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Participatory methods and the measurement of well-being

by SARAH WHITE and JETHRO PETTIT

Introduction

Wealth ranking and related methods marked a breakthrough in participatory appraisal. Levels and characteristics of wealth and poverty could be defined in ways that actually meant something to the people being 'measured'. Development workers and poverty researchers were liberated from time-consuming household surveys, and could quickly cluster and rank households so that they could better understand the realities of different groups. They could focus efforts where the need was greatest and prevent better-off families from 'capturing' resources. But beyond these practical benefits, wealth ranking contributed to a larger awakening to the multiple and complex dimensions of poverty and vulnerability. Practitioners and researchers, some of them inspired by the methods documented in *Participatory Learning and Action*, became more aware of the complexity of people's livelihoods. They saw the need to distinguish between different dimensions, such as poverty, insecurity and vulnerability. This led into growing recognition of the importance not only of the material bases of people's lives and livelihoods, but also their personal and social relationships, values and ways of understanding the world. As limitations in conventional understandings of development became clearer, some began to suggest that improvements

in 'well-being' (rather than simply income or wealth) could be a key development objective.

Moving from the familiar concept of 'development' to the more people-centred notion of 'well-being' is not, however, as simple as it seems. We need to ask hard questions about the difference between the two, rather than assuming we can simply substitute the one for the other. Participatory approaches have an important contribution to make in **defining** well-being, and ensuring that we do so in ways that genuinely reflect people's own perspectives. As PLA methods were scaled up beyond projects to be used in assessments for policy purposes in the 1990s, for example in the World Bank sponsored Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPAs), being able to use indicators that would work across contexts, and which could be used for **measurement** that could be recognised by bureaucratic agencies, became a real issue. This paper reflects on these two questions: the **definition** of well-being and its **measurement**. On the one hand, how can participatory methods contribute to the meaning and measurement of well-being? On the other hand, what challenges does the new focus on well-being bring to the PLA tradition?

Understanding well-being

Well-being is a complex notion with many different dimensions. The 'well' shows that it is concerned with values and assessment. 'Being' suggests the importance not only of

economic security and physical health, but also of subjective states of mind and social relationships. But to understand what these mean to people, and the dynamics which result in well-being for some and suffering for others, we need to go beyond 'snapshot' views of where people are at present, to explore the social and cultural processes which lie behind these (McGregor, 2004). This means asking three sets of questions, relating to having, doing and thinking:

- having: what do different kinds of people have or not have? (including material and human resources, and social relationships);
- doing: what do (or can) people do with these resources and why? What can or do they not do, and why?; and
- thinking: how do people judge, assess, and feel about these things? How do they make sense of what happens? What meaning does it have for them?

What are the strengths and weaknesses of participatory approaches in exploring these three dimensions?¹

Having

Participation has much to offer in showing what goods and relationships are most important for people to **have** in particular contexts, and what **not having** such key assets means in terms of poverty and vulnerability. The Pathways to Participation research on PRA experiences in eight countries found that the methods were useful in identifying 'improved quality of life according to local standards' (Cornwall and Pratt, 2002, 2003). In Mexico, locally defined indicators for 'improved quality of life' ranged from jobs, income, health and housing to gender relations, self-esteem and reaffirmation of cultural identities (Garcia and Way, 2003: 30).

Karen Brock's (1999) review of participatory appraisals done by NGOs and research institutes during the 1990s reveals the diverse views of poor people. Drawing on qualitative data from 58 sources in 12 countries, she notes how often different indicators were mentioned. Where objective endowments of material resources and social relationships are concerned certain broad indicators emerged time and again, with marked differences for men and women and for people living in rural and urban areas:

Respondents in rural areas placed a strong emphasis on food security in their definitions of poverty, ill-being and vulnerability, as well as lack of work, money and assets. They also emphasised the vulnerability of particular groups within

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the community: the old, the disabled, female-headed households and those living alone, isolated from social networks. The definitions of those in an urban setting place far more emphasis on the immediate living environment: crowded and unsanitary housing, lack of access to water, dirty and dangerous streets and violence both within and outside the household (Brock, 1999: 9).

