

## National character revisited

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# National Character Revisited

*Alex Inkeles*

In the first edition of the *Handbook of Social Psychology* published in 1954 I sought to define the field of national character research as »the study of modal personality and sociocultural systems« (Inkeles and Levinson 1954). While acknowledging the legitimacy of deriving national character from the institutional or cultural forms shared by a population or from the behavior of their nation in acts such as war, peace and commerce, we urged that »national character ought to be equated with modal personality structure; that is, should refer to the mode or modes of distribution of personality variants within a given society«. We based our recommendation on the simple ground that the actual referent in most common observations about national character was in fact the personality and related behavior of *individuals* viewed collectively. We also stressed the advantage that maintaining these distinctions made it possible subsequently to explore the inter-relations of modal personality characteristics with institutional forms, cultural patterns and nation-state behavior.

Finally, we called attention to the tendency of research on national character to present a picture of national and ethnic groups characterized by their uniformity and uniqueness. Although this outcome may have been influenced by certain theoretical preconceptions of the authors, it was also the result of reliance on small, homogeneous and unrepresentative samples. These analysts therefore often failed to perceive how far the distribution of personality characteristics in a national population was multi-modal, a fact which increased the probability that some modes might be shared across national lines. The tendency to sketch national character in unimodal terms also obscured the extent which particular status groups, most notably religious, occupational and educational groups, might share more personality traits with their common status group *across* national lines than they shared with their fellow countrymen in different social statuses.

Coming back to review the field again in 1969 we were able to report in the second edition of the *Handbook* that in the ensuing decade a new style of work had been introduced which promised to correct many of the more serious shortcomings of the earlier studies of national character. These new studies no longer

focussed on a single ethnic group or nation, but dealt with four, six, or more countries simultaneously, thus greatly facilitating systematic cross-national comparisons. Their instruments and methods of data collection were standardized. Projective tests, which posed massive problems of reliable interpretation, and were in any event extremely costly to analyze, were largely replaced by seemingly simpler and more straightforward attitude and value questions in the common mode of public opinion research. Most important, large and representative samples of the entire population replaced the small, special, and usually totally unrepresentative samples on which virtually all of the earlier studies had rested. This greatly compensated for the fact that most of these newer studies were not designed specifically to describe national character in broad general terms, but were rather intended to explore a single theme or issue such as national stereotypes (Buchanan and Cantril 1953) or the »civic culture« (Almond and Verba 1963).

Stimulated by these advances we were moved, in 1969, to predict that »the burgeoning of this new type of study may soon permit us to develop composite national modal-personality descriptions based on large samples [that] would yield rather strict comparative statements about the *relative* strength of particular components in different national groups and thus [to learn] what is distinctive as well as what is common, in the personality patterns to be found in various nations« (Inkeles and Levinson 1968-69, p.447).

Now we find ourselves with some two decades of additional research experience, and the invitation of the 1988 Joint Congress of the German, Austrian and Swiss Sociological Association to revisit national character provides an opportunity to assess how far the promise we foresaw in 1969 has been fulfilled in the intervening period.

## Growth of the Resource Base

First, I shall turn briefly, to the question of what we have to work with, that is, the resource base which new research provides to support the task of assessing national character.

By far the greatest surge of activity has been on the part of those identifying themselves as practicing »cross-cultural psychology«, an identity maintained by the existence of a *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* (1970–), annual handbooks (Triandis and Brislin 1980), and summary textbooks all bearing that title. Now conducted predominantly by individuals trained in psychology, this work continues and greatly expands a pattern initiated by anthropologists in the earlier

stages of the field known as culture and personality. But the fatal flaw of these studies for the student of national character lies in the unsystematic nature of their samples. Those generally are very small, often counted by tens; they are selected on opportunistic grounds, which casts in serious doubt the comparability of the national groups involved; and, in any event they are obviously unrepresentative of any national population. Consequently this vast outpouring of research, whatever its other relevance or virtues, cannot, except in very rare cases, serve as material for judging the distribution of character within national populations of adult individuals.

In this same period sociologists and political scientists oriented to survey and public opinion research methodology, while producing many fewer studies, did, by contrast, give us a substantial body of attitude and value data which meet the criteria of being either truly representative of entire national populations, or of being relatively strictly comparable when they focussed on particular segments of a population such as an occupational group. Although often quite limited in their relevance for understanding basic features of personality or deep lying behavioral tendencies, they nevertheless constitute a new and considerably enriched data base for the delineation of national character.

