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Hans A. Illing

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COMMENTS AND RESEARCH REPORTS

THE TRAINING OF PAROLE AGENTS IN GROUP COUNSELING*

HANS A. ILLING†

The differences between counseling and psychotherapy have been observed in correctional settings in the State of California for some time, but only recently did the subject of differentiation between these two functions become acute. In the first place, in August, 1953, an Outpatient Psychiatric Clinic in the Adult Parole Division of the Department of Corrections was established in Los Angeles, providing an important extension of the psychiatric treatment services in the Department. In addition, in 1959 the Adult Parole Division established a group counseling program for many individuals on parole, the group counseling being conducted by Parole Agents in their respective branch offices. Prior to the establishment of this group counseling program for parolees, the Department had been engaged in an active group counseling as well as group therapy program within the correctional institutions.

For all institutional counselors and therapists Fenton's *Handbook*¹ has been a valuable guide for a number of years. This all the more because group counseling means involving the total staff, and particularly the Correctional Officers in the institutions, most of whom lack prior training for such a program. Fenton expresses the view that group counseling may be one of a series of steps in the development of prisons into therapeutic communities. He feels that group counseling contributes to safe confinement and the smooth operation of

the prisons, as well as to rehabilitation. Studies at the Folsom, Soledad, and Chino prisons have all strongly suggested that group counseling tends to reduce disciplinary difficulties. At the same time, Fenton admits that prisons have not been hospitals, nor are they hospitals. Therefore, a prison environment is not necessarily conducive to the development "of either sound social controls or strong inner controls within the individuals." As Harrison puts it, "we cannot expect a man who has been a sort of schizoid isolate to safely return to the community as a healthy, constructive, socialized individual."²

As of the summer of 1960, institutional counseling in California involved approximately 9,000 inmates and 650 counselors. Approximately 80% of the inmates were involved in the program during some portion of their prison terms. As of January, 1957, it was estimated that about 1% of the parolees of California state correctional institutions had had one year or more of group counseling. As of June, 1960, approximately 50% of the parolees had had one year or more of group counseling.³

Group counseling in the Adult Parole Division was initiated at about the same time it began in the institutions. This program for parolees has never achieved growth comparable to that of the institutional program. Initially most of the groups met on a once-a-month basis. Problems of geography and meeting places, as well as conflicting interests, have tended to keep the program small. Also there has been an understandable concern about the possible dangers of association. Parole Agents (subsequently called PAs) leading groups have consistently made clear to the group members that participation in the counseling program does not justify association outside of the group meetings. Concern about outside association has decreased with time, because few incidents have

* This paper is an abridgement of a manuscript prepared in 1961.

† The author is a psychotherapist with the Parole Outpatient Clinic of the Adult Parole Division, California Department of Corrections. He also serves on the staff of the Hacker Clinic in Beverly Hills. Dr. Illing received his LL.B. and Ph.D. degrees from the Friedrich Wilhelm University in Berlin, his B.A. degree from the University of Utah, and his M.S.W. degree from Tulane University. He formerly served on the staffs of the Southern Reception and Guidance Center of the California Youth Authority in Norwalk, California, and the Veterans Administration Regional Office in Los Angeles.—EDITOR.

¹ FENTON, AN INTRODUCTION TO GROUP COUNSELING IN STATE CORRECTIONAL SERVICE (Calif. Dep't of Corrections 1957).

² Harrison, Mental Health Applications in the California Correctional System (unpublished, mimeographed address to the California Department of Corrections, 1960).

³ *Ibid.*

occurred which appear to be consequent upon association in the group. In line with this new group counseling program in the Adult Parole Division, a series of demonstration research projects was developed and a new method was found of classifying people in terms of integration levels of interpersonal maturity. This will be described in some detail below.

In order to structure this program and with some modest prospect of success, a first meeting of all those PAs was called in the Southern California area who were interested in group counseling, in order to introduce the program, for the writer and the PAs to get mutually acquainted, and to establish a goal for this new program. During this first meeting, inquiries were made about the educational backgrounds of the participants and their experience as psychologists, sociologists, or criminologists, or professionals in allied fields. An initial theory of "group counseling" was presented for their consideration, and it was suggested that this writer would be willing to join their groups provided that the PAs had no objection to his coming to their groups as a visitor and observer.

