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# Navigating change: Theoretical perspectives to relate research on transitions and learning<sup>1</sup>

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### **Abstract**

Although life course transitions are not a new topic – see for instance van Gennep's (1909/2019) work on rites of passage or various studies on changes in the life course, their social conditions, and societal consequences – educational research has explored the topic of transitions in a rather segmented fashion. Transitions have been investigated according to age (e.g., youth transitioning to adulthood), according to pedagogical institutions (e.g., from family to day care), and pertaining to education subdisciplines (transitions in adult education). As a result, it is easy to lose sight of the connections between life course transitions and profound questions of education and learning. With the aim of further developing the educational learning discourse, this conceptual paper discusses life course transitions as an impetus and framework for learning and transformation processes.

Keywords: transitions, learning, transformation, practice theory, pragmatism

### Introduction: Research transitions

Transition research – broadly speaking – deals with changes in the life course. Whereas life course studies focus on the social-historical conditions and consequences of life courses (Elder et al., 2003; Levy & Bühlmann, 2016; Shanahan et al., 2016), transition research has thus far focused on the changes in and between life stages and the associated changes in status. Of interest are the forms, conditions, and consequences of transitions,

which subjects experience against the backdrop of their changing (institutionalised) life course (Ecclestone et al., 2009a).

The theoretical and empirical approaches to studying these transitions are heterogeneous. There are studies of rites of passage (van Gennep, 1909/2019), understood as institutionalised forms of initiating and accompanying transitions between major turning points in the life course, when people move between different sets of social networks (such as in the transition from the group of children to the group of adult members of a family). These status passages are accompanied by new social positions, with new behavioural expectations and tasks (Glaser & Strauss, 1971; Heinz, 1997). From a sociological perspective, this research focuses on the social and institutional conditions of the transitions, the reproduction of social inequality in transitions (Buchmann & Steinhoff, 2017), and the social demands and challenges people are confronted with. In contrast, a doing-transitions perspective (Stauber et al., 2022) is interested in the social practices that produce and shape transitions and in the reconstruction of the individual, social, and institutional arrangements that constitute and influence the ways in which people deal with new situations in the life course.

In adult educational research, transitions have been discussed as forms of critical life events such as divorce, unemployment, the death of the partner, or illness (Merriam, 2005; Bühler et al., 2023). These are deemed starting points for organising professional educational support. Furthermore, research is oriented to the institutionalised life course (Kohli, 1985/2017) and the distinction of different pedagogical institutions. Accordingly, there are foremost studies that deal with transitions within or departing from the educational system – from school into vocational training or postsecondary education (Blossfeld & Rossbach, 2019; Larsen, 2022; Siivonen, 2016) or transitions into and throughout working life (Billett et al., 2021; Pita Castro, 2014; Stroobants et al., 2001). Topics include how transition-related challenges are dealt with, how significant others participate (Settersten & Thogmartin, 2018), and how professionals influence (successful) entry into the next phase of life (Bridges, 2020).

The serious social, political, and ecological challenges of the last few decades have clarified that transitions are more than just phases in the institutionalised life course (Kohli, 1985/2017). In a broader view, they must be seen as part of the coping with everyday life. Not only the transition from the training phase to employment and then that to the post-employment phase mark transitions. Family changes (e.g. parenting), migration, and work-related mobility or a change of career can also be interpreted as transitions in the life course.

From this perspective, in this paper, transitions can be understood as periods of uncertainty in which people must deal with different options for action. Drawing on an understanding of transitions as something to be shaped, constructed, and dealt with, the focus shifts to the subject that engages with changes in the life course and to whom the transition represents an impetus for learning. Consequently, we pursue in this paper the question of how transitions can be conceptualised as an impetus and frame for learning. In doing so, not only do the subject's individual transformations come into view, but so do the learning opportunities. Elaborating on learning opportunities in relation to transitions, allows us to emphasise the learning's social dimensions, and to further develop the educational learning discourse. At the core of our deliberations is the *relationship* between transitions and transformations, between the individual's change of social state and roles (Elder, 1985) – and the development of altered meaning perspectives (Mezirow, 1978) or habits of mind (Dewey, 1933/1986).