These research enterprises may be divided into two types: special focus studies and general purpose surveys. The special focus studies are themselves of two types. As my designation indicates, their predominant concern is with a single issue such as political participation as in the work of Verba, Nie, and Kim (1978). Other examples are the research on uses of time (Szalai 1972) and on images of the future (Ornauer 1976). Another form of specialization, however, is to focus on the same subgroup of the population followed across countries. An example of this genre is Stein Rokkan's (1970) research on teachers from five European countries. Later examples are the studies of industrial managers (Haire *et al.* 1966; Tannenbaum and Rozgonyi 1986), the studies of automobile workers in various countries (Form 1976), and Hostede's (1980) study of the employees of a single multi-national company across 40 countries.

Apart from the constraints created by their restricted focus, such special studies suffered from other limitations on their utility for cross national comparison. The sets of countries studied were often very limited in number. Moreover, because the sets differed from one effort to another the nations represented in different studies did not overlap, greatly reducing their cumulative significance. Even within the same study, some national collaborators failed seriously to generate representative samples, or to insure the strict comparability of the subgroups under investigation. In addition, most of the collaborations were one-time ventures, so that no assessment could be made of the stability of attitudes

over time nor of their differential sensitivity to intervening events such as domestic economic depressions or international crises.

A number of these limitations have been at least partially overcome by the development of what I call the general purpose survey. They are general purpose because they are not designed to deal with only a single issue or group, but rather seek to assess the views of various total populations across a wide range of topics. Even though from time to time they will focus mainly on a single issue, such as political participation or reactions to pollution, and thus seem indistinguishable from the special purpose study, they nevertheless, are a distinctive genre in several respects. First, they are a continuing enterprise, sometimes repeated every year. Second, they report on the same core set of countries each year, although the core may be augmented. Third, they rigorously meet the criteria for large and strictly representative national samples.

Perhaps the best known, certainly the most extensive, of the general purpose surveys is the Eurobarometer series begun by the Commission of the European Communities in 1970 (Rabier and Inglehart 1975); the International Social Survey Program (ISSP); and the European Values Study group (Stoetzel 1983; Harding *et al.* 1986). The efforts of all these groups are supplemented by the Office of the Prime Minister of Japan (1982) which undertakes surveys to augment the samples collected in Europe. In addition, international polling agencies such as Gallup continue on their own to ask interesting and relevant questions in many nations simultaneously.

The accumulation of this body of survey data puts us on a much better footing for grappling with issues of national character than was available somewhat more than two decades ago. If you note in the tone of this observation something less than the euphoria which you might assume would be generated by the sheer volume of the newly accumulated information you will not be mistaken. However important from a political and public policy point of view the questions asked in the general purpose surveys may be, unfortunately few of them permit us to measure basic values, let alone to assess the deep lying and relatively enduring psychological dispositions and behavioral propensities of the national populations interviewed. To my knowledge, none of these general purpose surveys included psychological or personality tests of the type which claim to have been standardized for use in cross-national research, such as the Minnesota Multiphasic (Butcher and Pancheri 1976) or Cattell's Sixteen Personality Factors test (Cattell *et al.* 1980; Cattell *et al.* 1986). Measures of cognitive functioning, such as those of flexibility or of field dependence, have not been introduced. Modes of cognitive functioning, the ways in which people confront and express the social and personal demands for persistent effort and striving have not been regularly measured, if measured at all. The strength of the needs for af-

filiation, achievement, and power, about the importance of which McClelland (1968, 1975) has labored so assiduously to sensitize us, are barely touched upon, if dealt with at all.

To these lacunae on the side of the content dealt with in the main surveys must be added those which hamper our analysis by limiting the representation of nations regularly and systematically covered. Europe constitutes, after all, but a small set of the world's nations, and a far from representative one, and those in the EEC are even more selective.

