other people's children

Adoption in Australia

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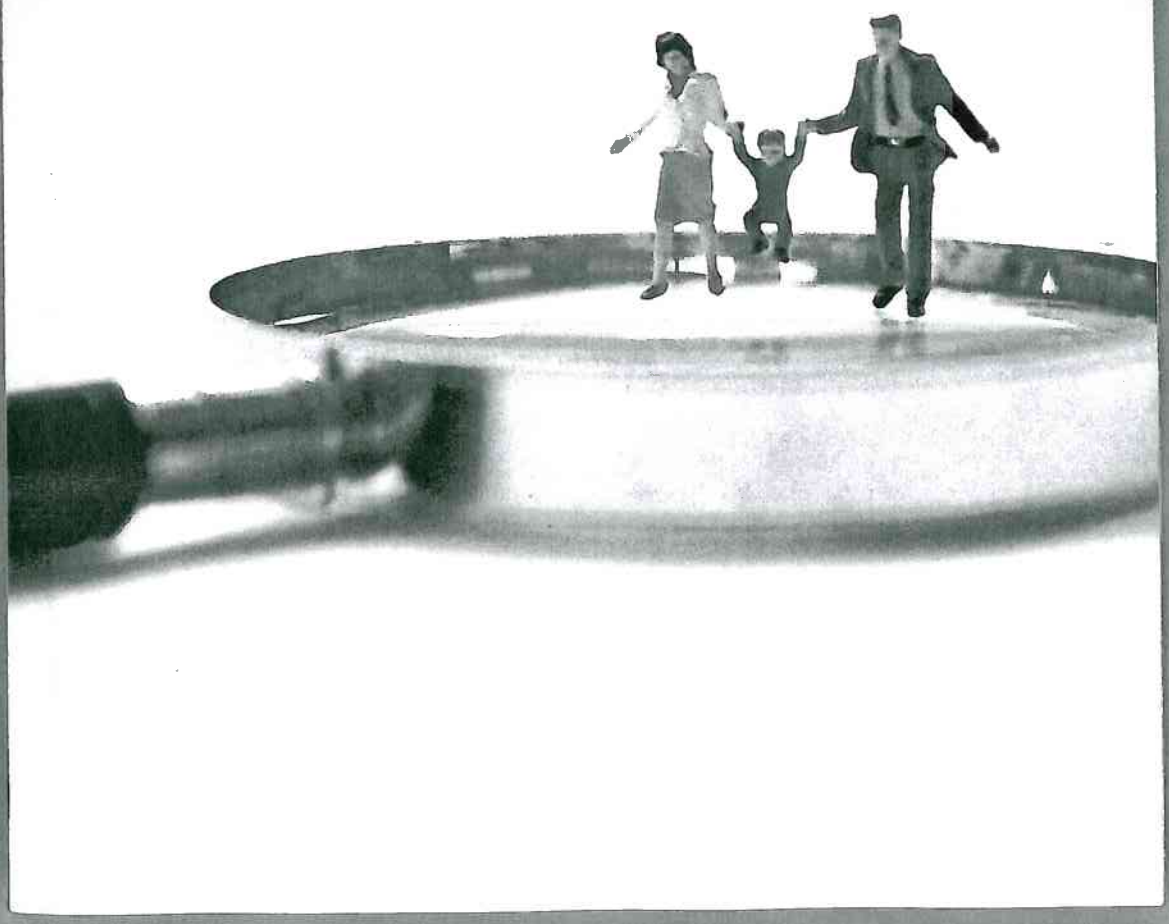

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well-being and identity of adolescent and adult intercountry adoptees and non-adopted migrants in Western Australia

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Introduction

This chapter focuses on the well-being and identity of over half the population of 14- to 26-year-old intercountry adoptees in Western Australia (WA). The chapter describes and discusses the findings of a quantitative study that compared the adoptees with a group of non-adopted migrant peers and includes an examination of the influence of non-Caucasian physical features and minority group membership on well-being and identity.

