Strategies for Values Inquiry: An Exploratory Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Values inquiry refers to systematic investigation of the values relevant to a program, including understanding those outcomes most prized by stakeholders. Although much attention has been given to stakeholder involvement, the literature on value inquiries per se as an approach is limited. This paper demonstrates how several of the steps used in the ATM approach to developing logic models [Am. J. Eval. 23 (2002) 493] are congruent with the tenets of values inquiry and can serve to advance values inquiry methodology. Using a case study approach, we describe how interview and deliberative approaches were combined to prioritize a large number of potential outcomes for a coalition of agencies working toward the same goal. Successes and challenges in understanding the application of the ATM approach to furthering the development of values inquiry methods are offered.

The program evaluation standards are clear in emphasizing the need to include all stakeholders in the development of evaluation plans (Sanders, 1994). However, as the number and range of stakeholders increases, there is also likely to be an increase in the number of potential outcomes of interest that someone wants to be included in the evaluation plan. Because of resource limits, commonly it is not possible to include in the final evaluation plan all the outcomes of interest to all the stakeholders. Under such circumstances, values inquiry may be a useful approach to systematically and fairly narrowing the scope of the evaluation plan to those outcomes considered most important by stakeholders (Mark, Henry, & Julnes, 2000).

Based on related writings about stakeholder involvement, it can be argued that engaging stakeholders in values inquiry should help create a sense of pride and ownership, even if the outcomes of highest priority for specific stakeholders are not represented in the final evaluation plan (Patton, 1997; Sanders, 1994; Weiss, 1983; Wholey, 1994). One limitation in using values inquiry is that its methods are not as extensive or as highly evolved as other aspects of evaluation method, perhaps because much of work evaluators have done with stakeholders has been treated as background work and not systematically reported (Mark et al., 2000). In searching

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for methods it is sometimes possible to adapt approaches from other fields of inquiry, such as consensus building (Lewis, Johnson, & Braddock, 2000), participatory planning (Wener, 1988) and so forth. In our practice, we believed the steps involved in building logic models using the ATM approach (Renger & Titcomb, 2002) were consistent with the tenets of values inquiry. This report explores this procedure as a means of assisting in the prioritization of outcomes.

We begin the paper by providing an overview of values inquiry, and by proposing that several of the steps involved in ATM approach to developing logic models (Renger & Titcomb, 2002), although not originally developed under the rubric of values inquiry, can serve as a prototype for advancing methods in this field of investigation. We then present a case study in which the identification and prioritization of outcomes were central to the development of an evaluation plan. Aspects of the ATM approach that were implemented to meet these needs are then highlighted. We conclude with insights regarding the success and failures of the approach and with recommendations for the future.

UNDERLYING THEORIES

The process of prioritizing outcomes becomes more complicated as the number of stakeholders increases. Each stakeholder has specific interests, and these may compete with the priorities of other stakeholders in a collaborative. Further, for pragmatic reasons it usually is not possible to include every stakeholders' interests completely in the evaluation. This need to be selective in terms of which outcomes are measured can generate problems. For instance, if a given stakeholder's preferences are not included after the process of prioritizing, there is a risk that stakeholder may be unwilling to continue to invest resources or may become disengaged from the evaluation.

In the following case study, the evaluation team decided to use an integration of two approaches (philosophical and methodological) to manage a multitude of collaborators and programs in prioritizing outcomes. First is the idea of values inquiry, a general, developing framework which supports the prioritization of values by those who are most invested in the evaluation and its outcome. Second is the method of the ATM model (Renger & Titcomb, 2002), which outlines steps for leading program personnel through the creation of a logic model.

Values Inquiry

In short, values inquiry refers generally to the use of systematic methods to "identify the values relevant to social programs and policies and to infuse them into evaluations" (Mark et al., 2000, p. 40). Values inquiry can be broader than the study of stakeholders' values, but our focus here is on stakeholders' priorities for a program. In light of this focus, values inquiry can be seen as a philosophical approach that allows the stakeholders in a program to determine "what are the criteria by which the success of the policy or program should be judged" (Mark et al., 2000, p. 289). Values inquiry does not imply a single specific method, but can be achieved with any method that allows for systematic investigation into the priorities of stakeholders' outcomes in the program. Relative to earlier approaches to stakeholder involvement, the values inquiry approach: advocates the use of systematic inquiry to assess stakeholder values; encourages transparent reporting of these methods; treats the results as findings that can and should be reported; and encourages explicit discussion of how the findings of values inquiry are translated into decisions about the evaluation's procedures (Mark, 2003; Mark et al., 2000). Using a values