This writer's subsequent experiences can be divided into several phases: It seems that whatever his role was in the eyes of the PAs, supervision and consultation seemed to have a synonymous meaning to them. If, therefore, subsequently the word "supervision" is used, it can, and should be, used interchangeably with "consultation." The stages or phases of supervision can be divided as follows:

The first phase of supervision is a period of preparation and information lasting until the supervisor and the PA and the PA's group get acquainted with each other.

The second phase could be called a period of growing insight into the psychodynamics of both the PA's personality and the group members' character disorders. It seems, as pointed out below, that less difficulty was found in this writer's participation as a visitor with the groups, than was found in the transference and counter-transference phenomena with a PA. Only time, patience, and "reaching out" accomplished a more meaningful relationship between the various agents. To this writer it seems that many of the agents have anxieties about demonstrating their own leadership abilities.

The third phase seems to have as its aim an analysis of the total situation.

THE GROUPS

In the course of eight months this writer visited a total of seven groups. One PA conducted his group meetings in the central office, another agent in the western district, a third agent in what is called "West Central," and two agents each in two different eastern offices. With one exception, all groups were homogeneous in nature, consisting of members who were, or are, narcotics addicts, usually using heroin. The exception was the group in the western office, which did not consist of drug addicts, but of various sorts of offenders, ranging from murderers to bad check writers.

The frequency and the intensity of this writer's visits with the various groups depended on: (1) his time available to travel the distances to the various offices and to the time of the groups scheduled; (2) the willingness of the PAs to have this writer participate in their meetings; (3) this writer's evaluation of a PA's experience, more consultation being indicated with the less experienced PAs; and (4) the element of transference and counter-transference of the visitor regarding his presence in the group.

In starting with the group in the western section, hereafter called Group I, it should be mentioned that the PA was the only person on the staff who had known this writer as a personal friend for some years prior to their joining the staff of the Department. As mentioned above, his group was the only group in the entire area whose members were not drug addicts. This group also differed from the other groups in that a number of the members had been coming to the group counseling meetings for as long as a year and a half. Finally, the PA was known to have the most experience among all PAs, approximately seven years.

For these reasons, this writer visited with Group I only on a few occasions over the period of eight months, more because he wanted to get an impression how this group functioned than because he expected to be consulted about group dynamics. During these visits, he noted at least three individuals whom he had seen during the previous group meetings. The records show that these members were quite regular in attendance, rarely missed a meeting, felt at ease, and seemed to have a need for these biweekly sessions. The rest of the group changed continuously. The reason for a steady stream of newcomers was simple: this PA required every new release from a correctional institution to attend his group counseling meetings,

which were biweekly, for at least 90 days. Thereafter the parolee was free to continue or discontinue attendance at the group counseling meetings. The size of the group was approximately nine. The PA as the leader kept the group strictly to daily problems, particularly in the case of the newcomers, and to problems of their readjustment to life "outside," such as job problems, family conflicts, and the like. He was firm, somewhat authoritarian, but very kind, and he was respected. Above all, he revealed a sense of humor.

The visitor's role in this group was confined primarily to observation rather than participation. Only on one or two occasions was he asked a question either by the PA or by a member of the group. Apparently no difficulty resulted from the presence of the observer, who sat in a circle with the parolees.

The group at the West Central office, hereafter called Group II, was conducted by the only PA who seemed to have some experience both in group counseling and in group therapy, in addition to being ambitious in his research in group dynamics. He was, to this writer's knowledge, the only PA who had undergone analysis, and also the only PA who used a tape recorder during his meetings, with the approval of the group. These tapes were often, although not always, played back to those members of the group who wished to listen, but in any event the PA often played these tapes back to himself prior to the next meeting.

Finally, his group also differed from the other groups this writer visited in that, in the course of eight months, not only did this writer attend his sessions for as long as five consecutive weeks, but also in attendance were a co-leader, another PA, attending as a visitor, and, at one time, a visitor from the Department's headquarters.

With this PA's permission, the following two episodes, which took place at two different meetings, are hereby quoted from the live tape:

"Visitor: If I may be so inquisitive, last week we spent most of the time discussing some of your problems. Please forgive my curiosity, but I was wondering what has become of it, I mean the questions we discussed last week?

