Reconsidering Shame:

Should a Recent Shame Experience Mitigate our Judgment on Others' Moral Transgressions?

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Abstract

The present research investigated whether a recent shame experience shapes people's moral judgment when faced with the deviant behavior of another individual. After inducing shame by a hypothetical scenario, participants read about a situation in which they were bystanders of a blameworthy act of another person. In response to this transgression participants' moral judgment, levels of shame, empathic concern and state of mind were measured. The expectation was that condition will have a softening effect on moral judgment. Results revealed that in the experimental condition shame levels were significantly higher and people's moral judgment less severe. The findings imply that through pathways of psychological constructs as empathic shame and perceived oneness, a shame experience makes individuals more tolerant resulting in a milder moral judgment. The present study provides evidence for an indirect link between shame and moral judgment.

Introduction

Research on moral emotions such as shame and guilt is flourishing. Although shame and guilt are frequently used interchangeably in everyday language, they are definitely distinct emotions. When engaged in moral transgressions, people often experience a mix of these two emotions (Schmader & Lickel, 2006). According to the most widely accepted difference, feeling ashamed makes us evaluate our whole self negatively whereas feeling guilt refers to a negative behavior: *"I* did that horrible thing" compared to "I *did* that horrible thing" (Tangney, Niedenthal, Covert & Barlow, 1998). One of the most prominent researchers on moral emotions, Tangney and colleagues describe in several studies that shame can be a very painful, negative emotion associated with the desire to disappear or hide (Tangney, Stuewig & Mashek, 2007). As cited in De Hooge, Zeelenberg and Breugelmans (2011), according to Gilbert shame is "one of the most powerful, painful and potentially destructive experiences known to humans". Studies focusing on shame-proneness and measuring it by means of the Test of Self-Conscious Affect (TOSCA) have resulted in a seemingly growing evidence about the negative role of shame.

This long-lasting, overwhelmingly negative view of shame has been questioned in the last decade by a group of researchers who revealed pro-social functions of shame (De Hooge, Breugelmans & Zeelenberg, 2008; Gausel & Leach, 2011; Gausel, Leach, Vignoles & Brown, 2012; Nelissen, Breugelmans & Zeelenberg, 2013). Several empirical studies claim that shame is not as dysfunctional in the regulation of morality as it was thought to be for several decades (De Hooge et al., 2008; De Hooge, Zeelenberg & Breugelmans, 2010; De Hooge et al., 2011). There is growing evidence that shame can also activate restore motives leading to approach behavior (De Hooge, Zeelenberg & Breugelmans, 2010). Also, Tangney and colleagues have recently found evidence about the "two faces of shame", illustrating that shame can also prompt pro-social motives (Tangney, Stuewig & Martinez, 2014). The

growing interest in shame has led to a number of studies analyzing it from the perspective of a bystander or in-group member (Lickel, Schmader, Curtis, Scarnier & Ames, 2005; Welten, Zeelenberg & Breugelmans, 2012; Welten, 2011; Lickel, Steele & Schmader, 2011). These studies delivered seemingly paradoxical evidence that people have the capacity to experience self-conscious emotions such as guilt or shame vicariously, when witnessing the wrongdoings of others.

It is necessary for the present experiment to note that the conceptualization of vicarious shame is not consistent in the literature: vicarious and empathic emotions are sometimes used interchangeably. Paulus, Müller-Pinzler, Westermann & Krach (2013) suggest that vicarious emotions do not necessarily depend on shared feelings, whereas other researchers use the term empathic concern for the same affective state. As opposed to Paulus et al. (2013) other researchers (Cialdini, Brown, Lewis, Luce & Neuberg, 1997; Haidt, 2001) use the term vicarious emotions to indicate a state that the perceiver and target share an emotion. Stocks, Lishner, Waits and Downum (2011) seem to resolve this inconsistency by using the terms imagine-self and imagine-other perspective taking. According to them, imagining being in the transgressor's situation yourself (imagine-self perspective) would result in similar emotions such as empathic shame. On the other hand, imagining how the other would feel (imagine-other perspective), people would experience empathic concerns.