As a theoretical starting point to relate transitions and learning in this paper, the pragmatist theory of learning (Dewey, 1933/1986) and transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1978) appear fruitful. From these perspectives, learning is conceptualised as an engagement due to irritating experiences (Dewey) or disorienting dilemmas (Mezirow), potentially leading to a transformation of experience or the development of new perspectives. By focusing on the learning process and the development of new perspectives, the embeddedness of the learning process in the experience of life course transitions – and therefore in the lifeworld – tends to be relegated to the background. To shift these socially situated dimensions of learning into the focus, reference to the conceptualisation of biographical learning (Alheit, 2018, 2022) seems to be helpful. It posits that 'the processual structures of our life course, the dynamics of their emergence at the surface suggest an extension or a restriction of autonomous biographical action' (Alheit, 2018, p. 161). Correspondingly, from the point of view of transition research that is interested in the processes shaping transitions, we argue that learning is understood not solely as an individual but rather as a socially embedded act. Institutionalised rules and normative expectations in the shaping of transitions as well as the socially shared forms of creating and sharing knowledge must be considered.

To illuminate these social dimensions of learning, we will, in a third step, shift our focus to learning as a social practice. Drawing on the work of Lave and Wenger (1991/2008) as well as newer approaches of practice theory, we aim to further develop perspectives on learning in the life course, particularly during life course transitions, thus, contributing to a *learning while doing transitions* perspective.

### Approaches to understanding transitions as movement through an institutionalised life course

When transitions are conceptualised as changes in the status of the institutionalised life course (Buchmann, 1998; Ecclestone et al., 2009b; Elder et al., 2003; Heinz, 1997; Hirschfeld & Lenz, 2022; Krüger, 2022; Schoon, 2015), various questions regarding adult learning emerge: Who undergoes which transitions? Which demands result from the new role for the knowing and acting? How do people cope with these demands, and which societal and institutional forms of support exist or are conceivable?

With an eye on the study of conditions and processes of status passages, one can then analyse individual competencies, institutional and discursive framing, as well as the social and material conditions of bringing about the transitions. This understanding of transitions has led to attention being paid to various aspects of changes in the *institutionalised* life course as evidenced by the German National Education Panel (Allmendinger et al., 2019; Blossfeld & Rossbach, 2019; Ecclestone et al., 2009a).

Contrasting with this view of transitions that builds on the notion of societal and institutional expectations for the life course, there is a perspective that considers a transition as a phase of life in which previously held assumptions are challenged and new knowledge, orientations, and patterns of practice are required (Bridges, 2020; Merriam, 2005). In this view, adult learning comes into focus more than adult education. The experiences in the life course shift to the centre of attention as 'opportunities for learning and development' (Merriam, 2005, p. 5). Consequently, transitions have become a foundation for concepts in counselling (Anderson et al., 2021; Bridges, 2020) and theoretically strengthen a perspective that focuses on agency and identity in 'learning lives' (Biesta et al., 2011). As Merriam explains: 'The transition process involves letting

go of the past, experimenting with strategies and behaviours to accommodate the new, and finally, feeling comfortable with the changes one has adopted in terms of identity, values, behaviours, or social roles' (Merriam, 2005, p. 7).

How this understanding of learning in transitions can be further conceptualised will be the focus of the next sections.

## Transitions as an impetus for learning and individual transformation in learning trajectories

The connection between learning and transitions becomes apparent particularly in situations in which learning is not conceptualised solely as a reaction to instruction but rather as learning across the life course (Hof, 2017, p. 271; Hof & Rosenberg, 2018).

In particular, the turn from lifelong education to lifelong learning in the 1990s has fostered a new theoretical discussion about the learning of adults (Hof, 2017). With reference to the tradition of life course research and biographical studies, learning has, thus, increasingly seen as embedded in life histories. Transitions as turning points in biographies serve as crystallisation points in which learning may become a necessity for the subject and thus an interesting point of investigation. Research into learning in the life course and biography demonstrates the importance of recognising learning as 'a subjective process, related to immediate sensory experience and to specific situations in which we are placed, as well as the cultural bodies of knowledge or scripts for interpreting experience, mostly mediated via language(s), available to us' (West, 2007, p. 286).