The well-being and identity of intercountry adoptees in Australia are much debated subjects, but surprisingly little

locally-based empirical research and evidence seems to exist. To address some of the gaps in local knowledge, a longitudinal study on the well-being of intercountry adoptees in WA was initiated in 1993, the first such study to be undertaken in Australia. The first stage of the study targeted the age group of four- to 16-year-olds for two reasons. First, over 80% of the estimated 432 intercountry adoptees in WA at that point in time were born between 1976 and 1990. Second, four- to 16-year-olds were the target group of the West Australian Child Health Survey (WACHS), a large epidemiological study that was taking place in WA around the same time (Zubrick *et al.* 1995). The WACHS offered the rare opportunity to compare the well-being of intercountry adoptees with that of a large group of non-adopted peers from the local general population and added to the robustness of the methodology of the intercountry adoption (ICA) study. At this first data collection point, nearly 200 adoptive parents reported on the health and well-being of 283 adoptees. The adoptees represented 80% of the estimated population of four- to 16-year-old intercountry adoptees in WA and had a mean age of 10 years. The overall findings indicated that parents considered the large majority of the adoptees to be happy, healthy in body and mind and functioning at least as well as their non-adopted peers in the WACHS (Rosenwald 1994).

In the second stage of the study, started in 2004 when the adoptees were aged 14 to 26 years, adoptive parents were again asked to report on the well-being of their ICA children. Their views were also sought on the adoptees' sense of identity. In addition, the adolescent and adult adoptees themselves, as well as a group of non-adopted migrant peers who had arrived in Australia at a young age with their biological parents, were asked to provide a self-report on their sense of well-being and identity. Migrant parents were also invited to report on their children's well-being and identity. The inclusion of a migrant comparison group is a first for ICA research in Australia.

At this second point, data was collected on a wider range of physical, psychological and mental health aspects of well-being and examined in greater depth than in the first stage. An examination of identity was also added, addressing such aspects as adoption, migration, community, heritage, ethnicity, culture, race and nationality. The study of identity was added for several reasons, not the least of which was that identity is often closely linked to well-being in ICA and migration literature. This chapter presents evidence that relationships between the aspects of well-being and identity examined in the present study were mostly weak and non-significant for both the adoptees and migrants. The chapter also describes how the well-being and identity of the adoptees was more similar than different to those of the migrants before. Following this discussion, the chapter explores two of seven threats and risks to well-being and identity that were included in the study. The two threats—namely 'problems created by looking different' (from the majority of people in WA) and 'perceiving the continuity of their minority group to be under threat'—were found to be the most powerful predictors of well-being and identity in adoptees and migrants alike. Notably, 'looking different' from their adoptive parents—by which we mean having different physical features from adoptive parents—had no significant influence on either of their well-being. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how, and how well, the two groups have negotiated *looking different* in the context of the socio-cultural-political environments they have grown up in, and how they have coped with the dynamic relationships between their physical appearance, their involuntary membership of ICA and migrant groups, and the perceived continuity of these groups. In the next sections, the spotlight will briefly rest on the small body of existing quantitative ICA research in Australia, before moving to the findings of the present study.

Australian research on well-being and identity in ICA

Despite the fact that ICA to Australia has been formally practiced since the mid-1970s, research on the well-being of intercountry adoptees, both quantitative and qualitative, has rarely been undertaken and published in Australia. The few quantitative studies that were published over the years include the seminal work by social researcher and former lawyer Ian Harvey (1981) on the adjustment of the child victims of the Vietnam War who were adopted in the 1970s by families in New South Wales. Another salient study is that by New South Wales psychologist Juliet Harper (1986) on the well-being of intercountry adoptees who had arrived in Australia at an older age. A decade later saw the publication of a South Australian study on the emotional well-being of adolescent intercountry adoptees from Indonesia by psychiatrist Robert Goldney and colleagues (1996). In each of these studies the authors concluded that the majority of the adoptees were functioning as well as their non-adopted peers. Similar conclusions had been drawn in previous reviews of ICA research undertaken overseas (Tizard 1991) and in more recent meta-analyses of adoption studies from around the globe (Juffer and Van Ijzendoorn 2007).