As humans are an intensely social species, belonging to a group and having social relationships are important aspects in our lives (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Eisenberg, 2000). Moral emotions as shame or guilt help us resist selfish decisions with immediate benefits and take into account the interests of others that can be more rewarding in the long run (Nelissen et al, 2013). Nelissen et al. (2013) note that Darwin and Smith had already described that moral emotions not only serve the interests of society as a whole but – indirectly – also benefit the long-term interests of the individual. Due to our need for social connections

together with the need to maintain and protect our self-esteem we constantly self-evaluate. A negative self-evaluation threatens our integrity which could result in a self-conscious emotion like shame (Leary, 2007). We frequently imagine how we are seen and judged by other people. This process helps us to avoid rejection by peers and promote group cohesion (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

As described above, shame plays an important role in regulating morality. Nevertheless, opinions are divided on the causal role of emotions leading to moral judgment. Theories have long been dominated by rationalist models emphasizing reasoning and conscious thoughts leading to moral judgment. However, there is increasing evidence that moral judgment involves intuitive, effortless and emotion-based mechanisms (Haidt, 2001; Greene & Haidt, 2002; Wheatley & Haidt, 2005; Valdesolo & DeSteno, 2006; Berthoz, Grezes, Armony, Passingham & Dolan, 2006; Schnall, Haidt, Clore & Jordan, 2008). Haidt (2001) suggests that most of our moral judgments seem to be the result of moral intuition processes: operating automatically and unconsciously giving us the illusion of arising from nowhere. As opposed to the rationalist approach, the social intuitionist model proposes that reasoning is produced to justify an already made moral judgment (Haidt, 2001). This debate inspired several researchers to conduct neuroimaging studies based on fMRI (Berthoz et al., 2006; Takahashi et al., 2004; Huebner, Dwyer & Hauser, 2009; Michl et al., 2014). Neuroimaging has revealed that moral judgment and moral dilemmas produce increased activation of emotional circuits. However, it fails to license the claim that emotions are the single source of processes leading to moral judgment.

As the review of the literature shows, much progress has been made in the last decade to uncover the secrets of shame and the processes leading to moral judgment. However, despite the extensive literature, to my knowledge, no study to date has explicitly investigated the link between the two: can feelings of shame affect moral judgment? If it can be

demonstrated that such a relationship exists it could have important implications. For this reason, an experiment in this field would be an informative and useful addition to the shame literature. This brings me to my research question: would people be influenced in their judgment on the moral transgression of another person if they have recently experienced shame? In the present paper I will examine people's judgment after a recent shame experience to reveal if there is a link between shame and moral judgment.

I have three reasons to expect that the moral judgment of people with shame experience will be less harsh. First, as shame has a negative effect on self-esteem, people would be relieved when another person commits a similar transgression. Witnessing a similar act could facilitate to see the own incident in a less negative light and feel more positive about oneself, which in turn, can lead to a less severe judgment on the other person's blameworthy act. More importantly, the second reason for my expectation of a milder judgment is Welten's (2011) claim: "empathic shame (...) can help to understand the transgressor's shameful position, resulting in a positive attitude towards the transgressor". When individuals recently experienced shame and they still remember how it feels when people are looking at them in disapproval, it is much easier for them to take the perspective of another, positioned in a similar inconvenient situation. Consequently, it is more likely that they would experience empathic shame. As empathic shame promotes positive approach towards the perpetrator, as Welten (2011) claims, I expect a less severe moral judgment. The third and most important underpinning for my prediction of a less severe judgment is the study reinterpreting the logic of empathy-altruism of Cialdini et al. (1997). In contrast to the altruistic model that asserts that empathic concern results in selflessness, Cialdini et al. (1997) argue that a seemingly selfless action is ultimately directed toward the self. They introduce the term "oneness" as a measure of perceived self-other overlap between the bystander and the victim. This identity overlap of the self and the other is brought about by a perception of familiarity or similarity

by the witness, resulting in taking the perspective of the suffering victim. When one takes the perspective of another, similarly to the imagine-self perspective taking defined by Stocks et al. (2011), the witness vicariously experiences what the other is feeling, making it possible that "one comes to incorporate the self within the boundaries of the other" (Cialdini et al., 1997). This symbolic expansion of the self into the other, a kind of perceived oneness can in turn mediate helping. As similarity can create "relationship closeness" (Cialdini et al., 1997), a merged identity - to some degree - can also arise in strangers or near strangers. Generalizing this reasoning to the present study, my expectation is that people with a recent shame experience – through the similarity of the incidents - might perceive a kind of oneness with the transgressor and, as a consequence, would be milder in their judgment.

