

## **PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS ACROSS THE LIFESPAN: A SUGGESTIVE PERSPECTIVE FROM COMMUNICATION THEORY<sup>1</sup>**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article provides a suggestive, theoretical perspective regarding the developmental nature of personal relationships across the human lifespan. As an alternative to linear thinking, this interpersonal communication perspective builds upon an organismic conception of relationships that accommodates the complexities of relational changes over time, and advances a tetradic model of relational adjustment and adaptation. Building on the organismic perspective about relational change, this model identifies intensification, obsolescence, retrieval, and modification (or reversal) of interpersonal transactions as variable features of a given relationship. This theory provides a much-needed, simultaneous communicative approach to the study of any interpersonal relationship as it is influenced by and embedded in larger, complex kin, social, and socio-cultural networks across the lifespan. Dyadic, triadic, and socio-cultural relationships illustrate the changes that motivate this alternative perspective. Aspects of theoretic development create a system for projecting the usefulness of this alternative perspective. By exploring the dynamic and evolving communicative processes that emerge within varied relationships, researchers can further unfold the relational complexities of the aging process.

Comprised of communicative interactions with romantic partners, family members, friends, co-workers and others, interpersonal relationships play an essential role in our personal and social lives. From these relationships and the influence of varied experiences individuals can discover themselves and patterns of personal development throughout their lifespan. An inherent part of these on-going relationships are many suppositions about relational change, redefinition, and in many cases complete change or transformation, which

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result in various forms of adjustment and adaptation. Little is known or understood, however, about the transformative nature of the communicative processes associated with an individual's relationships as they are influenced by and embedded within their network of relationships across the lifespan. To understand these complex and simultaneous developments over time requires more than a linear explanation of the study of interpersonal relationships.

Interest in the study of interpersonal communication and the aging process, is an area that has rapidly expanded in recent years (Nussbaum & Coupland, 2004; Nussbaum, Pecchioni, Thompson, & Robinson, 2000). O'Hair and Sparks (in press) recently examined relational agency within the health care system in terms of the transformative changes cancer patients often go through from diagnosis to treatment and beyond. Few studies, however, have examined the unique cultural and transformational nature of changes of interpersonal relationships across the lifespan and into older adulthood (e.g., Hummert, Wiemann, & Nussbaum, 1994; Nussbaum & Coupland, 2004; Pecchioni, Ota, & Sparks, 2004). Despite this neglect, the development of interpersonal communication at any age is not only central to our self-concept and functional relations with others, but is also a crucial element of the aging process itself. As Hummert and her colleagues state, "the abilities to interact and to maintain networks of relationships not only provide us with such affective states as happiness and satisfaction, but also function to meet our basic needs for companionship, success, and, eventually, help us to survive" (1994, p. 3). How then is interpersonal communication embedded in survival strategies of older adults? This is the broad question within which the following position fits.

To understand interpersonal relationships more completely, researchers need to consider the *simultaneous, developmental* nature of varied transactions in relationships over time and the *simultaneous, developmental* nature of each relationship as it is embedded within larger social and socio-cultural networks. Whereas the chronological development of older adult relationships invites a linear consideration, such a deceptively simple approach obscures the simultaneous and complex interweaving of different aspects of these relationships over time. Since the nature of relationships among younger people are often only partial, older-adult, self-report data provide a stronger basis to study patterns of interaction over time. Traditional approaches to personal relationships also tend to neglect the complex embedding of relationships within larger kin and social networks that become more visible across the lifespan.

Accordingly, this article will promote an organismic conception of relationships that accommodates the complexities of relational changes across the lifespan, and will propose a tetradic model of relational adjustment and adaptation to account for the distinct social and socio-cultural influences on interpersonal relationships across the lifespan. Building on the organismic perspective about relational change, the model will identify intensification, obsolescence, retrieval, and modification (or reversal) of interpersonal transactions as variable features of such a relationship. Dyadic, triadic, and socio-cultural relationships will illustrate the changes that motivate this alternative perspective. Aspects of theoretic development will further create a system for projecting the usefulness of this alternative perspective. Within this framework interpersonal communication researchers can shed light on older adult relationships as they explore the intriguing, evolving, dynamic communicative processes of each individual across the lifespan.

