

Avoiding Traps in Member Checking

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Due to the variations of design and protocol in qualitative inquiry, researchers may inadvertently create problems for themselves in terms of the trustworthiness of their research. Miscommunication between participants and researchers can especially arise from the unique and unpredictable nature of human dynamics. In this paper I contend that such problems, or traps, can easily and at times unknowingly be set during the qualitative process known as member checking, threatening the researcher/participant relationship and possibly the stability of the study. In this paper, I examine member checking through five vignettes personally experienced. These vignettes are preceded by a presentation of common procedures for increasing trustworthiness, and are followed by several recommendations for avoiding the setting and triggering of member checking traps. Key Words: Narrative Inquiry, Qualitative, Member Checking, and Trustworthiness

Introduction and Background

It has been poignantly noted by novelist, John Steinbeck (1954), that humans are the “only kind of varmint[s]” (p. 159) that set their own traps, and then habitually catch themselves in them. His assertion provides an appropriate caution for novice researchers of both the qualitative and quantitative variety. There is ample recognition that unintentional omissions or commissions in research procedures, can happen quite readily, resulting in researchers creating their own problems and threatening the credibility of their own studies. This recognition is evidenced by the volumes of publications over the past several decades on how to conduct pristine disciplined inquiry, and the scrupulous research oversight to which doctoral students are commonly subjected. Fortunately, many researchers learn quickly and avoid making the same mistake twice. However, that was not always true in my early research experiences; hence, the impetus for this paper.

Self-laid traps are potentially more common among qualitative researchers due to the variations in research design, protocol, and paradigm. The qualitative world of research entails interpretive recommendations rather than systematic requirements (Merriam, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Ideas for increasing trustworthiness are presented as *should do's* rather than *must do's*. Collecting and analyzing narrative data, characteristic of many qualitative studies, presents a plethora of unique challenges. Narrative inquiry is concerned with human experience, thought, memory, and interpretation, all of which, by nature, are subject to continuous change and transformation (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). With all of its shape-shifting tendencies, narrative inquiry continually presents its researchers with surprises and new experiences that have the potential of threatening relationships with participants. A pivotal point where participant rapport can be especially tenuous is during a particular aspect of qualitative inquiry used for increasing trustworthiness known as *member checking*.

Stemming from my own early research experiences, the author contends that traps can easily and, at times, unknowingly be set during member checking, threatening the researcher/participant relationship and possibly the stability of the study. If triggered, these traps may instill a participant with feelings of disappointment, uncertainty, or embarrassment, or squelch the willingness of a participant to continue in the study.

Purpose Statement

The primary purpose of this paper is to identify traps associated with qualitative member checking through the examination of five personally experienced vignettes. These vignettes are preceded by a discussion of common qualitative procedures for increasing trustworthiness including member checking, and are followed by several recommendations for avoiding the setting and triggering of such traps.

Aspects of Trustworthiness

Qualitative inquirers mindfully employ a variety of techniques to increase the *trustworthiness* of the research they conduct; that is, how much trust can be given that the researcher did everything possible to ensure that data was appropriately and ethically collected, analyzed, and reported. Other common terms used interchangeably with trustworthiness include authenticity, goodness, plausibility, and credibility. The necessity for such careful measures stems in part from the regular use of researcher-created instruments (or researchers themselves as instruments) and interpretive analysis, rather than quantitative instruments that have been scientifically validated and are compatible with objective analysis of data through statistical computations (Creswell, 2009; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). More responsibility is placed on qualitative researchers to demonstrate that their entire research process is worthy.

Among the most often used procedures to increase trustworthiness in qualitative inquiry are audit trails, reflexivity (Creswell & Miller, 2000), thick and rich description, triangulation, and member checking (Creswell & Miller; Merriam, 1998). Following is a brief description of these techniques, provided as a segue into the vignettes that focus specifically on the last procedure presented: member checking.

