

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Pragmatist Epistemology and Jane Addams: Fundamental Concepts for the Social Paradigm of Occupational Therapy

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### Abstract

The objective of this manuscript is to contribute to the education of future occupational therapists within the current paradigm of the profession. To this purpose, some of the conceptual foundations of pragmatist epistemology and philosophical contributions of the philosopher Jane Addams are presented.

Some pragmatist fundamentals such as the holistic vision of the human being, the paradox of separating “knowing from doing”, and giving the *usefulness* of the activity and knowledge primacy in the process of human development, inspired the profession of Occupational Therapy in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century. Today, almost 100 years after the founding of the *National Society for the Promotion of Occupational Therapy*, pragmatism is still relevant to the profession. Specifically, its pertinence is related to the current scenario of the profession, and its powerful development in working scopes related to socio-community fields. This helps identify how we are on the verge of another paradigm, known as *Social Paradigm of the Occupation*. This new social understanding of the discipline allows us to understand the relevance of professional work in community or social contexts. Future research could address how the pragmatism contributes to the understanding of occupation as a social phenomenon within this new paradigm. Copyright © 2016 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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## Introduction

This paper proposes to “re-read the prehistory” of Occupational Therapy in United States of America (USA), taking into consideration those theories promoted by once significant personalities in order to re-claim their relevance. The imperative behind this re-reading is based on the current scenario some

countries are going through: the emergence of a *Social Paradigm of Occupation* (Morrison et al., 2011).

Furthermore, there is a quite diverse bibliography on the subject – especially from Latin America – on the social approach of the discipline (Da Rocha, 2008; Galheigo, 2012; Ampuero et al., 2014; Navarrete et al., 2015), also known as *Social Occupational Therapy* (Dias

et al., 2006; Barros et al., 2007; Reis et al., 2010; Malfitano et al., 2014; Esquerdo et al., 2015). This data is separate from the diverse international proposals, from both Occupational Therapy and Occupational Science, whose main focus is on solving social issues (Pollard et al., 2009; Galvaan, 2012, 2014; Angell, 2014; Ramugondo and Kronenberg, 2015; Simó and Townsend, 2015).

Interests in Social Occupational Therapy and social issues in occupation are foundations for configuration allow the configuration of this new paradigm. Therefore, this philosophical research,<sup>1</sup> which is outlined in feminist studies of science,<sup>2</sup> hopes to spread the initial *pragmatists' epistemologies* that, from the point of view of different occupational therapists (Diasio, 1985; Breines, 1986, 1987; Hooper and Wood, 2002; Ikiugu and Rosso, 2003; Dickie et al., 2006; Ikiugu and Schultz, 2006; Cutchin and Dickie, 2012), were fundamental to the development of Occupational Therapy.

The apparent historical identity crisis (Kielhofner, 2009) that Occupational Therapy has suffered can be linked to our failure to recognize *Pragmatism* as part of the discipline's core philosophy (Breines, 1986). While records indicate that *Adolph Meyer* (considered one of the founding pillars of the profession) was influenced by pragmatists such as *William James* and *John Dewey*, this link tends to be overlooked in discussions concerning the birth and history of Occupational Therapy (Diasio, 1985; Breines, 1986).

*Susan Tracy* and *Eleanor Clarke Slagle*, two Occupational Therapy pioneers (Quiroga, 1995), cited Addams, James and Dewey in their work; however, because of prevailing *androcentricity*, the scientific writings of these women failed to capture the attention granted to manuscripts drafted by their male peers

<sup>1</sup>Corresponding to the development of my doctoral thesis: *The pragmatist philosophy in the Occupational Therapy of Eleanor Clarke Slagle: epistemological and historical records from the feminists' studies on science* (Morrison, 2014).

<sup>2</sup>Feminist studies of science permit us to observe from a critical position the "official" history, considering it as andocentric and away from the "reality of facts" (Morrison, 2011). Additionally, feminist scientists propose that knowledge has been validated and built only for men, and for a reduced group of them: white men, Christians, heterosexuals and middle-class men (Haraway, 1991; Longino, 2001), which has generated particular fashions and biased perspectives to validate what we understand as "reality".

such as Barton, Dunton or Meyer himself (Morrison, 2011).

