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Ethnography of Housing: a conclusion.

This paper is the final report of a research project that spanned three years, exploring three field locations and capturing the stories of forty (plus) housing workers. Using an ethnographic research approach, this paper provides an account of how housing workers use language and stories to understand and make sense of their challenging and changing work. Firsthand accounts (‘stories’) about everyday housing work provide a framework for this paper, explaining how housing workers in Victoria have experienced and made sense of the shift from public housing as ‘affordable housing for the working poor’ to ‘housing of last resort for the most vulnerable and needy members of the community’. Using composite stories, this paper provides the reader with a glimpse into the world of public housing work, transporting the reader from the relatively static world of policy and procedure to the more colorful world of tenants with ‘high and complex’ needs, ‘wicked’ problems, weary staff and the daily reality of organisational change.

A unique feature of this paper is the comparison of how different workers use stories to build a range of ‘socially constructed realities’ around housing work and its problems. This paper compares and contrasts the socially constructed realities of frontline staff with the corresponding social reality for the managers at head office (and vice versa). This ‘same problem, different perspective’ approach allows the reader to better understand how the same problem is understood and approached in different ways, depending on the individual’s organisational role, responsibly and authority. Using stories about ‘working with problem tenants’, ‘collecting rental arrears from the poor and marginalised’, ‘maintaining old, neglected properties’ and ‘coping with organisational change’, this paper illustrates how the shifting (and sometimes contradictory) construction of housing problems means that for some years, the organisation has struggled to devise and implement a sustainable remedy.
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Abstract:
This paper is the final report of a research project spanning three years, exploring three field locations and capturing the stories of forty (plus) housing workers. Using an ethnographic research approach, this paper provides an account of how housing workers use language and stories to understand and make sense of their challenging and changing work. First hand accounts ("stories") about every day housing work frame the data in this paper, explaining how housing workers in Victoria have experienced and made sense of the shift from public housing as ‘affordable housing for the working poor’ to ‘housing of last resort for the most vulnerable and needy members of the community’. Using a number of composite stories, this paper provides the reader with a glimpse into the work of public housing staff, transporting the reader from the relatively static world of policy and procedure to the more colorful world of tenants with ‘high and complex’ needs, ‘wicked’ problems, weary staff and the daily reality of organisational change.

A unique feature of this research is the comparison of how different workers use stories to build a range of ‘socially constructed realities’ around the housing work and its wicked problems. This paper compares and contrasts the socially constructed realities of frontline staff with the corresponding social realities of the managers at head office (and vice versa). This ‘same problem, different perspective’ approach allows the reader to better understand how the same problem is understood and approached in different ways, depending on the individual’s organisational role, responsibly and authority. Using stories about ‘working with problem tenants’, ‘collecting rental arrears from the poor and marginalised’, ‘maintaining old, neglected properties’ and ‘coping with organisational change’, this paper illustrates how the shifting (and sometimes contradictory) construction of housing problems has meant that the organisation has long struggled to devise and implement sustainable remedies to these problems.

The following pages describe how the problems identified in the Housing Office Review (and experienced in the daily work of the ‘modern day’ housing worker) are simply a contemporary manifestation of ‘age old public housing issues’. This paper describes and explains how housing staff have long used narrative to make sense of their often difficult work and ultimately, how they understand and experience a major process of operational policy change associated with the shift from ‘public’ housing to ‘welfare’ housing

A comment about the research approach.

The process of negotiating field locations for this project was delicate: No single office is ‘typical’; no particular office can be generalised to ‘represent the organisation’ and as a result, identifying the
'best' office to observe was problematic. I was keen to collect stories from an office that was busy, interesting, and 'challenging' and the Office of Housing was keen for me to visit an office that was relatively stable and would produce data that represented the organisation in a fair and balanced manner. In order to secure access, my negotiations with managers at the Office of Housing had to take into account these differing objectives. I was aware of the pitfalls of observing an office that was 'bland', secure and stable, the housing managers were conscious of observing people who had heavy workloads, problematic teams and unresolved workplace conflict. After some weeks of negotiation, I located the first of three field locations; the manager of local office in the Western Suburbs of Melbourne had agreed for their office to participate. This placement was the first of three and was to last almost six months.