Ted: I told the girl's parents.

Visitor: You did? What happened?

Ted: It didn't work out.

Visitor: It didn't work?

One of the members laughed, rather an odd laugh.

Visitor: Why?

Ted: They got all up in the air. I couldn't reason with them.

PA: Then they greeted it with emotional reaction?

Ted: Yeah.

Visitor: You mean it is off now?

Ted: Yeah.

A group member: It looks like it worked out real good for you. You're so happy about it.

Ted: It's like a relief."

The background of this exchange was a discussion by Ted at the previous meeting in which he attempted to articulate his feelings about a girl whom he wanted to marry, but the reaction of whose parents to his proposal he feared. The group members then seemed to be divided in their opinions as to how to handle this situation.

The next episode was based, briefly, on this event: Before this writer joined the same group for the third consecutive time, a representative from the Department's headquarters, whose title was Coordinator of Group Counseling for all state correctional institutions, expressed his desire to visit this group. The writer, however, advised him that he could attend only if the PA and the group gave their permission. To this the representative agreed. The tape recording of the interaction of the group while the visitor and his guest waited outside goes as follows:

"PA: Let me interrupt you, Jerry. The doctor is here and with him is a Mr. H., who is coordinator of group counseling for the Department of Corrections, and he would also like to sit in. Now you can either allow him to sit in or not. He understands that. It is up to the group.

One Member: Does he work out of this office?

PA: No, he is from Sacramento. He is in charge of group counseling for the Department.

Member: He came all the way down here? I guess we better let him in.

PA: The group can feel free to accept him or not.

Another Member: Take a vote on it.

PA: No, we don't vote in the group. If one member has strong feelings against it, that's enough. Would anybody like to start a discussion on it?

Silence.

General mumbling of agreement.

Another Member: It's okay with me. No objections.

[General consent.]”

One of the reasons why this PA had four authoritarian figures sit in at his meetings was to find out the degree, impact, or influence of transference reactions on the group as a whole. Would they hold back, be intimidated? Or would they show off? The amazing impression that all the visitors received was that no appreciable degree of “naturalness” diminished due to the visitors’ presence. Even though on one or two occasions when the attendance of group members was four group members as against four authoritarian figures, that is, visitors, still the group members’ interaction seemed to be uninfluenced by the presence of so many “threatening” authoritarian “strangers.” In fact, as the above discussion indicates, even the fifth authoritarian figure, who came only once, was accepted without any objection and was easily “absorbed.” One might say that the group made no fuss about the visitors and there was no sweating over “authority.”

While undoubtedly the PA conducting Group II projected his personality into the group to a different degree than the other PAs, nevertheless it seems to this writer that the interaction and the content of the discussions were similar to those in the other groups consisting of narcotics addicts.

Groups III and IV were attended by this writer in one of the eastern offices. As with Group II, Groups III and IV consisted wholly of drug addicts. However, both PAs were quite uninitiated in the method of group counseling and, therefore, seemed to appreciate this writer's presence at their meetings. Group III did not last very long. Among the difficulties of these group members were that they were unemployed, that they had been recently released from correctional institutions, and that group counseling was combined with nalline testing, usually done after the group counseling meeting. To make matters worse, the physical setting consisted of only partially partitioned offices, so that one could hear the noise in the other offices, and there was a steady coming and going. In addition, it was possible for this writer to visit this particular group only three times. Although the premature termination of this group may not necessarily be attributed to the writer's absence, the PA had to overcome obstacles which perhaps were too great for him.

Group IV in the same office was conducted by another PA, probably not much more experienced in group counseling than the leader of Group III. However, he was able to keep his group for several months, and this writer attended Group IV meetings for about two months, making four visits. The psychodynamics of the group members were not wholly different from those of the other addict groups. The members felt free in their interplay, in their interaction, and in the material which they presented. Much of what they expressed was intellectualized as well as rationalized; that is, they did not bring forth their feelings toward their offenses, or their addiction, or such relationships as they had with one another and with their families. Some of the group members, perhaps, had some language difficulties, being of American-Mexican descent and speaking primarily Spanish. Some, however, showed distinct symptoms of withdrawal from emotional involvements and also failed in reality testing. As is unfortunately so usual with many drug addicts, they did not think they had any problems. Nevertheless, this group served its function fairly well, and the members came to see that there was some point in getting together once weekly and to reassure themselves of some need, even though they were all too aware that these group counseling meetings were “imposed upon them” by the State.