inquiry approach thus has a number of practical implications for evaluators. First, it allows evaluators to create a means by which to prioritize a potentially infinite number of outcomes that can be assessed, particularly with complex programs. Second, it also fosters engagement on the part of the stakeholders, by providing a fair and transparent process to determine whether the outcomes in which they are most invested are included in the evaluation plan.

The values inquiry perspective provides the viewpoint from which to undertake developing an evaluation plan, but it does not imply a particular methodology. For the evaluation described below, the evaluation team searched for methods that would be conducive to a values inquiry philosophy. The ATM approach, previously used to construct logic models, appeared to possess several steps that might be adapted to assist in prioritizing outcomes.

The ATM Approach

The ATM approach (Renger & Titcomb, 2002) is a three-step process designed to engage stakeholders in the development of a logic or conceptual model for their program. The first step is "A: Antecedent Conditions." The goal of this step is to develop a visual map of the "problem," and its relationship to other antecedent conditions. For the purpose of this paper, a problem is defined as the cause for concern for which solutions are sought, such as a reduction in diabetes.

Engaging individual stakeholders in an interview process during which a series of "Why?" questions are asked is one method within the ATM approach for identifying antecedent conditions. As a result of the interview, a visual map is created that depicts the relationship between the problem and its associated antecedent conditions. In some cases, stakeholders identify antecedent conditions that create causal chains. For example, if there is a lack of knowledge about the benefits of physical activity (one antecedent condition), then individuals may opt to lead a more sedentary lifestyle (another antecedent condition), which in turn places the individual at higher risk for diabetes (the problem). The first step of the ATM approach is highly reliant on stakeholders for their expertise in the problem at hand and their experience in the conditions that make it favorable for problems to arise.

The second step is "T: Target Antecedent Conditions." The purpose of the Step 2 is to achieve clarity as to which of the antecedent conditions identified in Step 1 will be targeted by strategies developed to address the problem. This process is similar to that suggested by other authors for determining the importance of targeting antecedent conditions for change, that is, for identifying which conditions are sensitive to attempts to intervene (Green & Kreuter, 1999). The ATM Model is not prescriptive in how to target the most important conditions; rather, it leaves intervention methodology to program personnel. Again, in this step the expertise of the stakeholders is key. Those who have experience with the problem are in a distinctive position to know which conditions are most important to be targeted for evaluation. One additional resource that can be very useful is the literature relating to the problem at hand. For example, connections between antecedent conditions can be supported in existing research.

The final step is "M: Measurement Issues." In this step, potential indicators and objectives are noted for each condition, ensuring that the outcomes of the antecedent conditions in the final logic or conceptual model are possible to measure.

The ATM Model as Method for Values Inquiry

Some of the steps of the ATM Model involve methods that appear to provide a good fit to the idea of values inquiry. Values inquiry addresses the need of evaluators to have stakeholders

involved in the process and engaged in the prioritization of outcomes. Values inquiry also suggests the use of systematic methods, with transparency, reporting of findings, and explicitness about how the findings of values inquiry are translated into evaluation design (Mark et al., 2000). The ATM Model for developing logic models provides a means by which evaluators, faced with many potential outcomes and limitations on budget and/or time, can stay congruent with the tenets of values inquiry.

In Step 1, antecedent conditions are identified through interviews with stakeholders. It is the antecedent conditions, identified through the interview process, that form the list of potential outcomes to be prioritized. In this way, explicit stakeholder involvement is used to generate the list of possible outcomes. Of course an antecedent condition per se is not an outcome. However, it is the antecedent condition that is targeted for change by a strategy and, therefore, the expected change in the antecedent condition becomes the outcome of interest. Thus the reader is reminded that, throughout the remainder of the paper, prioritizing antecedent conditions can be equated with prioritizing outcomes.