Similar patterns emerged in the PPAs (Brock and McGee, 2002: 3). Echoing earlier livelihoods analyses, these show the importance of time and seasonality, gender differences, the value of 'safety nets' to tide over bad times, and how poor people value multiple sources of food and income (IDS, 1996: 3, summarised in McGee with Norton, 2000: 28).

From having to doing

Wealth and well-being ranking are sometimes thought of as the same, but there are differences. Wealth ranking involves generating a range of local criteria for wealth, (see *PLA Notes* 15). Participants sort cards representing households into piles reflecting wealth-based categories, according to these criteria (Pretty *et al.*, 1995: 253-259). Alternatively, participants generate the criteria during the process of sorting households into levels. Although the criteria are not just related to income, in most cases they are limited to ownership or access to tangible assets or resources. They do not touch upon intangible, social and other subjective or culturally constructed experiences of well-being.

The shift from wealth ranking to well-being ranking can help us to gain a fuller sense of social processes and interactions. Well-being can show how social factors 'shape people's experiences of poverty and determine their priorities'; how poor people themselves explain the causes; and how there are 'dynamics of deprivation at levels other than the household' (Robb, 1999: 22-24, cited in McGee with Norton, 2000: 28-32). Connections can emerge between social relations and people's subjective experiences, particularly

¹ This conceptual framework is taken from the approach to well-being developed by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Research Group on Well-being in Developing Countries (WeD) at the University of Bath (www.welldev.org).

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concerning their sense of power or powerlessness:

The disaggregated findings clearly demonstrate that different kinds of poor people experience their lives in very different ways, and that relationships of power are often a crucial component in understanding the dynamics of poverty and ill-being (Brock, 1999: 1).

The mix of the three dimensions of what people have, do, and think or feel, is also reflected in the World Bank’s Voices of the Poor research, which found many inter-related dimensions of powerlessness. Some relate to livelihoods, food, income and assets, but others are grounded in experiences of social isolation and exclusion, unequal gender relations, physical isolation and vulnerability, and abusive behaviour. They also include the political dimensions of being excluded from or disempowered by institutions, or of being only weakly organised as poor people (Narayan *et al.*, 2000: 248-250).

These findings were made largely by combining the results of diverse focus group discussions. In general, however, there seems to be a trade-off between the scale of research methods and their power to reveal these more subtle connections. Larger-scale PPAs can miss the ‘intangible’ dynamics of poverty, particularly relations of power, gender and exclusion. Even when these do surface, evidence of a more complex, dynamic social picture can be a problem for policy-makers (McGee with Norton, 2000: 33). So while the Voices of the Poor project identified as one of its more important conclusions an ‘inter-connected web’ of the ‘dimensions of powerlessness and ill-being’ (Narayan, 2000: 249, Figure 11.1), this finding hardly appeared in the resulting World Development Report 2000/01 (Chambers, 2001: 302).

Thinking, meaning and feeling

Gaining an insight into people’s own worldviews has long been a concern of social anthropology and PLA. Other research traditions also have recognised the importance of understanding people’s perspectives at an individual level, and in making this case to policy makers, have brought the issue of measurement to the fore. The most robust example of this is the Quality of Life research which aims to give a numerical value to people’s subjective perceptions, which can then be compared across different contexts. The origins of this research lie on the one hand with the Social Indicators movement, and on the other in the area of medicine and health, where the information has been sought as a means of assessing the benefits of different drugs or treatments. While all of the Quality of Life approaches involve some elements of participation, they differ considerably in the form and level at which participation occurs.

The World Health Organisation Quality of Life project (WHOQOL) represents one pole, with a highly structured, relatively bureaucratic approach, backed up by extensive psychometric testing. Focus groups made up of people with a range of professional experiences, scientific knowledge and cultural backgrounds participated in defining 25 key ‘facets’ of the six areas or ‘domains’ (physical, psychological, level of independence, social relationships, environment, and spirituality) identified by the WHO. The measures for overall quality of life and general health perceptions were all developed at the same time in 15 centres, and the core instrument was then translated into different languages and cultural contexts (Camfield and Skevington, 2003). The result is a formidable instrument of 200 questions in the full version or 52 in the summary version (WHOQOL BREF) which respondents answer using a five-point scale². This is now being used in more than 50 countries. Views differ as to whether the scores from these six ‘domains’ should be combined into a single Quality of Life indicator, which would suggest that each domain carries equal importance, or if there should be a weighting between the different domains. In either case, the data can be compared across contexts, and used for complex statistical analysis.