In this new tradition of biographical research, there is a growing body of work that reconstructs the biographical articulation of transitions or examines the individual processing of transition-related challenges as well as the individual shaping of personal trajectories (e.g., Biesta et al., 2011; Eberle et al., 2022; Karmelita, 2018). The empirical study of learning in transitions permits analysis of not only learning outcomes but also differentiated dimensions, challenges, and modes of learning – understood as individual transformation processes.

From this perspective, then, a transition can be viewed as a potential impetus for learning. Life events that challenge previously held patterns of action and orientation might lead to 'personal troubles' (Ingram et al., 2009, p. 3):

If a life event is utterly incongruous with our previous experiences, we may reject it, and if it is too similar to previous experiences, we may not notice it. For learning to occur, an experience needs to be discomforting, disquieting, or puzzling enough for us not to reject or ignore it, but to attend to it and reflect on it. It is then that learning takes place. (Merriam, 2005, pp. 7-8)

The experience of a transition might turn into an impetus for learning through tensions that result from the not-yet-knowing against the backdrop of previous experience. Here, the *attention* paid to the experience becomes salient: 'Learning from a life event or experience in our lives begins with attending to and reflecting on it' (Merriam, 2005, p. 8).

Arguing from the pragmatist tradition, John Dewey, in particular, elaborated on the significance of irritations as the starting point for engagement with experiences. For him, the act of thinking commences with a diffuse state of 'perplexity, confusion, or doubt' (Dewey, 1933/1986, p. 123).

Thinking begins in what may fairly enough be called a *forked-road* situation, a situation which is ambiguous, that presents a dilemma, that proposes alternatives. As long as our activity glides smoothly along from one thing to another, or as long as we permit our imagination to entertain fancies at pleasure, there is no call for reflection. Difficulty or obstruction in the way of reaching a belief brings us, however, to a pause. In the suspense of uncertainty, we metaphorically climb a tree; we try to find some standpoint from which we may survey additional facts and, getting a more commanding view of the situation, may decide how the facts stand related to one another. (Dewey, 1933/1986, p. 122, emphasis in original)

To move past uncertainty and doubt, individuals, according to Dewey, draw on their ability to reflect. They develop an idea on how the problem can be solved and the state of uncertainty be turned into a state of – at least preliminary – certainty (Dewey, 1933/1986, p. 206). In this process of inquiry, a pre-reflexive irritation leads to spontaneous 'suggestions' (Dewey, 1933/1986, p. 200) after which the problem is interpreted and intellectualised. Through establishing hypotheses, reasoning, and testing the hypothesis through overt or imaginative action, individuals assess whether assumptions are true or must be revised. In this way, the newly acquired experiences result in a new 'order of facts' (Dewey, 1933/1986, p. 117) which permits a changed view of the world and an adjusted potential for action. Dewey (1938/1988) understands experiences as both passive suffering and as an active process of interpretation and shaping of situations. Similarly, learning to engage with these experiences appears as a continuous process of interpreting and shaping the environment.

Through the interplay between the irritating impulses of the environment and the forms of an individual processing of these experiences, a learning process emerges and is manifested through transformed patterns of action and interpretation, called 'habits':

The basic characteristic of habit is that every experience enacted and undergone modifies the one who acts and undergoes, while this modification affects, whether we wish it or not, the quality of subsequent experiences. For it is a somewhat different person who enters into them. (Dewey, 1933/1986, p. 18)

Thus, learning initiated through irritations takes place not only *in* life course transitions and societal transformations but also *as* individual transformation (English, 2005; Lave, 2019).

Emphasising the issue of a potential transformation, also Jack Mezirow underlines its relevance and describes the processing of and reflecting upon disorienting experiences as subsequent transformation of frames of references (Mezirow, 1978, 2000; Taylor & Cranton, 2013). Therefore, he talks about transformative learning: 'Transformative learning refers to the processes that result in significant and irreversible changes in the way a person experiences, conceptualizes, and interacts with the world' (Hoggan, 2016, p. 71, emphasis in original). The starting point of transformative learning theory is the assumption that individuals interpret their world against the background of their 'takenfor-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mindsets)' (Mezirow, 2000, p. 7). If these frames of reference turn out to be unsuitable for understanding a new situation or for solving a problem, then the person has two options: one either ignores the problem or takes the irritation as an impetus to acquire new perspectives. When the newly acquired perspectives have been integrated into one's life with associated scripts for action habituated, transformation of the habits of mind is considered complete (Mezirow, 1991, p. 168). The new perspectives 'may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action' (Mezirow,

2000, p. 7). Transformative learning, as described by Mezirow, can thus manifest itself in the expansion of existing patterns of meaning, the acquisition of new perspectives, and critical reflection on and transformation of previous meaning perspectives (Mezirow, 2000, p. 19; Taylor & Cranton, 2013, p. 40).