It is also important at this point to clarify what is meant by the term outcome, which itself is not always clear in the evaluation and values inquiry literature. The term outcome is defined here as the consequences of participating in a program (Fink, 1993). Within the context of the ATM approach, the consequence is the change to an antecedent condition, which follows as a result of the strategy intended to change it.

Prioritizing outcomes is central to values inquiry. However, a key question is "How do you initially derive the list of potential outcomes to be prioritized?" The first step of the ATM approach identifies potential outcomes by uncovering antecedent conditions through a simple, yet systematic asking of the question "Why?" in the interview process.

Of course, the resulting list of antecedent conditions could simply be listed before being prioritized. However, our experience is that a visual representation of the antecedent conditions can substantially assist in prioritizing outcomes. That is, some antecedent conditions are dependent on others for change. In the example above, a change in sedentary lifestyle is dependent on first changing knowledge. Thus, it might be argued that demonstrating a change in knowledge is a priority because it is a necessary prerequisite to changing sedentary behavior.

Step 2 of the ATM approach also contains key elements that are congruent with the principles of values inquiry. Step 2 systematically engages stakeholders and uses explicit criteria, communicated to all involved, to narrow a large number of antecedent conditions to a smaller subset. As noted above, the narrowing of antecedent conditions can be equated with prioritizing outcomes. Step 3, measurement, is less linked to the central tenets of values inquiry, though could include the priorities of the stakeholders in determining the best way to measure valued outcomes.

THE CASE STUDY: ENGAGING IN VALUES INQUIRY

Context

Eight social service agencies in a Southwestern urban area formed a collaborative to address the growing numbers of young parents in their area who were unstably housed. Statistics for the area confirmed the increased risk for child abuse and continued dependence on public assistance. The main goals of the collaborative were to (1) decrease the level of poverty among the population of young, unstably housed parents, thereby reducing their reliance on

public assistance, and (2) provide support to these parents to reduce child abuse and neglect, thereby breaking the cycle of dysfunctional parenting. The eight social service agencies were already providing the target population with services and programs, such as education, family self-sufficiency training, parenting skills training, job placement, housing, and financial assistance. The vision was for the agencies to provide seamless services to young, unstably housed parents through the collaborative in a location separate from any individual agency.

Members of the agencies involved in the collaborative were viewed as both stakeholders in the evaluation process and experts in the knowledge of young, unstably housed parents. As evaluators, we needed to seek a balance, on the one hand, between affording stakeholders an opportunity to provide input into prioritizing outcomes and, on the other hand, remaining expedient. The evaluation team used a values inquiry philosophy in response to the multiple stakeholders in the evaluation. The values of the stakeholders would guide each step of the process. In addition, several steps of the ATM approach were chosen to guide the methodology for obtaining the perspectives of those stakeholders and determining the outcomes of most importance.

The Process

Step 1: Antecedent conditions. The purpose of this stage of the evaluation planning process was to gain a thorough catalogue of the conditions that contribute to young people becoming parents and becoming unstably housed. These conditions would form the basis of potential outcomes to be prioritized. Thirteen agency stakeholders representing each of the eight agencies were interviewed separately for 30–40 min to elicit their understanding of the antecedent conditions of the problem.

The interview process was intentionally broad. That is, stakeholders were not restricted to commenting on only those antecedent conditions they felt their program targeted. Past literature suggests that an interview process such as this one gives those involved a sense of contribution and worth, with the hope of creating engagement and increasing their participation in the implementation of the final evaluation plan (Posavac & Carey, 1997). As a result of the interviews, 40 antecedent conditions, or potential outcomes to be prioritized, were identified. These conditions addressed the environmental, family, and individual levels. They included factors such as low self-esteem, a history of parental abuse or neglect, lack of social support, lack of child care, and current involvement in abusive relationships. A review of the literature provided an additional two conditions, bringing the total possible outcomes requiring prioritizing to 42.

Based on these conditions, a conceptual model was constructed in the form of a visual map that showed the linkages between antecedent conditions and their linkage to the "problem." For example, stakeholders noted that a sense of isolation contributed to feelings of depression in young mothers. These feelings of depression then led to dysfunctional behavior, which in turn affected the child. In terms of values inquiry, this provided a visual representation of the potential outcomes that needed prioritization. This was preferred over a table format because it placed the potential outcomes in the context of their relationships to other outcomes. We reasoned that understanding that some antecedent conditions preceded others might also assist in prioritizing.