## A cautionary note

A new data base carries with it not only increased potential for discovering the new, but also increased possibilities of falling into error unless we are sensitive to the peculiarities of our new sources. All of the pitfalls in the use of survey data for domestic research are present when that material is used cross-nationally, plus others peculiar to cross-national research. Of the latter none is more troublesome than the issue of equivalence, the question of whether the meaning and the stimulus value of a word such as »prestige« or »conformist« or of a concept such as »being independent«, are still basically the same after being translated into other languages and transposed to a different cultural context. Awareness of this issue greatly reinforces a point of which all users of survey data have become painfully aware, namely that the single question can be and very often is treacherous, and that it is almost indispensable for placing people reliably on any matter to have multiple measures of the same issue.

No less troubling is the effect of question form, and the problems raised by variations in response shaped by variations in the context in which inquiries are placed. Of course, all data present challenges of interpretation, every technique has its pitfalls, and every methodology its vicissitudes. We must recall U.S. President Truman's folksy admonition, and not allow ourselves to be barred from the kitchen because we cannot stand the heat. Exercising proper caution, and doing as best we can with what is available, it is now possible to develop new, more systematic, and better documented impressions of the national character of major world populations. In the remainder of the time available to me I propose to take you with me on two brief forays into this new realm.

## The happiness of nations

The first foray leads us to explore a single theme, but one of great significance, the relative happiness of the people of many different nations. The states of happiness and unhappiness, and their associated moods of optimism and pessimism, are among the most widely observed and richly described in all languages and by all peoples. These are amongst the most fundamental of human emotions. Moreover, we commonly assume that beyond momentary manifestations of joy and sorrow, there are general tendencies or dispositions in individuals to lean to one or the other of the poles, that is, to be a happy or an unhappy *person*, with the negative pole classically described as the »melancholic« personality.

To claim one can assess the happiness of individuals, to say nothing of whole national populations, invites philosophical discussion of what is happiness, and carries with it challenging methodological issues of what its indicators should be and how we would measure them. Here I must cut through all that to simply assert that for present purposes we will be taking happiness to be what individuals say is their state or condition as happy or unhappy, without any assumption as to whether those reporting are really »truly« happy; without testing whether they *behave* in an unhappy way, as in committing suicide; and without ascertaining whether they give other signs, such as anger or alienation, which may or may not be reasonable correlates or surrogates of happiness or unhappiness.

As long ago as 1960 in my paper *Industrial Man* I pointed out that the French, contrasted with those from the Anglo-Saxon settled countries, would rarely allow that they were very happy. In the same context I reported that despite the stereotypes of smiling workers and singing peasants in sunny Italy, the people there also showed a tendency to report themselves as not happy (Inkeles 1960). Of course, we then had only scattered poll results, and had to assume the responses observed might well have been momentary and ephemeral, perhaps to be explained away as understandable reactions to some presumably temporary conditions such as economic depression.

The data collected by the general social surveys put us in a totally different position for assessing happiness in national populations. With that data we can track the response of ten national populations in Europe tested regularly over a ten year period from 1976 to 1986, and for shorter spans for a much larger and diversified assortment of nations. As should be clear from Table 1, the propensity of the people in different nations to see themselves as happy or unhappy is remarkably stable, with very modest variation from year to year. As indicated in Table 2, similar results emerge when the form of the question is changed to inquire whether, on the whole, the respondents are satisfied with the life they lead.

Table 1: Stability over time of national reports on happiness

Question: »Coming to more personal matters, taking all things together, how would you say things are these day – would you say you're very happy, fairly happy or not too happy these days?«

Year	Netherlands		Italy	
	percent »very happy«	rank <sup>1</sup>	percent »not too happy«	rank <sup>1</sup>
1976	38	1	38	9
1978	44	1	44	9
1979	49	1	33	9
1982	44	1	36	9
1983 (April)	43	1	31	9
1983 (Sept/Nov)	41	1	34	9
1984	43	1	29	9
1985	39	1	29	9
1986 (March/April)	44	1	27	9
1986 (Nov)	41	1	28	9

(1) Ranks are within a set of 10 EEC countries, and are based not on »very happy« category above, but rather on *mean* national happiness scores averaged over the 10 surveys.

Source: Hastings and Hastings 1976–1986, reporting EEC data, and Rabier *et al.*, *Eurobarometer*, nos. 3 May 1975 to 24 October 1985.

