Tavistock and Portman Staff Publications Online

JOURNAL ARTICLE

The Tavistock and Portman **NHS**
NHS Foundation Trust

Creating the conditions for collective curiosity and containment: Insights from developing and delivering reflective groups with social work supervisors

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Abstract

In this article we share our reflections and insights from developing and facilitating small group reflective practice spaces over the last three years as part of a government funded professional development programme for statutory children and families social work supervisors and their managers. Based on formal programme feedback and communication with facilitators and participants, there is clear evidence that participants have valued the space to reflect with peers on the diverse dilemmas they face in their role. We begin by setting the context for including small group spaces in the programme, and outline the theoretical and research frameworks underpinning our approach. Drawing from the sources of

evidence outlined above, we explore three key thematic reflections: creating conditions for successful reflective groups; understanding roles and functions within the groups and reflecting on group processes. We conclude the paper by highlighting our learning from both in-person and virtual modes of delivery.

Key words – reflective groups, group supervision, facilitating groups, supervisor, containment, children and family social work

Introduction

It is widely accepted that supervision is a central component of social work practice. Over the last decade, there is growing recognition of the importance of reflective practice and how social workers can be supported to reflect through using group models (e.g. Bostock et al., 2017; Dugmore et al. 2018; Forrester et al., 2013; Lees and Cooper, 2021; O'Sullivan, 2018). In this paper, we share our experiences of providing reflective groups to managers and leaders in statutory children and family social work, through our role as facilitators on a government funded continuing professional development programme delivered to first time social work supervisors. As the authors of this paper we have ensured that the diversity of our personal and professional identities has been incorporated into our deliberations on our experiences. In so doing we have found a consensus within our thematic reflections presented here and having shared our work in progress with other facilitators and participants, are confident that it is representative of the experiences of the social workers and managers who have been part of the programme.

The Policy and Practice Context

Since 2018 the Department for Education has made significant investment in a continuous professional development programme for social workers who are responsible for supporting and developing the practice of other practitioners in children and family services, across all local authority areas in England, with approximately 1350 participants completing this programme between 2018-21(Research in Practice, 2021). In 2020, this offer was extended to the line managers of these participants. The design of the programme was informed by the views ascertained from: a focus group of children and families who use services; a practice reference group including practitioners and managers, and an academic reference group. Two evidence scoping reviews (Maglajlic, 2018 and Ruch and Maglajlic, 2018) were also undertaken to inform the programme design.

Over the past 10 years, research and literature pertaining to social work supervision in general has developed into a substantive body of knowledge (Beddoe and Wilkins, 2019; Wilkins, 2019). In comparison, research and literature focusing on the continuous professional development of supervisors is sparse. The knowledge that does exist emphasises the importance of training being flexible, with a range of didactic and experiential components (Milne et al., 2011) and the integration of action learning sets (Patterson, 2017). In light of this body of evidence, and specifically Patterson's (2017) recommendation for small group experiential learning opportunities, it was decided that three small group reflective development sessions would be an integral component of the programme design and would additionally serve as a mechanism for participants to apply their learning from other aspects of the programme. Five different models for reflective group discussion (see Appendix One), which draw on a range of theoretical perspectives, complement the

emotionally intelligent, reflective, curious, relational supervision practice that lies at the heart of the programme. Whilst the programme was delivered in-person for the first two years, the context of the Coronavirus pandemic resulted in all sessions being delivered virtually.

Thematic reflections

In order to identify themes that had emerged from the reflective group sessions, a number of sources of evidence were drawn on. These included our own unique, personal experiences as facilitators, the experiences of other facilitators communicated directly to us and the experiences of participants, reported via our formal programme feedback processes and anecdotally to us individually. The psychoanalytic and systemic theoretical and conceptual lenses that were brought to bear on this evidence are in keeping with the lenses underpinning the programme and our professional expertise. From our diverse sources of evidence three core themes, each with their own sub-themes, were identified.

Creating conditions for successful reflective groups

> *"Discussing live practice issues and dilemmas with other social work managers on the programme was really valuable. It has assisted me with models for group supervision and group learning and has given me lots of food for thought to use with my team, particularly around models of reflection."* (Participant comment in programme feedback, 2021).