The paucity of quantitative research on identity in intercountry adoptees in Australia is another surprise, considering that ethnicity and racial heritage, in particular, are frequently raised as critical aspects of identity perceived to profoundly influence adoptees' sense of well-being. The present study's thorough empirical examination of the relationship between the well-being and identity of intercountry adoptees and migrants builds on a rare exploration of the racial identity of intercountry adoptees in Australia by Juliet Harper and Helen Bonanno (1993). The authors found that an awareness of race, and being racially different from parents, developed in intercountry adoptees from as young as two years, particularly among the darker-skinned adoptees. The parent reports indicated that racist comments started earlier, and were more numerous, towards this group

than those directed at the lighter-skinned children. These findings raised further questions about the long-term outcomes of ICA. Results from a recent North American study on adult intercountry adoptees have provided some answers. Using a measure of cultural and racial identities that was specifically developed by an intercountry adoptee for transracial adoptees, it emerged that transracial adoptees were able to develop a positive sense of self that included a broad range of cultural and racial identities without negatively affecting their well-being (Baden 2007). The same cultural-racial identity measure was used in the present study and appears to be validated by the striking resemblance of a graphic representation of the WA adoptees' identities to those reported in the Baden study. The weak associations found between these identities and well-being were also consistent with Baden's findings. The present study shows, in addition, previously unexplored differences between the cultural and racial identities of ICA and migrant families. These results are described in more detail following an overview of the demographic characteristics of the study's respondents.

Demographic profile of the adoption and migrant groups

The study's four groups of respondents consisted of 110 intercountry adoptees, 80 non-adopted migrant peers, 120 adoptive parents of 160 adoptees and 44 migrant parents of 56 migrants. The 'self' and parent reports provided data on 181 adoptees and 87 migrants. Both groups had a mean age of 20 years. The majority of adoptees were female adults from Korea, reflecting the fact that most intercountry adoptees in WA were of Korean origin. This predominance continues today and is similar to the demographic pattern found in ICA communities in other part of Australia and other receiving countries (Rosenwald 2007; Selman 2006). The remaining adoptees in the present study originated from other Asian countries such as India, the Philippines and Fiji. The control group of migrant peers and parents were drawn from the thousands of migrants who form part of WA's African, Asian, Eastern European

and South and Central American ethnic communities. Attempts were made to match the adoptees and migrants on countries of origin, but several country-specific ethnic communities in WA were either too small—for example Korean and Mauritian—or absent, for example Hong Kong. This necessitated the use of continental categories instead. The small Korean community, in particular, lacked the large number of non-adopted migrant peers required. This resulted in significantly more responses from Korean adoptees than migrants, despite an almost 100% response rate from the target Korean migrant families.

Matching adoptees and migrants on age at arrival also proved more challenging than expected, mainly because migrants who had arrived at a young age did not readily identify as migrants. This only became evident during the course of data collection, and resulted in a sample of migrants with a mean age at arrival significantly older than that of the adoptees, namely six years compared to two years. Despite their younger age at arrival, adoptees had reportedly suffered pre-arrival adversity more frequently and at more severe levels than their migrant peers. Other differences were related to residency. Adoptees had lived longer in Australia than migrants, and more often outside the metropolitan area. They were also more likely to have completed 12 years of education, to be employed and to be living independently. Migrants, on the other hand, were more likely to still be attending school or studying.

The many similarities between the two groups included aspects of family structure. Both groups came predominantly from intact two-parent families with an average of three children. Ten per cent of both adoptees and migrants were only children. In each group, 15% were living with a partner although adoptees were more likely to have children. Many adoptive parents were migrants themselves, with 55% of adoptees having at least one parent who was born overseas. It was found that most of the differences in demographics highlighted above had little influence on the well-being and identity of the adoptees and migrants.

Well-being

Using 13 different measures to assess well-being, both 'self' and parent reports indicated that the levels of well-being in adoptees and migrants were more similar than different. The large majority of both groups seemed to enjoy good to excellent physical and psychological health with most adoptees and migrants reporting high levels of self-esteem, self-efficacy, happiness, life satisfaction and satisfaction with their adoption or migration. The majority also reported normative levels of mental health in terms of competence, internalising and externalising problems, substance use and absence of psychiatric disorders. Although age and gender had little overall effects, the following three groups stood out.