That the tendency to report oneself as happy or unhappy is a relatively reliable measure of the feeling state of a nation, would seem to justify describing such tendencies as truly a national character trait. That in turn suggests that variation in this response would be a very appropriate basis for the comparison of one nation with another. Over many years the range reporting themselves »very happy« across 10 EEC countries typically went from a low of 12 or 13 percent in the least happy countries to a high of about 45 percent. On the measure of satisfaction with life the range was typically from a low of 10 or 11 percent to a high of 55 percent who reported themselves »very satisfied«. With a marked degree of consistency on both measures Holland and Denmark show the highest proportion of happy people, Greece, Italy, Germany, and France, the highest proportion of those dissatisfied with life. The details are available in Table 2.



Table 2: Average percent of high and low levels of happiness and satisfaction in 10 EEC countries: 1975–1985

Question:

*Happiness:* »Talking all things together, how would you say things are these days – would you say you're very happy, fairly happy, or not too happy these days?«

*Satisfaction:* »On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, or not very satisfied, or not all satisfied with the life you lead?«

Country	Happiness <sup>1</sup>		Satisfaction <sup>2</sup>		Rank <sup>3</sup>	
	very happy	not too happy	very satis.	not at all satis.	hap.	sat.
Netherlands	43	6	42	1	1	2
Denmark	35	12	55	1	2	1
Ireland	32	11	36	4	3	3.5
Belgium	29	11	34	3	4	5
Great Britain <sup>4</sup>	28	14	31	4	5	6
Luxembourg	24	10	36	2	6	3.5
France	15	22	12	7	7	8
Germany	14	15	19	2	8	7
Greece <sup>5</sup>	11	30	8	7	9	10
Italy	8	33	11	10	10	9

(1) Happiness % based on excluding DK/NA responses.

(2) Satisfaction % based on including DK/NA responses.

(3) Figures for Greece ›happiness‹ are for 1982 onwards; Greece ›satisfaction‹ are for 1981 onwards.

(4) Figures for Great Britain (United Kingdom) exclude responses from Northern Ireland until 1982; from 1982 onwards Northern Ireland is included.

(5) Rank is based on average percent ›very happy‹ or ›very satisfied‹ and not on overall mean scores as in Table 1.

Source: Rabier *et al.*, *Eurobarometer* 3 May 1975 – 24 October 1985. For this Table, the happiness figures are from 10 surveys between 1976 and 1986. The satisfaction figures are from the 11 Spring Surveys from 1975 to 1985. Neither the collectors of the original data nor the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research bear any responsibility for the analyses or interpretations presented here.

Observing the rank order of national reports of happiness in Europe one is likely to be tempted to assume that those expressions of feeling are closely linked to income or wealth. That assumption is challenged, however, by certain contrary findings. First, the correlation of individual level income and reported happiness *within* any country is quite weak. Second, there is the stubborn fact that as the wealth of any nation rises the average happiness its citizens report fails to rise accordingly, as the theory would seem to require. Third, we find in those instances in which we can greatly extend the range of countries observed to include a variety of poor and less developed countries that the association of national development and popular expressions of happiness is very imperfect. Thus, a Japanese sponsored survey in 1979, while showing the familiar pattern for the European countries, still gave no support to the idea that national underdevelopment and personal unhappiness are closely linked. As may be seen in Table 3, India was at about the level of France; the Philippine people more often reported themselves as »very happy« than did those of West Germany; and the inhabitants of Singapore achieved a rate of happiness almost equal to that of Canada.

*Table 3: Very happy in selected countries, 1979*

Question: »Generally speaking, how happy are you these days? Very happy, fairly happy, neither happy or unhappy; fairly unhappy or very unhappy?«

Country	Percent »very happy«	Rank
U.K.	47	1
Australia	46	2
U.S.A.	42	3
Brazil <sup>1</sup>	40	4
Canada	39	5
Singapore	32	6
Phillipines	18	7
France	16	8
India <sup>1</sup>	14	9
Japan	12	10.5
West Germany	12	10.5
Italy	10	12
South Korea <sup>1</sup>	5	13

(1) Samples represent urban areas only.

Source: Leisure Development Center Study, Tokyo, Japan, 1979, reported in Hastings and Hastings (1982).