Given the value participants ascribed to taking part in reflective groups, it is important that as facilitators, we can clarify the components which contribute to the sessions being experienced as constructive professional learning and development spaces.

Clarity of purpose

Firstly, we suggest, it is important to consider the purpose of the reflective group process and 'what it is there to do'. In the programme documentation it states that 'the groups offer practice supervisors the opportunity to reflect on a dilemma or issue from their practice supervisory experience, apply their learning from the programme and consider different models of reflective practice to use in the workplace' (Practice Supervisor Development Programme, 2019, p. 6). According to Lees and Cooper (2021, p. 94) the term 'reflective practice group' can be used to describe a range of models whereby practitioners come together to reflect on and develop their practice, engage in learning and offer mutual support. These benefits of support and learning for staff have been reflected in research findings of evaluations of group supervision (Cross et al., 2010; Forrester et al., 2013; Kadushin and Harkness, 2002). Evaluations of systemic group models in social work contexts have also found that they contribute to the advancement of practitioners' communication and interaction skills with families (Cross et al., 2010; Bostock et al., 2017), which we suggest is translatable to supervisors' communication and interaction skills in supervision settings. A further aim of the programme is for participants to engage in a reflective group process, in the hope that they may be able to draw on their own reflective group experiences when facilitating group supervision within their own teams.

Benefits of structure

Structure, boundaries, timings and duration are all important aspects of successful reflective group processes (Kurtz, 2019; Lees and Cooper, 2021; Ruch, 2007). These characteristics of reflective groups are a crucial component in teaching participants about the different reflective models and how the reflective space is to be utilised. All of the selected models used on the programme have explicit, distinctive structures and timings, which are shared with participants at the start of the process. The common features of these are a specific time for the presenter to share their dilemma, time for the rest of the group to share their observations, feelings, thoughts and ideas and time for the whole group to consider the issues generated. The space created offers an experience of amplified connection for the group and a continuation of relationship building that is an integral feature of the whole programme. Embedding these processes provides a predictable rhythm and tone for the conversation, which in turn create a consistent and containing context for reflection and learning. The creation of such a supportive environment is crucial for experiential learning, a key component of reflective groups.

Learning from experience

On several occasions in conversation with programme participants they described prior negative experiences of professional reflective spaces that provided the opportunity to 'offload' or, worse still, 'whinge', but not as places where they could feel confident to be vulnerable and to learn from the experience of being in a group. These accounts of reflective practice tend to be characterised by spaces that are atheoretical and unstructured. This stands in stark contrast to the experience participants have on the programme, where, as acknowledged earlier, all of the models adopted have explicit theoretical foundations, which

inform the structures, features and practices of each of the models. Experiential learning, even when it is a core component of the reflective group models being adopted, however, does not come easily and requires participants to feel safe in a group setting.

The anxiety associated with the unfamiliar perspectives of uncertainty and curiosity that reflective groups invite participants to explore, was frequently experienced as unbearable. Initial engagement with the reflective models, for example, was often characterised by behaviours that resisted 'not knowing' and involved instant and premature practical suggestions or problem solving responses. Over time, as the participants' familiarity with the requirements of the reflective models increased, as their trust in their peers deepens and the benefits of reflective spaces becomes more apparent to them, their willingness and confidence to step up with an issue for discussion often increased, as did their reflective capabilities. Alongside this the nature of the issues that were presented became noticeably more personal, nuanced and, in essence, professionally 'risky'. Unsurprisingly, perhaps the extent to which this happens is closely aligned with how safe and understood – contained - participants feel in the group.

Issues of inclusion, equality and diversity

An essential component in creating conditions for reflection is the attention that is paid to power and privilege and how these dynamics impact on participants' experiences of the supportive and educative elements of the groups. Since the inception of the programme, the programme team have been committed to decolonising the programme's taught materials and to adopting an inclusive mind-set to the delivery of the programme's resources. An example of this involves facilitators considering how they model anti-racist approaches to

conversations in supervision and the addition of a programme session inviting participants to develop their 'critical consciousness' (Freire, 1973) through constructing 'critical conversations' about race in supervision, based on the ideas of O'Neill and del Mar Fariña (2018).