An alternative example, from near the opposite pole of maximum flexibility and participation at the individual level, is the Person Generated Index or PGI (Ruta *et al.*, 1994)³. In this case the individuals can specify the areas (or domains) of life that are important to them. They then evaluate their perform-

² The WHOQOL also makes available specific modules for countries, people living with HIV/AIDS, older people and on spirituality and personal beliefs.

³ This was originally entitled the Patient Generated Index.

ance with respect to these. Individual measures are becoming increasingly influential within medicine because they have high 'face' and 'content' validity and directly address the changes that are important to patients. For well-being research, this approach is attractive, in that it is designed to identify the values of individuals and works with them to gauge their quality of life. It is sensitive to local culture, conditions, and the social identities of participants, and it also gives scope for comparing results and analysis. Part of this is how often different areas are identified, and the range of scores that they attract. The PGI can also be used to give a single, overall view of the subjective quality of life, defined as 'the extent to which our hopes and ambitions are matched by experience' (Calman, 1984). But to be meaningful, this figure showing the gap between what people have and what they desire would probably need to be matched by another, externally defined measure (Camfield, pers. comm). For measuring well-being, there is clearly scope to broaden this out from its current focus on health, and this is already being developed (Ruta, 1998). There is also potential to use it in the pre-appraisal or evaluation of development programmes, by identifying the critical areas of people's lives that require intervention, or showing the perceived impact of an intervention, according to a range of locally or personally defined criteria. An exploratory study is looking at the scope for developing a broader 'development-related quality of life' profile from the PGI approach. In Ethiopia, the participants 'visibly enjoyed' allocating coins to indicate their priorities and were 'amused and pleased' by the outcome (Bevan *et al.*, 2003).

A caution is perhaps important, however. There is also the question of **how** people experience well-being – the subjective, socially and culturally constructed experience of well-being as a whole (vs. its components) – which is often overlooked. These questions do not fit easily within policy perspectives, but they are vital if participatory approaches are to genuinely reflect people's own values and orientations. For example, you could get people to participate in generating numerical values to represent their assessments of the relative importance of different aspects of their quality of life. But does this rather abstract exercise reflect the ways that people live their lives? Does it capture the underlying rhythms within which they take action and understand the meaning of their experience overall?

Perhaps the major challenge of any well-being research is how it can generate genuinely new and surprising information about the ways in which people see the world. These are what mark the limits of 'what is possible', the values that lie so deep they are 'forgotten': the unconscious sense of

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where the limits lie (Bourdieu, 1977, Mitchell, 1990). What is at stake here is not only the words used and references made, but also the 'tacit understandings' (Giddens, 1977:169), which form the 'common-sense' that shapes people's lifeworlds. These are made up of assumptions and ways of seeing which people have so profoundly internalised that they cannot be asked about directly, but are grasped intuitively, as they emerge 'crab-wise' through the stories that are told (White, 1992:8).

Well-being ranking, for example, asks for local perceptions of 'the good life', and may clearly generate unexpected information in terms of what factors people identify and how they prioritise them. However, perhaps what people see as 'the good life' does not adequately capture the deepest values of what people consider well-being to be. For example, maybe there is a critically moral dimension to this, better explained by the notion of '**living** a good life', which lies outside the frame which the 'well-being ranking' unconsciously imposes. An example of what we mean is offered by Veena Das (2000:224). In a footnote to her discussion of a woman's responses over her lifetime to the disasters that the Partition of India and Pakistan wrought in her family, she writes:

I must emphasize that the moral stakes for Asha can only be understood if we can enter a lifeworld in which she felt that her eternity was in jeopardy.

There is a danger that all forms of research, especially when undertaken cross-culturally, will be tone deaf to such subtle harmonies. For well-being researchers, this may mean missing the underlying melody which makes sense of the themes and variations sung through the more tangible data. This is not primarily an issue about methods and techniques, but about ethics, conduct and principles of research.