'All research is not without limitation' (Van Maanen, 1995). Despite the fact that this project is informed by data gathered over a period of almost twelve months and captures the stories of many workers, it cannot, and should not, be considered an exhaustive study of the work world of all public housing staff. Instead, this research paper is a 'thick description'(Van Maanen, 1988) of the demands, stresses, and challenges facing a cohort of staff in a complex, socially constructed bureaucracy undergoing significant organisational change. The aim of this paper is to take my many hours of interviews, pages of notes and boxes of artefacts and make 'visible' the 'invisible' enabling the reader to comprehend the potency of discourse for staff who work with difficult tenants, limited and declining resources, wicked problems and organisational change. This paper uses 'sedimentation' as a geological metaphor for how housing workers have long contributed to a multilayered organisational narrative about the wicked problems they face. This process, 'sedimentation' has been described as a manner by which workers, over time, produce structure and construct reality by progressively layering their concerns and issues by sedimenting a different set of understandings over preceding ones (Tolbert and Zucker, 1997).

After reading public housing documents dating back some seventy years, I came to realise that the 'new' problems described in the Housing Office Review (Office of Housing, 2004) are essentially the most recent layer in the sediment of public housing discourse. The exploration of this discursive sediment uncovers a persistent and recurring narrative; serving ever changing tenants requires an ever changing organisation. As a result, the theoretical framework of 'sedimentation' became the first of two useful and compelling devices around which I ordered the data. The second device was the concept of 'wicked problems'. In the 2007 report 'Tackling Wicked Problems; A Public Policy Perspective', the Public Service Commissioner describes wicked problems as 'highly resistant to resolution' and 'difficult to clearly define, the nature and extent of the problem depends on who has been asked, that is, different stakeholders have different versions of what the problem is' (Australian Public Service Commission, 2007). I have adopted this simple definition because housing problems
are highly resistant to change and the nature and extent of the problem varies, depending on who you ask.

The suggestion that the definition of (and actions that result from) particular wicked problems 'depends on who has been asked' made me realise that the broad framework of 'wicked problems' would be a useful way to reconcile the data gathered in symbolic world of the 'knowledge makers' at head office with the data from the 'gritty, socially constructed reality' of daily work in the local office (Etzioni, 1976). It became quickly apparent that even though staff had told me many different stories, the theme and central concern in these stories seemed to return to four key wicked problems; problems with tenants, assets, income and organisation. These 'sedimented, wicked problems' became the second framework for my enquiry and can be summarised as follows:

Tenants have changed, the ‘working poor’ have been replaced by tenants with complex and multiple needs, people with drug and alcohol related issues, aged and infirm tenants, single parents, multi-generational welfare dependant families and many others. The majority of tenants now live on very low incomes. Funding through the CSHA continues to decline, the cost of repairing and replacing housing stock has increased exponentially and income-based rent setting has resulted in reduced rental income and this income no longer covers real costs. The combination of high demand and aging properties has created an assets problem; waiting lists continue to grow with no real growth and replacement plan and the absence of life cycle planning means that some older properties will become unsafe and uninhabitable in the near future. The final problem, organisation, is the most pressing. The organisation finds itself faced with changing and challenging communities, communities that call for a connected ‘whole of government’ approach. These ‘challenging communities’ are also part of a broader cultural change; staff are now required to serve customers who have the right to complain, appeal and question whilst experiencing ‘best practice’, ‘case management’ and excellence in ‘service delivery’. One worker told me that the Office of Housing is not the organisation he joined some fifteen years ago 'we cling to the ideal of the old-fashioned housing tenant, the hard working honest poor, but really we have so few of those people left, we need to move on'.

What did this research discover?

1) What is old, is new again.

The first discovery was a simple and rather obvious one. Wicked problems with tenants, assets, income and organisation are not new. Early in the research, I spent some time researching public housing literature in order to gain an insight into how the long-established problems with 'building, filling and billing' might have an enduring impact on the roles and responsibilities of current housing workers. The public housing literature (from the 1930s onwards) is dominated by discourse about building and construction, finding new ways to reduce costs and increase productivity through prefabrication and the utilisation of limited land in slum areas. (Australian Army Education Service,
1948, Barnett and Burt, 1942, Commission of Inquiry into Poverty, 1975, Gaskin and Burkitt, 1958, Housing Commission of Victoria, 1967. Housing Commission Victoria, 1966, Howe, 1988). This early sediment makes little reference to what happens after the construction ends and provides little or no guidance to the practical elements of managing properties, collecting rent and developing these new, ‘instant’ communities.