First, adult female adoptees reported not only significantly higher levels of competence than the other adoptees and all migrants, but also higher levels of problem behaviours, including substance use. Second, adolescent and adult male migrants reported the highest level of internalising problems such as anxiety and depression. Third, adolescents rated themselves healthier, happier, more satisfied with life—adoption and migration—and to have fewer behavioural problems than adults. The decline in well-being of maturing adolescents became particularly evident in the reports from 17- to 23-year-old adoptees. However, this trend seemed to reverse with increasing maturity, because adult adoptees aged 24 to 26 years reported a significantly higher level of well-being than the 17- to 23-year-olds. A similar pattern of decline in well-being was reported by migrants, but at the older age of 24 to 26 years. This developmental difference could be partly explained by the migrants living at home longer and achieving independent-living status at an older age than the adoptees.

Another interesting and unexpected finding showed that adoptive and migrant parents generally rated their children's well-being more positively than the adoptees and migrants did themselves. It was furthermore expected that any differences between 'self' and parent reports on well-being would be smaller in migrant than adoptive families because the migrants reportedly

lived at home longer. Surprisingly, the reverse was found to be the case with the adoptive families reporting higher levels of agreement than migrant families.

Identity

Identity was explored with seven measures covering aspects of biological and cultural heritage, identification with an adoptee or migrant group, ethnicity, culture and race and attachment to state and nation. The majority of adoptees and migrants preferred to describe themselves as students or by employment or professional role. Although few mentioned their adoptive or migrant status, their country of origin or their ethnicity as primary identity markers, almost all adoptees and migrants reported that they identified with other intercountry adoptees and migrant peers. About 20% of adoptees appeared to have regular contact with ICA peers while more than half of the migrants reportedly socialise regularly with other migrants.

Most adoptees and migrants expressed interest in their biological and cultural heritage. About a third of adoptees expressed interest in finding out more about their biological parents. Understandably, few migrants expressed such interest as all had arrived with at least one of their biological parents. Nevertheless, there was more interest among migrants to find out about extended biological family than among adoptees. This unexpected finding suggests that migrant families either refrain from talking openly about extended family members or have little or no information about them. The latter is usually the case for intercountry adoptees.

Although general interest in country and culture of origin was expressed by only 25% of the adoptees, 75% identified moderately to strongly with their country of origin. Among the migrants, 65% expressed interest in their country and culture of origin and almost all identified strongly with their country of origin. Those adoptees and migrants who expressed an interest in their cultural heritage reported stronger ethnic identities and

seemed to identify more strongly with their adoption or migrant group and their country of origin. The large majority of adoptees and migrants reported an interest in, and involvement with, people from ethnic groups other than their own. These findings could be interpreted as adoptees feeling more comfortable with people from other ethnic groups than from their own—or that they were denying their ethnic identity—but this was not the case. Adoptees reported moderate to strong ethnic and racial identities at similar rates to those found among migrants.

In terms of cultural identity, most adoptees showed a strong orientation towards the cultures of their adoptive parents and their adoptive parents' racial groups. The same orientation was found among the migrants, suggesting the presence of family cultures and identities among both groups. The notion of a family culture and identity provides support for the basic assumptions of the cultural-racial identity model that children are knowledgeable about, competent within and comfortable with the culture of the parents who raise them (Baden and Steward 2007). The broad range of cultural and racial identities reported by the adoptees was also predicted by the model. Its sharp contrast to the narrow range of cultural and racial identities reported by the migrants, represents a significant new finding in this research which breaks new ground in the research on identities in ICA.

The same sharp contrast was found between the self-reported cultural and racial identities of the adoptive and migrant parents. Interestingly, the adoptees reported a stronger orientation towards the culture of their parents' racial group than adoptive parents reported for themselves. The opposite was found in the migrant group. When considered together with the fact that almost all of the adoptive parents belonged to WA's Caucasian majority group and the migrant parents mainly to WA's non-Caucasian minority groups, these findings suggest that adoptees and migrants are more assimilated into mainstream WA society than their parents—a phenomenon consistent with migration research findings in general.