Groups V and VI were visited in another eastern office. The former was attended by this writer quite regularly for a period of three months. The members of the group represented all races and, perhaps, all social-economic levels. The main speaker of this group was a Negro who projected his feelings both of inferiority and superiority onto the other group members. He felt inferior as far as racial discrimination was concerned, but superior as far as the other members were concerned. Nevertheless, he seemed to be tolerated. He loved to hear himself speak, dominated the group, and usually it was difficult for anyone else to break in. Another member of the group, of American-Mexican descent, was his antagonist, also speaking quite a bit, although he was not as articulate, and often digressing from the subject under discussion. He was quite argumentative and always seemed to be at odds with some members of the group. Most members of this group were forced to attend these meetings, and it was evident that their resistance was overwhelming; some would be absent, and many came late to the meetings. The discussions ranged from a currently

prominent murder trial that occupied the headlines of the newspapers, to new legislation pertaining to drug addiction. Although the majority, if not all, of the group members were not of the white race, including the PA, they felt free to talk about racial discrimination in the presence of the visitor.

Group VI, on the other hand, contained only one or two Negro members; the rest of the group, approximately five or six, were whites. Nevertheless, their discussions were quite similar to those of Group V. Their problems seemed to be the same, although here, too, little emotional material was revealed in these meetings. Apparently, the two Negro members were quite accepted by the rest of the group, and, in fact, they often dominated the group discussions. But the resistance to group counseling was as great here as in Group V; there was a considerable amount of absenteeism and late arrivals to the meetings.

Group VII met in the central office and, because of conflict of time, was attended only once by this writer. This group consisted of only four members, who seemed to discuss their problems very informally and to be relatively well oriented. In contrast to members of the other addict groups, these men brought forth some emotional material.

THE COUNSELORS

The writer's observations on the counselors may be divided on the basis of three forms of contact: (1) visits to the counselors' groups; (2) individual discussions with counselors; and (3) monthly seminars with the entire group of counselors.

Although this writer encountered certain initial difficulties concerning his visits to the PAs' groups, it turned out, as time went by, that these visits encountered little resistance. Except for one instance, all the counselors came to be more or less at ease and did not feel that the consultant was "looking over their shoulders." Whatever their feelings were toward their particular groups they, for the most part, seemed eager to obtain the visitor's reaction to their attitude, their direction, and their way of counseling the groups. Discussions with the individual PAs sometimes took the form of an informal comment by the consultant, and sometimes the form of an evaluation of both the group and the counselor, but never the form of criticism, with the one exception referred to above. (Because such an exception occurred only once, it does not need to be described.)

Because of the intensity as well as frequency of these discussions about (a) the dynamics of the group, (b) the dynamics of the counselor, (c) the dynamics of the visitor, and (d) an analytic approach to transference and counter-transference between the groups and their leaders, some noteworthy results were observed. First of all, the concepts of the counselors as well as the roles which they were playing emerged as follows: One PA regarded group counseling as "bread and butter"; that is, he regarded it as the adynamic function of the group leader to orient his group toward jobs and to stabilize their attitudes toward socially accepted values. Another PA called group counseling "the cream of the cake"; that is, he considered group counseling a rewarding function which was a "bonus" to the routine of the day, which he took to be that of a "cop." (In thinking of himself as a "cop," he differed from his colleagues, who considered themselves "peace officers.") A third and fourth PA, being goal-oriented, felt that counseling would bring about the digging up of feelings hitherto not in evidence in the group members. The other PAs did not express an opinion either because they were novices in group counseling or they felt it inappropriate to express an opinion.

By far the most difficult aspect of this writer's job as a consultant was the monthly seminars, each lasting two hours, which were held in the Central Office's Board Room, and to which all PAs were invited, including both those who currently conducted groups and those who did not. The attendance of the PAs in itself gave a clue to the strength of their motivation regarding group counseling and the seminars. The "kick off" seminar meeting was by far the largest in attendance, with nearly 30 agents present. That figure was never repeated. However, the average monthly attendance was closer to 20 than to 10.

