FINDINGS

The Formation of Marginality

In the case of this study, marginality could not exist without racism. On a societal level, racism creates the conditions that are necessary to generate a reaction to marginality. Investigation of the present social climate revealed that the nature of racism through the 1990s and into the 21st century is characterized by subtlety. More powerful than overt racism that can be challenged, subtle racism is a constant barrage of insinuation, innuendo, media stereotyping, implied inferiority, and petty humiliations.

At the present time, there are no social movements to counteract the conditions of marginality. The African-American is left to cope with racism on an individual basis. Consequently, there is wide variation of the experiences of racism among African-Americans. However, each African-American does develop a "social construction of reality" that incorporates each experience. The result is a cognitive stance that is termed "reaction to marginality."

On a personal level, the major factor that impacts this stance is exposure, familiarity, and knowledge of the dominant culture. Those individuals experiencing the most difficulties in academia are those people who have had the least exposure to the norms and expectations of this social environment. For the most part, this is due to the fact that significant interaction with Anglo-Americans has been limited. There is no wonder that this environment can be perceived as hostile, uninviting, and foreign. If there is no opportunity to learn the "rules of the game," there

is no sense in playing. Individuals who have parents that have been through the system, or who have friends from the Anglo-American culture, or who hold professional-type jobs while completing college have access to essential information for success. This does not mean that a student cannot succeed without these advantages. This simply means that lacking these resources, attempting to participate in a college program is a formidable task.

Social Conditions That Sustain Marginality

On an institutional level, several factors sustain marginality. Sheer demographics ensure that in many classes African-American students will be a slim minority. This is especially significant for those students who come from a predominately African-American neighborhood and/or high school. For other students, this is only a continuation of conditions experienced earlier in life. If these conditions are coupled with an instructor who is intimidated or insensitive to stereotypical remarks, or actions, the chasm widens.

Another factor that sustains marginality is the bureaucracy surrounding financial aid. Although several students noted that there are African-American personnel in the financial aid office, under-staffing of this department severely limits the time spent with each student. This barrier is especially frustrating for students who are critically dependent on receiving financial assistance in a timely manner. As several students commented, prompt payment may make the difference whether a student attends college or not. Several comments suggest the problems faced by students, as these three respondents' experiences demonstrate:

I didn't work as many hours as I could have because I figured that my loan would be in. So the loan gets in and they tell me that I have to wait 30 days before you can get your loan. You have to be in school 30 days before you can get your loan [as a freshman]. But they don't tell you that when you sign up and fill out the papers.

I lost classes due to lack of funds and there is nowhere to go for help.

But they [financial aid] keep sending the forms back stating they need something else.

Freshman orientation is an additional factor. The existing program makes some faulty assumptions that create less than favorable conditions for the new student. Several of the students did not have any idea what "placement" testing meant. Others mentioned that too much information was dispensed too quickly to absorb all the essential information. Frustrations such as these are encapsulated by a student in the sample who noted that

at certain times in school, I have needed help and at a certain point they will say they cannot help you anymore, where you should be able to get help all the way through a problem.

Finally, many of the social activities at colleges and universities are centered around the Anglo-American culture. Although groups such as Black United Students (BUS), Black Accountants, and Black Engineers serve a vital socializing role, they tend to encourage separation between African-American students and Anglo-American students. There are few activities that promote a spirit of interaction, understanding, and cooperation between these two groups. One respondent described how

I think oftentimes, you either grow up in an all-White school or an all-Black school. Since there is not a bunch of race relations between people my age in elementary school and prior to college, you really don't understand Black people. And I can't say I understand White people because I don't. I haven't had to deal with that many.

Individual Factors That Affect Marginality

On an individual level, three factors play significant roles in sustaining or mitigating the conditions of marginality. First, social support comprised of friends, professional people, and class-mates *within* the academic domain provides a great source of encouragement, mental support, and assurance. Those individuals who were successful illustrated complex social networks on campus; those who were experiencing the least success did not have this support. Second, active participation in school activities was another indication that the student had developed a sense of commitment and belonging to the university. This was especially true

for sport participation. However, not everyone can play sports, and students were able to cite other examples of worthwhile clubs, professional organizations, and planned activities that had encouraged positive feelings about academia. Finally, the students who were experiencing the most success had found a way to individualize the attention that they received. They were not afraid to approach instructors, find tutors, attend labs, obtain counsel and advice, or make new friends in classes. Those students who were not experiencing success were much more reticent and rejected the idea of being proactive in creating a new social world for themselves or actively seeking help.