Learning during life course transitions, as understood in this pragmatist tradition, can be seen as a process of reflective interaction with experience that leads to progress in action. But at the same time, the focus on experience points to the social dimensions of learning (Jarvis, 2006, 2009). The experience of irritating changes in the course of life and the interpretation of this transition not only result from the isolated coping of the individual but is much rather framed socially and associated with normative expectations of, for example, the societal context. Consequently, we argue, learning in life course transitions needs even more emphasis on an understanding of learning as both an individual and a social phenomenon (Hof, 2018, p. 184).

### Learning during life course transitions as a social practice: Doing situated transitions

Studies of learning in transitions have been interested particularly in changed relationships to the self, world, and others (Koller, 2017; Merrill, 2009). These are conceptualised as the acquisition of new knowledge or the transformation of previous patterns of orientation and action. Learning, in this view, is understood as an inner process of acquisition and transformation of knowledge and competencies. Social aspects tend to appear merely as context, such as socio-structural life conditions (Levy & Bühlmann, 2016), belonging to milieus or collective discourses in biographical narrations (Dausien & Alheit, 2019).

Once the focus no longer rests solely on individual forms of transforming knowledge and experience in reaction to irritations but rather on how individuals shape biographical transitions, the view on learning in life course transitions also broadens. On the one hand, it refers to the fact that learning takes place against the background of biographically acquired orientations and patterns of interpretation with which perceptions are interpreted. At the same time, however, learning is also embedded and thus dependent on the experiences with which the individual is confronted as the 'material' to deal and engage with. As Dausien asserts:

'Life is a construction site', and learning is the constructive process in which interpretations and meaning are produced from actions and lived experiences. Which biographical meaning and knowledge configurations emerge, depends on the one hand on the 'material' and the tools that are available on the respective construction site, and on the other hand on the possibility space for concrete action, for initial testing and renewed attempts ..., for mistakes, modifications and new designs; finally, also on the communicative space for individual and joint reflection. (Dausien, 2008, p. 167, translation by the authors)

Biographical learning is therefore to be seen not only as an expression of individual forms of experience processing but also as a socially embedded process in many ways. To understand learning during transitions, we must take into account the relationality of individual and social aspects of processing experience.

The social embeddedness of learning was studied in particular by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991/2008). By drawing on ethnographic studies in which they analysed apprenticeship processes in different work contexts, they showed that the transmission of knowledge did not occur through explicit instructions from experts but rather through the participation of newcomers in work activities and engagement with various complex tasks. Learning, thus, occurs as embedded in concrete (work) action. At that moment, not only is the acquisition process situated, but also the specific knowledge is relatively relevant and results from the particular task.

Workshop staff are part of a community of practice. Through this participation, they acquire socially shared knowledge – factual, procedural, and knowledge on social interactions – through which they complete shared tasks. Therefore, Lave and Wenger (1991/2008) also describe learning as a form of legitimate participation in the institutionalised social practices of the (work) community.

Legitimate peripheral participation provides a way to speak about the relation between newcomers and old-timers, and about activities, identities, artefacts, and communities of knowledge and practice. It concerns the process by which newcomers become part of a community of practice. A person's intentions to learn are engaged and the meaning of learning is configured through the process of becoming a full participant in a sociocultural practice. This social process includes, indeed it subsumes, the learning of knowledgeable skills. (Lave & Wenger, 1991/2008, p. 29)