Audit Trails

Qualitative researchers are often, by nature, scrupulous note-takers as they tend to see everything as important or potentially so. Creating an audit trail refers to keeping careful documentation of all components of the study, should an external auditor be utilized. Keeping field observation notes, interview notes, journals, records, calendars, and various drafts of interpretation are all parts of creating audit trails. Maintaining audiotapes, videotapes, and photographs for a set length of time (often three to five years) is also part of constructing an audit trail. Some researchers do regularly bring in auditors who are external to the study. Many do not, but still keep careful documentation that they reveal in their research report. In this way, the reader is viewed as the external reviewer, and as someone who will be determining credibility (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Reflexivity

All researchers, quantitative as well as qualitative, have personal biases that can influence their interpretation of data (Creswell, 1998; Creswell & Miller, 2000; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In quantitative research, there are ways to drastically reduce those biases that are not as easily employed in qualitative inquiry. Researcher bias is not necessarily viewed as problematic in qualitative research as long as researchers “bring [their] preconceived beliefs into the dialogue” (Harry, Sturges, & Klingner, 2005, p. 7) by explicitly disclosing their biases, assumptions, and aspects of their backgrounds that could influence the interpretations they make. This indicates reflexivity, that is, the recognition by researchers that they have “a significant influence on the development of the research and the engagement of the participants” (Curtin & Fossey, 2007, pp. 92-93) and that they have a duty to be transparent about that influence. One way to engage in reflexivity is for researchers to keep a journal that is specifically for recording thoughts, feelings, uncertainties, values, beliefs, and assumptions that surface throughout the research process. The final report can and should include conclusions regarding what went well and what should be altered or avoided in future research endeavors (Curtin & Fossey).

Thick and Rich Description

Qualitative inquiry involves the investigation of uniqueness – of unique individuals, groups, and phenomenon – each situated within unique contextual settings. Although qualitative researchers are not concerned with inter-study replication, they are concerned with corroborating or substantiating findings over time across similar situations. Corroboration is not possible without in-depth understanding of commonalities that may exist among situations. This is one of the main functions of thick and rich description – to provide understanding of relevance to other settings. Researchers also provide very detailed descriptions of settings, participants, data collection, and analysis procedures as a way of making their accounts more credible – to show that they were diligent in their attempts to conduct respectable research (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002). An additional purpose of thick, rich description identified by Creswell and Miller (2000) is to draw the reader more closely into the story or narrative to increase coherence and to evoke feelings for and a sense of connection with the participants in the study.

Triangulation

This procedure basically entails gathering and analyzing data in more than one way (Curtin & Fossey, 2007). Data may be collected from different people or groups, at different times, and from different places. It may also be collected in different ways such as interviews, questionnaires, observations, and archival data (Creswell & Miller, 2000; McMillan, 2004). The premise is that if researchers can substantiate these various data sets with each other, the interpretations and conclusions drawn from them are likely to be trustworthy. Triangulation can also be used during data analysis by members of researcher teams or partners conducting analysis individually, and then comparing their

interpretations. A third type of triangulation offered by Curtin and Fossey (2007), although not as often utilized, is triangulation of method, meaning the use of both qualitative and quantitative design to explore the same topic.

Member Checking

Member checking is basically what the term implies – an opportunity for members (participants) to check (approve) particular aspects of the interpretation of the data they provided (Doyle, 2007; Merriam, 1998). It is a “way of finding out whether the data analysis is congruent with the participants’ experiences” (Curtin & Fossey, 2007, p. 92). Commonly, participants are given transcripts or particles from the narratives they contributed during interview sessions and are asked to verify their accuracy. Participants may be asked to edit, clarify, elaborate, and at times, delete their own words from the narratives; although Creswell (2009) stressed that member checking is best done with “polished” (p. 191) interpreted pieces such as themes and patterns emerging from the data rather than the actual transcripts. Member checking can be an individual process or can take place with more than one person at a time, such as in focus group settings, as a discussion with the researcher (Doyle).

Member checking is often a single event that takes place only with the verification of transcripts or early interpretations. Sometimes though, it is done at a few key points throughout the research process with some scholars recommending it be done continuously (Doyle, 2007). Some researchers regularly provide participants with their interpretations of the narratives for the purpose of verifying plausibility (Curtin & Fossey, 2007; Merriam, 1998) and asking: Am I on the right track? Did I understand this in the same way you meant it?

Lenses in member checking.