More recent discursive sediment contains strategic thinking around how to reduce waiting lists/times, how to understand the changing needs of tenants and planning the development of functional linkages between intergovernmental departments and more broadly, how best to respond to the increasing (and changing) needs of tenants (Office of Housing, 2004). Successive housing authorities have written about the problems with developing a simple, equitable and effective rebate system, they have described permanently high rent arrears, and expressed their frustrated attempts to maintain properties that require substantial, ongoing and costly repairs. These documents provided me with an interesting insight into how the understandings and perceptions of past housing managers are subject to ongoing (re)interpretation and play an important role in the structure and structuration of the organisation.

The historical literature describes how, over time, housing staff have evolved to become managers of ‘welfare’ housing; offering accommodation as component of the social welfare system, providing shelter to the most needy and marginalised members of society. It would appear that they have been, for sometime, managers of ‘housing of last resort’.

2) An example of sedimented discourse: A brief case study of Rent, Arrears, Rebates and Income.

This research uncovered a number of useful exemplars of how enduring and persistent housing problems are sedimented in to organisational discourse and as a result, shape and influence the daily work of housing staff. One of the most compelling exemplars is the assessment, collection and management of rent. The calculation of a rental rebate has long been the first action undertaken by a housing worker when establishing a new tenancy and most workers, at some stage, talked to me about rent. ‘Rebating’ is a formulaic procedure that tailors weekly rent to a fair and reasonable proportion of the tenant’s income. The rationale for this system is simple; the rebate system generates a ‘tenant by tenant’ rental charge that starts at full economic rent and is systematically rebated to a predetermined proportion of their income. In theory (and in practice) four different sets of tenants living in the same block of flats might be paying four different rents and as their circumstances change, so will their rent. Rebates are perceived as making rents equitable, flexible, and tailored to the circumstances of individual tenants. They are also exceptionally complex. (Office of Housing, 2004) The literature shows that this complexity has long been a problem for housing workers and
discussions about the problems with rebates are not new; as early as 1942, housing commentators remarked on the organisations ability to administer the rental rebate system:

*In the opinion of the Authors the rental rebate system adopted in Victoria has disclosed inherent defects; - (a) it is not directly related to subsistence requirements of the tenant for the reason that the cost of living and the basic wage varies considerably from time to time; (b) it presents difficulties in administration and (c) it is not easily understood by tenants, thereby tending to create dissatisfaction and misunderstanding. (Barnett and Burt, 1942. p.35)*

Doug, a retired worker, told me that there existed ‘an uneasy partnership between tenants’ honestly disclosing their income and staff understanding and correctly applying a complex mathematical formula that seems fraught with peril’. He told me that new staff were quickly overwhelmed by the lack of clarity and transparency around how ‘rebating’ works and are rapidly inoculated into the ‘leave it til later club’. A significant number of the participants in this study told me that they ‘felt overwhelmed’ by the complexity of rebates and ‘dreaded’ the unpopular and unpleasant task of chasing up tenants who were behind with their rent. Most staff (but not all) told me that they ‘simply ignored arrears (or followed up on what they describe as ‘the easy cases’’) until ‘management has a hissy fit and gets on our case about it’. The 1989 flow chart provides some insight into the complexity of processing and recovering arrears:
When showed this diagram, the retired housing workers laughed and told me of their own experience with rent:

*Rebates! What a nightmare. One bloke and I spent the best part of a day trying to work out what to charge this woman. The manual was pages and pages long, filled with descriptions of circumstances, rules and tens of variations to each rule. We just settled on what we thought she looked like she could afford. Three months later, she is in arrears.*  
*(Chalkley, 2005)*

Staff told me that they find the management of rent to be time-consuming, difficult to administer, easily exploited and relentless; *no sooner have you done a rebate and someone gets a little bit of*
work and it's useless'. As a result, some staff place 'rent issues' at the bottom of their 'to do' list, further exacerbating the problem by waiting until the matter is 'urgent'. In the middle of August 2004, I observed another problem with rebates;