In this paper, I will elucidate pragmatism from a very general perspective as a coherent epistemology that is highly relevant to the current state of the discipline. More specifically, I will explore the important theoretical and social contributions of Jane Addams, one of the most recognized women in the history of social policy.

Addams, a social worker and winner of the 1931 Nobel Peace Prize, was the cofounder of the *Hull House* settlement home (in Chicago). According to many authors (Quiroga, 1995; Metaxas, 2000; Morrison, 2011), Addams consolidated some of the major concepts underlying contemporary Occupational Therapy – that is, Occupational Therapy as a *social, critical and community* discipline – although this perspective was obscured for several decades. Addams was heavily involved with Occupational Therapy, supporting Eleanor Clarke Slagle in her successful candidacy for president of the *National Society for the Promotion of Occupational Therapy* (NSPOT) in 1919, celebrated at the third meeting of NSPOT at Hull House (Quiroga, 1995).

Many of Addams's ideas were adopted by Slagle, who pushed Occupational Therapy towards a *social and critical focus*, which was unfortunately edged out by the *Mechanistic and Reductionist Paradigm* that took hold of the discipline from about 1930 to 1960 (Kielhofner, 2009; Morrison et al., 2011).

Thereby, occupational therapists have failed to explicitly recognize pragmatism, especially the work of Jane Addams in the USA, and instead early Occupational Therapy in the USA developed with an emphasis on mechanistic and reductionist ideas. Yet pragmatism is part of the Occupational Therapy identity and needs to be included in Occupational Therapy education to help practitioners understand the epistemological foundations for "social occupational therapy". Attention to the social paradigm is necessary for occupational therapy practices to be true and congruent with prominent occupational therapy models that all include the "Environment". One cannot really practice authentic occupational therapy without practices that address the social conditions and the social issues that influence what persons actually need and want to do in their occupations.

Nevertheless, when revising pragmatism, especially Addams' proposals, these ideologies tend to regain

strength. Observing how history does not follow a linear logic, you are invited to read this paper with a critical and reflective perspective, to start evaluating the pertinence or lack thereof in our respective fields of action, bearing in mind the new perspectives and fields which Occupational Therapy goes through within the Social Paradigm.

## An introduction to the pragmatist philosophy

Pragmatism is considered the first and most important philosophical movement originating in the USA (Menand, 2002). The movement was born at the end of the nineteenth century (Hookway, 2008; Goodman, 2011; Shook, 2011) and developed throughout the twentieth century, splitting into various branches and subdivisions (McDermind, 2006). *Charles Peirce* (1839–1914) and *William James* (1842–1910), both from a scientific background, are considered to be the most important representatives of the movement, although both men eventually adopted a perspective that diverged from the initial ideology. Other important leaders included *Chauncey Wright* (1830–1875), the leader of *The Metaphysical Club* (Goodman, 2011); *John Dewey* (1859–1952), an influential figure in USA education reform and the third great leader of the pragmatism movement, after Peirce and James (Hookway, 2008); *George Mead* (1863–1931), a founder of social psychology and promoter of American sociology (Breines, 1986); and, *Jane Addams* (1860–1935), an influential activist and pacifist who applied the principles of pragmatism from an ethical, social and political perspective (Breines, 1986, 1987; Hamington, 2006).

The origin of pragmatism as a movement can be traced to “*The Metaphysical Club*,” a discussion group associated mainly with Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts from 1871 to 1879 (Goodman, 2011; Shook, 2011). The group evolved through two main periods. The first, from 1871 to 1875, focused on pragmatism itself as a philosophy and was organized principally by Peirce, Chauncey and James, all of whom were profoundly influenced by *John Stuart Mill’s* empiricism and *Charles Darwin’s* theory of natural selection. The second, from 1876 to 1879, focused on idealism and the ideas of thinkers such as Hume, Kant and Hegel. Towards the end of the first period, some of the first pragmatists began to move beyond the group,

sparkling applications of the pragmatist philosophy in diverse fields (Goodman, 2011; Shook, 2011).

According to Menand (2002), pragmatism was born to oppose the European philosophic idealism of the nineteenth century, and its epistemological foundations were found on Mill’s empiricism, whom on the one hand highlighted the importance of the experience in the production of scientific knowledge; and on the other hand, highlighted the concept of *regulating ideas* of Kant, as in the *active character of beliefs*, which are capable of guiding knowledge.