### **Organismic Study of Relationships Across the Lifespan**

The individual, the dyad, the triad, the society and the culture are vital levels for understanding the communicative processes that occur within relationships. An organismic approach to systems theory provides a means of understanding an older adult's changing relationships across the lifespan (Altman & Rogoff, 1987; Bateson, 1972, 1980; Weick, 1979). Altman and Rogoff describe organismic approaches as "the study of dynamic and holistic . . . systems in which person and environment components exhibit complex, reciprocal relationships and influences" (1987, p. 19). Some of the defining qualities of organismic systems are interdependence, mutual influence, and holistic functioning. "Smaller systems can be embedded in larger systems, in which case the rules governing the smaller system become subordinate to those that govern the larger one. Familiar organizing principles are rules and norms that govern social and family interaction" (Werner & Baxter, 1994, p. 339).

A few prior studies have examined close relationships from an organismic perspective (e.g., Duck & Silver, 1990; Milardo & Weilman, 1992). These studies center on the embeddedness of close relationships in complex kin and social networks. The characterization of relationships as interdependent represents a sociological approach to their study. Lazarsfeld and Menzel (1961) described the interdependence perspective as collective in orientation, and the relational dimensions view as having a member orientation. Scholars who support such a collective view consider the study of relationships polluted when the perspectives of individual members are considered. These arguments are reminiscent of those of Durkheim (1950) who was concerned that sociological explanations be reduced to psychological ones. Williamson and Fitzpatrick (1985) argue, however, that communication researchers wary of reductionism tend to avoid considering vital information such as the degree to which the individual (member) and the dyad (collective) are connected across the levels of analysis. Further, researchers have found the collective or interaction level of analysis is significantly related to the individual level (Fitzpatrick & Indvik, 1986). Therefore, researching older adult relationships, as embedded within their complex kin and other social and socio-cultural networks, from an organismic perspective may prove to be a more fruitful approach than restricting the analysis to a single level.

Because relational communication is a transactional process with attributes of an open system (social and socio-cultural networks), one must not only focus on the relationship between the participants (Wilmot, 1987), but also acknowledge the need for synthesis of individual concerns and the levels that connect them. Millar and Rogers (1976) claim the focus should be on the interdependent properties that the participants have collectively created. However, if the study of personal relationships treats interdependence exclusively, the critical perception of the individual interactants can be neglected. Both sets of concerns are important. Relationships have characteristics that cannot be fully explored by concentrating efforts only upon the individuals or their interdependence within any given relationship. In other words, each relationship is more than the sum of the individual characteristics of the two interactants, is more than the environmental factors that influence the relationship, and is more than the patterns of interdependence. The organismic approach encourages more complete understanding of interaction patterns by considering the interweaving of all these sets of influences without concern for potentially constraining problems of reductionism.

The majority of research on relational change has centered on the initiation, maintenance, and dissolution stages of relational development (e.g., Baxter & Bullis, 1986;

Metts, Cupach, & Bejlovec, 1989; Wilmot & Sillars, 1991) and relational stages (e.g., Altman & Taylor, 1973; Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Knapp, 1978). Few studies, however, have emphasized the *simultaneous*, developmental nature of relationships as they are embedded within larger social networks (O'Hair & Sparks, in press; Nussbaum, 1994). Several communication researchers have suggested that investigating the ongoing fluctuations over time could provide added depth to the study of relationships (cf. Wilmot & Sillars, 1991).

Relationships are not static, but instead are inherently characterized through the assumptions of change, process, and development over time (Nussbaum, 1991; Nussbaum et al, 2000; Nussbaum & Coupland, 2004; Pecchioni, Ota, & Sparks, 2004). To understand communication phenomena, such as manifest in a given relationship, one must first discover and uncover the developmental process of the relationship. That is, one must not only understand the processes by which certain behaviors develop within the relationship, but also within the lifespan that frames that relationship. Thus, "the lifespan frame of the interaction gives meaning to the interaction" (Nussbaum, 1991, p. 3). Over time, members of a relationship gain a more complete understanding of each individual in the relationship. Relational awareness may evolve from *simultaneous* understanding occurring not only within each relationship over time, but also as this understanding is influenced by relationships within each individual social network. To identify the dynamic, changing, and transformative nature of older adult relationships and the influence of their social networks within which these relationships are embedded, one must first understand the ways in which the individual, dyad, triad, and social are intertwined in interaction.

