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My Paradigm Can Beat Your Paradigm: Some Reflections on Knowledge Conflicts

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Disagreements about knowledge generation and application in social work are examined from a paradigmatic level to try to account for the moral indignation often accompanying the disagreements. The positivist paradigm with its pervasive influence on social science inquiry has been challenged in recent times by a more relativistic, interactive, consciousness based paradigm. The problem of "standardizing Intersubjectivity", and the process of "Inversion of Mastery", are used to examine the paradigm differences. The positivist's accusation that the newer paradigm advocate is "irresponsible", and the rejoinder that positivism contributes to a "damaging hoax" on humankind are the crux of the moral heat of the conflict.

In recent years some different ideas about knowledge, research, and practice in Social Work have been struggling to be heard and meeting resistance. To add to the struggle in a 1984 article, I attempted to cover a number of converging ideas as a possible contribution to new thinking. While reviewing the social work literature on the debates about knowledge, scientific method(s), empiricism, etc., it was obvious that each side in the debates carried a barely controlled undercurrent of exasperation at the wrong-headedness of the other camp. I suggested that "Challenges to these intuitive givens [paradigmatic assumptions] are sources of considerable anxiety, and conflicts often include moral overtones" (Haworth, 1984, p. 354).

One particular conflict was between Fischer and Gordon regarding whether social work has a paradigm, and if so, whether it resulted from revolution or evolution (Fischer, 1981; Gordon, 1983). The squabble generated the following:

> Gordon's response consists mainly of a plethora of periphrastic platitudes, a gallimaufry of obfuscations and misunderstood

quotes taken out of context, a hodgepodge of inconsistencies and
non sequitors, a mish-mash of outdated conceptions, a grab bag
of unsupported speculations, and a hugger-mugger of self-serving
self-references. Other than that, Gordon's response was excellent
(Fischer, 1984, p. 71).

Because I was trained in science- not rhetoric or innuendo- it is a
bit difficult to respond to Fischer's blast at me and my article, "So-
cial Work Revolution or Evolution?" I do not need much valuable
space in SOCIAL WORK to respond, because Fischer's statement
in this issue does a pretty good job of exposing his techniques
against which I inveighed in my criticism of his original article. I
must have successfully unveiled the real Fischer or he would not
have tried to hide behind such unrestrained verbal abuse, name-
calling, and general lashing out to redefine the issues in a way that
attempts to put his ideas in a better light (Gordon, 1984, p. 74).

The delicate interchange is particularly interesting since the
combatants both, perhaps of different generations, represent the
same paradigm.* One can imagine that "heat" if they really
disagreed with each other! The paradigm in question began to
"revolt" or "evolve" out of the hard sciences in the 1930s, but is
still alive in social science for some reason. By contrasting the
consequences of an emerging paradigm with the established
belief system I try to account for some of the heat of a moral
nature generated by the conflict in world views held by sincere
people, all claiming to be reasonable and scientific.

The Paradigms

One way to approach this phenomenon is to contrast the
conflicting positions on the place of subjectivity and intersub-
jectivity in knowledge. But first, a brief look at the paradigms
is necessary. The positions have no high consensus labels, but
generally they represent two scientific heritages. The older, tra-
ditional view, which I refer to as Positivism, still carries the
image of a Newtonian universe (deterministic and mechanical)
and Cartesian dualism (mind-matter separation) into social in-
quiry. This positivist view is deeply embedded in our culture as
synonymous with Scientific Method. The emerging naturalistic,

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* The title of the present paper is prompted by the story of two Hollywood
tykes arguing, "My dad can beat your dad," . . . "Oh yeh, your dad *is* my dad."

or New paradigm poses a very different reality including relativity, the inseparability of the data from the consciousness of the investigator, and a nature based on information generating processes.** It derives its appeal for those open to the view by appearing to account more satisfactorily for much more human experience. It is not my purpose to recount all the details here, but rather to account for the profound distress the conflict creates.

Subjectivity and Intersubjectivity

As human attempts to understand nature moved from reliance on the authority of revelation, tradition, and political power to basing understanding on the experience of the senses, certain problems became critical and are still with us. The experiences had to be ordered by the individual (subjectivity) and communicated to others for confirmation (intersubjectivity). Accompanying this beginning of modern science was a further institutionalization in Western thought of a belief in the separation of Mind and Matter (Descartes). The problem of knowing was cast in the form of a private entity (mind) taking in the meaning of sensory information from external public entities (matter), and somehow sharing it with a community of minds.