Box 1: The 'Internal Learning System'

The 'Internal Learning System' of the Bangalore-based NGO New Entity for Social Action (NESA) is using participatory methods to monitor human rights abuses with Dalit, Adivasi and other vulnerable communities. In 2000 villages, literate and non-literate men and women make entries every six months to score degrees of abuse, on a scale of one to five. Aspects of life monitored include husbands drinking, domestic violence, Dalits having to drink out of separate glasses, Dalits being made to carry dead bodies or dead animals, whether a girl can select her life partner (personal communication. Vimalathan S Nagasundari and H Noponen). The diaries are aggregated to give an indication of social change (Chambers personal communication, 2004).

However, the danger of misrepresentation is particularly acute with participatory methodologies. When their findings re-confirm rather than challenge the powerful and accepted worldviews, it seems a more grievous failure than when other research approaches do the same, simply because they claim to be able to genuinely represent 'other' voices.

Participatory methods and the measurement of well-being

As Laderchi (2001:11) notes, since wealth and well-being rankings typically result in information being presented in a numbered sequence, few people dispute these numbers. Many studies find that wealth rankings result in similar patterns as economic surveys (Scoones, 1995 in *ibid*). However, these similarities differ depending on who is responding. Women's responses differ most significantly from the survey data. This suggests that gender is an important key variable in both knowledge (e.g. of differing income sources) and values (*ibid*). This echoes the findings of the Voices of the Poor research and other detailed micro studies of household budgeting and markets in other contexts (see e.g. Johnson, 2004).

Other studies, however, raise questions. How reliable is quantitative data gathered through PRA compared with that gained through surveys or key informant interviews? (e.g. Davies *et al.*, 1999, in Laderchi, 2001). Direct comparisons between different pieces of research are often difficult to draw. Differences between findings from PRA and other forms of data collection may also help us to understand better the conditions in which both are produced, and what is actually being measured.

There are certainly some interesting innovations emerging in larger-scale, participatory monitoring of poverty and ill-being. In more than 2,000 villages in South India, people have used visual diaries to monitor their experiences of

Box 2: The County Poverty Alleviation Method

The County Poverty Alleviation Method in China uses eight indicators representing livelihoods, infrastructure and human resources. These can be modified and weighted according to local context and to participatory input from residents; 'since the weightings given will be used in the econometric formula used to calculate the final 'Participatory Poverty Index' (PPI), this means that the villagers' own priorities will be reflected quite strongly' (Weldon 2002: 3) The overall process, which draws on a range of PRA techniques, is backed by the Asian Development Bank, the World Bank and bilateral donors. Thanks to Robert Chambers for calling this example to our attention.

discrimination and abuse (see Box 1). Another is a 'participatory poverty index' created for use in poverty alleviation planning in rural China. Developed by Prof. Li Xiaoyun, Joe Remenyi and others, this has recently been adopted by the Chinese government (see Box 2). It will be used in nearly 600 of the country's poorest counties as an alternative to the national poverty line assessments (Weldon 2002). Table 1 shows the eight 'village-friendly poverty indicators' which were found to have almost universal results.

There are clearly trade-offs in terms of process and quality in larger-scale approaches which add up results 'across the board'. But there is also potential for mixing participatory and conventional approaches. In particular, participatory methods can bring added value and insight to more complex and context-specific issues. Holland and Abeyesekera (forthcoming) are developing a synthesis of experiences with 'participatory numbers', including a recommended 'code of good practice'.

Ultimately, however, it is not so much the techniques used as how the research is conducted and the relationships established between researchers and research participants that determine the quality of research. Questions of ethics and behaviour have a direct bearing on how valid the findings are. The Pathways project, a major review of PRA experience in eight countries, identified the quality of practice as a key issue. This was partly due to the rapid mainstreaming of PRA methods and the sheer volume of people claiming that they were now 'experts' in using methods⁴. Unfortunately, as Laderchi (2001) points out, while the quality of the research practice is clearly a critical factor in assessing how valid the research results are, it is very difficult to assess this quality afterwards. In some ways the active involvement of research