In a paper entitled *Anxieties about knowing in the context of work discussion: questions of difference,* Crehan and Rustin (2018) share their experience of 'loud silence' in relation to addressing issues of inclusion, equality and diversity in work discussion groups**.** Crehan and Rustin seek to understand these challenges, especially in relation to racial, religious and cultural diversity, through a psychoanalytic theoretical and conceptual lens. In so doing they suggest that the epistemic anxiety of participants impacts on their contributions to the group discussions. Within our programme, by encouraging facilitators to adopt the principles of 'critical conversations', participants were helped to acknowledge their own anxiety and explore some of the disconnections related to differential power and privilege, thus cultivating pathways to critical consciousness (O'Neill and del Mar Fariña, 2018). Therefore if the presenting issue of focus is about a participant's concerns about a supervision relationship, the facilitator will draw on this model to invite the group to consider what may be underlying issues relating to difference, power and privilege, suggesting race, disability and gender as possibilities.

Engagement in experiential reflective groups, where the session content is unknown until the presenter shares an issue, requires facilitators and participants alike to step into a potentially professionally exposing space. This can present in uniquely challenging ways for each individual within group, dependent on their individual identity, no matter whether their role is as a facilitator or participant. The risk and/or fear of disclosing, unconscious, albeit unintentional, racist or discriminatory comments and behaviours or micro-aggressions (Sue et

al., 2007), is not inconsiderable for white participants. For supervisors from black and minoritised groups, there can be associated fears i.e. that their dilemma will not be understood and they will be seen as lacking, not only as a supervisor but due to their race. In order to confidently hold such a reflective space, it has taken particular time, exploration, reflection and self-examination on the part of the facilitators. This has included regular opportunities for us to practice as a group working with sensitive issues in order to experience the discomfort, name our vulnerability and find the courage to overcome some of the powerful feelings which can arise in order for us to be prepared to 'model imperfection'. This continues to be a work in progress for us as facilitators and indeed, as authors with different racial identities, finding a way to articulate this together and reach a consensus for this paper has required us to continue our personal self-reflection.

Understanding group roles and functions

Participants as active learners

Alongside enabling the participants to both experience a group process <u>and</u> learn to facilitate a group, the group experience helps participants to be 'active learners'. Participants often speak of having previously attempted to facilitate groups and report struggling to fully give up their role or positioning as supervisor. They sometimes find that their role becomes compromised by their desire to give their view or, more accurately, the 'right answer'. We have noticed that this challenge to maintain an open, curious mind can then transfer into the reflective spaces provided on the programme and can result in a lack of professional confidence. We also note that as facilitators, we too are not exempt from these internal drivers to 'know the answer', and that it is important that we 'reflect in action' (Schön, 1991) and model reflexivity to the group when we notice this internal pull. We have also learnt that

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to be successful at facilitating, you need to clarify what good participation looks like and experience what this feels like. An important first step in addressing this is for facilitators to clarify roles and responsibilities, as part of explaining the model and process.

The Bells that Ring model (Proctor, 1997; Dugmore et al., 2018) allocates clear roles, with role descriptors. This explicitly invites participants to take up a particular position and implicitly invites them to be active in *how* they engage in the group as well as *what* they may contribute. Some facilitators have also tried inviting one member of the group to take responsibility for adopting a 'diversity lens' on behalf of the group, to highlight that this aspect needs explicit consideration. Following these principles for roles in all reflective models, enables participants to place themselves as 'learners', rather than 'experts' who need to know the answers. The extent to which participants feel able to take up their role is inextricably connected to how group participants perceive and experience the role of the facilitator. Group participants need to be able to tolerate being in a position of dependency without feeling they are dependent. Facilitators, therefore, navigate a tricky course between encouraging professional dependency, transparency and vulnerability to allow learning to happen, whilst simultaneously promoting group participants' professional autonomy and competence, which supports the transfer of learning into practice.

Facilitators as containers

> "*This year we had some of the best small group sessions I think, in part, due to our grasp of the material, experience and reflection from the first year but also [by] skilfully using our authority to 'make' people try something new without fear of being 'exposed'*" (Facilitator, 2021)

The facilitator's reflection above highlights the pivotal role and attuned position that facilitators take in providing containing experiences for the participants. The concept of 'containment' is based on the work of Bion (1961) who understood the importance of individuals being emotionally receptive to the feelings of another, able to 'emotionally digest' the shared experiences as part of a process of sense making, in order to make the material more 'digestible' for those sharing it. The facilitator's role in a reflective group is one of 'holding' and containing the space in order firstly, to enable everyone an equal chance to contribute in ways they feel they can, and secondly, to maximise the learning that participants can take from the group experience. It is, therefore, essential for facilitators to be attuned to their own position of power and how they model containment, through valuing every contribution and being emotionally attuned to each unique individual as well as the group as a whole.