During the first four monthly meetings the Chief Psychiatrist was present to assist the writer in his job, to "kick off" the seminars, and perhaps to observe. He greatly assisted this writer in answering many of the questions and in, at least partially, overcoming some of the more violent resistance on the part of some of the PAs. The majority of them did not care for the Department's new program, even those who already had been conducting group counseling meetings for several years.

The fifth seminar, however, took on a different aspect. In the first place, the Chief Psychiatrist

was no longer present, as he felt things were running "smoothly." Therefore, "facing the gang" became a real chore to this writer. It seems as though the dams of stream were released by the majority of the agents present, and a great many enacted their conscious or unconscious resistance by openly expressing their hostility toward this writer. It seemed to this writer that a real group cathexis was reached, the room being laden with emotionalism which took on a paranoid character, although only temporarily.

The writer was accused of almost everything on the menu: he was defensive, he was ignorant, he didn't know the answers to all of the questions, he was deceiving himself as well as the PAs, and he was not entirely honest. He was told that he was unaware of his own feelings, that he had counter-transference feelings which he "harbored" against some of the PAs. (The writer never denied this.) All told, this group cathexis helped to clear the air, and shortly before the meeting broke up, several PAs commented on the usefulness of "playing roles" as they became a little more aware of a group experience in which they themselves played the role of "patients." However, for the most part they opposed being "patients" and felt they did not wish to be "therapeutically manhandled." Some of them, however, admitted that they were. The following meetings took on an entirely different character.

The subsequent meetings seemed to be more structured. The PAs, once they had assured themselves that the writer was no longer the "authority figure sent down by the administration" to grill them and to instruct them in various methods of group counseling, felt more at ease and started asking questions, motivated by the sincere desire to learn. For instance, two seminar meetings were programmed around the topic of authority and how to use authority. Many of the agents brought forth unconscious material revealing their hostility toward administration, toward members of the groups which they conducted, and even personal feelings regarding their own families. The writer feels certain that the participants were not aware of what and how much they expressed. Although these were not analytical sessions, the writer attempted to structure these seminars analytically. Thus, counter-transference feelings were discussed quite frankly, and some of these unconscious feelings were brought to the surface. For instance, indi-

vidual parolees were discussed against whom some PAs had certain feelings of hostility; these PAs were unaware of their feelings until they themselves brought up the subject and were made aware of their hostile feelings by their colleagues. (As a rule, this writer did not participate in the discussion once the group was immersed in what he chooses to call role-playing.) In other instances, several PAs expressed their hostility toward the writer, even though they tried to tone it down, by questioning his suggestions of methods or techniques, such as that only certain new types of offenders should be admitted to their groups.

Many PAs seemed to have the opinion that the so-called quiet and reserved parolees did not disturb them, whereas the more aggressive protagonists of the group did. They were also frightened, and not unjustly so, by some of the material revealed in the group counseling meetings. Such material as dreams or sexual relationships tends to make some PAs uneasy. This as well as the aspect of "interpretation" of conscious or unconscious material seems to be the real crux of differentiation between group counseling and group therapy; for some PAs can handle interpretation and dream material easily, and, in fact, solicit it. Others, on the other hand, are frightened and either stop the conversation and channel the conversation into other topics or openly express fear and anxiety. Since the demarcation line between group psychotherapy and group counseling is a thin one, and since hardly two experts agree on the demarcation line between the two methods, this writer did not attempt to suggest to the PAs where or when to stop. He simply expressed his belief in the individual's ability to handle the group and usually made comments only when they were solicited by the PAs. But, even then, he was careful not to suggest a limit in "group counseling" but rather a limitation of the PA's personality and training, which to this writer seemed to be the natural barrier to further exploration of the intrapsychic dynamics of the individual group members.

To emphasize the uniqueness of this training program, and in view of the above impressions, it is especially interesting to note the evaluations made by the PAs of their experience in the seminar program. These evaluations were made in an informal discussion following one of the seminar programs. They correspond very closely with the

observations made by Klein and Lindemann,⁴ and, therefore, the writer will quote what these authors obtained through anonymous analyses written to individual students. They summarize as follows: "The students felt that the greatest gain was in the greater understanding of others. This resulted in better acceptance of patients and their problems as well as rapid and more comfortable development of friendship patterns. Not only were they able to relate more satisfactorily to other students, but some of them obtained help in understanding their families, and also most of them expressed an increased ease in those relationships which were based on their mutual needs. They also felt they were able to look more realistically at their problems, which then shrank to manageable size. This experience provided them with techniques for handling problems which they might face in the future."