⁴ The Pathways to Participation Project, hosted by the Institute of Development Studies at Sussex, was a collaborative, critical review of practitioner experiences using PRA methods in Kenya, the Gambia, Mexico, Nepal, India, Vietnam, China and Pakistan. Findings can be found in Cornwall and Pratt (2002, 2003) and in a series of papers available at www.ids.ac.uk/particip/research/pathways/

Table 1: Indicators used in participatory poverty index, China

Livelihood poverty	Cash flow through the household Food insecurity Poverty of personal environment, especially shelter
Infrastructure poverty	Drinkable water Isolation/access/all-weather road Energy poverty, e.g. no reliable electricity
Human resources poverty	Women's health (e.g. unable to work) Education (drop outs as indicator)
Source: Weldon (2002)	

subjects makes ethical issues a particular concern in participatory research. But it would be a mistake to over-emphasise participatory research in this regard. There is an increasing interest in ethics across the research community. Participatory researchers may have much to offer other, more conventional researchers because of the strength of their self-critical reflections on practice. The 'social life' of any research project – its principles, conduct and relationships involved – is in fact central not only to its morality, but also to the quality of information it can yield.

A particular concern in participatory research is the quality of **dialogue** generated with participants through the research, and of being faithful to this when representing results. For example, with PRA/PLA, there has been much discussion about our notions of 'community' and its 'mythic' quality (e.g. Gujit and Shah, 1998). An important part of the ancestry of PRA methods is how they have been useful for raising awareness, for community mobilisation and for collective action. This means that dialogue is used to **forge** community, to create common interests and a shared version of reality, which can be used in a collective project. Differences between individuals within communities do not cease to exist, but they are **set aside for the present** in the pursuit of a common, shared goal. The facilitators – or 'facipulators', as some have perhaps more honestly termed themselves (White and Tiongco, 1997) are not simply allowing an existing consensus to emerge, but are actively involved in **creating** a shared interpretation of reality which animates a community. 'Community' is indeed a myth, in a positive sense, a myth that motivates and energises, a myth to live by. It is when this shared consensus is divorced from a shared project for action, or when important internal differences are so hidden by 'consensus' that some groups are in fact further marginalized by the project, that problems arise. Then the representation of community becomes something

flat, not born of a shared vision of where people wish to go, but from a false representation of an identity of where people are coming from⁵. If you separate participatory research from people's own analysis and action and then present it to external policy makers, there is the moral hazard that this could be extractive and even exploitative (Laderchi, 2001). It may also produce poor quality information, representing a false consensus and a shared interest where none in fact exists.

Participatory researchers often use 'triangulation' – using multiple methods or sources – to explore the same issue from different angles. But this also illustrates the tension and difference between an emphasis on unity or diversity. For those concerned with using participatory research to produce measurements, triangulation can check a variety of sources to establish the reliability of particular results. Others, however, use it with 'the intention of highlighting different viewpoints' and to ensure that these 'are not buried under singular versions' (Cornwall *et al.*, 2001: 32). This reflects a broader tension between those who use PRA methods to seek outcomes unbiased by the researchers, and those for whom 'producing knowledge is always an inter-subjective process' (*ibid*) and cannot be 'hands-free'⁶.

The related issues of 'facipulation' and how people influence each others' knowledge and ways of knowing raise questions about the critical claims of participatory approaches. Can they really represent reality simply as people themselves see it? As Laderchi (2001) comments, where a report must be written, or where the research forms part of a policy process, there will always be questions. Has the analysis come simply from the respondents themselves? Has it been influenced by the researcher's own concerns? As participatory approaches become more and more 'scaled up' and 'mainstreamed', they are being used increasingly by unreconstructed, dominant development institutions. This means that the analysis is **less** likely to be a straightforward representation of poor people's realities. It is ironic that this myth of 'hands-free' research, which comes from a 'hard-science' point of view, is central to the legitimacy of participatory approaches. In fact, many people engaged in participatory research disagree with this view. It is now widely accepted that researchers are **always** actors,

⁵ This is a development of Jordan's (1989) analysis that significant dimensions of identity derive not from abstract structural characteristics such as gender and class, but rather where we want to go and what we can offer one another.

⁶ Inter-subjective: how researchers and research subjects influence the ways in which they each think and perceive things, and how this affects results and knowledge.