Mill’s ideas involved the importance of experience in creating social constructs that are utilitarian and respond to society’s needs. For example, he asserted that justice answers to the calls of various moral demands, which are evaluated collectively according to their position on the scale of social utility (Pardo, 1970). This idea, *utility*, would become a central concept for pragmatism.

Kant’s *transcendental dialectic* influenced the ideas of James and Peirce in regards to the difference between the practical sphere, ruled by reason and *a priori* moral laws, and the pragmatic sphere, regulated by the wisdom of experience. According to Kant (Esteban, 2004), “practical” means everything that is possible through freedom, but if the conditions for the exercise of our free will are empirical, then, reason can have in this exercise none but a regulative use, and this implying that under these conditions, reason is incapable of supplying us with *a priori* laws, but only *pragmatic laws of free conduct* aimed at achieving the purposes commended to us by our senses. *Pure* practical laws, created *a priori* through reason, represent the *moral laws*.

From another perspective, Douglas McDermind (2006) argued that pragmatism stood in opposition to three predominant philosophical theses of the nineteenth century: first, the traditional concept of truth, characterized by *fundamentalist realism*, the commonly held belief that the world of physical objects exists *independent of human thought* or language; second, the *correspondence theory of truth*, which indicates that “true beliefs” faithfully and accurately represent an objective reality; and third, *foundationalism*, the view that our understanding of the world must rest on a solid base; that is, on *beliefs whose justifications do not depend on other beliefs*, resulting in “a well-built and imposing edifice” (McDermind, 2006, p. 1).

William James (1909/1974) remarked in his book *The Meaning of Truth* that pragmatism is the most

original contribution of Occidental philosophy. James recognized Peirce as the movement's founder in 1881 and Dewey as another strong proponent of the philosophy. James indicated that the European Enlightenment gave rise to notions of empiricism; religious and political tolerance and, above all, the belief in equal rights among societies, expressed in the search for practical solutions rather than the framing of problems.

James noted that as the European ideas were adapted to different realities and environments, thinkers began to emphasize the importance of actions and practical applications. He added that the value of pragmatism lays in its *practical value to society*, that is, its tendency towards action and its close relationship with human experience. Examples include the education reforms initiated by John Dewey (Putnam, 1999) and social reforms spearheaded by Jane Addams (Hamington, 2006).

While the ideas of Mill and Kant were crucial to the development of pragmatism, it was *Darwin's theory of evolution* that sparked a break with the reigning paradigm of the era. For Dewey (1910), Darwin's works forever altered the logic underlying morality, politics and religion through the key concept of *transition*, a precept that can be applied to species but also to *ideas*. According to James (1909/1974), this meant, for the pragmatists, that *ideas are not immutable articles, but rather entities that continually shift as a result of intellectual processes*. At this point two conclusions can be drawn: (1) the world studied by traditional philosophy is fictitious, and (2) thinking, for human beings, would probably be used as an adaptation instrument for the environment. From which the *usefulness* of the ideas is drawn.

Darwin's theory of *Natural Selection*, according to Dewey (1910), allowed for reflection on the point that organisms adapt through constant variation and the elimination of undesirable traits in the "struggle for existence" which situates human beings in a privileged position in terms of intelligence and habits that can be developed as a result.

Although there are various schools of pragmatist thought, all pragmatists seek to explain the roles of knowledge and thought in terms of experience (James, 1909/1974). Knowledge is considered to be *active* and constantly *transforming* through the endeavours of human beings; ideas, therefore, are not mere copies of reality. Putnam (1999), when referring to Peirce, James and Dewey, notes that "access to a common reality

does not require an access to a pre-conceptual element, but to an own capacity to build shared concepts" (p. 36–37). At this stage, he alludes to the significance of the transformation of concepts and realities on the part of each human being, whom as a whole shape what is known as an *existing reality*.

The above ideas were all brought to the height of their political and social expression by Jane Addams, who honed pragmatism as a tool of social transformation.