This perspective has central implications for theoretical approaches of learning which have been reflected only selectively in discussions on learning, particularly in a focus on learning during transitions. Lave and Wenger distance themselves from understanding learning as an individual *or* social phenomenon and instead view it as 'an integral and inseparable aspect of social practice' (Lave & Wenger, 1991/2008, p. 31). Their emphasis follows the extensive critique of supposing dichotomies of person and environment, thinking and acting, learning and living; a critique harking back to also pragmatist critiques of these dichotomies. Because as Lave underlines: 'Everyday life and learning both make and are made in the medium of participants' partial participation in ongoing, changing social practice' (Lave, 2019, p. 129). It is 'whole' people who live their lives and, in doing so, participate in the social world. Learning is, thus, part of social practice: 'It is a perspective that locates learning, not in the head or outside it, but in the relationship between the person and the world, which for human beings is a social person in a social world' (Wenger, 2010, p. 179).

However, Lave and Wenger (1991/2008) oppose the view that learners are being socialised into pre-existing social worlds. Instead, they emphasise the interdependence of person and world. The context, constituted through the respective situation, thus influences the acting and thinking of participants as, conversely, the activities of people shape the social world. In this sense, it would be incorrect to consider learning merely a process of changing knowledge and capabilities within a socially situational context. This is because the distinction between learner and social context would be maintained. Instead, learning is to be considered part of everyday life: 'it is the transformation of people that accompanies their participation in practices' (Schatzki, 2017, p. 26). Inasmuch, learning is a constitutive part of every social practice.

With their theory of situated learning, Lave and Wenger opened our view to learning being embedded in social practices and the potential for acquiring the necessary ability to participate and play along (Alkemeyer & Buschmann, 2017, p. 122) in social practices. Applying this emphasis on learning's situatedness to learning in life course transitions, we must consider that not only the experienced transition but also the various societal dimensions that structure the life situation are relevant. This might better be described by referring to the concept of practice architectures that Kemmis et al. (2014) presented:

learning is *always* and *only* a process of being stirred into practices, even when a learner is learning alone or from participation with others in shared activities. We learn not only knowledge, embodied in our minds, bodies and feelings, but also how to interact with others and the world; our learning is not only epistemologically secured (as cognitive knowledge) but also *interactionally secured* in sayings, doings and relatings that take place amid the cultural-discursive, material-economic and social-political arrangements that pertain in the settings we inhabit. Our learning is bigger than us; it always positions and orients us in a shared, three dimensional – semantic, material and social – world. (Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 59, emphasis in original)

The learning process characterised in this way refers to participation in a social practice. The ability to participate is enabled and constrained by various factors. These could be prior knowledge, social communication possibilities, as well as financial resources to deal with transition challenges (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2022; Kemmis, 2022; Lizier et al., 2023; Penuel et al., 2017; Romano et al., 2022).

Beyond the individual competencies, interests and economic life situations, a wide range of learning opportunities or learning cultures (Hodkinson et al., 2007) provide resources for shaping transitions. By emphasising the 'cultural-discursive, material-economic, and social-political arrangements' that enable social practices, Kemmis et al. (2014, p. 30) help to highlight the societal aspects of power and inequality that also influence learning processes. Researching learning in life course transitions, as we have developed in this paper, has started with the question of how to shape and deal with experienced changes in the life course. Emphasising the process of doing transition with a focus on learning, we pointed to social practices as a promising theoretical perspective to understand these learning processes. Against that backdrop, the situated characteristics of communities of practices are to be highlighted. We must consider that social communities are embedded in broader temporal, material, political, and social frames (Lave et al., 2024). Further research could point to the dialectic relation between society and everyday life and their impetus for learning in life transitions.

With respect to individual lives, not only the social factors are complex, but also the plurality of life-situations. A person participates not only in one community of practice or practice architectures. Instead, a person moves between those and, thus, participates in *different* communities and practice arrangements:

Learning takes a course in the metaphorical sense of forming a progression, different acquisition episodes overlapping or occurring successively and building on prior ones. ... Learning also takes a course in the literal sense that its occurrences form a broken spacetime path through bundles of practices and arrangements. (Schatzki, 2017, p. 30)

Practice-theoretically speaking, the lives of subjects can be described as a sequence of activities. These connect to trajectories (Dreier, 1999; Lave, 1997): 'Trajectories are made and made possible in ongoing relations of participation in practice' (Lave, 1997, p. 131). Whereas social institutions and social practices are significant in shaping life courses, they do not determine the conduct of life. Much rather, various institutionalised social practices provide opportunities for participation. Whether a person participates in them and in which communities of practice they participate are a result neither solely of the person's intention nor of their expectations. Instead, it is the specific relation between these two because 'trajectories of participation involve movement across space, place and communities of practice' (Lave, 1997, p. 132).