Almost all adoptive and migrant parents expressed interest in their children's cultures and countries of origin. The high frequency with which adoptive parents expressed this interest suggests an affirming rather than a negative or dismissing attitude towards their children's cultural and racial heritage. This conclusion is contrary to anecdotal evidence from first and other second generation intercountry adoptees in Australia who described adoptive parents as being focussed on assimilating adoptees into mainstream Australian society and neglectful in nurturing adoptees' ethnic identities (Armstrong and Slaytor 2001). A moderate to strong identification with Australia and WA was indeed found among almost all adoptees, but also among most migrants. Furthermore, this identification was found to have little influence on their ethnic and racial identities. As a final point on identity, few differences were found between the genders and between adolescents and adults. The latter was surprising in view of the understanding that identity is a dynamic developmental process over the life-span with particular salience in adolescence (Breakwell 1986).

Relationships between well-being, identity, threats and risks

Although a person's well-being and identity are generally believed to strongly influence each other, the relationships between the aspects of well-being and identity measured in the present study were mostly weak or negligible among both the adoptees and migrants. These included the negligible associations between their well-being and ethnic, cultural and racial identities. The few significant associations found, differed for adoptees and migrants. Those that emerged among adoptees related to their attachment to places, whereas those found among migrants related to ethnic community networking, particularly among the adults. A stronger sense of belonging to Australia and WA made adoptees feel happier, more satisfied with life and more in control of their life, but had little influence on these well-being aspects in migrants. A stronger identification with their own migrant community and

other ethnic groups was related to higher levels of self-esteem and interaction with friends and lower risk of suffering from psychiatric disorders in migrants, but had little influence on these well-being aspects in adoptees.

The present study explored the influence of four threat and three risk factors identified from the literature, and examined which of these factors best predicted the well-being and identity of adoptees and migrants. The threat 'problems created by looking different' was taken from the Dutch longitudinal study on ICA (Tieman 2006), as were the three risk factors of age at arrival, pre-arrival adversity and parent socio-economic status (SES). The threats 'perceived racial discrimination', 'threat to group continuity' and 'discrimination for being an adoptee or migrant' were taken from a South African study on ethnic identity (Korf and Malan 2002).

The influence of age at arrival, pre-arrival adversity and parental SES on the well-being and identity of adoptees and migrants was found to be mostly weak and non-significant. An examination of whether these risks made adoptees and migrants more vulnerable to any negative effects of the threats showed different outcomes for the two groups. In the adoptee reports, no significant relationships were found between the risks and threats. It appears that adoptees who were over the age of two years at arrival, had experienced moderate to high levels of adversity prior to arrival, or had been placed in a higher SES family, and are not significantly more vulnerable to the negative effects of discrimination and threats to group continuity than adoptees without these risk factors. Migrants with adverse pre-arrival experiences and lower parental SES, on the other hand, seem to be more vulnerable to being affected by public stigma, prejudice and discrimination than adoptees. Less than 20% of adoptees and migrants reported to have experienced discrimination based on their adoptive or migrant status. The majority expressed pride in their status and about half agreed with the statement that their respective group would maintain its unique identity. However,

when asked about how secure they felt about the future of their respective groups or communities, the majority of adoptees and nearly half the migrants indicated that they considered the continuity of their group to be under threat. More importantly, and unexpectedly, this perceived threat emerged as the strongest predictor of a weak identity among both adoptees and migrants, particularly in terms of identification with their respective reference group or community.

In regards to any threat their physical appearance may pose to well-being and identity, it was found that almost all adoptees and migrants had non-Caucasian physical features which made them stand out from the majority of people in WA. More adoptees than migrants reported being conscious of their different looks but most also indicated that they liked looking different. Despite this satisfaction with their uniqueness, a quarter of the adoptees and migrants believed that their different looks created problems for them. This belief was in turn related to a wish to look like an 'average Australian', expressed by nearly half the adoptees and 17% of the migrants. When asked where their different looks created the most problems for them, both adoptees and migrants pointed to public places. Migrants, in particular, reported that they considered their skin colour and other physical features to work against them in their pursuit of education, employment and intimate relationships. Although more than 80% of both groups also reported to have experienced racial discrimination, racism by itself was not found to be a strong predictor of either well-being or identity. This finding was as unexpected as the emergence of the threat 'problems created by looking different' as the strongest predictor of well-being, especially of internalising problems such as anxiety and depression. Adoptive parents largely agreed with their children about the potential negative effects of looking different in WA. Migrant parents, on the other hand, hardly agreed with their children and seemed to underrate the prevalence of the problems and seriousness of their negative effects. Despite these significant results, the question about which

factors make well-being and identity in individuals deviate from the norm, remain largely unexplained by the study's findings.