## Jane Addams and pragmatism

One of the 100 most influential women of all time, and the first "public philosopher" in the USA (Kuiper, 2010), Jane Addams applied the pragmatist principles in her work (Hamington, 2006) as the founding of Social Work and Social Ethics (Miranda, 2007). Addams's contributions were instrumental in achieving social reform in the USA and improving equality between men and women at the beginning of the twentieth century.

From this perspective, we can start identifying that the manner in which Addams did philosophy was very different in comparison with the imaginary we have from the "philosophers". She established one of the main pragmatists' precepts, which does not separate philosophy from the rest of the areas of life. She linked philosophy with political and social movements, the same as with William James and John Dewey, but in its radical form.

A unique characteristic of pragmatist philosophy is its close association with political and social movements (James, 1909/1974; Dewey, 1955), such as the women's liberation movement during the second wave of feminism, the workers' movement that fought against the denigrating labour conditions resulting from industrialization, and the movement to address the social differences that impacted immigrants arriving to the USA. Moreover, pragmatism provided *practical philosophy* applicable to daily life; that is, social movements engendered epistemological reflection, such as consideration of how a given theoretical concept might guide a specific public policy and vice versa.

Addams modeled the use of pragmatism as a foundation for social and political thinking. Examining her close ties to the male figures in the movement – James, Mead and especially Dewey – helps to illustrate how her philosophy is an application of epistemology

in a basically practical context (Haack, 2001; Hamington, 2006; Miranda, 2007).

To understand the development of Addams's pragmatism, it is important to examine the political and social context of her time from a gender perspective. Other pragmatists, such as James, Peirce and Dewey, are considered major or minor *masculine* figures in philosophy, science, education, and politics. However, Addams is seen as something of a novelty, one of those "exceptional women." From a feminist perspective, this undervaluation of Addams's intellectual contributions may be attributable to a tendency to cast women into a role "where they belong," assigned by society and by an (arbitrary) rewriting of history, or in this case, of philosophy. As a result, history failed to grant her a status as a philosopher on par with her male peers.

According to some authors, Addams's philosophy could be classified as applied philosophy or "clinical sociology." However, this categorization is remiss, given that Addams's numerous publications (over 500) expressed, albeit in a manner different from the traditional form, epistemological reflections of great insightfulness, although they were "eclipsed" by her image as a social activist (Hamington, 2006; Miranda, 2007).

Pragmatist, feminist, socialist and pacifist are labels often assigned to Addams (Levingston, 2001; Knight, 2005; Hamington, 2006) to interpretively categorize her contributions to society, which (strictly speaking) goes against her wishes, given that she refused to categorize herself as belonging to an arbitrary ideology so as not to "construct a reality" that would spark opposition to her efforts (Hamington, 2006), demonstrating her pragmatic strategy. The foregoing does not mean that she did not publically express her ideas; in fact, the majority of her writings<sup>3</sup> explicitly critiqued gender inequality and social injustice, advocating for a new understanding of what she called "truth."

With the ideological goal of *social cohesion*, Addams avoided labels that might engender divisions. Believing that ideas are "mutable representations," Addams

<sup>3</sup>Some of the writings most relevant to this point, in the view of this author, include *The Settlement as a Factor in the Labor Movement*, in Addams, J. (Ed.) *Hull House Maps and Papers* (Addams, 1895), *Democracy and Social Ethics* (Addams, 1902/2002) and *Twenty years at Hull-House* (Addams, 1912), which present theoretical-practical philosophies, expressed through her own life experiences.

created practical realities that were later "theorized" and substantiated, or described in theoretical terms, and vice versa, in a constantly recursive, systemic and circular reciprocity (Addams, 1895; Addams, 1902/2002, 1912, 1916/2002). This approach integrated theory and action, as prescribed by pragmatism, to develop an applied philosophy that was immersed in social action and included a gender and class perspective, resulting in a pragmatism much more radical than the one espoused by Dewey, Peirce or James (Hamington, 2006).

