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Learning by doing: de-constructing linguistic attitudes and stereotypes through narration

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The study describes the results of an Experiential Learning (EL) course directed to the professionals of a C.A.R.A. (an Immigration Centre for asylum protection, located in Eastern Sicily). An emic and etic approach was used to understand attitudes and stereotypization processes within and outside the migrant community of the Centre. The results highlight the importance of working with professionals and migrants by using a narration approach in order to develop mutual cultural understanding and ultimately to promote effective models of inclusion.

Keywords: plurilingualism, norms, linguistic attitudes, ethnography, experiential learning.

> *No one educates anyone else*
> *nor do we educate ourselves,*
> *we educate one another*
> *in the context of living in this world*
> (Freire 1968)

1. Introduction

Although recent countries of in-migration, like Italy, are currently trying to come into terms with the increasing pluralism of their population, various difficulties are faced not only because of the lack of a reception protocol but also because of the unawareness of the implications linguistic and cultural diversity may have.

Generally, any policy of inclusion intends to go far beyond the simple idea of providing facilities for migrants. This is highlighted in the Resolution [1437 I.4 (2005)] of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe:

The concept of integration aims at ensuring social cohesion through accommodation of diversity understood as a two-way process. Immigrants have to accept the laws and basic values of European societies and, on the other hand, host societies have to respect immigrants' dignity and distinct identity and to take them into account when elaborating domestic policies.

In this sense, all host countries have been invited to re-think all kinds of public services, housing, admission to the labour market and education programmes to meet the needs of immigrants. However, to promote "a two-way process" and to take into account immigrants dignity implies also to understand what their needs are. Observational data shows that often services are not re-thought following migrants' real needs but rather practitioners' representations of what their needs are. For example, a map designed for migrants should show not only where the main public services are, but also what kind of service the newcomers can ask for. An effective reception protocol should be tailored to the newcomers' needs, perceptions and expectations in order to prepare and inform them about norms and habits of their host country and allow them to adapt and function appropriately in the new society. However, this appears to be quite difficult when discursive formulations tend to frame migration as 'forced' or 'voluntary', legal or illegal, oversimplifying the complexity of this phenomenon (Mayblin 2019). We know that migration is a complex process that goes beyond our capacity of governing or guiding it and that resists any kind of generalization. People come from a multitude of countries, they move for various reasons and during their journey, meet a wide range of factors, such as changing immigration laws, smuggling chains, humanitarian support, abuses. Any overgeneralization or reduction of the complexity affects their life and the host countries policies. Allegedly, current deficits in the reception and in the process of inclusion of migrants are the starting point of populist arguments against any kind of migration policy. For example, in their attempts of understanding migration, policy-makers have developed narratives of steering (Boswell et al. 2010) in order to frame the nature and scale of the problem and the possible solutions and interventions. However, their attempts have led them to drastically simplify it by framing it as a security problem and promoting policies mainly in this direction.

Overgeneralization and ethnocentrism seem to drive migrant policies with the following results: 1. we tend to forget that behind the category 'migrant' there are many different worlds; 2. we think we know what they need and we tend to reduce cultural complexities to linguistic differences. The result is that the reception system in Italy is

not based on a stable and consolidated migration policy but on a series of actions which are disconnected and are justified by a continuous emergency and urgency. The current situation then, does not allow both migrants and professionals to cooperate to design a sustainable project of life. For this reason, we maintain that when starting from analysing the nature of communication and of relationships, we have to think about what is possible to do for migrants at the individual and community level.

Our analysis starts from the meaning of the word *reception* that implies an attitude based on the acceptation of diversity. Reception means to be open to someone, to include otherness within a community and within our own inner self. In other words, reception is based not only on the accommodation of the community but also of the individual. Reception is based on acceptation, accommodation, inclusion and excludes judgement. It is based on empathy and on the capacity of understanding the emotional states of other people. Any communication arises from an emotional dialogue and is shaped by empathy and modified by interaction. The second fundamental step is the capacity of listening. It is an emotional active capacity that enables an empathetic understanding (I listen to you to understand your story, your life, the person you are) (Fontana 2017). This paper will explore a policy of reception that promotes an *accommodation of diversity* based on a co-production approach (Ostrom 1996) that has been experimented in Reception Centre for Asylum Seekers (C.A.R.A.), in Sicily, a centre for immigrants, where about 3,000 immigrants live waiting for their political refugee status (Fontana 2017). Migrants' inclusion policies co-produced and co-designed by migrants and practitioners together are more likely to be successful as they develop what matters for the people who receive services by sharing responsibilities. Integration can become a two-way process only if the migrants take part and contribute to this exchange that enriches both migrants and people of the receiving countries.