All of these areas are opportunities for remediation and improvement of the academic system. What follows is a discussion of proposed policy interventions based on these issues.

PROPOSED INTERVENTIONS

An intervention program based on findings from this research is the most salient benefit of this study. Giles-Gee (1989) has demonstrated that practical, yet inexpensive, techniques utilizing *existing* resources of the university can, in fact, impact the retention and progression of African-American students. Several suggestions may incur short-term expenses. However, beneficial results can have positive financial gain for the university in the long run. As competition for students increases, the institution that can retain students is in a better position for the future.

The theory of marginality, as formulated in this study, identifies the institutional component as contributing important factors to sustaining the conditions of marginality. These factors (bureaucracy, mystification of procedural processes, and organization of social activities) can impact a student's sense of belonging. In addition, the present system requires that the student create and maintain support systems on his/her own. Also, under the present conditions, personal attention, which the data shows is a strong factor in sustaining successful performance at the college level, must be sought by the individual. At this point, suggestions can be offered to improve at least the institutional component of the marginality model. Ten suggestions are offered.

The first suggestion is to give more atten-

tion to the financial aid department. At the present time, new students are required to attend a workshop in order to apply for financial assistance. This can be very confusing, and there is no follow-up once the forms are sent back to the student. At this point, a student is left to personal devices to figure out what to do or where to go. A follow-up workshop could be required to discuss the *results* of the applications. There should also be workshops offered on obtaining scholarships, especially for African-American students. There are no structured services to acquire this information. Counseling services offer computer searches, but the system is confusing and obtuse. Financial aid can take a more proactive stance to helping students find existing sources of financial assistance.

The second suggestion is based on the fact that, at the present time, there is one course required for African-American students who have become "at risk" due to GPA. The students who were interviewed who were also participating in this class spoke very highly of the class and the instructor. The concern is that it may be too late to have much impact. Existing resources are available that could identify the students who are experiencing difficulties much sooner in the process. The peer counseling program could be extended and systematized to infuse more accountability to advisors before the student is in deep trouble academically. A more individual approach to assistance could be provided. To be placed in an "at-risk" class when in trouble could serve to stigmatize and alienate a student who is already "separating" from the system.

The third suggestion, in conjunction with the second suggestion, recognizes that counseling and advising are critical for those students who are experiencing difficulties with transition to college. Career planning, which stipulates a specific plan with clear goals and objectives, would stimulate the student who is floundering in the system. If a student could be detected early on, special attention to specific career goals might stimulate the student to take academics more seriously. The personalized attention could promote a sense of belonging. During the first year of college, most advisors take a cavalier approach to "advice and counseling." Several students in this study stated that their advisor simply said "Take these

courses" without any explanation of why or how the courses would fit into the four-year scheme. Students are left to select majors on a whim or without adequate knowledge of the educational requirements needed to complete a particular degree or any specific knowledge of the nature of the job itself. The response to this suggestion might be that it is all in the college catalog; however, anyone working with freshmen is aware that this is rarely done. A personal discussion could serve as motivation for planning and assuming personal responsibility for career selection and success. Relevant information can instill a sense of control regarding one's life.

The fourth suggestion urges improvement of the peer counseling program. As stated above, the peer counseling program is one of the most positive approaches with regard to African-American students. However, at this point it is very informal and the reluctant students can easily avoid the program. There is no formal tracking on this program, nor are there rewards for the peer counselor who does a more than adequate job. Initially, the peer counselor could participate in orientation to individualize the process for the new student. Physical contact with the peer counselor might make additional contact easier and more likely. Funding should be sought to expand and improve this program. One person needs to spend time monitoring the process and identifying students who need additional assistance or a different peer counselor. The first match is not always successful. Some kind of incentive should be offered to peer counselors, whether credits or financial, to stimulate involvement with the program. The peer counselors are extremely important because they get involved in the initial stages of socialization to college. They are aware of problems and potential pitfalls long before they come to the attention of more formal areas of the university. They can provide the social support, information, and individual concern that are essential for some students who are entering a "foreign land."