Of particular importance is the facilitators' capacities to be conscious of the delicate, dynamic balance needed to maintain the boundaries, pace and flow of the group's conversation, whilst reflexively adhering to the agreed structure of the model. This means that the 'facilitator as container' complements the principles underpinning the model, and the containing role is enacted through feedback and psycho-socially attuned, gentle correction, ensuring the contributions from the group are held flexibly in line with the process of the chosen model. This also includes managing time and providing a clear beginning and end to the session. Through this, the facilitator is taking on the role of 'governance' by pausing and stepping in when, for example, they hear participants (or themselves) cross the line of curiosity and reflection into action and advice giving or linear thinking. This is in parallel with providing encouraging and validating feedback, allowing silences to emerge and helping to navigate the

group out of the silence and into another angle on the conversation. This is where the facilitator role can be seen to move beyond a technical task to one of artistry.

Presenters as vulnerable professionals

All of the models focus on something that has arisen from a participant's professional experience and is current, i.e. is unresolved and a cause of concern, curiosity, confusion and/or contemplation. It does not need to be a crisis or particularly big issue. Initially in response to the invitation from the facilitator to bring 'an issue' for discussion it is not uncommon for participants to demonstrate resistance to sharing a professional experience (Kurtz, 2019). In many cases, the opportunity these spaces afford to think more deeply and expansively about things is unfamiliar and can appear to be unbearable and unusable. Silence and avoidance of eye contact, along with participants often reinforcing each other's responses of 'not having anything to bring to discuss', are common. Navigating through and reflecting on this 'resistance' and silence, wondering out loud what might lie beneath it, is a position the facilitator often has to take up and helping participants to filter what might be an appropriate 'issue' or 'dilemma' is an integral part of the group process. When an issue is finally forthcoming, it is not uncommon for it to be introduced as 'not really much of a worry' or 'only a small thing', perhaps in the context of the 'bigness' of the daily issues inherent in safeguarding children. Yet through careful facilitation, such an issue can be revealed as more deep-rooted and significant than the presenter first realised.

These familiar group dynamics speak to the importance of participants learning to manage their professional vulnerability and positions of 'not knowing'. Against the pervasive backdrop of contemporary social work practice that privileges certainty and risk averse practice (Munro, 2010), and invites us to be dismissive of 'small' but significant issues, experiencing their

professional vulnerability can be exceedingly challenging for participants to tolerate. All of the programme's reflective models, however, emphasise the importance of not rushing to problem solve and invite wider and deeper discussions of the complexities of practice. One facilitator's comment eloquently captures this process:

> "*Participants have valued the impartiality of the space where they can be vulnerable and sit with uncertainty while also creating alternative and helpful narratives that celebrate often muted stories of success and acknowledgment that 'Actually, I'm doing a really good job!'"* (Facilitator, 2021).

By definition, therefore, professional shortcomings and knowledge gaps will be identified, but these need to be understood as sources for professional curiosity, as opposed to grounds for professional recrimination. Once again, as acknowledged above, the facilitators play a crucial role in modelling their capacity to tolerate their own professional vulnerabilities and be compassionate towards themselves.

Reflecting on group processes

Curiosity and practicing positions of 'not knowing'

As outlined above reflective group processes makes explicit the importance of not seeking immediate solutions (if at all) and the need for the group as a whole to be able to sit with, and even 'treasure uncertainty' and hold a position of 'not knowing'. This can lead to anxiety, restlessness, and frustration or boredom behaviours. We believe this stems from the nature of

social work with children and families, which is an anxiety provoking arena, where practitioners and supervisors are required to 'think under fire'. (Bion, 1982). In such circumstances taking a psychoanalytical position of 'negative capability' (Cornish, 2011; Keats, in Gittings, 1970) helps individuals to tolerate anxiety and fear and stay in a place of uncertainty, in order to allow for the emergence of new thoughts or perceptions (Eisold, 2000). Simpson et al. (2002) further suggest that this can create an intermediate space that enables one to resist dispersing into defensive routines and continue to think in difficult situations. Providing a reflective space for a group to slow down and think together creates such an opportunity and maximises their capacity to be curious.