Discussion

This chapter provides a brief summary of a 2004 study on the well-being and identity of 14- to 26-year-old intercountry adoptees and their non-adopted migrant peers in WA. It is the first quantitative study in Australia to thoroughly examine the association between adoptee well-being and identity. The results from 'self' and parent reports indicate that in 2004 the large majority of the adoptees and migrants were happy, healthy in body and mind and competent, with high levels of self-esteem and self-efficacy, moderate to high levels of ethnic, cultural and racial identities and a moderate to high degree of identification with adoptee and migrant groups, birth countries, Australia and WA. The results on well-being and identity are comparable with findings from recent research among young adult intercountry adoptees in other countries (Tieman 2006) and among immigrant youth in Australia and 12 other countries (Berry, Phinney, Sam and Vedder 2006).

The adoptees and migrants were found to be more similar than different in terms of demographic characteristics, well-being and identity. Differences were largely based on issues of culture and acculturation. One of these differences was alcohol consumption by adults. More adoptees than migrants reported drinking at levels considered risky, but still within the Australian norms reported by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2007). The migrants' lower levels were consistent with the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2006) reporting of low alcohol intake by new migrants and increasing intake with increasing length of residence in Australia. This increase suggests an acculturation or assimilation effect on alcohol drinking habits which could, at least partly, explain the adoptees' drinking patterns.

Adoptees and migrants were found to be more similar than different in respect to the impact of threats, such as discrimination,

on their well-being and identity. However, the assumption that Caucasian adoptive parents find it more difficult to acknowledge their non-Caucasian children's experiences of discrimination than non-Caucasian parents (Harper and Bonanno 1993; Lee 2003) were not supported. In fact, the evidence suggests that the opposite may be the case. The intercountry adoptees in this study were born between 1976 and 1990 and are considered to be part of the second generation of intercountry adoptees to come to Australia—the Vietnamese adoptees are generally seen as the first generation. The adoptees and most of their migrant peers grew up during a time that the public discourse in Australia included strong anti-Asian sentiments and objections to non-Caucasian immigrants, as well as calls to stop all forms of adoption—including transracial domestic and ICA. When the study's findings are placed in these historical contexts of Australian race relations, child welfare and adoption politics, it is clear that these discourses form part of the foundations of the adoptees' and migrants' perceptions of bias and discrimination against their status and their physical appearance. The strong public discourses may, however, also have promoted open communication between adoptees and parents, leading to their shared acknowledgement of the adoptees' experiences of bias and discrimination as indicated by the high level of agreement between the adoptees' 'self' and parent reports on these threats. Although migrant families may be less open to talk about these issues, reflected in the low level of agreement found between the migrants' 'self' and parent reports, both approaches are consistent with the different but equally valid and effective strategies that different groups use to cope with perceived threats. The high levels of self-esteem and self-efficacy, reported by the adoptees and migrants, seem to attest to the presence of resilience against threats in both groups.

Australia has previously been identified as an ethnically-diverse country where immigrant youth is at moderate to high risk of experiencing discrimination, despite a public policy of multiculturalism (Berry *et al.* 2006). According to Berry *et al.* (2006),

perceived discrimination reflects the attitude in the larger society towards minority groups and their members. This is consistent with reports from the adoptees and migrants of a seemingly relentless questioning of, and about, their physical features and an implied questioning of the authenticity of their Australian identity. It thus seems that the earlier call by Harper and Bonanno (1993) to help increase positive attitudes in the next generation and reduce discrimination, seems as relevant today as it was then.

Despite the positive findings on the well-being and identity of the large majority of adoptees, their reported pessimism about the continuity of a distinct ICA community could well be a reflection of the longstanding stigma against adoption in Australia (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Human Services 2005). Steps taken in recent years by the Attorney General's Department of the Australian Federal Government (2008), such as increasing responsibility of ICA programs in Australia and the establishment of the National Intercountry Adoption Advisory Group with intercountry adoptees among its membership, may go some way to address the existing stigma towards transracial and ICA. Future research is needed to assess if, and how, these socio-political changes impact on the well-being and identity of all ICA generations in Australia.

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