2. When sharing a language is not enough

To understand what language is, we start from a few examples of communication failure taken from our data. Food, parenting and

health care seem to represent some of the most critical areas as they involve daily practices, beliefs, rituals and traditions. Practitioners tend to be strongly ethnocentric (Taylor 1994) and to interpret culturally-bound behaviour as something "wrong". For example, the headmaster of one school in the nearby complained about the fact that all Muslim children felt discriminated at school because they could not eat ham. He argued that this "useless habit" was a factor of discrimination and that "either newcomers accept our rules or they come back home". Cultural variations in parenting beliefs and behaviours are also significant. Individuals experience unique patterns of caregiving and parental cognitions are thought to shape parenting practices. Therefore, a social support worker who saw a mother holding her child upside down, could not imagine that she was doing a typical African massage for newborn babies. Accommodation of diversity means also to take into account migrants' prejudices. During my research in the C.A.R.A., mediators that were previously migrants told me that before leaving home they were recommended to be careful of the white men who can steal their blood. This information was very useful to understand the reason why some newcomers literally refused to have their blood drawn.

As we have seen, different cultural and social background can make mutual understanding difficult even though linguistic mediation is provided because language is not only grammar but also "a meta-language, that is a system to talk about the world" (Cardona 1985: 34). Language is dynamic and conveys many different meanings that participants at the communicative events are able to interpret because they share that specific historical, social and cultural dimension. This means that language users are able to use the language not only correctly but also appropriately. Given that the linguistic competence is the knowledge of the language code, i.e., its grammar (phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics), communicative competence includes the sociolinguistic competence that is the capacity of making the appropriate linguistic choice. It includes also gestures made with the body, with the face, and with the hands that are culturally bound (Kendon 2004; McNeill 2005). In fact, in communicative events, it is necessary to learn what aspects or traits could be considered part of a socio-linguistic and cultural attitude. For example, Eritrean people may not look straight at professional's eyes to express respect. The

same behaviour in Italy will be interpreted as rude, ambiguous, and inappropriate. Being appropriate implies the knowledge of the taboos in a culture, of politeness indices, of the politically correct term to use in each different situation, of how a specific attitude (irony, authority, courtesy, friendliness) is expressed.

[…] a normal child acquires knowledge of sentences not only as grammatical, but also as appropriate. He or she acquires competence as to when to speak, when not, and as to what to talk about with whom, when, where, in what manner. In short, a child becomes able to accomplish a repertoire of speech acts, to take part in speech events, and to evaluate their accomplishment by others (Hymes 1974: 277).

In other words, appropriateness is related to the setting of the communication, the topic, and the relationships among the people communicating. In cross-cultural communication, assumptions made about other cultures can affect their reciprocal understanding. If we consider that values, beliefs, perceptions and concepts are not the same, it may easily happen that assumptions based on one's own cultural experience may readily crystallise into a set of biases and prejudices about the migrant. This could ultimately represent a great obstacle in setting a dialogue and understanding their needs.

3. Exploring the notion of culture and identity in a C.A.R.A. community

When migrants arrive at the C.A.R.A. of Mineo, they have to learn where they are, what they can or should do, who is the "European white man", the implicit and explicit norms of behavior and interaction within a community composed of migrants waiting for permission, professionals and staff members, police, military forces and health support service. For example, they have to learn to trust police and military forces that often they may have experienced as corrupt in their countries and that the white man is not interested in his/her blood as people of their community told them. As we have previously argued, linguistic competence is not enough to

communicate. We need to accommodate our communication to the expectations of one or more addressee in a particular context.