### Individual

As individuals mature, they develop relationship schemata or sets of categories about personal relationships. Research on relationship schemata and cognitive changes in adulthood indicates that individuals develop relational labels and establish relational criteria that are judged from communicative phenomena (Planalp, 1985; Wilmot & Baxter, 1989). The continuity of relationships, according to Sigman (1991), is organized and maintained through relationship continuity constructional units, defined as "pieces of behavior that precede, occur during, and succeed moments of relationship members' interactional nonengagement and serve to define the relationship as a continuous one despite the absence of face-to-face management" (p. 109). Thus, each individual continues to define each relationship apart from the interaction as well as during interaction. Individual behavior is only one part of an ongoing communication system because it is influenced by the history of interactions that make up the individual. Baxter (1992) notes, for example, that to enact a dialogue, the interactants need to fuse their perspectives through interaction but without losing their differentiated voices. Communication is the natural link connecting individuals to one another.

### Dyad

Of all forms of communication exchange, dyadic communication is the most prevalent and represents the essential features of all communication (see e.g., Fisher, 1953; O'Hair & Sparks, in press). Geertz (1973) views personal relationships as webs of meaning spun through the communicative practices of two partners. Dyadic communication is transactional and progresses through various stages including initiation, maintenance, and dissolution (Wilmot, 1981). It requires simultaneous sending and receiving of cues, such as talking or gesturing, while also acquiring meaning for those many cues (Wilmot, 1987).

Research about dyadic interpersonal communication has often centered on initial attraction, relationship formation, disengagement, the redefinition of romantic relationships (e.g., Metts, Cupach, & Bejlovec, 1989), and relational stages (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Knapp, 1978) and turning points (e.g., Baxter & Bullis, 1986). Communication scholars have explored not only the process of dyadic relationship maintenance (e.g., Ayres, 1983; Baxter & Dindia, 1990; Canary & Stafford, 1992; Dindia & Baxter, 1987; Lee & Jablin, 1995; Shea & Pearson, 1986), but have also examined relational redefinition as an alternative to the termination of dyadic relationships (e.g., Metts, et. al., 1989) such as turning points in developing romantic dyads (see e.g., Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Bolton, 1961). In recent years, increasing attention has also been paid to health communication dyads (see e.g., Cegala, Gade, Broz, & McClure, 2004; Kreps & O'Hair, 1995; O'Hair, Sparks, & Kreps, in press; O'Hair & Sparks, in press; Sparks, 2003; Sparks, O'Hair, & Kreps, in press; Sparks & Villagran, 2004; Wanzer, Booth-Butterfield, & Gruber, 2004). Although these studies capture moments and stages of relationships, the *simultaneous* nature of the dyadic relationship over time and the influence of an outside member on the dyad have received minimal attention by communication scholars.

### Triadic, Social, and Socio-Cultural Influences

Transactions in triads have been studied from a sociological perspective for several decades (Caplow, 1968; Satir, 1967, 1972; Simmel, 1959; Von Wiese, 1932). The study of triadic communication, however, has been sparse (Wilmot, 1987). Simmel (1959) was one of the first to recognize that triadic communication is an essential component of a functioning society ranging from a family of three to a brief conversation among three persons. For Simmel all triads include one member playing a mediating role between the other two members. Caplow (1968) further accented that triadic communication is central to society and serves as the basic social process whereby persons and groups modify each other's behavior. Complementing these positions, Wilmot (1987) explained triadic communication, insofar as one member might be isolated, suppressed, or excluded from complete participation, as forming a dyad plus the third person. When a dyad forms within the framework of three people, the primary dyad is not permanent, but will likely change, evolve, and shift alliances among the three (Caplow, 1968). For example, a newborn baby, mother, and father will likely experience shifts of alliances across the family lifespan. Another instance might include a physician, patient, and third-party (e.g., nurse or spouse) will likely experience shifts across the lifespan of the health care experience as they go through diagnosis, treatment, and survivorship options. Not only has little research focused on the difficulties of triadic relational maintenance (see e.g., Caplow, 1968), no research has examined the extent by which the communicative process of an individual outside the dyad influences participants to redefine or transform a given relationship.