In the present study the experimental group is first confronted with a scenario of shameful behavior of their own; subsequently participants are witnessing the moral transgression of a stranger, whereafter they are asked to make judgments about the behavior of this person. I hypothesize that people with a recent shame experience are less severe in their judgment on the moral transgression of another individual.

Method

Participants and Apparatus

The research sample consisted of one hundred and sixty-seven participants between the ages of 17 and 73 (75 males and 92 females, M_{age} = 32.45; SD = 15.96). The survey was conducted in Qualtrics and was available both online, in mobile format and printed on paper in order to acquire more participants. Participants were requested to take part in the experiment personally or through social media.

Design

This experiment was a between-subjects design, shame group versus control group. Two different scenarios were set up as the independent variable: a shame-induced scenario for the

experimental group versus a neutral scenario for the control group. At the beginning of the survey participants were requested to empathize with the situation described in the scenario. They were informed that their answers would be treated anonymously.

The experimental group read the following scenario that was meant to induce shame:

> Imagine that you are on vacation in Rome. While taking a tour in one of the most famous ancient churches in the city you decide to stay in the church and attend a church mass. The priest is talking in Italian, so you do not understand much, but you are enjoying the serene atmosphere and admiring the beautiful pieces of art around you. Suddenly the silence is abruptly broken by the loud ringtone of your phone that you forgot to silence. Even though you silence it as quickly as possible, you see that a few people are disapprovingly looking at you.
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> A few minutes later when the mass has ended, everyone seems to have forgotten the incident. After the mass a group of tourists are coming inside. One of the tourists begins to take pictures, although the signs clearly indicate that it is prohibited. Moreover, he is talking loudly to his partner. However, when the surveyor of the church reminds him not to take pictures and keep quiet he stops immediately.

The control group read almost the same scenario with the exception of the incident with the loud ringtone.

After reading the scenarios participants were asked to complete a short questionnaire. The dependent variable in the present study was moral judgment. The first question block in the questionnaire consisted of four moral judgment related statements: (1) The behavior of this tourist is immoral; (2) His behavior is unacceptable; (3) This tourist must be punished; (4) This tourist is disrespectful. All items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 “strongly disagree” to 7 “strongly agree”. The Cronbach’s Alpha reliability test indicated a

reasonable consistency (α = .731), however not high enough to treat these items as a scale. For this reason, these four moral judgment items were analyzed separately.

The second block had three empathic concern statements (e.g. " I felt sorry for this person") adopted from Welten (2011), rated on a 7-point scale (Cronbach's α = .799).

The third question block had five shame-related questions adopted from De Hooge et al. (2011), who refer to these five statements as the basic elements of shame experience: (1) how small they felt; (2) how alone they felt; (3) how much they felt that all attention was directed towards them; (4) how much they did not want others to know about this incident; (5) how much they were worried about what others would think of them. All items were rated on a 7-point scale (Cronbach's α = .928). In the last question block participants were asked to report how much shame, guilt, embarrassment, satisfaction, regret, relief and anger they felt before the incident with the noisy tourist. Items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale. Among the moral emotions there was a set of non-moral distractors embedded, thus it was irrelevant to conduct a scale.

All the questions were identical to both the control and experimental group. However, before the shame related questions the experimental group was first reminded of their own incident, how they previously disturbed the silence in the church themselves. At the end of the questionnaire a few questions were included concerning age, gender and religion.

Participants were assigned to the experimental and the control conditions by means of a built-in randomizer in Qualtrics. Participants who were personally approached were alternately given printed versions of one of the two conditions. As both online and printed versions were used, a new variable was added and the two versions were checked for differences.