18th August 2004

Centrelink payments have gone up (including Youth Allowance, New Start, Parenting Payment etc) and this means that the majority of tenants in this area will receive between fifteen and thirty dollars more each fortnight. This has two consequences – the increased income has auto-generated rebate review letters for a significant number of tenants and they are now ringing or coming into the office, some quite agitated and upset. These letters have been sent directly from head office and HSOs were unaware of the post out. The staff are equally upset about the panic and angst these letters have caused. The second problem was actually picked-up by Sophia. As the extra centrelink payments were slow in being processed (the increase was due in early July), tenants have received nearly six week back pay. Sophia called head office and asked: 'does this mean that tenants have been in arrears for the past six weeks because their rebate was calculated on the old payment?' It would appear that 'yes, probably, maybe' is the answer. The staff are now doubly angered and the smokers have bolted to the back door! [Field note: Location One.]

The problems with rent (especially rebates) are compounded by the number of tenants who rely on social security payments; in particular the provision of commonwealth provided income support for those with a disability or chronic illness. One HSO told me how he sees the welfare system as the tenant’s enemy and best friend:

Ok, if I was a tenant, there is no way I would try to get a job, especially a casual one. The system punishes you! Make a little extra, pay more rent. Make too much, no longer eligible for public housing, but you won’t have enough to survive in the open rental market. I understand why we have three generations of welfare dependant families – there’s little support and no incentive to work – the rebate system just adds to this. [Interview: Location One.]

Staff told me that the rebate system is complex, often inaccurate, and open to exploitation and disliked by tenants and staff alike. Rebates are prone to influence by outside agencies (in particular changes to welfare payments), require constant review and revision and can act as a disincentive for tenants who might want to work. So, why is the rebate model still the corner stone of the Office of Housing rental system? At Head Office, I asked Henry about rebates;
**I know they are really difficult** – we have a rebate hotline to help with the really tricky ones and the rebate team here work really hard to make the process work as well as it can. To be honest, we have a rebate system because it’s the only fair way to work out a rent that works for the individual. From a schematic point of view, rebates are really sound, but sadly they are difficult to apply in the real world.

[Interview: Location Three.]

The suggestion that some procedures might be ‘schematically sound but with imperfect real world implementation’ is really important because it illustrates a problem that was repeated in a number of my interviews; ‘how policy and procedure can make perfect sense at Head Office and yet make no sense at all by the time it reaches the coal face’ (Chalkley, 2005). Rental rebates are, on paper, an equitable and flexible system to generate a ‘tenant by tenant’ rental charge that starts at full economic rent and is systematically rebated to a predetermined proportion of their income. In theory, rebating should be straightforward and easy to manage but in practice, it’s not.

In the majority of documents examined in this research, the discourse around rent echoed the reflections of the housing worker; the rebate scheme is perceived as unduly burdensome, costly and difficult to manage. The multifaceted and enduring problems with rental rebates appear to be intensely layered in the sediment of the organisation; the literature tells us that rebates are (and have always been) difficult to administer, are easily exploited, require constant surveillance by staff, are poorly understood by both staff and tenants and often result in unintended arrears (Housing Commission of Victoria, 1967; Barnett and Burt, 1942, Ministry of Housing, 1989). The sedimented discourse about rent tells staff to expect this procedure to be difficult and problematic, and it is.

### 3) Managers of public housing or managers in public housing? Different roles, different responsibilities, same problems.

The second discovery is also associated with how wicked problems are ‘difficult to clearly define, the nature and extent of the problem depends on who has been asked, that is, different stakeholders have different versions of what the problem is’ (Australian Public Service Commission, 2007) Early in my time at head office, I uncovered many (sometimes conflicting) definitions around the nature/composition of wicked housing problems and subsequently, my field notes record some disputation around the organisational and procedural actions that required to remedy these problems. I discovered that the frontline staff perceive themselves to be managers of public housing, accountable for the day to day allocation of scarce resources, the supervision of individuals in their patch and intervention in and management of, antisocial activities. The managers in this study saw their role in a slightly different manner; they were managers in public housing; responsible for high level decision
making, objectively prioritising resource allocation at an organisational level, coordinating regions, rather than neighbourhoods and only intervening in antisocial events when these events might have a deleterious effect on the department or minister. For some senior managers, it was not the ‘content’ of what was to be managed, but the skill of managing itself that was most important. At the regional office, staff told me that one of their key roles was to ‘translate’ and ‘mediate’ between head office and local offices and as a result, workers at this location told me that they were skilled at shifting between management of public housing and management in public housing. Some staff felt that these skills were, on the whole, under-utilised by staff at both head and local office.