Even though all personal relationships are embedded in the larger socio-historical-cultural milieu of society, each relationship also develops its own dyadic culture (Baxter, 1992). In other words, as relationships develop over time, they constitute bonding and negotiation of interdependence and dependence both within and outside the relationship. Therefore, the individual affects and is affected by different social and cultural situations, and at the same time is influenced by the dyadic, triadic interactions framed within these embedded social and cultural networks. Interpersonal communication scholars can add to the

basic understanding of relationships by examining the dynamic, reciprocal, complex intricacies of each relationship in relation to other relationships within the social network.

### **Tetradic Model of Relational Adjustment and Adaptation**

McLuhan and Powers (1989) originally formulated their tetradic structure to explain transformations in world life and media. This article argues for further extension of the that model by considering interpersonal communication processes as they are embedded in and influenced by social and socio-cultural influences. In parallel research O'Hair and Sparks (in press) has used this adaptation of the tetradic model as a way to study the impact of a long-term illness diagnosis on relationships. The unique properties of such interpersonal relationship processes may also be understood via the tetradic model. From a perspective grounded in the lifespan developmental perspective, an adaptation of McLuhan and Powers' (1989) tetrad can provide a more realistic approach to the study of the impact of social and socio-cultural influences on interpersonal relationships due to its simultaneous nature. Similar to O'Hair and Sparks (in press) the following analysis will focus on the distinct features of the tetradic structure which comprise four *simultaneously* occurring units or variables, namely, intensification, obsolescence, retrieval, and modification (or reversal). All four elements of the tetrad exist in motion at the same time; however, one or more of the four may be more salient than another at any given time.

Although this tetradic structure was first developed to explain the increasing development of new technologies resulting in the global village concept, it extends the model to explain interpersonal communicative processes as influenced by their social and socio-cultural environments. Individuals must acknowledge and understand the different ways individuals from more visual-oriented Western societies think and operate versus the different ways individuals from more acoustic-oriented Eastern societies. By understanding and accounting for these different ways of thinking simultaneously, we can experience increased satisfaction and happiness in our relationships.

McLuhan and Powers (1989) initially created their tetradic structure while investigating the formal aspects of communication and found that all media forms simultaneously undergo change through four fundamental components. Thus, communication processes contribute to *intensify* something in a culture, while, at the same time, *obsolescing* something else. They also *retrieve* a phase or factor, previously pushed aside, and undergo a modification (or *reversal*) when extended beyond the limits of their potential. The elements or "variables" comprising the model are, therefore, intensification, obsolescence, retrieval, and modification (reversal). Thus, as a relationship *intensifies*, parts of the relationship become *obsolete*. However, at the same time each individual in the relationship is discovering new information about the other (*retrieval* on some level). As this relational information seeking and discovery increases, the relationship is going through constant *modification* (or even reversal). All such units are simultaneously occurring over time. Depending upon the nature of the relationship at a given time, certain aspects appear to be more salient at different points in time. The connections and interactions among them constitute the tetradic model of relational adjustment, which we now extend to include social and socio-cultural influences. The result of these extensions is a tetradic model of relational adjustment and adaptation.

Specifically, the theory continues to focus on the situations of communication that are characteristically continuing over time. Two fundamental laws govern the interaction among the variables or units of the model. First, there is a positive or direct relationship between the level of an individual's intensification and the perceived obsolescence in a given

relationship (e.g., as intensification increases, obsolescence increases). Second, there is a positive or direct relationship between the level of an individual's retrieval and the perception of modification (or reversal) in a relationship over time, e.g., as retrieval increases, modification (or reversal) increases. For example, a romantic relationship *intensifies* and becomes more passionate, while at the same time *obsolescing* the friendship or Platonic nature of the relationship because of the intensification. As the relationship progresses, each individual initially pushes aside annoying characteristics of the other in the relationship, but these characteristics never totally disappear, so the process leading to their *retrieval* is begun at the onset of the relationship. The factors that were pushed away cause the relationship to go through a *modification* (or reversal). In other words, the modification (or reversal) process was in an incubation period because it had not been discovered, yet it existed at the beginning of the relationship. However, since these characteristics had extended beyond the limits of the relationship, modification (or reversal) over time is likely to occur. When this four-part structure of communication is applied to relationships, one can identify the dynamic social impact of the individual and his or her dyadic, triadic, social, and cultural relational networks within which the relationship is extended and embedded. These distinct dimensions working together comprise the tetradic model of relational adjustment and adaptation.