There is a constant accommodation in the C.AR.A.: migrants enter a new environment with their own representations, their prejudices and beliefs, professionals and staff receive the newcomers starting from their prejudices, beliefs and experience of migrants. Approaching the concept of community means to consider the differential distribution of power in society and in the social environment (Goffman 1961). This is true also in a C.A.R.A., where as Goffman (1961: 285) noted, "some persons (clients) place themselves in the hands of other persons". Community is not a label nor a feature of a category of people. It is a relational issue that has two dimensions: the community and the individual level that are mutually dependent. Community is a multi-level and multidimensional process that occurs in a space, mental, physical and/or virtual. In more specific terms, a micro-, meso- and macro-level can be distinguished (see Asselin et al. 2006). Interaction between persons, their attitudes towards each other and towards the professionals that manage the social environment are included in the micro-level of analysis. The nature of this interaction can be dyadic, triadic or group-based. It is dyadic when it occurs between two people that can be in the same community position (both are migrants) or with a different status (one is migrant and the other one is a professional or a staff member); it is triadic when it involves the newcomer, the professional and the mediator; it is group-based when people belong to the same nationality or institution. However, this does not apply when professionals and migrants share the same nationality. Some mediators coming originally from African countries, have told the researcher that they are not trusted by migrants because they think that they have lost their identity.

When we look at the meso-level, we consider the impact relations between newcomers, staff members and professionals may have in the social environment. For example, the foundation of a mosque within the C.A.R.A. is the result of this interaction.

On the macro-level, processes can result of goal-oriented action of professionals or/and newcomers outside the C.A.R.A aiming at improving or empowering newcomers or at making services more effective.

The *Parliament of CARA* is the result of the accommodation between professionals' services and newcomers' needs. Professionals answered newcomers' needs starting from their own experience of representativeness which is often unknown to migrants. Many of them voted for the first time at the Parliament of CARA. The Parliament of C.A.R.A represents migrants also in public events, when members of the local Prefecture or the Italian government came to visit the Centre.

In this perspective, it is interesting to highlight identity strategies which are:

[…] procedures worked out (at the conscious or at the unconscious level of elaboration) by a social actor (individual or collective) for the attainment of one, or more than one, (conscious or unconscious) objectives; these procedures are elaborated as a function of the interactive situation, depending on diverse determinations (socio-historical, cultural, psychological) of that situation" (Camilleri et al. 1990: 24).

Migrants often can react in function of the representation they have about what is the problem, the identity victory or gains and the objectives perceived, but also in relation to the community where they live the pressure they receive in one or another direction (Camilleri et al. 1990). What does identity mean in a C.A.R.A.? When we create categories for identities, we run the risk of framing them as "cookie cutters" or as objective notions ready to be picked up, described and classified by researchers (Geertz 1999). The concept of identity has been quite debated and includes notions like self, sameness and otherness. These concepts are better understood in terms of processes that involve the people living in a C.A.R.A. Sameness is a wide concept that in a foreign country can be related to the skin colour, to the country or even to the continent. Otherness is represented by people working at the CARA and the system of norms, value, the cultural norms they share. Self is a process involving the individual, his/her aims and projects and affecting the micro and macro community (Baofu 2012).

Identity is then a relational dynamic concept because self, sameness and otherness always interact in a different way. Chakravorty Spivak (1999) maintains that when western policies promote otherness, they represent it as separate and build a sort of

conceptual apartheid. There is not a single way to be Italian, Egyptian or Syrian: there are different modes of behaviour that are individual but at the same time can become typical of a certain group, but when they turn into labels they automatically might turn into stereotypes. Identity, culture and language imply a systematicity to self and others that cannot be dealt with as given.

All languages/cultures share the norms of a particular system of cultural, social, historical, sociolinguistic and linguistic values that are continuously negotiated within and outside the communities. The meaning of what is right and wrong, good and bad, masculine and feminine, desirable and disgusting is defined by a cultural frame. Under this perspective, the notion of culture can be an artefact itself. There is one reason why it is necessary to go beyond the concept of culture and it is expressed by Abu-Lughod (1991: 466) in her essay "Writing against culture":

The notion of culture (especially as it functions to distinguish "cultures"), despite a long usefulness, may now have become something anthropologists would want to work against in their theories, their ethnographic practice, and their ethnographic writing. A helpful way to begin to grasp why is to consider what the shared elements of feminist and halfie anthropology clarify about the self/other distinction central to the paradigm of anthropology.