A list of all antecedent conditions and the preliminary visual map was sent to each of the interviewees for a member check (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This, we believe, was an early act to infuse the values inquiry with transparency and the reporting of findings to those involved. For the most part, stakeholders were comfortable that the summary accurately captured the essence of the interview. None of those interviewed offered substantive changes to the visual map.

Step 2: Target antecedent conditions.   Once a comprehensive review of antecedent conditions was completed and a conceptual map designed, a winnowing process commenced. This winnowing process represented the initial step in prioritizing outcomes. Measuring the impact of the collaborative on all 42 separate conditions was a daunting, and pragmatically infeasible task. Due to time constraints and to the absence in the ATM's methodology for targeting conditions, the evaluation team developed a list of criteria to assist in prioritizing.

The evaluation team started with a pragmatic approach to answering the question, "What best represents the outcomes of these programs?" As a result, four criteria were developed. The criteria were presented in the form of four questions to the agency representatives over a series of two meetings. These criteria provided the basis for the value judgment and prioritization to occur. These criteria were used to select only those antecedent conditions that (1) were addressed by programs already in place, (2) were most strongly supported by research, (3) were able to change in the given time span, and (4) were measurable by existing data or new instruments. The first three criteria were used to make decisions during the course of one meeting with the stakeholders. The last criterion was used for decisions in an additional meeting.

The first criterion we asked stakeholders to use was: "Do programs target the antecedent conditions?" Because the goal was to evaluate the effectiveness of the collaborative's programs in producing change in the antecedent conditions, it was reasoned that only those antecedent conditions being targeted for change by a coalition agency should be a part of the evaluation plan.

The evaluation team called together the stakeholders to begin the process of sorting through the antecedent conditions. Attendees included six of the original 13 stakeholders who were interviewed, representing five of the original eight agencies. The meeting began by asking stakeholders to systematically examine each of the 42 conditions and to indicate whether a program their agencies offer targets the condition. Each antecedent condition was read aloud and agency representatives were asked for a show of hands to indicate their responses. This was a way of beginning to subtly draw from stakeholders the outcomes that should be prioritized.

There were several additional ideas guiding this activity. One was to allow stakeholders insight into the elimination of some conditions and keep the process as open as possible. The second was to have the stakeholders appreciate other antecedent conditions at play besides those upon which their program was focused, leading perhaps to a greater appreciation of the importance of other agencies in the coalition.

As a result of the first criterion, seven antecedent conditions were eliminated from consideration, thus reducing the number from 42 to 35.

The second criterion involves the strength of research evidence for each antecedent condition. Thus, the next point in the process was to share with the stakeholders the results of the literature review that had been completed after the interviews and preceding the current meeting. The evaluation team had rated the strength of research support for each condition using a 0–5 scale. Scoring was based on the number of peer-reviewed, empirical articles that could be found to support the relationship between the antecedent condition and the problem. If no empirical publications could be found, then the strength of research evidence was scored as 0. If more than 10 articles could be found, then the strength of research evidence was rated a 5 (highest score). (In retrospect, other measures such as effect size could have informed the scoring of the strength of the research evidence.)

The strength of research evidence for each of the remaining 35 antecedent conditions was shared with the stakeholders. They were provided with a list of antecedent conditions and the score that was determined by the evaluation team. The evaluation team recommended that

antecedent conditions receiving scores less than three be dropped from the evaluation plan. For the most part the stakeholders agreed with the recommendation. There were a few instances where some disagreed. In these cases, they were able to recommend other sources of research evidence and successfully argued for keeping the condition. The net result was that only one was dropped, narrowing the number to 34.

An unintended consequence of this process was that stakeholders felt many antecedent conditions were conceptually similar and could therefore be combined. The result of grouping conceptually similar antecedent conditions further reduced the number to 21. The conceptual model was again modified to reflect the remaining 21 conditions.

The third criterion was: Can change in the antecedent condition be expected within the timeframe of the program? Correspondingly, the last activity in this initial stakeholder meeting was to rate each remaining antecedent condition as to the likelihood that change could be expected within the timeframe of the program, which in this case was two years. Stakeholders were given a list of the remaining 21 conditions and were asked to note the feasibility to changing each within a two-year time period. Stakeholders used a five-point rating scale, with larger scores indicating a stronger belief that change could be expected in two years. After completing the scale individually, stakeholders reported their scores on each condition. Each condition was taken by turn, and disagreement on scores was discussed. After discussion, a vote was taken for keeping or eliminating the condition.