THE CONSULTANT

The last section of this paper may be devoted to the writer's own feelings in regard both to the PAs and to the groups which he visited during the period of nearly ten months. According to a recent publication by the Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry, it is believed that "further roles will develop for consultants and that, increasingly specialists in human communication will be asked to assist in understanding specific impasses as they arise. Fortunately, the independent consultant enjoys great advantages of objectivity and non-involvement in details and possesses technical skills which provide powerful possibilities for clarification in such situations."⁵ However, this writer does not entirely agree with this picture pertaining to "objectivity and non-involvement in detail" rather than subjectivity and involvement both in detail and in general.

In some instances, this writer was fully aware of his counter-transference feelings on a conscious level, and he worked hard to overcome his feelings toward a particular PA or member of a PA's group. He did not always succeed. On the other hand, there were counter-transference feelings on an unconscious level which came to the surface through the seminar discussions and the aforementioned cathexis of the group as a whole. For

⁴ Klein & Lindeman, *Preventive Intervention in Individual and Family Crisis Situations*, in *PREVENTION OF MENTAL DISORDERS IN CHILDREN* (Caplan ed. 1961).

⁵ GROUP FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF PSYCHIATRY, *APPLICATION OF PSYCHIATRIC INSIGHTS TO CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION* 393-94 (1961).

instance, one individual often vented his feelings toward the writer during seminar meetings. The writer reacted first with bewilderment and then with some kind of negative defense mechanism, which other PAs then brought to his attention and which he subsequently discussed freely in the group. In other words, he admitted that there might have been some personality differences to prevent a dynamic interaction with this PA if the writer's feelings had not come to the surface because of the PA's transference feeling expressed toward, or against, the writer. Likewise, the writer would not have known of his own feelings, perhaps involving insecurity and defense, against this PA if the PA as well as the group had not brought them to his attention. It is this writer's belief, however, that such transference on the PA's part and counter-transference on the writer's part have been resolved by now. They are perhaps by no means resolved with several others; this is an ongoing process.

CONCLUSIONS

The following points in favor of the program, after an initial trial and error of ten months, can be observed: (1) The PAs have more confidence in conducting group counseling programs. (2) The PAs have confidence in the consultant or visitor. (3) Almost all of the PAs have overcome their initial resistance to, or reluctance toward, the Department's program, which is now part and parcel of their parole program manual. (4) All PAs have become more sensitive toward their parolees. (5) They are more skilled in group counseling techniques, and most of them see the value of the group counseling technique. (6) They are now more confident and competent in their individual techniques.

The following points seem to tell against the group counseling program as disadvantages, many of which are known to the Department: (1) Some PAs have no privacy. (2) Many PAs do not have any groups. (3) The nalline testing interferes with group counseling, or group counseling interferes with the nalline testing. (4) Many group members remain inaccessible to group counseling because of distance and/or lack of carfare to come to the parole offices more than once weekly. (5) The PAs work overtime and, as a rule, cannot be expected to spend more time on group counseling, as they should. (6) Some of the parolees have to attend the group counseling

meetings on a mandatory basis, and neither time nor place nor counselor seems to be able to overcome the resistance to motivate these parolees for group counseling meetings beyond the initial period of 90 days. (7) Very often the time of the meetings is poorly chosen both for the PA and for the parolees. (8) Although most of the supervisors endorse the program wholeheartedly, there is still some administrative resistance to the program. (9) Except for the aforementioned exception, all groups consist of narcotics addicts. Group counseling should be extended to all kinds of parolees. It seems to this writer that the Department is making an error in stressing group counseling mostly for narcotics addicts.

To sum up, Freud's statement prefixed to a work written shortly before his death (here translated by this writer) seems to apply to the relationships between consultant, PAs, and counselees, namely, that all theories and practices "must be based on an infinite quantity of observations and experiences, and only he who repeats these observations on himself and on others has found the way to his own direction."⁶

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