Culture is in the relationships between individuals, in the way languages ipo-codify or over-codify the environment. The way we live and interact with the world, the way we interact with each other is framed by interpretive narrative that are created and play the role of making sense of the events.

The very fact that we recognize these cultural narratives and frames means that they are instantiated physically in our brains. We are not born with them, but we start growing them soon, and as we acquire the deep narratives, our synapses change and become fixed. (Lakoff 2002: 33-34)

These simplified narratives became often policy imaginaries that allows individual to build a perspective on an event or situation. Beliefs, personal circumstances, social processes contribute to build up hegemonic imaginaries and pattern social behaviours. Social

construals emerge in this way and if they become hegemonic, tend to frame institutional responses to policy issues. The risk is to consider these concepts as labels within a western ethnocentric paradigm and analyse them following our perceptions.

A possible way to explore the relationship between individuals and community, is to start with a cultural script approach. Scripts are the narratives that people use in shaping their life plans and telling their stories (Appiah 1994). For this reason, a cultural script approach (Goddard and Wierzbicka 2004) allows outsiders to understand speech practices and culture-specific norms when based on an emic perspective. Cultural scripts are made accessible by narration and self-narration because the way we tell a story or talk about an event generally displays culture-specific patterns.

The Experential Learning path promoted in the C.A.R.A aimed at understanding the nature of cultural scripts with C.A.R.A. professionals by using narration and self-narration to develop not only linguistic awareness and a sense of belonging but also for understanding identity and diversity (Bamberg 2004).

4. The research: theoretical and methodological aspects

The present study is part of a wider research study conducted in the C.A.R.A. of Mineo. This is literally a small town with terraced houses about 15 km from any local town nearby that can host up to 3,000 people. They are hosted until a special Commission of the local Prefecture approves or rejects their refugee status. The C.A.R.A. is organized in four main areas of management: food; support for families and children; social services (including social support services, psychological support, legal support, mediation); job centre (training courses on computer and Italian). This research took place from 2015 to 2018 and involved the professionals (psychologists, mediators, social support workers, lawyers) and the migrants of this Centre. At the beginning of the research, the newcomers hosted in the C.A.R.A. came from the countries listed in Table 1, which includes migrants that were living or were registered from November 2015 to June 2016 in order to give an idea of the number and different nationalities of people living there.

Nationalities	From 1.10.2015 to 30.6.2016
Afghanistan	7
Bangladesh	354
Benin	8
Burkina Faso	24
Camerun	7
Ciad	6
Congo	2
Costa d'Avorio	138
Egitto	2
Eritrea	1720
Etiopia	94
Gambia	842
Ghana	286
Guinea	124
Guinea-Bissau	40
India	7
Iran	9
Iraq	68
Kenya	2
Libano	9
Liberia	16
Libia	2
Mali	728
Marocco	6
Mauritania	4
Niger	12
Nigeria	1432
Pakistan	505
Palestina	89
Repubblica Centrafricana	1
Senegal	586
Sierra Leone	23
Siria	513
Somalia	437
Sudan	349
Togo	15
Tunisia	3
Turchia	2
Yemen	1
Total	**8473**

Table 1. Countries of the newcomers in the C.A.R.A.

Whether during that time span they left or not, was not taken into account, being the main aim of this research to explore whether communication between professionals and migrants is effective and how expectations and perceptions of migrants are met. Asylum seekers are people coming from various countries, with many languages, different religions, education levels, genders, ages.

The present study explored communicative events where professionals and migrants are involved in order to show how the

discursive representation of migrants can affect services and support. Communication has been analysed in terms of what is expected to be said and what is not, what is implicit and what needs to be explicit (Hymes 1974). The ultimate goal of this research was to tailor an experiential learning course (Kolb 1984, 2015) for professionals and promote a co-production approach in the C.A.R.A. that will be discussed in the present paper.

The research is based on two main assumptions that can be summarized as follows: first, since any analysis of migration can have significant implications for people's lives, an approach based on the ethnography of communication will be used in order to explore communication practices (Duranti 2007; Hymes 1974).