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crafting a representation of other people's reality (see e.g. Geertz, 1988). The promise of PRA to deliver 'the people's' views perhaps owes more to the politics of development than it does to its connections with the wider intellectual community.

Conclusion: trajectories and challenges

Participatory methods have contributed a great deal to understanding how people experience well-being, and to its measurement. They are also being combined with conventional methods, for example to identify appropriate criteria and to design better surveys. There is a growing interest in using participatory methods to generate numerical data (see e.g. *PLA Notes* 47). These innovations are likely to lead to a greater use of participatory methods to define well-being, and to monitor and measure it on a larger scale.

But barriers remain to putting these findings to good use. Brock (1999) notes the huge amount of data being collected by NGOs and research institutes, but finds that 'such information is usually marginalized in planning top-down poverty alleviation strategies'. Despite progress made in integrating qualitative and quantitative poverty data, she found that 'this does not often include making the full use of the micro-level qualitative data which already exists', due in part perhaps to 'the absence of relationships between micro and macro institutions in the policy process' (*ibid*). Generating and integrating appropriate data is not enough: we need to strengthen relationships among key actors within processes of research, policy and practice.

This means that 'the people' should not be the only participants in the research process. Participatory research should also involve key officials as stakeholders within the design and process, helping them to own the findings. They can then influence knowledge and action at the levels of policy making and implementation, rather than simply

relying on the research report to achieve results. Officials and middle managers are often those who could best benefit from a better understanding of poverty and well-being. There are many innovative examples of this approach to participatory poverty research (see for example McGee and Brock, 2002, and Jupp, 2002).

But we should not forget the politics and dangers of co-option which have beset participation from its earliest adoption in development agencies (Selznick, 1949/53). Many of the scaled-up and mainstreamed practices of participatory research have not been particularly effective at (or even interested in) measuring or analysing things like exclusion or power. There has been a tendency to over-stress technical issues and under-recognise political dimensions of poverty and well-being.

Three major conditions need to be met if participatory methods are to be used effectively to enable genuinely alternative understandings of well-being to emerge. First, while the question of measurement lends itself to debates regarding technical validity, it is important to locate these within discussion of wider issues. These concern on the one hand the **meaning** and **interpretation** of numerical data when removed from the contexts in which they are generated, and on the other hand broader questions regarding the purposes of measurement: what kinds of data are required for what and by whom?

Second, and following on from this, greater sophistication is needed in appreciating the relations between local and universal models of reality, and what characteristics are proper to each. There may indeed be some universal differences between the worldviews of 'policymakers' and 'the poor', especially in light of the complex nature of the problems that poor people face. It is without doubt important that these be recognised. But micro-studies cannot simply be 'scaled up' to provide macro level data. Universal models of reality are not simply local models 'writ large'. Data does not remain 'the same' when it is abstracted from its context. These are not simple issues, but they are critical if we are to make a genuine commitment to seeing people's lives as more than 'cases' of poverty or deprivation (Wood, 1985), and to pursue interventions that are appropriate to the real contexts in which people live.

Finally, there is the risk that 'well-being' will simply replace 'development', or the focus on poverty, with little real change in the way these are understood. This danger is very evident in the slippage between 'wealth-ranking' and 'well-being ranking', where the second can easily be simply a more inclusive – or invasive – version of the first. While

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‘well-being’ as presented, for example, in the Voices of the Poor study, undoubtedly wears a more human face than economic growth models of development, there is still a worrying familiarity about the shape of many ‘new’ findings and their resonance with ‘old’ development rhetoric and

priorities. This familiarity intensifies the closer in and higher up you get in the development policy nexus, with the clear danger that well-being (like ‘rights-based approaches’ – see Pettit and Musyoki, this issue) may simply be a new euphemism for old agendas.

The promise of both participatory research and the focus on well-being is that they will enable us to hear genuinely different voices, voices that speak from and about realities other than those configured by development discourse and institutions. If this is the case, it should be possible to ask the question, ‘Does more development mean greater well-being?’⁷ Only when such a question can be asked, and answered, will the critical criteria for both the definition and measurement of well-being be met.

⁷ A WeD research statement.

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NOTES

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