Results

As both online and paper questionnaires were used, an independent-samples t-test was conducted to check if the online and paper versions differed. There were no differences between the scores on the four moral judgment items, empathic concern scale, shame scale and reported emotions (all *p*s > .05). However, there was a difference between the scores on age ($p = .001$), gender ($p = .003$) and religion ($p = .010$). To make sure whether there was no interfering effect of the distribution method (paper versus online) on the main effect, four ANCOVAs with distribution method as covariate, condition as independent variable and the moral judgment items as dependent variables were conducted. The results revealed that the distribution method did not interfere with the effect of condition on any of the moral judgment items (all *ps* > .328). As age, gender and religion were not expected to influence the main effect between shame and moral judgment and no other significant differences between the paper and online versions were found, the two datasets were merged.

The manipulation check showed that shame induction was successful. An independent-samples t-test revealed that there was a significant difference of shame in the scores between the experimental ($M = 5.26$, $SD = 1.09$) and control condition (($M = 3.01$, $SD = 1.38$)*;* $t\ (165) = -11.59$, $p = .001$). Condition also had an effect on all reported emotions, i.e. reported shame, guilt, embarrassment, regret, relief and satisfaction (all *p*s < .001) except on anger ($p = .954$). The experimental group also felt more shame ($M = 5.63$ versus 2.82), guilt ($M = 4.84$ versus 2.75) and embarrassment ($M = 5.56$ versus 3.01) compared to control participants.

In order to test the main hypothesis whether condition had an effect on moral judgment, another independent-samples t-test was conducted. This test revealed an effect on the first three moral judgment items Immoral, Unacceptable and Punishment (all *ps* < .043). However, the scores on the fourth item Disrespect were equal in both the experimental ($M =$

5.09, *SD* = 1.48) and control condition ((*M* = 5.11, *SD* = 1.49); *t* (165) = .10, *p* = .920). It seems that no matter whether participants were primed with shame in the experimental group, they still found the other offender as disrespectful as the control group

Since the initial expectation was that shame itself could be the predictor of less severe moral judgment, four simple linear regressions were conducted to predict moral judgment based on shame. No significant regression equation was found of shame on the first three moral judgment items: Immoral (β = -.038, *F*(1, 165) = .237, *p* = .627), Unacceptable (β = -.037, *F*(1, 165) = .229, *p* = .633) and Punishment (β = -.060, *F*(1, 165) = .602, *p* = .439). Since the previous t-test indicated no effect of condition on Disrespect, consequently a simple linear regression showed that shame did not predict Disrespect (β = .120, *F*(1, 165) = 2.392, *p* = .124).

In order to check whether other emotions predicted moral judgment, additional linear regressions were conducted. When different emotions were entered individually into the equation, none of them had an effect on Immoral (all *p*s >.262), nor on Unacceptable (all *p*s > .278). However, Punishment was predicted by Relief (β = .159, *F*(1,165) = 4.299, *p* = .040) and by Anger (β = .190, *F*(1,165) = 6.184, *p* = .014) and surprisingly, (reported) Shame predicted Disrespect (β = .189, (*F*(1,165) = 6.112, *p* = .014). When all emotions were entered in the model simultaneously Anger continued to predict Punishment (β = .239, *F* (7,159) = 2.062, *p* = .008) and Shame continued to predict Disrespect (β =. 532, *F* (7,159) = 1.813, *p* = .004). However, Guilt negatively predicted Disrespect (β = -.306, *F* (7,159) = 1.813, *p* = .033) and the effect of Relief on Punishment was rendered nonsignificant (*p* = .324).

Finally, four ANCOVAs were conducted for each of the moral judgment items to determine whether empathic concern had a mediating effect between condition and moral judgment. The results revealed that empathic concern had no effect on any of the moral judgment items (all *p*s > .223).

Discussion

The aim of this study was to reveal whether a shame experience would shape people's moral judgment. The results support the hypothesis that people with a recent shame experience are less severe in their judgment on others' subsequent deviant behavior. After successfully inducing shame, participants in the shame condition scored considerably lower on moral judgment. However, the shame scale had no significant direct effect on the severity of moral judgment. Although reported shame predicted disrespect, it seems that other psychological constructs, rather than shame directly, contributed to a more tolerant judgment.