In order to understand language functioning, it is crucial to access to what is called traditionally an emic knowledge that is accounts, descriptions, and analyses are regarded as meaningful and appropriate by the members of the culture under study. This knowledge is validated by the consensus of native informants, who must agree that the construct matches the shared perceptions that are characteristic of their culture. Etic constructs, which are models and categories of analysis of researchers, should be based then on emic accounts in order to build effective models of inclusion. The second assumption is that language is multimodal and in order to explore and understand communication, speech and gestures should be taken into consideration.

Data were collected through the participant observation technique which is an ethnographic method that includes observation, interviews and document analysis as means to collect data for qualitative analysis. It is based on an open, nonjudgemental attitude, being interested in learning what is meaningful for the individual and/or community under analysis (DeWalt and DeWalt 1998). In this way it was possible to collect the emic accounts that were validated by the community or by the individual that took part to the event. For methodological purposes, newcomers were observed during the meetings and were not interviewed because it is very difficult to ask the appropriate question without actually influencing the answer. Observation often provides data that the researcher could have not imagined or asked. Professionals were interviewed because we need

to collect explicit explanation of what their aim is when they provide support services or set up informative events.

Communicative events have been chosen following some criteria that are: their accessibility for the researcher; the representativeness of the events occurring in the speech community; the representativeness of the communicative phenomenon under study. For this reason, only face to face interactions were taken into account. Written form of communication such as notices, letters and advice were excluded as they would have required a different methodological approach.

The research was divided into three different steps: the first step was devoted to the exploration of the setting in order to understand how communications and interactions between professionals and migrants took place and whether they were successful or not. This step shaped the *toolbox* and helped to define the different activities of the Experential Learning Course that will be discussed in the next paragraphs and that represents the third step of this research study.

5. Telling stories to understand: an experiential learning path

There are many different ways to intend Experental Learning (E.L.). It is a process by which the learners create meaning from direct experience. Kolb (2015:38) considers it "a process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience". In fact, learning through experience is a holistic process that involves both learners and instructors in the pedagogical path. Participants have a personal stake in the subject and go through different steps: experience, reflection and application. The role of the instructor is to choose carefully experiences and promote reflection, critical analysis and synthesis. E.L. is strongly based on relationships: participant to self; participants to others and participants to the world at large.

What is important in E.L. is the process rather than the product of learning. In fact, as shown below, all different steps are interconnected.

Each step of this experience involves the students and the instructors in shaping the path of the pedagogical process.
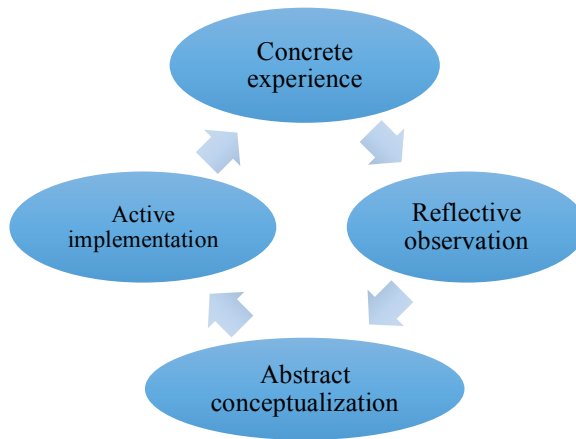
Figure 1. Experience Learning Cycle (Kolb 2015).

In the first step, "Concrete experience", students perform a hands-on minds-on experience with little or no help from the instructor. Results, observations and reaction are shared during the "Reflective observation". During the "Abstract conceptualization", participants focus on the issues, problems and themes that emerged as result of the experience.   Finally, when participants apply what they learned to similar or different situation, they are promoting an "Active implementation".

5.1. Course design

The E.L. course promoted in the C.A.R.A. was designed following the results of the first step of this research. During the observation, the researcher observed different situations where communication was not functioning appropriately (see Section 2). The E.L. was inspired by Kolb's experiential learning conceptual frame and was shaped by the participants during the path. The starting point of the E.L. course is that narratives are attempts to develop plausible interpretation of complex phenomena or events (Roe 1994). In fact, each participant was invited to use narration as an identity tool at the end of each step to share issues, insights and meaning with the group. There were a

few rules that the participants were expected to respect which were: active listening because it generates the feeling of *being together* and promotes reciprocal trust; non-judgemental attitude because it makes everybody feel much more free to tell what he/she feels. Reciprocal accountability was the core of the E.L. project as it was crucial that all participants share the vision, the aims and are involved in designing the path.