Our learning as facilitators has indicated that inviting participants to stay with the reflective, analytic and hypothesising stages of reflective practice has been challenging for participants as problem-solving is a default position that many automatically fall into. This reflects the 'quick fix' tendency (Morrison, 2005) of moving from telling the story of experience, to 'doing' or action planning, which is evident in contemporary social work supervision practice (Wilkins et al., 2017). By applying a lens of curiosity, more creative, 'out of the box' thinking about complex, messy issues can emerge, which in itself can generate energy and inspiration. To demonstrate a respectful circumvention of this habit, facilitators return to the important theoretical underpinnings of the models used, all of which invite participants to practice taking up positions of 'not knowing'. By taking this position, the group has an opportunity to establish alternative meanings they may put to events, which opens up the potential for more diverse views to be stated and heard.

Collective listening and empathy

Another of the benefits of reflective groups is the multiple perspectives gained through providing a space for participants to become 'thinking peers' (Kline, 1999). Programme participants remark that this sharing and learning from peers, often featuring situations they have faced themselves, is an important part of their learning. The presenter is given time to tell an unfiltered story and metaphorically 'empty out' the components onto the table. The group reflective models used in the programme invite a non-judgmental approach, which embraces difference and deep attentive listening with empathy (Ruch, 2007; Staempfli and Fairtlough, 2018), demonstrating care and kindness, rather than fault finding and judgement. In reflecting from a curious, respectful stance, participants connect to aspects of the story through their own senses, emotions and experience in a selfless way, which, rather than taking away ownership of the dilemma from the presenter, actually deepens engagement with it. Through this process they practice being in the present moment, sifting through, unpicking, exploring, noticing, wondering, sense making and meaning making. Importantly this group 'dialogical approach' to 'relational reflective thinking' additionally helps to steer away from individual fault finding in the context of group differences (Gergen, 1999).

What is sometimes highlighted, is that the presented dilemmas often boil down to uncovering the presenters' doubt about their own self-efficacy, confidence or self-belief. The group may also uncover beneath the surface a struggle or uncomfortableness with power and/or authority. Our task as facilitators, along with the participants, is to reflect this back to the presenter in some way, to help them to recognise it and name the feelings it evokes. The collective nature of these reflective spaces allows for the responsibility and the burden of the issue to be shared, which in turn can help the presenter to feel supported and held by peers, more able to process the dilemma and walk away feeling more informed. The helpfulness of this dynamic is reflected in feedback from presenters who have remarked on how supportive

they have found the process, the importance of being heard and understood being key elements:

>*"It was particularly helpful when I was able to discuss within a small group, a case scenario for a supervisee that I had worked with, which allowed me to think about how my own professional value base had impacted on how I worked with them. Having the opportunity for group work, allowed for ideas to be shared about best practice and what good group supervision should look like."* (Participant feedback, 2019).

Through peers bearing witness to the struggles of another, it also enables them to recognise universally shared dilemmas, which can lead to them benefiting themselves from group reflections. At the end of the session, it is not uncommon for there to be a sense of a collective 'joy' as the group share what they have gained from the process; that everyone feels they have learned or gained insights signifies the true collaboration that has taken place.

Delivering respectful challenge

For most practice supervisors, their day to day experience within the workplace is fast paced and stressful. Case management systems mainly measure - quantify - whether a task has been completed, as opposed to consider – qualify - how the task was undertaken (Wilkins et al, 2017; Wilkins, 2019). Programme participants often give examples of the harsh, disrespectful milieus in which they work and have also spoken about their own need to 'tell off' their staff in relation to performance. Feedback to individuals can often reflect a lack of empathy and

understanding in the pressure to put things right quickly. This 'right or wrong' continuum, may then be experienced as critical, judgemental and shame inducing. These shame evoking experiences within the organisation can create a need for individuals to 'defend' themselves. One valid defence is to never draw negative attention or criticism through finding a position of 'being right' and 'doing it right'. Here there is certainty, where a show of vulnerability is seen as weak and, therefore, unacceptable.