In some cases, stakeholders agreed that although the programs they provided targeted the antecedent condition and there was good research support to suggest the antecedent condition was linked to the problem, it was unreasonable to expect to see change in the two year span of the program. This resulted in elimination of three additional antecedent conditions. Thus, as a result of applying this criterion, the antecedent conditions being considered for evaluation were reduced from 21 to 18. It took approximately 90 min to work through the first three criteria and a second stakeholder meeting was then scheduled.

Step 3: Measurement.   The fourth criterion for winnowing possible outcomes, "Can changes in the antecedent conditions be measured," corresponds to the third step of the ATM model. The practical matter of measurement may not be a part of values inquiry, in that it focuses on whether indicators exist rather than on what stakeholders value. Nevertheless, we wanted this aspect of the outcome selection process to be guided by the same principles from values inquiry of stakeholder involvement, transparency, and feedback of findings to stakeholders.

Before the second stakeholder meeting, another review of the literature was completed to determine whether there were any psychometrically valid indices available to assess the narrowed list of antecedent conditions. The lack of available indices to measure an antecedent condition would make it impossible to determine whether respective collaborative programs had an impact in affecting change, thus bringing into question the utility of including the antecedent condition in the evaluation plan. Stakeholders were also asked for any additional measurement tools they were currently using to add this list. The evaluator assessed the availability, reliability, and validity of assessment tools currently being used by collaborative agencies as well as those found in the literature, again rating the tools using a 0–5 scale, with higher scores suggesting that reliable and valid indices were available.

The group of stakeholders reconvened about three weeks later. Attendees at this meeting included 7 of the original 13 stakeholders who were interviewed, representing three of the original eight agencies. Before proceeding, the evaluation team asked whether the meeting should be reconvened until all agencies were represented. The evaluation team was informed

that two of the agencies could not attend, but that three agencies had decided to withdraw from the project. It was not until several months later that the evaluation team learned that the three agencies withdrew because they felt their interests were not being represented in the evaluation plan.

The meeting began with a discussion of whether change in the antecedent conditions could be measured. For each antecedent condition, the evaluation team reported out the success at finding a measurement tool, a description of the tool including the length of instrument, what it purports to measure, associated psychometric properties, and the evaluation team's rating of the tool. It was recommended that antecedent conditions for which assessment tools received scores of three or less be dropped from the evaluation plan. As a result of applying this criterion, the number of antecedent conditions was narrowed from 18 to 12 and the conceptual model was modified to reflect the remaining 12 conditions.

At this point the evaluation team developed a comprehensive evaluation plan based on the conceptual model. Only three of the original eight social service agencies remained and were responsible for implementing and evaluating the services. The evaluation plan was implemented. At the time of writing, data regarding outcomes are not available.

DISCUSSION

The program evaluation standards are clear in the need to include the input from all stakeholders in developing evaluation plans. Values inquiry represents a sensible approach to achieving this goal. The difficulty is that the methods for value inquiry have not been well defined and tested (Mark et al., 2000). In the case study presented, the ATM approach (Renger & Titcomb, 2002) was used as a method for accomplishing a process congruent with values inquiry. In this study, the express purpose of engaging in values inquiry was to have some orderly, transparent way of identifying potential outcomes of importance, narrowing these outcomes to a manageable number (i.e., prioritizing outcomes), and in the process creating engagement in the final evaluation plan.

Strengths

From an efficiency standpoint, the adapted steps of the ATM approach worked well. Input was gathered from a large number of stakeholders and agreement reached in a relatively short period of time. As the process was planned, each stakeholder had equal say in the decisions that were made and each decision was made open for discussion. No decisions about the antecedent conditions were made behind closed doors on the part of the evaluation team. The interview process and member checking afforded an opportunity for agency representatives to share their insights as to any and all antecedent conditions of worth. The process appeared to provide an efficient, transparent way to translate the initial values of multiple stakeholders into explicit priorities for measurement.