The starting point was to understand what belonging to a community means. This activity was named "exploring who I am to understand the others". Looking at the Kolb's experiential learning circle, this is an activity based on their concrete experiences. Specifically, the researcher encouraged professionals to answer the question by drawing a tree where the roots represented metaphorically their own family or community, the trunk their own self and the branches their expectations, wishes and hopes. Another step of this activity was to explore their linguistic identities and to understand which language they use in which context and why.

This was a way to introduce and discuss the mechanism of stigma and stereotypization and shift to the second step of the Circle, "Reflective observation", whose aim was "living the stigma and stereotypization". Starting from telling their own experience of stigma and stereotype, the researcher reversed the situation by asking them to write down on a piece of paper when they have been prejudiced and why. This offered to the participants the opportunity of exploring together what happens when the stigmatization is suffered and when it is acted. The possibility of writing about their experience of acting stigmatization processes and sharing them without necessarily saying who is the actor allowed all professionals to explore some aspects and processes of stigmatization and connect them to their job.

During the step of the "Abstract conceptualization", participants focused on the activity "I explain what I do and for whom". The aim of this step was to explore their way of working with migrants by exploring successful and unsuccessful actions. Finally, the "Active implementation" step was based on generalizations and resulted from the discussions and analysis of the previous step.

Each step revealed various forms of stereotypization that were based on overgeneralized beliefs (Barna 1985) and sometimes also on prejudices.

5.2. Participants

Participants to the E.L. course were professionals working in the service area and in particular: psychologists; social support workers; teachers of Italian; mediators; lawyers. They were mainly Italian and female in the 28-61 age range. Only few of them came originally from sub-Saharan Africa and work as mediators. 5 mediators out of 6 experienced migration themselves. The majority of them were men in the 21-43 age range. Thirty people regularly participated to the E.L. activities guided by the researcher.

Profession	Female	male	Country of origin
Psychologists	1	4	Italy
Social Support Workers	5	1	Italy
Teachers of Italian	2	2	Italy
Mediators	3	5	Italy 2 (1 male and 1 female) Africa 6
Lawyers	3	4	Italy

Table 2. Professionals involved in the project.

6. Discussion

During this path, all participants (including the researcher) learnt and co-educated. The de-construction of stereotypes was promoted through the different steps of the E.L. path through narration. This activity allows the participants to identify, define and explore insights that can ultimately schematize scattered events. During the E.L., learners were able to recognize their stereotypes and stereotyping tendencies as well as those of people taking part to the EL course. We learned that many inaccurate predictions about behaviors were based on stereotypes. Most stereotypes were based on western perspectives on civilization, education, culture that emerged in narration and were discussed, de-constructed and re-constructed by including the perspective of otherness. Ethnocentric attitudes related to different aspects of everyday life were revealed and discussed. In particular, professionals learn how and what to ask to their colleagues, to the newcomers, to the direction. They learn that communication is made

by the language and by the body, is explicit and implicit. They learnt how to tell a story about them and about their job, to talk about their failures and their success. Finally, they learned to teamwork and to practice active listening. The researcher learnt how and what to ask professionals and how and what to tell to elicit specific behaviors or answers. The ability of analyzing the correct linguistic behavior and the disadvantages of stereotypes showed meta-cognitive and meta-linguistic awareness and control.

Finally, the E.L. path might be overwhelming and require to work within a green zone. It consists of a safe area where everyone is self-confident and relaxed with the themes that are being discussed. This is not always so easy because for example when some mediators were invited to tell their own stories and to draw the tree, they end up re-living the distress of their migration journey.

The ultimate goal of the research[1] was to promote co-production services practices. Although this is not the aim of this paper, it is important to highlight the fact that the E.L. promoted also empowerment for the mediators coming originally from Africa, as they became more aware of their role in relation to other professionals and they fixed some deontological norms much more in order for their service to serve better the migrants.

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[1] The stories of the professionals have been collected in a book (Fontana 2017) edited by the researcher and by one of the psychologists who took part to the E.L. path, who collected the stories of some migrants living in the C.A.R.A.

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