As described, member checking can be utilized in various ways that may be chosen intentionally, naively, or haphazardly. Creswell and Miller (2000) posited that procedures for trustworthiness, including member checking, should be largely determined by incorporation of three lenses: of the self (the researcher), of the participants, and of the external readers of the final research report. These are the three entities for whom the researcher desires trustworthiness approval, and the lenses through which researchers should view and interpret their work. Data should be continually revisited and scrutinized for accuracy of interpretation and for meaningful, coherent conveyance of the participant’s narrative contributions.

Providing options for member checking.

Doyle (2007) has provided helpful guidance in options for member checking with older participants. These options, however, would be welcomed and useful for any participants who may have challenges that could impede their member checking abilities. Doyle asserted that researchers should view their research as a “negotiated process” (p. 889) of meaning making with their participants, and should also focus on ways to give power, voice, and engagement to the participant throughout the research process. Her

approach, named by her as “participative member checking” (p. 908), includes providing choices to participants for how member checking will proceed. Participants may choose to receive hard copies of transcripts, electronic copies, audio copies, or have someone read the transcripts to them. They may choose to have a researcher mentor present during member checking and other stages of the study. Participants are also given approval power for selected narratives the researcher would like to publish.

The influence of transcribing.

The act of transcribing is influential on member checking, and was the root of some of the problems that surfaced in the vignettes to be shared in the next section. There are various ways of transcribing that should be carefully chosen depending on the purpose of the study and how the narratives will be used in the research report. There are researchers who transcribe verbatim, including filler words, false starts, and repetitive phrases. Others condense the narratives somewhat for better flow, while still maintaining the narrators’ actual words. Still others create transcripts that have been “cleaned up of disfluencies to render [them] easily readable” (Kohler Riessman, 1993, p. 31) and grammatically correct. Sometimes, a complete transcription is most appropriate. Sometimes, only portions are selected when the researcher knows precisely what kind of information will be useful and analyzed. If the researcher is not the person doing the transcribing, a complete transcription is recommended to ensure nothing of importance was overlooked (Tilley & Powick, 2002).

Personal Experiences with Traps in Member Checking

The following short vignettes describe five participants (using pseudonyms) in an early narrative inquiry study that I conducted, and some of the problems that emerged during the member checking process. Abigail, Barry, Cal, Dennis, and Emalee were mailed full, verbatim paper transcripts of their audio-taped, two-hour interviews. Many of the transcripts were two to three dozen pages long. The extent of the enclosed cover letter was to restate the purpose of the study and to ask the narrators to check the transcripts by writing corrections directly on them that they felt were needed. No explanation was given to them as to what kinds of corrections would be helpful or desirable. They were provided a self-addressed stamped envelope, asked to send the checked transcripts back within a few weeks, and encouraged to contact me if they had any questions. For most of the participants in the study, my planned procedures were carried out without any concerns (that I was aware of, that is). The five participants described in the following vignettes, though, did have concerns that could have been avoided had I been more knowledgeable of potential member checking traps. For each vignette, a brief contextual background is provided, the trap is described, and a few suppositions are offered that would likely have prevented the problems from occurring.

Abigail

Abigail was a participant with whom I had rapport that was quite positive from the time I first contacted her, through the interview process and up to the time for

member checking. She was one of the first people I interviewed as part of a *real* research study, meaning one that was conducted under the purview of an institutional review board for the protection of human subjects. I met the participant in her home. We drank tea and ate cookies and talked informally for about an hour after our tape-recorded interview was over. She gave me some of her personal books and artifacts that were related to my study. She showed me old photographs. We ended our time together with smiles and laughter.

Abigail was an ideal and enthusiastic participant. Admittedly, I felt quite proud of my inquiry skills, that is, until she received my transcriptions in the mail. I did not hear from her for about three weeks, and so I called to inquire if she had received the transcripts and had any questions. There was an uncomfortable pause before she shared that her language in the transcripts was so riddled with poor grammar that she did not know how I had ever been able to transcribe the tapes in the first place. She suggested that we could conduct a new interview and she would be sure to do better next time. I assured her that the interview we had was just fine, and there was no need for another one. Still, she was overcome with embarrassment and soon after withdrew from the study, apologizing that she had made a mess of my research.