Limitations

We see three notable shortcomings in our use of the ATM approach as a method for values inquiry. One was the unequal representation of the agencies, with some agencies sending more stakeholders to meetings than others and, more generally, the selection and representation of

stakeholders in the process. A second problem was the selection and application of criteria to prioritizing outcomes in Step 2 of the process. A third (which may be the result of the first two problems) involved the loss of participating agencies during the process.

First, during the deliberative process, not enough care was taken to ensure that each agency within the coalition had an equal voice. That is, during the group meetings it was not uncommon for some agencies to have more than one stakeholder present. Because of the voting procedure, the disproportionate representation certainly led to some outcomes being considered of greater worth than others. We speculate that stakeholders from agencies with smaller representation may have perceived the process as unfair and as a result withdrew. In addition, our decision to involve only representatives of the participating agencies, and not clients or other stakeholders, can be questioned, and future efforts at values inquiry may choose to engage a broader array of stakeholders. In such cases, the process for selecting stakeholder representatives should be clearly communicated and part of the record of values inquiry.

A second, important source of limitations involves the adaptation of Step 2 of the ATM approach. Although the deliberative process relied heavily on input from agency representatives, the evaluation team determined the criteria to be used for prioritizing outcomes. It is possible that the agency representatives did not value the criteria the evaluators selected. Perhaps stakeholders would have been more invested in the remaining in the collaborative evaluation plan if they had weighed in on the criteria to be used and their relative importance, prior to using the criteria in the prioritizing process. More congruent with values inquiry, the evaluation team could have used a Delphi methodology to let the stakeholders develop the criteria themselves, determining relative importance and directing more of the "winnowing" process. In our case example, we did not fully appreciate values inquiry as something deeper than engaging stakeholders in an agreement-building exercise. And, again, the evaluation team may have missed important stakeholders to include, such as members of the population the programs were to serve. As a result, potential outcomes of importance may have existed that were not even considered.

In practice, all the criteria worked well in terms of helping to prioritize outcomes, with the exception of the criterion requiring research evidence. Considerable resources were invested in searching for research support for linkages identified by the stakeholders. The net result was that good research support was found for virtually every linkage. Thus, the criterion did little to help narrow, or prioritize, outcomes. In hindsight this is not surprising, as the stakeholders interviewed were content experts in their field. It is likely that a major factor contributing to their expertise is an awareness of the literature published in their field. While research support is necessary to justify the delivery of certain service programs, in this case it proved not to be particularly useful in assisting in prioritizing outcomes.

A third problem that arose as we conducted the process was the loss of several of the agencies that originally planned to participate in the collaborative. Many agencies whose primary interests were not represented in the final evaluation plan withdrew from the collaborative. Perhaps agencies were willing to engage in values inquiry with the hope that their interests would be included. Even if the values inquiry approach used in this case study was completely fair, it is possible that those agencies whose agenda for entering the coalition was not completely met may have still opted to withdraw.

Another possible reason for withdrawing is that agency representatives may have equated the absence of an outcome (i.e., antecedent condition) they prized in the final evaluation plan with dropping the program. In assigning scores to outcomes, the evaluation team may not have

been sensitive to the fact that stakeholders were interpreting the process as assigning worth to their programs. Clearly these are not the same thing. Perhaps a different decision rule for voting, or an alternative procedure for choosing the winnowing criteria, would have helped keep agencies in the collaborative. Or perhaps additional interaction between the evaluation team and the stakeholders is needed, to allow additional opportunities for concerns to be raised and addressed. Then again, the early drop-out by some agencies may have been a good thing, in that the agencies that dropped out might otherwise have provided the most resistance to the evaluation plan and to the collaborative itself. Perhaps the process simply led them to understand the collaboration better and so they simply withdrew earlier than they otherwise would have. Nevertheless, this possible side effect of values inquiry is worthy of attention in future applications of the approach.

CONCLUSIONS

The intention of every evaluator is to develop fair and meaningful evaluation plans. Many of the steps adapted from the ATM approach worked well in prioritizing outcomes. However, clearly a lack of sensitivity to the philosophy of values inquiry may have contributed to some stakeholders becoming disenfranchised. It is hoped that the lessons learned here will assist other evaluators in evolving values inquiry methods further and help to avoid similar mistakes in applying this promising approach.

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