Such an analogical extension of theory from one area to another is often undertaken and encourages a reexamination of components of theory development to locate the necessary adjustments. Dubin provides a useful set of concerns for this extension (1969, 1978). A theoretical model begins with (1) *variables or units* whose interactions constitute the subject matter of attention. Then, the model specifies the manner in which these variables interact with each other or (2) the *laws of interaction* among the variables of the model. Because theoretical models are generally of limited portions of the world, the limits or (3) *boundaries* must be set forth within which the theory is expected to hold. Most theoretical models are presumed to represent a complex part of the real world, part of whose complexity is revealed by the fact that there are various (4) *system states* in which the variables interact differently with each other. Finally, the theorist is able to derive conclusions that represent logical and true deductions about the model as it is operates or the (5) *propositions* of the model. Then, each term in each proposition of the model must be converted into an (6) *empirical indicator* of the term. The next procedure is to substitute the empirical indicators by generating (7) *hypotheses* from these propositional statements to determine whether the theoretically predicted values are achieved in the research.

Although a number of narratives can illustrate this perspective, consider the tetradic model of relational adjustment and adaptation applied in the following scenario. A romantic relationship appropriately might uncover this *simultaneous* notion of relational adjustment and adaptation. Person "A" had been in several long-term relationships across his adult life. Each of the three relationships had failed. Then, "A" formed a friendship with Person "B." Over time, the friendship intensified into a romantic relationship and eventually "A" decided he wanted to marry "B." Thus, the initial notion of friendship had become obsolete due to the intensification of the relationship that escalated into marriage. As the relationship intensified, "A" pushed aside many of his true feelings. Yet, as the marriage progressed, "A" retrieved the phase or factor that had been pushed aside (e.g., his fear of commitment or parenthood, drug addiction, or discovery of homosexuality), which ultimately caused the relationship to undergo a modification (or reversal) since the characteristics had extended beyond the limits of the relationship. Ultimately, "A" could not continue the relationship because of personal

characteristics which had been pushed aside, and “B” could not continue because of “A’s” personal characteristics which were not previously known. The relationship ends because it is not mutually satisfying due for one or both parties in the relationship. Thus, the initial tetrad of the simultaneous processes of communication occurring over time is not only distinct from other more linear approaches to the study of interpersonal communication, but also provides a better understanding of the unique, dynamic and evolving nature of relationships as they progress over time.

*Boundaries/Scope (precision of prediction)*

This theoretical model generally concerns personal relationships and their changes over time within an individual’s relational, social, and socio-cultural networks. A “benign” boundary of the tetradic model limits its anticipated application. Dubin (1969, 1978) explains a benign boundary as one beyond which the model is alleged not to hold, but where the characteristics of the boundary are not themselves relevant to the manner in which the model operates. Even though the tetradic model was not initially intended to be representative of relational networks, it can serve to suggest aspects of personal relationships despite its narrower scope of prediction (cf. O’Hair and Sparks, in press).

The limiting values or boundaries of the law of interaction are clearly built into the model. The intensification variable has a zero value and may increase to a level where the system is destroyed (the system being the reaction of the individual to the relationship); namely, the individual may either intensify the relationship or does not, while at the same time obsolescing or not a part of the relationship. These two boundaries clearly limit the law of relationship between the individual’s perceived benefit from the relationship becoming obsolescent, while another part intensifies. In a parallel way, the relation between retrieval and modification (or reversal) has comparable limits. The lower limit of retrieval is zero (no retrieval), and the upper limit is presumably high but unspecified, since, for example, an individual evaluating modification or reversal of a given relationship may have an untested limit of expectations about the level of modification of that particular relationship, as it is embedded within others in the social network.