In my desire to conduct *good* research, I had transcribed every word, every sentence fragment, every false start, and every “um” that was uttered. I also transcribed sections that were off-topic or that I knew would not help inform the study. I thought that was what I was supposed to do, and was not aware there were other transcribing options. In this situation, using a transcribing approach of using partial transcripts, providing partly analyzed portions, leaving out filler words, or fixing grammatical concerns would likely have maintained my relationship with Abigail and resulted in mutual positive feelings regarding her participation in the study. My attention to detail in my transcribing may have still been acceptable if I had informed Abigail of what to expect. She should have known ahead of time what the transcripts would look like, how long they would be, how detailed they would be, and feelings that she may experience in reviewing her own words before she received the transcripts.

Barry

Barry was a participant who was an academician with a long history of publishing and editing other people’s work. He knew what to expect and had been involved in both qualitative and quantitative primary research in different ways as a participant, a supervisor of graduate student research, and as a researcher himself. At one point, he complimented me on my careful attention to detailed transcribing, which of course, reinforced my belief that I was doing the right thing.

When I received the checked transcripts back from Barry, I discovered he had made scores of editing notes, often correcting his original grammar. He had also added new items of information and deleted other things that I had thought were relevant, but apparently he did not. Some of the new information added was incomplete, since he was writing it in the page margins rather than telling it. The transcripts he returned to me barely resembled the original version I had sent him.

Although my relationship and rapport with Barry did not seem to be affected by the member checking process, I suddenly found myself without narrative data that I once

thought I had and would be able to include in my study. I did not anticipate the extent to which Barry would eliminate the original data he had contributed. In my mind, when I had given the instructions to change anything to make the transcripts more accurate, I was thinking in terms of a few words here and there, but definitely not entire paragraphs. Had my instructions for member checking been more precise, perhaps even offering some examples, this particular trap would not have been set.

Cal

Cal was a participant who seemed honored to be asked to be a narrator for my study about a renowned person he had once known. During his interview about this particular person's leadership, he told several personal stories that highlighted aspects of his own life. It was common for him to veer from the questions that were asked about this person he once knew and instead, to talk about himself. This was not problematic to me at the time because these personal stories revealed how deeply this other person had influenced Cal. The phone interview ended on a friendly note, and soon after, I received in the mail a personal photograph from Cal of the person I was researching. I was thrilled that he cared enough to share this with me.

When Cal received his transcripts in the mail, unfortunately, the main thing that caught his attention was the disproportionate amount of time he had spent talking about himself rather than answering the questions I had asked. He called me to apologize and suggested that he had wasted my time and not given me what I wanted for my study. He was embarrassed that he had drawn so much attention to himself, rather than focusing on the person I was researching. Although I tried to assure him that what he shared during the interview was appropriate and useful, he was not convinced. He disgruntledly told me that I could use whatever I wanted from his interview, but he did not want to send any member checking notes back to me, and did not want to see any more future transcripts.

In this situation, I did not foresee Cal's concerns because I myself did not view the stories he shared as inappropriate. Had I not interviewed several other people already, I would have definitely needed narratives from him that were more focused on my interview questions. I could not have predicted Cal's reaction to the content of his transcripts. However, similar to Abigail's experience, I set my own trap by not informing Cal ahead of time of what to expect in reading the transcripts. Had he known of the feelings and uncertainties that can arise when reading one's own transcripts, or known that only selected pertinent parts of the transcripts would be used in the final report, he may not have experienced the reservations that he did. His dignity in participating would have been retained, and I would not have had the angst I did in using some of his narratives in the research report.

Dennis

Dennis was a passionate, outgoing participant who spoke in a rough style littered with colloquialisms and improper grammar. He was an engaging person to interview as he shared fascinating and insightful stories about the research topic almost non-stop for the entire interview. When I explained that he would be receiving written transcripts from me and the basic member checking procedures I would ask him to follow, he

declared that he felt fine with what he had shared and that there was no reason for me to burden myself with sending the transcripts to him. Of course, sticking to my definition of a good researcher, I insisted on sending the transcripts to him and again asked him to go through the member checking process.

Not surprising to me, Dennis returned his transcripts without having made any corrections at all. A friendly, hand written note explained that what he said the first time was what he meant to say. At the time, I attributed this to his high self-confidence and self-esteem. Later, because of that perspective, I found it slightly humorous that people who proofread my research report before publication continually wrote corrective editing marks on his narratives, which I mostly ignored.