Such contrary findings may not by themselves vitiate the forthcoming claim of Ronald Inglehart that he found a correlation of .57 between economic development and life satisfaction for some 20 countries studied in 1980 (Personal Communication). Explaining 32 percent of the variance is no mean achievement for the social sciences, but it is well below the level of connectedness observed with many measures aggregated at the national level, and, in any event, it leaves much room for other explanations. Personal happiness may, for example, be related to how people treat each other, and how they raise their children. In this connection we may note that the European Values Study showed France and Spain, two of the least happy countries, had by far the smallest percentage, 25 and 28 percent, respectively, reporting that in the last two weeks they had felt »proud because someone had complimented them« (ESRC, 1981, Q. 122).

Confronted by a list of some sixteen qualities one might stress in raising a child, the French, Spanish and Italians were outstanding in emphasizing hard work, and loyalty, with thrift, patience, and self-control also coming in for a fair share of attention. Children from the countries more often claiming happiness faced a rather different set of expectations, with much less emphasis on hard work and obedience, and more stress on independence, tolerance, and unselfishness. Of course (ESRC, 1981, Q. 262), this type of question is subject to all the cautions I have urged above, and the results should be seen as merely suggestive. But they also point to intriguing possibilities whereby we might account for the apparently durable tendency of various national groups to feel very different degrees of happiness and satisfaction with life.

## Contrasting the Netherlands and Denmark

The second foray involves assessing whether we can find any notable differences in basic attitudes and personal qualities in two nations which share many objective characteristics yet may be expected to differ in at least some important respects in more subjective matters. The two nations I selected for this exercise were The Netherlands and Denmark.

Both participate regularly in general surveys, so there is considerable information for each. But, of course, I might have selected some other pair. I was influenced in my choice by the fact that both are small countries in the same geographical area, with a comparable record in recent history of peacefulness and honorable international conduct. Neither is deeply divided on ethnic grounds, as is for example Belgium, although Holland is fairly evenly split between Catholics and those in the Reformed Church, whereas the Danes are quite homogeneous

in their affiliation with their national church. In this contrast might lie the seeds of important differentiation, but I was influenced in my choice mainly by the thought that the Danes might be the carriers of certain tendencies common to Nordic culture which were not significant influences among the Dutch. There are, of course, numerous differences in the historical experiences of the two countries as well.

However, my analysis was not theory driven, but rather was data driven — if you like it was sheer empiricism. My method was very simple. It consisted of having an assistant, who of course knew my general approach to national character research, run through a large but not random sample of the general surveys and note all questions which might have psychological meaning and on which the Dutch and the Danish samples were significantly differentiated. The procedure was rough and ready, but not purely subjective. We insisted that where the numbers were in the 40 range, the two countries be at least 10 percentage points apart. Where the percentages being compared were small, or where summary non-percentage indexes were used we required that the two countries be separated by at least one standard deviation.

It should be noted for the record that the great majority of the responses from the two populations did not show them to be markedly different. This is to be expected because in many respects all the populations of Europe share a common culture, and these two nations were selected for comparison precisely because it was assumed they would be alike in many respects. The critical issue therefore is not how much they were alike, but how far they differed. My method did, in fact, turn up several dozen questions on which the Danes and the Dutch differed substantially. Those differences seem not to be random. Rather, they suggest a pattern, a coherent structure of responses which indicates that beyond sharing many characteristics of the general European advanced country syndrome the Dutch and the Danes do indeed manifest a number of quite different psycho-social traits. Some of the illustrative differences are shown in Table 4, with the questions grouped under three headings.

First, the citizens of Holland seem to feel much more constrained by life's forces than do those living in Denmark. The Dutch are much less likely to feel that they can influence the course of events, and instead they see external forces as much more in charge of their lives. For example, asked whether they could bring about a change for the better in their country, Danes consistently were first among EEC citizen's in having confidence in their personal effectiveness, usually at a rate twice that of the Dutch. And on the key question of »How much freedom of choice and control you feel you have over the way your life turns out«, 43 percent of Danes, but only 22 percent of the Dutch, felt they had »a great deal« of freedom and control.