Describing learning as a social practice in detail thus requires close analysis, as also Schatzki pointed out: 'Which learning opportunities are afforded at these locations

depend on the practices that are carried on at them, for example, leather good production practices (apprenticeship), cooking practices, teaching practices, training practices, review practices, and the like' (Schatzki, 2017, p. 30).

## Conclusion: Understanding and studying transitions as an impetus for learning

Transition research that is interested in the processes of constructing and shaping transitions thus prompts us to view learning not only as a temporarily structured process of an individually changed relation to the world, to others, and to oneself (cf. Koller, 2017, p. 34) but also as a socially embedded phenomenon. Through participation in practices, learners learn, change the practices themselves, and generate new knowledge. Against the backdrop of understanding irritations in life course transitions as the departing point for learning, one can ask *which* irritations come into focus, how people deal with them, and which further activities result from this engagement.

Understanding learning as a social practice further implies a close look at the social situatedness of activities. In doing so, one must consider the specific configuration of doings, sayings, and social as well as material arrangements. This is because people make and have experiences in and of the social world. They interpret and reflect on these experiences against the backdrop of perspectives and expectations deemed to be relevant in this social world. Finally, people refer in their activities to socially available rules of interaction and opportunity spaces: 'Life trajectories pass through, occur on the background of, and are part of as well as dependent on bundles of practices and arrangements. Lives and practice-arrangements are distinct phenomena even though they episodically coincide and are mutually dependent' (Schatzki, 2019, p. 68).

From the practice-theoretical perspective, specific engagements with irritations and unexpected experiences are thus understood as a social practice in which subjects can relate to different 'bundles of practices and arrangements' (Schatzki, 2016, p. 26). The question of which specific path will be taken would then be a matter of investigation and detailed analysis of life courses. Conceptualising a transition as an impetus for learning leads us to call for the empirical study of transitional learning processes and an analysis of institutionalised bundles of practice and communities of practice as opportunity spaces for learning.

Moreover, researchers must consider that transitions in the life course differ in their shapes and consequently relationship with learning. They might be mired and complex or easy to shape. Furthermore, individuals have different capacities and resources to deal with the challenges they have experienced (Field & Lynch, 2015).

Finally, recent studies emphasise that transitions differ. They might be linear processes or rhizome-like, possibly linked with other transitions or the transitions of other people (Settersten et al., 2022). The doing of transitions might be explained as a form of becoming or as a dis-assemblage (Amundsen, 2022; Gale & Parker, 2014; Gravett, 2021; Taylor & Harris-Evans, 2018). The theoretical perspectives presented in this paper have been drawn upon to further investigate empirically in other studies *how* such non-linear and linked transitions – for instance transitions in adults' lives due to migration – may serve as an impetus for learning (Bernhard, 2022, 2023a, 2023b, 2024). Taking the pragmatist, transformative and practice oriented theoretical views on learning mentioned above as the conceptual framework, these studies illustrate how irritations, dilemmas and social dimensions shape adult migrants' learning while dealing with excluding practices

(Bernhard, 2023a) and various forms of boundaries (Bernhard, 2022). These studies further illuminate that learning in (migration-related) transitions is influenced by normative ideas concerning the temporal structure of the life course in the respective societal contexts and by the ways, in which subjects conceptualise their own learning (Bernhard, 2023b). Such research on the relationship between learning and transitions aims to broaden our understanding of learning and knowing, probing for the value of including so-called indigenous or non-Western perspectives on learning which further emphasize the relational nature of learning and transitions (Bernhard & Hof, 2023).

Whatever their shape, transitions serve as crucial starting points for learning. And, as we have argued here, taking a transitions perspective deepens our understanding of learning, particularly regarding the biographical and social practices in which learning is embedded.

### **Notes**

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The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship or publication of this article.

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