Unfortunately, it was not until after some selected narratives of Dennis' were published in their original, grammatically incorrect form and read by some of his acquaintances that I considered the consequences and possible embarrassment to him. Up until then, I had felt that I was remaining true to Dennis' wishes and maintaining the positive relationship I had with him. Similar to the situations that arose with Abigail and Cal, it had not occurred to me that Dennis may have been unaware of the incorrect grammar he used or incapable of proofreading his transcripts and may have appreciated my offer to do so for him. He should have been informed of my intentions to use literal selections from his transcripts and should have been given the option to approve those selections before being submitted for publication.

Emalee

Emalee was an elderly female participant who was interviewed by phone. Her weak voice trembled and she tended to take extra time after each question to gather her thoughts before answering. I realized that the interview was probably challenging for her, but had not pre-determined any alternative ways of gathering narratives from any of my participants. I did choose to bypass some of the questions with Emalee, resulting in a shorter interview than for the other participants.

Emalee did not ask any questions of me regarding the member checking procedures to be used until she received her transcripts in the mail. She called me to explain that she had problems writing due to her age, and wanted to know if it would be acceptable for her to make an audio recording of her thoughts regarding the transcripts. I asked if she wanted to tell me over the phone, and I could record her comments. She declined that offer and explained she wanted to make her own tape and had the equipment to do so. What I received from Emalee was not actually a commentary on the transcripts, but a brief acknowledgment that the transcripts were accurate accompanied by a lengthy poetic rendition of her life in terms of how it was influenced by the person who was the subject of the study. I was not completely convinced she had actually read the transcripts, but felt that I missed the opportunity to suddenly implement some other procedure.

In retrospect, I realized that Emalee might have had difficulty reading, in addition to her self-identified challenges with writing. Perhaps that was the reason for her pauses after each interview question as if she were hearing it for the first time, since each participant had received the questions in writing a few weeks beforehand. It was also possible that Emalee could not read or write at all, regardless of any age-related issues.

The trap I laid was due to my own tacit assumptions that the participants in my study could all read and write, and that if they could not, they would feel safe and confident enough to tell me. It did not occur to me to ask, nor to have pre-determined some options to universally offer all of the participants. I could have provided the interview questions and transcripts by way of an audio recording or by reading them aloud. Emalee seemed content with her involvement in the study, and with the audio recording she sent me. However, other participants may not have been as comfortable. Emalee's experience also left me wondering if Abigail and Cal's situations could have been related, in some way, to their reading and writing capabilities.

Recommendations for Avoiding Traps and Increasing Trustworthiness

The problems that presented themselves with all five of these narrators could have been avoided by placing the researcher/participant relationship at the center of concern, and by utilizing the lenses of the participants and the external readers in addition to the lone lens of the researcher that was used. Beyond the avoidance of self-laid traps, increasing trustworthiness of the research study is the larger objective or greater good to aim for in qualitative inquiry. To reiterate, trustworthiness is gained when researchers show that their data were ethically and mindfully collected, analyzed, and reported. In this study, I had mistakenly equated trustworthiness, in part, with transcribing accuracy and thoroughness. With the implementation of member checking choices, a few alterations to transcribing, partial and interpreted transcript selections, and more information given up front to the narrators, I would have increased my trustworthiness as a researcher in the eyes of the narrators as well as in my own eyes.

Recommendations are provided here for researchers to consider, recognizing that the implementation of them will depend largely on the purpose and analysis requirements of the study. These are recommendations born out of my own experiences as described in the vignettes, yet also supported in the literature. Many of these recommendations should be attended to during the research design phase, as they may help potential narrators decide whether or not to participate and can prevent anxiety that could arise if participants are not clear about what to expect and what their roles and choices in member checking will be.

Pre-determine Choices for Member Checking Procedures

Choices are provided to reduce challenges that the narrators may experience due to visual, auditory, literacy, or other limitations they may have. Choices will also aid in increasing participants' comfort and confidence levels throughout the member checking process (Doyle, 2007). In certain situations, a trusted mentor should be offered to be present at various stages of data collection and member checking. Choices may include hard copies, electronic copies, listening to the audiotapes with the researcher, or having the researcher read the transcripts aloud. The information cover letter and consent form should provide information about the member checking procedures that will take place, and the choices the narrators will have regarding those procedures. Offering choices for member checking may encourage people's decisions to participate in a study they might otherwise have declined due to limitations they may have.