The fifth suggestion concerns the more formal areas of assistance, tutors, labs, and Minority Affairs. These areas need to take a more proactive stance with regard to students. Just being there does not encourage the reluctant student to participate. More information needs to be dispensed, and students who do use these sources need to be contacted for information to assess the effec-

tiveness of these services. Several students turned away from the tutors after *one* bad experience.

The sixth suggestion stresses that the importance of African-Americans in the position of instructors, administrators, residence assistants, and other areas of management should be obvious. These important sources of role models are too few at the present time, or reside in specialty areas that give them little exposure to African-American students. An intense effort to recruit and retain African-Americans for the university becomes more and more important as the composition of the university changes. This is even more important if the university attracts a disproportionate percent of African-American students. Being located a convenient distance from a central city places this university in this position.

The seventh suggestion addresses instructors and the educational processes. Anyone who wishes to teach at the university should be required to take at least one class in Human Diversity as a prerequisite for hiring. There is a cavalier attitude that educated people are all sensitive to minority issues. This is not the case. One class is a minor price to pay for admission to academia. Again, this is not just for African-American students, but is relevant as the total minority population at the university grows. Complaints about instructor conduct should be taken seriously.

The eighth suggestion is in conjunction with the above suggestion. Instructors should be encouraged to provide clear guidelines and specific outcome measures for students. African-American students who were interviewed expressed a need for more progress reports, and these need to be available early in the semester. Minority students especially are hurt by the present system that asks little accountability from anyone teaching a class. Student evaluations are done at the end of the semester, long after many of those students who had difficulties are gone.

The ninth suggestion concerns freshman orientation. The program needs to be expanded. The present system tries to disseminate too much information, too fast, to too many people. Also, attempts to individualize this program need to be explored. Special interests or concerns need to be identified and the students expressing these issues need to be answered. Presently, the orienta-

tion has a mob mentality that easily alienates or loses the student who is reticent anyway.

Finally, the participation in clubs, professional organizations, and activities that initiate social contact, stimulates interaction with all students, and promotes understanding and cooperation appears to positively affect college students. The university should consider giving credit for these types of activities and *requiring* a certain number of these credits to graduate. An institution conveys the importance of a particular social behavior by its own system of rewards. If the university is really trying to prepare students for the realities of the world, this type of requirement seems more germane than physical education or other requirements that have lost their relevance over time. Realizing that programs are limited as to the number of requirements that can be made of a student, this is still an important area that the university needs to incorporate as a integrated part of university training.

The above suggestions are made in light of the findings from this particular study. However, it should be apparent that these suggestions not only would assist African-American students, but all students who may experience difficulties with socialization to college and successful progression toward a degree.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

One of the characteristics of qualitative research is the ability to generate clear directions for future research. On a theoretical level, one study is not enough to fully describe the reactions to marginality. More qualitative studies of reactions to marginality in other areas of human endeavor are necessary to verify that all reactions to marginality have been identified and described. Once a definitive typology is developed, a measurement of reactions can be created, tested, and verified. This is an essential step in future research since the ability to measure reactions to marginality could play a significant role in intervention. Identification of an individual's reaction to marginality could assist in assessing how this factor might be impinging on success in other domains of social behavior. Awareness by the individual of his/her particular stance with respect to marginality and its effects on behavior could provide a defined problem for which resolution

can be planned and executed. The individual is offered an alternative to rejection of the system or nonproductive defiance.

SUMMARY

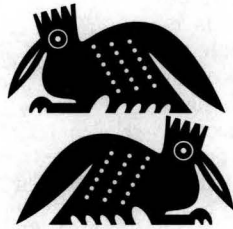
This work presents a strong argument for the incorporation of marginality theory in the investigation of racism. Race appears to be a multi-dimensional factor that includes reaction to marginality, SES, and values. Attention to these different facets of "race" might provide the heterogeneity that exists *within* groups. Treating any social group as diverse as African-Americans as homogeneous is open to validity problems. These problems are evidenced by conflicting results in other areas such as aging and social stratification when a factor is treated as uni-dimensional. Marginality theory holds great heuristic promise for African-American studies and all other individuals and groups who experience marginality through the life course.

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