*System States*

The system within which the theoretical model operates is defined by the values taken by all the variables or units in the system. Dubin (1969, 1978) explains a system in terms of the dimensions of its distinctive values that persist over time, no matter how long. For example, the tetrad could characterize the individual as being in a state of varying levels of intensification, obsolescence, retrieval, and modification depending upon each relationship within the individual’s relational network as influenced by the surrounding social and socio-cultural environment. The first state of the system might be characterized where the individual is in an equal state of intensification/obsolescence, and retrieval/modification. A second state of the system might be characterized as the level of intensification/obsolescence that is much higher than the level of retrieval/modification or vice versa. A third system state might involve the balance of intensification/obsolescence outweighing the intensification side and the retrieval/modification outweighing the retrieval side or vice versa. Thus, three system states (and the opposite of each) may represent the levels of intensification, obsolescence, retrieval, and modification of the individual in each given relationship. On the assumption that these are persistent states for the individual, a basis emerges for the model to predict the

consequences of persistence of the state and the states to which the individual is likely to go if he or she moves from one state to another. At this point, propositions can be derived from the model and hypotheses can be tested from these hypothetical statements generated by the model.

### Propositions

Theoretical propositions become true because they are logical statements generated within a defined theoretical system. Truth statements consist of propositions derived from a theory that has specified its variables, laws of interaction among the variables, boundaries and system states. Some propositions that follow from the theoretical model of relational adjustment and adaptation are: (1) An individual's orientation toward a given relationship is the sum of a level of intensification and obsolescence, and the sum of a level of retrieval and modification. (2) An individual may feel no intensification and no obsolescence, and no retrieval and no modification toward a given relationship. (3) The level of intensification and obsolescence, and the level of retrieval and modification felt by an individual toward his relationship are independent of each other.

### Empirical Indicators/Hypotheses

The final stage is to operationalize the terms of a proposition to make hypotheses testable. An illustrative hypothesis derived from the preceding propositions would be: The level of an individual's intensification with a given relationship, when measured by a Likert-type intensification question, is inversely proportional to the perception of obsolescence of characteristics within that relationship, as measured by a comparison with levels of intensification/obsolescence in other relationships within the relational network. A second hypothesis might be: The level of an individual's retrieval with a given relationship, when measured by a Likert-type retrieval question, is inversely proportional to the perception of modification (or reversal), as measured by a comparison with levels of retrieval/modification in other relationships within the relational, social, and socio-cultural networks. The reality or the extent to which this theory models the empirical world is a research issue that can only be resolved by much more research about hypotheses generated by the theoretical model. To uncover the unique complexities of such relationships in later-life, researchers must hypothesize and observe the ongoing, simultaneous interaction of each relationship as it is embedded within larger social and socio-cultural networks over time.

### **Conclusion**

This article provides a suggestive theoretical framework for identifying the dynamic, changing, and transformative nature of older adult relationships and the influence of the social and socio-cultural networks within which these relationships are embedded. To gain a more complete understanding of the nature of relationships across the lifespan, researchers must consider the *simultaneous, developmental* nature of understanding transactions in relationships over time and the *simultaneous, developmental* nature of each relationship as it is embedded within larger social and socio-cultural networks. An organismic approach to the study of relationships across the lifespan was provided as an approach for the description of relational change across the lifespan. Then, a tetradic model of relational adjustment and adaptation composed of intensification, obsolescence, retrieval, and modification (or reversal) was explained within the context of a relationship as influenced by social and socio-cultural

networks over time. The intricacies of relationships across the lifespan are probably best revealed by unlocking any changes in the communicative content within each relationship, as well as discovering the influence of such diverse social networks across the lifespan.

Future studies should continue to examine the simultaneous, developmental nature of transactions in a given relationship by empirically testing the propositions and hypotheses offered. In addition, research may not only address the nature of each relational situation as it is affected over time by the supra-systems and intercultural communication networks in which these various relationships are embedded, but also should more specifically investigate the extent to which outside members influence the dyadic relationship over time. Since older adult relationships have likely developed over time chronologically and have been influenced by various social and socio-cultural networks, the dimensions of their relationships may provide a good starting point to assess relational change in a less linear, more simultaneous nature over time. By focusing on delineating the nature of the communicative processes that older adults consciously or mindfully enact in such decisive situations of different kinds of relationship exchanges, researchers can further understand communicative behaviors both within and outside of each relationship as it is embedded within their social and socio-cultural networks across the life-span.

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