Like Dewey (1916/2004), Addams believed in comprehensive understanding, that is, linking diverse fields of human expression that had been segregated and divided into polarizing dichotomies as a result of either hyper-specialization or a lack of points of connection among different disciplines. Addams believed that society and art are interrelated, suggesting an aesthetic component to human understanding and social justice. The material expression of this concept was *Hull House*<sup>4</sup> (Addams, 1902/2002), the incarnation of her most altruistic ideals for a just society.<sup>5</sup>

Addams's pragmatist theory cannot be properly understood without examining the ethical sense underlying her constructed social reality (Knight, 2005). One of her fundamental contributions was the concept of a Just Society, which deeply influenced later social reforms in the USA (Miranda, 2007). Addams stated that the truth can be uncovered only by means of a democratic and rational approach, attaining social expression (as was her aspiration) when all efforts are focused on this goal (Addams, 1902/2002). The foregoing is the essence of social ethics; democracy is the expression and foundation of a common truth and is

<sup>4</sup>Hull House was a settlement home, perhaps the most famous in America. It was co-founded by Addams and Ellen Gates Starr (1859–1940) and was a place where (generally middle-class) volunteers shared knowledge and tools with people seeking assistance, largely immigrants living in poverty, to help them escape their situation (Wade, 2005; Hamington, 2006).

<sup>5</sup>Hull House was the most-recognized female domain of the mid-twentieth century in the USA, providing an arena for the formation of thousands of professional women who participated in the second wave of feminism, including *Eleanor Clarke Slagle* (Breines, 1986; Quiroga, 1995; Metaxas, 2000).

<sup>6</sup>The *settlement houses* were shelters or community action centres, where people who needed a helping hand, mainly immigrants, could seek assistance (Wade, 2005).

oriented towards the future, where the utility and truth of a concept are to come to fruition (James, 1909/1974; Dewey, 1916/2004; Knight, 2005).

Social ethics is vital for healthy coexistence. Grave social damage results from exclusively expressing the viewpoint of an elite few who make decisions that affect others, denying the marginalized sectors of society a voice of their own. One example is the *settlement houses*,<sup>6</sup> which, while responding to real social needs, *maintained* the “truth” of social segregation. Therefore, it was important to Addams that focus on understanding the reality of those who sought assistance at the settlement houses, in order to improve efforts to better their living situations (Addams, 1895).

Addams understood that social injustices represented *learned behaviours* and *habits* entrenched in society, which could be modified with effort (Addams, 1902/2002, 1916/2002). However, changes cannot be imposed by an external force that fails to understand the reality and concept of truth held by those seeking to help. Addams critiqued the work of certain settlement workers and charity workers who made assumptions about the needs or faults of the people they were helping, betraying their feelings of “moral superiority” and sometimes blaming people for their own poverty (Addams, 1902/2002).

One path to developing social ethics, and creating a true common society, is refraining from making *a priori* judgments about others’ beliefs. Achieving this tolerance depends in large part, according to Addams, on dialogue: listening attentively and developing a comprehensive understanding (Hamington, 2006). Moreover, it is necessary to rid oneself of prejudices and false beliefs about what is “good or bad,” a notion also espoused by Dewey, who advocated becoming conscious of one’s beliefs or entrenched truths as a path to changing one’s mental habits (Addams, 1895).

Addams maintained that persons and communities are capable of creating new realities to improve their quality of life, that democracy possesses an unimaginable power and that numerous attempts might be necessary before success would be achieved. Therefore, the validity of an action should be evaluated by analysing both its long- and short-term effects; for example, while unpleasant situations (misunderstandings, disagreements) may arise from a movement, over time these efforts could lead to enhanced rights and long-term triumphs of social justice to the benefit of future societies (Addams, 1895).

A social ethics approach would preserve individual virtues in a new moral universe, through movements to acknowledge the equal rights of various minorities, oppressed groups and people with disabilities, for instance, the workers’ movement and the women’s movement. This new conception of truth for society (Levingston, 2001) would allow for radical reforms or social changes.

This approach, pragmatist in essence, but radical in its application through concrete social actions, situates Addams as the precursor of *Radical Pragmatism* (Hamington, 2006), which challenged existing power structures from a solid theoretical foundation with robust force. The result was a clearly elucidated ethical purpose and powerful social actions to benefit the community.

While the pragmatists in general argued for social progress, Addams extended the concept further (Hamington, 2006), advocating for *lateral progress*; that is, social gains benefitting all members of the community rather than only the elite groups. This concept was a critique of the way that the dividends of industrialization mainly served a privileged few, seeking to move forward with a more equitable approach: “progress [...] slower perpendicularly, but incomparably greater because lateral” (Addams, 1912, p. 175). Addams argued for equal opportunity in a context of active democracy, in which citizens and social organizations cared for one another, participating together to achieve lateral progress (Addams, 1912).