As described earlier in this paper, Stocks et al. (2011) make a distinction between imagine-self and imagine-other perspective taking. Imagine-self perspective taking occurs when people imagine themselves in the situation of another individual and experience the situation as if it happened to them (Welten, 2011). Participants in the shame condition in the present study could easily take the imagine-self perspective compared to participants in the control condition. As they experienced a similar violation of social norms, followed by shame, they still had in mind how it feels when people are disapprovingly looking at them. For this reason, they could easily get involved in the subsequent incident and by projecting themselves in the place of the other they might have experienced empathic shame. As empathic shame helps the witness understand the shameful position of the transgressor, it could have resulted in a less severe moral judgment. Support for this interpretation comes from Welten (2011) who suggests that when the observer takes the perspective of the transgressor, empathic shame can arise which can result in a positive attitude towards them. This interpretation of having a kind of connection with the transgressor is also consistent with the experiments of Cialdini et al.(1997), described earlier in this paper as the most important underpinning for my hypothesis. Cialdini et al. (1997) imply that by emphasizing with the inconvenient situation of another, relationship closeness might be elicited which, in turn,

facilitates perceived oneness. Generalizing this reasoning to the present study, it seems reasonable to suggest that participants in the shame condition – due to the similar incident they experienced before - might have felt connected to the subsequent shameful event. As they have violated a social norm themselves, they might have felt a kind of oneness: an identity overlap of the self with the perpetrator. This perceived oneness might have contributed to a positive attitude towards the other, leading to a milder judgment. Apparently, participants in the shame condition - due to the similarity of both incidents – experienced a kind of in-group feeling with the perpetrator resulting in more tolerance towards them. Support for this possible explanation comes from Cialdini et al. (1997) who imply that there is a striking similarity between this concept of perceived oneness and the ”in-group favoritism effect”. Moreover, they suggest that such in-group favoritism may be the product of perceived oneness with the group, that accounts for individuals allocating greater resources to members of their own group. In my view, in the present study this effect has led to a positive attitude towards the transgressor that ultimately resulted in a less severe judgment.

Interestingly, empathic concern did not differ significantly across conditions. Empathic concern is a kind of emotional reaction characterized by feelings such as sympathy or compassion that is evoked by imagine-other perspective taking (Stocks et al., 2011). It is important to note that it does not necessarily mean shared feelings, neither perceived oneness. Cialdini et al. (1997) demonstrated that although relationship closeness (evoked by similarity or familiarity) elevated the levels of both empathic concern and perceived oneness, ultimately only perceived oneness predicted helping attitudes. They suggest that empathic concern may have only appeared to predict helping attitudes in prior experiments because it covaries with perceived oneness. In my view, participants in both conditions might have empathized with and felt sorry for the transgressor. After all, empathic concern is limited to imagining how the situation feels like for the other person. People do not get involved, they observe the situation

as a spectator (Welten, 2011). This clarifies why there was no significant difference found in empathic concern across conditions. The fact that - despite similar levels of empathic concern - the experimental group scored lower on the severity of moral judgment implies that empathic concern did not contribute to a milder judgment. The results support this interpretation: empathic concern did not influence the effect of condition on moral judgment. These findings are in line with the assumption of Cialdini et al. (1997) who claim that perceived oneness, rather than empathic concern, accounts for the positive attitude towards the perpetrator in an inconvenient situation.

Although the findings are consistent, the present study has some limitations. First, objection can be raised against the use of hypothetical scenarios. When using scenarios it is assumed that participants have the ability to empathize and identify themselves with the person in the scenario. Although these scenarios can sound very natural, not everyone is able to predict accurately how they would feel and behave in the hypothetical situation. Studies including behavioral measures may have a better estimate of the actual behavior.

It might also be argued that moral emotions as shame, embarrassment and guilt co-occur frequently and might be entangled with each other (Eisenberg, 2000; Takahashi et al., 2004). It is very difficult to induce pure shame without inducing other emotions as well. Although results imply that most of the reported emotions had no significant effect on the moral judgment items, it cannot be excluded that other moral emotions – directly or indirectly - contributed to the difference in participants' moral judgment.

An interesting challenge for future work is to examine the effect of other moral emotions as guilt or embarrassment on moral judgment. In the present study condition had considerable effect on guilt and embarrassment. Stocks et al. (2011) have already illustrated that empathic embarrassment can result in a positive attitude towards the perpetrator. However, in their study the bystander had no similar embarrassment experience beforehand.

As embarrassment shares several characteristics with shame it would be an interesting direction for future research to conduct a similar experiment, focusing on the effect of embarrassment on moral judgment. Future research could shed light on whether experiencing embarrassment – directly of vicariously - influences people's moral judgment.