Subjective report has always been suspect in human interaction due to the hidden private nature of its origin. People lie to each other, and themselves, to attain many social and personal ends. Disagreements occur that can often only be reconciled by coercion of various sorts. In science disagreements were not, and are not, generally seen as lies, but as problems in human perception. Even as instrumentation evolved to extend the human senses, the problem of disagreement in subjective report could not be technically overcome. Consequently, much effort has gone into searching for procedures for reconciliation of experiential differences that avoid the earlier coercions of power relations. These attempts have tended to follow a logic that gives primacy to "objects" that are experienced as

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** In "The future of social work research," Pieper (1985) suggests calling this newer position the "Heuristic Approach". My preference is to resist any particular short hand reference in favor of requiring each of us in the controversy to explain what we mean as often as possible.

occupying space and time, and seem to have a separate "out-thereness" aspect. Somehow it seemed that we should be able to construct "objective" standards that reflect the real dimensions of nature around which "intersubjectivity" could be *standardized* (see Sampson, 1981, for further development of this idea). The idiosyncracies of subjectivity were felt to be controllable by a language of analysis, measurement, and quantification that was free of any particular everyday cultural language. These procedures have worked so well in some areas of investigation that scientific method came to be seen as a route to knowledge that could *by-pass* subjectivity and intersubjectivity.

There have always been enough anomalies and residual problems to keep most serious scientists from a complete acceptance of a reality of "objectivity", even though it is often seen as a desirable aspiration. Particularly in physics, the hardest of the sciences, the success of the procedures became their own downfall. The extension of human curiosity and instrumental intrusion into nature led to a confrontation with the impact of both the instrumentation and the curiosity. The objective measures eroded the view that the world is made of objects, in favor of a view of nature as fields of energy and information "potential". As a result certain aspects of the investigator's subjectivity had to be reconsidered.

Twentieth century physics is the story of the reluctant movement from the classical mechanistic world view to the startling implications of Quantum mechanics. The "Copenhagen solution" of Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg brought several aspects to awareness (Capra, 1975). For one, the instrumentation of investigation produces data by interaction, not objective observation. And even more sobering, the instrumentation is guided by human curiosity and consciousness. That is, unless a human being asks a question and there is enough group consensus that the answer would have value, scientific investigation does not take place. No matter how much we pretend otherwise, subjectivity and intersubjectivity precede investigation as well as influence the perception and interpretation of data, and the choice of what to study is a value choice.

The remarkable success of scientific method in many areas has reinforced the belief in objective discovery. However,

as one's thinking moves away from the assumptions of an objective discoverable reality to more plausible views of a constructed, or created, reality the account of how science succeeds changes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, chap. 3). The language of quantity and measurement seems to work on information that does not seem to be *initially* organized by human linguistic structures (perhaps the information that preceded our species' conscious existence, that we experience as light, sound, motion, etc., before we give them names). The subjective invention of "variables" can be constructed linguistically and used to organize the processes of observation and measurement. The procedures then create the existence of the variable by a *response*. If the response produces an outcome deemed valuable by the community it is felt that a "discovery" has been made. Under these conditions an investigation can produce a nonvalued result and be considered "wrong". Since the data have not, as far as we know, *interpreted* the measurement procedures, further investigation can be pursued to seek valued findings without doing great harm. For instance, light apparently does not *care* whether we set up apparatus to measure it as a wave phenomenon, or a particle phenomenon. It accommodates both, and goes on doing whatever it does. Light suffers little damage even though the reputation of one of the researchers may.

However, if the phenomenon being measured is *already* the product of interpersonal, intersubjective, and linguistic organization (society, personality, culture, science, etc.), we enter a realm where the data are not only generated and organized by a response to the measurement procedures, but by an *interpretation* of them. The inseparable involvement of the physicist's consciousness and actions in the generation of his findings becomes confounded even more in the human sciences where the data source is essentially another investigator.

Both paradigms need to standardize intersubjectivity in some way. The positivist relies on the notion of a reality external to the observer that is independent of the observer's subjectivity. In seeking order, the array of subjective variations in report become statistically reduced to create a hypothetical structure that is assumed to be the best estimate of the underlying reality and can serve as an external standard to appeal to for agreement.