This type of radical pragmatism is feminist to the extent that it defends the equality between men and women and postulates that everyone has a role in a democratic society (Hamington, 2006), and that with mutual understanding and common sense, society could achieve this inclusiveness.

Addams actively challenged the egregious gender gaps of her time, denouncing the inequities and injustices committed against women (Addams, 1912). She maintained that to achieve (lateral) social progress, a diversity of opinions is crucial, and that therefore it is essential to “give a voice” to the marginalized. She asserted that working-class immigrant women had relevant ideas worthy of consideration by the community. This proposition was one that generated little sympathy among the intellectuals of the day (Hamington, 2006).

Definitively, practical experience took priority over theory for Addams, as theory stems from practice, while at the same time providing a foundation for practice.

## Final thoughts

Given the various contributions of the pragmatists to the history and “spirit” of Occupational Therapy, it should not surprise us that we as Occupational Therapists have a particular and characteristic vision for our interventions.

Observing the person from a holistic approach, considering disabled persons as subjects of law in a “disabling society”, advocating for social inclusion rights of minority groups, understanding that for the social inclusion process – for instance, children with special needs – it is necessary to make a change, not only in the manner in which that child is “considered”, but also in those who create public policies that impact that child. These pragmatist reflections are present in the undergraduate training of Occupational Therapy.

The previous, added to professional behaviours and beliefs, such as active listening, respect for the diversity and the different truths inside of the same society, evidence how Occupational Therapy is pragmatist from its beginnings and how crucial this is for the process of “becoming” an occupational therapist.

Through pragmatism, Occupational Therapy may be able to comprehend the previous story of its own consolidation and; understand why it is addressed as such a “special” profession, in health sector. Following this train of thought, it is possible to understand that with strong scientific development, Occupational Therapy has inherently humanist characteristics in its spirit.

On the other hand, pragmatist epistemology and Addams’ contributions gain special relevance in the current historical moment, when the discipline is undergoing in some countries, known as Social Paradigm of the Occupation (Morrison et al., 2011, p. 12):

[This Paradigm] characterizes the current understanding of OT [occupational therapy] and OS [occupational science], granting “new” practices and settings a status as valid and innovative. This does not mean that these practices did not exist previously; however, in the past they were “quantitatively” less common, or unrecognized by the larger community of Occupational Therapists (...). The community OT and social OT are examples of this paradigm, differing (qualitatively) from previous types of practice. These roles are now recognized by the scientific community and seen as necessary. A

similar phenomenon has occurred within the “the politics” of OT, where political decisions are now inherent to the role and professional practice of the Occupational Therapist (...), as well as in interventions that include aspects of citizenship involving human rights (...). Another example is the push for an equal society from a gender perspective, as illustrated in articles seeking to reclaim the role of women in the history of the profession (...).

The foregoing invites us to include discussions of the various pragmatist theories as part of the undergraduate formation of new professionals, including concrete applications and reflections about how the role of Occupational Therapy has been influenced by this perspective.

Finally, when we consider the development of new practice areas for Occupational Therapy disaster intervention, ecology, work with people living in poverty or who have suffered violation of their rights; increased participation in other settings: drug dependency, incarceration, community health promotion and prevention, as well the most common areas of intervention like working with disabled people and physical rehabilitation or people with mental health issues, we can understand how the action of Occupational Therapy has always been social; however, its focus has broadened to actions distant from the “institutional view”, and has become more focused on people’s common spaces of cohabitation.

This expanded focus requires a new perspective on the role of the Occupational Therapist. From this perspective, our edifying construct – occupation – may be understood as a social phenomenon, capable of changing the way that society constructs and reconstructs itself.

The ideas of a Social paradigm of occupation and Social Occupational Therapy can be addressed in future research. Pragmatism, therefore, could be linked to this concept of occupation, and would allow for new connections and potential activities in the areas of Occupational Therapy interventions.

In this manner, our pragmatist perspective can be made explicit in the entire entry level and ongoing professional education of occupational therapists and in radically restructuring the occupational therapy profession which gradually becomes stronger in our society.

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