When participants come to the reflective groups they are familiar with, and often wedded to, this position of certainty, even if it is experienced as unpalatable. Often too its negative and restrictive impact on their own and their supervisees practice is not fully recognised. This position of disavowal, i.e. claiming to 'not know' what is actually 'known', manifests itself in contributions from participants, where their 'intentions' are to appear certain, 'right'. This often results in participants veering towards a problem solving, as opposed to a professionally curious position. If this is not possible, they frequently remain silent as the ultimate defence. It is no one person's responsibility to get it right and in the spirit of 'encouraging vulnerable competence', the facilitator's actions further support this and demonstrate what this looks like in practice. Through active listening and positive feedback, as well modelling how to take 'relational risks' (Lee, 2015) in order to provide gentle 'corrective' feedback, facilitators provide a sensitive steer when someone is veering into negative (shaming) judgements or solutions.

Moving from in-person to virtual learning spaces

The first two years of the programme were delivered in person. Typically, reflective groups of 8-10 would meet with one facilitator and would sit in a circle in the physical space. This would enable everyone to receive a whole range of emotional communication through

language, facial expression and embodied engagement. The reflective discussion model (Ruch, 2007) even invites the presenter to physically move out of the circle in order to listen to the reflections of the group without temptation for them to make eye contact and engage in direct comments and questions. As the programme moved into virtual delivery due to the Coronavirus pandemic, this provided an opportunity for facilitators and participants to learn how to navigate digital platforms and virtual spaces for reflection. Feedback from participants has been consistent with that of peers who attended in-person groups, which indicates that this has been received with apparent success.

The facilitator role has been more challenging in virtual spaces, as it is much harder to 'read the room' and attune to the emotional landscape of reflective practice. Digital platforms reduce people from their 'whole self' to a face in a small box, a name or a photograph if their camera is off and worst still, an anonymous disc with initials, on some platforms. In person, facilitators can embody their role much more fluidly, to engage physically, using posture and eye contact to steer, contain, conduct, acknowledge, include and 'notice'. We have found that it can help for facilitators to explain to the group how we would facilitate in-person and how they may experience us and the process. This enables us to model our position as 'facilitator as learners' in the hope that this will also mitigate any clumsiness through our verbal interjections into the air space. Being unable to use your body in this way limits a sense of being able to provide emotional containment, as do problems with technology, which can be experienced by everyone as lack of containment i.e. being ejected unexpectedly and having to re-enter, visually, on the screen. However, we have also wondered about the affect of being so close to people's faces, which are equidistant in small boxes and whether this gives a heightened sense of attunement and feeling of togetherness, which may feel containing.

Conclusions

As we draw our thematic exploration to a close it is readily apparent how the different thematic strands are interwoven and certain theoretical concepts recur in relation to different aspects of the life of reflective groups and the diverse experiences of group participants and facilitators. The central importance of containment in the face of the anxiety-ridden professional contexts the participants are working in is particularly apparent. As is the need for participants to be permitted to be professionally vulnerable, in order to maintain a position of professional curiosity. A golden thread that is woven through the whole of the programme is the systemic concept of 'parallel process' (Searles, 1955). By ensuring facilitators are contained via the programme's community of practice which they belong to, they can offer containment and model vulnerability and curiosity. This, in turn, enables the participants to experience containment offered by the facilitators' conduct, and to explore and express their own professional vulnerability. These professionally nourishing experiences can then be modelled for and provided to the practitioners that the participants supervise, who can then model and provide them for the children and families they work with. And that is ultimately what the programme is all about – supporting supervisors to support practitioners, to support parents, so they can manage the anxiety they experience in order to enable them to provide care for their children.

Appendix One: Five models for reflective supervision

Model	Theoretical Underpinning	Supporting Papers

Bells That Ring	Systemic	Dugmore et al.,2018; Proctor, 1997
Key Situations	Adult and Situated Learning	Staempfli et al., 2012, 2016
Intervision	Systems	Staempfli and Fairtlough, 2018; Wagenaar, 2015
Reflective Discussion	Psycho-social and systems	Ruch, 2007
Work Discussion	Psychoanalytical and Containment (Bion, 1962)	O'Sullivan, 2018; Rustin, 2008

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