4) Under-utilised, well intended and poorly implemented reform.

This research uncovered a number of other under-utilised and poorly understood components of the organisation; the two most obvious being the ‘invisibility’ of the regional office mentioned earlier and the ‘well intended, but poorly implemented’ Housing Support Coordinator positions. Frontline staff told me that ‘they respected and trusted the regional office’ and staff at head office staff told me that ‘they had a lot of time for the staff working in regional offices, but were a little unsure of their role’. This ‘fissure in understanding’ means that there is potential for the skills and capacity in the regional offices to remain under-utilised and the workers capacity to toggle between management ‘of’ and management ‘in’ housing, will not be fully realised by those charged with implementation of the Housing Office Review. The second example of a poorly understood component of the organisation was the ‘roll out’ of the specialised Housing Support Coordinator (HSC) position. The introduction of HSCs was one of the earliest actions stemming from the HOR, intended to underpin the work of HSOs and support them to better work with tenants with complex and multiple needs. The majority of HSCs told me that they were ‘parachuted’ into large local offices, poorly supported from the outset; their role and function misunderstood by the HSOs and managers alike. Most staff (HSCs included) believed that this first HOR initiative had been a ‘dismal failure’, not in intention, but in implementation.

The HSC position is one example of how different staff constructed differing perceptions around the HOR and its implementation; a small number of participants were openly hostile about the HOR and claimed that they intent to actively work to undermine its implementation. But, on the whole, most front line workers were ambivalent about the HOR, they had received a ‘flurry’ of early information and ‘PR spin’ about the HOR, but little detail or concrete information since. Longer serving staff had ‘seen it all before’, the younger/newer staff were interested but bored and disillusioned with the slowness of implementation, especially the absence of the revolutionary housing management software they had been ‘promised’. Team leaders and local managers understood that something has to change; the work is too hard, the load too big and the ‘neediness of tenants seem to increase with
every month that goes by'. Senior managers had a different set of expectations for the HOR; most believed that the HOR is not a 'new tool for managing difficult tenants', but a device that might be used to limit and mitigate their impact on a reformed housing system. The senior manager in this study believed that HSOs work has changed, tenants have changed and public housing need to change as a result. Most felt that the most promising thing about the HOR was an opportunity to 'reinvigorate the housing system, re-align resource allocation and to move towards a culture of customer service'. The HOR provides another example of a 'fissure in understanding'; HSOs want/need a timely reform that assists them with the ragged reality of working with tenants with complex and multiple needs and managers want a long term, strategic reform that reduces the impact of these tenants on the housing system. Finding a middle ground is difficult and it's here, in this middle ground, that I discovered the 'big five wicked problems' with organisation.

5) A fissure in understanding: ‘five big wicked problems’ with the organisation of housing.

The first problem; ‘management’ is also a problem with leadership. I found that housing staff view the management and leadership of the Office of Housing (OoH) in a number of ways; most talked about concerns with the organisational and the geographic isolation between the ‘housing manager’ and the ‘housing practitioner’, a number of head office staff told me about their concerns about the unsuitable and inevitable appointment of policy makers to leadership positions and how the profound busy-ness of operational work prevents ‘skilled local people who have worked from the ground up’ from developing and embracing the ‘leadership style’ needed to enable the successful implementation of the HOR.

The second major organisational problem; ‘teams’ is also a problem with the distribution and recognition of work. Under the ‘Patch Model’ staff work in teams, but often, not in any meaningful way. The daily work of HSOs is highly individualised and they, by and large, have been left alone to manage increasingly large and complex patches. In their stories, most staff understand that the ‘ever-enlarging patch’ model not sustainable, but frontline staff are nervous about how the introduction of the highly specialised, function based teams (as recommended in the HOR) might diminish the personal reward that comes from success in challenging, ever-changing and energising job.