Pre-determine Extent of Transcription Needed

As mentioned earlier, it is recognized that there are studies where full transcriptions are needed. It is posited here, however, that there are also plenty of studies in which transcript selections are acceptable and appropriate (Creswell, 2009). Partial transcripts should be considered so that participants can focus on their main contributions and not be distracted or embarrassed in seeing places where they were off topic. Researchers should listen to the interview audiotapes in their entirety, but consider transcribing only the portions that will be used for analysis.

Participants should be informed as to whether they will be receiving full or partial transcripts, and the reasons why (Kohler Riessman, 1993). General descriptions of the sections that were not transcribed can be provided to help narrators recall the context within which they were speaking. For example, wordage similar to the following might be inserted: (A section of approximately nine minutes was not transcribed here that contained a discussion of a recent visit to see a newborn grandson). Additional sections can be transcribed later if mutually deemed desirable by the narrator and researcher. If the narrator is listening to the actual audiotape rather than reading or listening to transcripts, the researcher should ensure that the person knows there are parts of the interview that will not be used for analysis, and when appropriate, point those parts out during the replaying.

Pre-determine Preciseness of Language Needed

It will help participants to know beforehand what to expect when they read or hear their transcripts in terms of verbatim or researcher-condensed grammar. They should know if every word, pause, and filler will be included such as, “Well, uh, I think at first I felt, sort of, you know, confused,” or if they will see slightly condensed versions such as, “Well, I think at first I felt sort of confused.” They should also know, if transcriptions are verbatim, the researcher’s reasons for needing to give such scrupulous attention to detail (Kohler Riessman, 1993).

Before entering the member checking phase, participants should be made aware of what they may feel or think when they read or listen to the transcripts or tapes (self-consciousness, embarrassment, the desire to do it over). Transcripts are supposed to document natural conversational language, which rarely consists of complete and grammatically correct sentences. Assurance should be given them that their contributions are worthy, valid and respected and that their signature and voice are of higher value than the accuracy of their grammar (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Inform Participants of Member Checking Desires

In the case of Barry, who took full liberty in drastically changing the transcriptions, it would have been helpful to retain the original data to have provided more precise member checking directions. If proofreading and editing for grammar or deleting sections of the transcripts is not desirable, state this. If adding in new sections of information is problematic, state this as well. Provide clear directions on what the

participant should do. Consider providing an example of a member checked paragraph or section of transcript.

Pre-determine Use of Narratives in Final Report

Inform participants how their narrative contributions will be used in the published version of the study. Let them know if the narratives will be used exactly as they appear in the transcripts, or if brackets will be used by the researcher to insert grammatical corrections and clarifications (or ask them if they would like the researcher to correct their narratives). Provide them with an example of what a narrative section will look like in the final research report. Consider sharing with them parts of their contributions that will likely be quoted in the final research report. Offer participants the opportunity to see and approve their narrative contributions once they have been placed into the research report in rough draft and final draft form (Creswell, 1998).

Concluding Remarks

The purpose of this paper was to reveal problems or traps in member checking that can be inadvertently set and triggered by qualitative researchers themselves. Through the presentation of five personally-experienced vignettes, I examined the topic of member checking, its role in establishing trustworthiness, and offered ways to avoid problems associated with it. The self-laid traps described herein were the result of inexperience and a misinformed belief that good qualitative research meant using consistent and rigid procedures for every participant. I was guilty of believing in the “Hollywood plot” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 181) where all good research turns out the way we want in the end if we just follow the script.

Additionally, the accuracy and thoroughness of member checking and transcribing procedures were naively placed by me at a higher level of importance than the participant’s dignity and voice. Had I been more “wakeful” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 182) of the importance of sustaining rapport and negotiating meaning throughout the entire research process, and the types of traps that can threaten that rapport, one of my participants would not have withdrawn, valuable data would not have been forfeited, narrator embarrassment would have been avoided, and a narrator with physical limitations would not have been put in a position of having to serve as her own advocate.

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