Further research could also bring more distinctness in the conceptualization of vicarious shame, empathic shame and empathic concern. As already mentioned, these terms are sometimes used interchangeably in the literature and - without a clear conceptualization - experiments cannot always be compared and results could even be misinterpreted.

It would also be an interesting challenge for future research to determine whether the present experiment with an individualistic Dutch sample would have divergent results in a collectivistic society. Although Michl et al. (2014) found neuroimaging evidence that shame manifests itself quite similarly across different cultures, they emphasize that - due to the different stages of socialization and development - it makes a difference whether shame is measured in individualistic or collectivistic societies. Similarly, Krawczak (2014) suggests that in collectivistic societies people care more about the judgment of other people and are more shame-oriented compared to individualistic societies. Also, Cialdini et al. (1997) claim that the idea of self-other overlap is more dominant in Eastern communal cultures than in individualistic Western societies. In my view, the underlying cause of these findings might be the fact that people in collectivistic societies are, in general, more dependent on one another. As a consequence, in case an individual violates a social norm, rejection by peers can have more consequences as opposed to individualistic societies where people are more independent. This interpretation has common ground with Nelissen et al. (2013) who suggest that moral emotions as shame - by inhibiting selfishness - presumably formed an adaptive advantage in the development of humans. As in the present study empathic shame and a perceived self-other oneness seemingly contributed to a milder judgment, the same

experiment in a collectivistic country might have a different outcome. It would be a valuable contribution to the established literature to find out whether a collectivistic sample with higher shame proneness and a more dominant self-other overlap would have divergent results, compared to the present study with the Dutch sample.

The findings of the present study that shame has a link with moral judgment have important practical implications. If people with shame experience tend to be more tolerant in their judgment than their peers, on one hand, the findings in this experiment can be seen as a confirmation of the prosocial characteristics of shame. On the other hand, there are situations where being too tolerant can be undesirable. Imagine that a policeman is struggling with feelings of shame and despite catching a criminal red-handed he lets them go instead of arresting them. What if a dangerous murderer is acquitted from a criminal charge by a verdict of not guilty, and remains at large because of a shame experience of the judge or the jury members? Though tolerance is generally seen as a positive trait, the present work implies that shame experience can sometimes lead to an undesirable softening effect on moral judgment.

The present paper has also theoretical implications. For several decades shame literature was focusing on the negative side of shame. Researchers emphasizing the prosocial functions of shame and focusing on the perspective of the bystander such as Lickel et al. (2011), Welten (2011, 2012) and De Hooge and colleagues (2008, 2010, 2011) appeared only in the last decade. Although too much tolerance can sometimes be undesirable, the findings of the present experiment overlap with the studies of De Hooge et al. (2008, 2010, 2011) who found evidence about the positive characteristics of shame. Nevertheless a positive attitude does not necessarily mean helping, it is also worth mentioning that this paper illustrates our ability to feel connected with complete strangers in an inconvenient situation. Furthermore, the present study has found confirmation for the claim of Cialdini et al. (1997) that empathic concern does not necessarily result in a positive attitude towards another in an uncomfortable

situation. More importantly, it has been attempted to clarify the distinct conceptualizations of empathic emotions, vicarious emotions and empathic concern. Furthermore, to my knowledge, this is the first study to date investigating the link between shame and moral judgment.

Let me return to my research question: would people with a recent shame experience be influenced in their judgment on the moral transgression of another person? The answer is definitely yes. Although indirect, the findings in this study seem to support the prosocial characteristics of shame: when feeling ashamed we somehow feel connected when faced with the deviant behavior of another individual. The ability to see the inconvenient situation from the perspective of another - via pathways of psychological constructs as empathic shame and perceived oneness - makes us more tolerant, leading us towards a milder judgment.

Shame is a very complex emotion and for many years research had been focusing on the dark side of shame. However, this long-lasting exaggerated negative view has come to an end: a growing number of researchers has delivered striking evidence that shame was not properly understood and has important prosocial functions. I hope my findings will contribute to a more positive image of shame and will encourage additional research to uncover the roots of this complex but utmost fascinating emotion and its effect on moral judgment.

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