Table 4: *Contrasting attitudes of the Dutch and the Danes*

<i>Control of life</i>	<i>Neth.</i>	<i>Den.</i>
Can people help change things for the better? Av. % »yes« 5 surveys over 8 yrs. (A1)	37 %	58 %
How much freedom of choice and control do you have over your life? »A great deal« (B1)	22 %	43 %
<i>Self-imposed burdens</i>	<i>Neth.</i>	<i>Den.</i>
Should your country increase aid to less developed regions of Europe? »Agree strongly« (C1)	30 %	14 %
Should taxes be used to develop the most needy regions, even outside your country? »Agree« (C2)	48 %	18 %
Should people follow orders even if they don't fully agree? »Yes« (B2)	39 %	57 %
Which categories of [11 extremists and deviants] would you not want as neighbors? No one rejected (B3)	8 %	34 %
Do you believe in . . . Sin?	49 %	29 %
Hell? (B4)	15 %	8 %
Think parents these days . . . Indulge children too much? (C3)	52 %	43 %
Are too concerned with the child's opinion? (C4)	23 %	11 %
Are <i>not</i> strict enough? (C5)	59 %	44 %
<i>Feeling states</i>	<i>Neth.</i>	<i>Den.</i>
How satisfied are you with your life? »Very satisfied« av. over 12 surveys in a 10-yr. period (C6)	42 %	55 %
How often do you feel anxious at home? »Often« or »sometimes«	71 %	22 %
»Never« (B5)	6 %	44 %
Alienation index (1–10 scale) (D1)	3.96	3.54
»Very proud« of your nation (D2)	19 %	30 %

*Sources:*

Question A1 is from Hastings and Hastings (1984)

Questions B1–B5 are from the *European values survey* (ESC 1981). The specific locations are: B1: Q 127; B2: Q 144; B3: Q 120; B4: Q 163; B5: Q 237.

Questions C1–C5 are from the *Eurobarometer* series (Rabier *et al.*).

The specific locations are: C1: vol. 11, 1979, pp. 51–52, Q 159 (M). C2: vol. 13, 1980, p. 12, Q 129. C3: vol. 11, 1979, p. 33, Q 142 (B). C4: vol. 11, 1979, pp. 34–35, Q 142 (D).

C5: vol. 11, 1979, p. 33, Q 142 (A). C6 from surveys in spring for all years 1975–1985.

Questions D1–D2 are from Harding (1986), pages 78 and 204 respectively.

Second, we find evidence that the sense of burden we perceive in the Dutch assessment of life is very much self-imposed. The Danes seem much more inclined to go along with things as they are, accepting both the structure of authority and the behavior of those around them. One indicator of the propensity of the Hollanders to accept burdens is manifested in their readiness to give aid to deprived regions both in their own country and abroad, something they are prepared to do at a rate double that of the Danes. Faced by an order of a superior with whom they are not in agreement, the majority of the Danes will follow the order because the superior is in authority, whereas the Dutch are much more likely to insist they must first be convinced the order is correct. Given a list of some eleven forms of extremism or deviant behavior in a potential neighbor the Dutch were clearly relatively upset by the prospect of such closeness, the Danes quite relaxed. Thus, 34 percent of the Danes would not exclude *any* of these extremists or deviants from their neighborhood, whereas only 8 percent of the Dutch were so accepting.

Third, the greater constraints on life the Dutch feel, and the burdens they take on themselves, evidently have a significant negative impact on their sense of psychic well-being. Of all the countries in the EEC the Danes are first in feeling very satisfied with life. Although the Dutch rank second, over an eight year period they were typically 10 and even 20 percentage points behind the Danes. In describing their feeling states, the Danes were least often »restless«, whereas the Dutch were among those ranking high on this measure (ESCR, 1981, Q. 122). The Danes were also much more likely to report themselves as »feeling on top of the world« (ESCR, 1981, Q. 122). Perhaps most critical is the evidence that the Dutch lead the EEC in the frequency of reporting they feel »anxious«, with 71 percent reporting themselves in that condition as against only 22 percent among the Danes.

What is reported above is work in progress, and the conclusions presented are very tentative. Some attitudes and values expressed by the Danes and the Dutch run counter to the evidence I have presented, and the structure of the responses of each national group is quite complex. Nevertheless, the patterns delineated above are challenging, and surely can serve as hypotheses for further study. In any event, my main purpose here has not been to prove a thesis but rather to illustrate the potential of our new sources of data for fresh initiatives in the delineation of national character differences in populations assumed to be otherwise very similar.

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