Problem number three; ‘staffing’ is by far the most significant and entangled problem in this research. I found that the OoH has long struggled to balance the conflicting aims of improving the skills and qualifications of staff in order to ‘professionalise’ housing work, whilst recruiting, training and retaining an adequate number of staff to cover workloads. The Office of Housing faces a number of problems with staffing; ‘good’ staff are hard to attract, the training of staff is expensive and time-consuming and retaining skilled and competent staff is an ongoing challenge for local office
managers. Most people work for the Office of Housing because they have to, not because they want to.

The fourth problem was described by one HSO as ‘slapping one hand while holding the other’. The data gathered in this research is rich with stories of how managers and HSOs believe that they have, for some time, struggled with increasingly demanding workloads, ambiguous performance indicators, and an escalating number of tenants with increasingly complex needs. One of the key findings of this research is the (not so surprising) discovery that housing workers struggle to reconcile the frequently conflicting role of ‘landlord’ and ‘welfare worker’. Staff told me about how they struggle to ‘sustain tenancies whilst not going soft on arrears’ (Office of Housing, 2004), how they are expected to respond to complaints about anti-social behaviour in meaningful, but non-punitive manner and how they ‘slap one hand while holding the other’.

The final problem, communication, is a significant one and has two elements: Like many large bureaucracies, the daily work of staff at Office of Housing requires them to communicate with tenants, staff, other agencies, non government organisations and numerous other groups and individuals. The Office of Housing has mixed success with the effectiveness of its communication; in their stories, staff described the consequences of ambiguous, centrally produced letters, they told me about the frustration of managing, decoding and dismissing a significant volume of information and I discovered that the way housing managers understand and value communication can be quite different to the understandings and values of the housing worker. The second element in the problems with communication is the way the OoH communicates internally. The majority of staff told me that the OoH doesn’t do this particularly well. HSOs felt that ‘the staff from head office is a waste of time, bossy and without any regard for how bloody hard out work is’ and head office staff told me that ‘we have some way to go here, communication can tend to be reactive, rather than proactive. Sometimes this is unavoidable because the director/minister wants immediate action and the first staff her of it is in the papers’. This absence of a shared context in which local and head office staff might discuss housing problems means that constructing an agreed discursive position around tenants with complex and multiple needs is problematic.

6) Complex and multiple needs; ‘two wicked problems’ with Tenants.

Collecting and listening to the workers stories concerning the problems with tenants, I was able to identify three key explanations about how staff experience and understand the problems they face with an increasingly needy tenant base;

The first is about how workers experience the wicked problems with tenants. ‘Problem tenants’ have an impact on both individual staff and the housing system more generally. HSOs attempt to manage and reduce
the impact of these problems in their patch, their performance and on the ‘stressfulness’ of their daily work; they do this because the problems with tenants have a deleterious effect on their morale, job satisfaction, work loads and job satisfaction. The more senior housing staff attempt to manage and reduce the impact of these ‘problem tenants’ on the housing system; they do this because their performance is measured by how effectively they manage the broader, strategic organisation of state housing.

Secondly, the problems with tenants are not exclusively housing problems; they are also problems with social security, child protection, community safety, crime and many other complex societal issues. In most of the ‘war stories’ I heard, little was said about how the problems with tenants were really problems with social welfare more generally. Frontline staff felt disconnected from the other components of the welfare system and as a result, disconnected from the agencies with the resources to assist them with these problems.

To conclude.

Whilst this paper is by no means an exhaustive report of the stories I collected over many months of field work, it does provide an insight into how housing workers in Victoria have experienced and made sense of the organisational changes proposed to remedy the wicked problems that have emerged as public housing shifted from ‘affordable housing for the working poor’ to ‘housing of last resort for the most vulnerable and needy members of the community’. Both managers and frontline workers told me that, in all honesty, this shift and subsequent problems are not new, nor are they a surprise. The ‘discursive housing sediment’ is layered with numerous historical accounts of how staff have attempted to remedy the housing problems identified in the Housing Office Review. Long serving and retired staff told me that for most of their career they (have) ‘dealt’ with the same key issues and managers told me that sometimes the political nature of ‘managing Public Housing’ prioritises the ‘procedure of change’ above the ‘actions of change’. The organisation continues to face a number of enduring and entrenched problems with communication, income and organisation and staff continue to structure and be structured by, these ‘wicked’ problems.

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