The new paradigm advocate tries to standardize intersubjectivity by appeal to shared value commitments. The variations in subjective experience are not seen as imperfect perceptions of a common structure, but as the reality of human existence. The new paradigm view is that there is no mechanical causal connection between social events, that continuity and meaning are intersubjective agreements. Value is attached to consciousness of this process and the responsibility for its outcome.

Inversion of Mastery

The apt phrase "inversion of mastery" is used by Edward Sampson to refer to the consequence of the uncritical use of the traditional paradigm as a guide to psychological investigation (Sampson, 1981). The process works something like this. The commitment to objective observation tends to focus on the repetitive and apparently stable processes of nature which are then named and the names reified into "structures", or Platonic "essences", or "laws". These intersubjectively named regularities are defined as transcending any particular event. Based on these assumptions some of nature can be manipulated by human efforts and the outcomes give a sense of mastery, in that we seem to have approximated portions of natural processes sufficiently to predict and control them, at least in the short run. As noted above, nature *responds* to these manipulations, but doesn't *interpret* them. For instance, nature doesn't seem to care if we convert all the information that is in material form on earth into energy by the magnitude of a mind-boggling constant squared ($E=MC^2$). Fortunately for human beings, so far these reactions have had some self-limiting aspects. However, the earth could very easily respond to our tinkering by conditions lethal to human life, and indeed seems to be doing so. Yet the heady feeling of understanding the underlying laws, or causes, of certain regularities and the attendant technical mastery is very difficult for humans to resist, even if deadly.

When science has focused on human action the same aspirations of mastery through prediction and control have prevailed. However, as stated above the subject matter is already a secondary ordering of information by human intersubjective

processes, even though the senses seem to be taking in infor-
mation about structures that precede the individual investiga-
tor. These social inventions do persist beyond the experience
of individuals, but they only exist through the *participation* of
individuals. The proposing of variables and their measurement
has tended to follow theories based on the traditional model of
seeking underlying causes for human events that are universal,
context-free, and beyond human choice.

Instrumentation also tends to be regarded as mechanical
extensions of the investigator's senses. However, these instru-
ments are communication devices that not only demand re-
sponse, but also elicit interpretation (for example: a Question-
naire item; I believe in life after death–SA, A, MA, MD, D, SD.
"What does that mean? I have no idea, I'm not sure there is life
after birth yet! Let's see, the guy who asked us to do this looked
nice enough—a little shy and pious perhaps. I'll bet he wants
me to agree with the statement, and since there is no neutral
point on the scale, I'll help him toward his M.A. degree with
a "Mildly Agree"). The process may be harmless enough with
college sophomores in Psychology classes where the only thing
at stake is credit for class participation, although the published
results could have some influence.

When the instrumentation is aimed at information related
to life chances of individuals and groups the outcome can be,
and is, very dangerous. Sampson argues that the assumptions
we accept to scientifically validate the measurement of individ-
ual variations are the very assumptions that are used to socially
construct and institutionalize the inequalities that the social sci-
entist is called upon to study. At any particular time social or-
der is maintained by, and maintains, individuals locating each
other in social roles and relationships to which they attribute
substantive reality. He notes that

> . . .the building blocks of positivist empiricism, truncated sub-
> jectivism, and abstracted individualism on which psychology's
> deep structure is based contribute to societal reproduction and
> are primarily ideological in their function. Insofar as the exist-
> ing socioeconomic and sociocultural system generates the neces-
> sary domination of the many by the few, psychology's role is to
> help foster the very self understandings that reproduce both the

underlying system and its accompanying system of domination and unfreedom. (Sampson, 1981, p. 131)

Briefly, these terms refer to interlinking influences. The adoption of the traditional scientific paradigm by psychology gives primacy to data directly available to the senses (positivist empiricism) and leads to considering current categories of social construction as universal "givens" of nature. The consequent neglect of sociohistorical processes tends to focus attention on internal causality residing within the individuals being scientifically analysed. The result is that "psychology's subjectivism is truncated in that it places a main burden on the mentation of the individual; the material reality enters the equation, but only in terms already processed by the actor's meaning endowing capacities" (Sampson, 1981, p. 88). The final link, abstracted individualism, refers to the support of an exaggerated illusion of automony and independence, or the American belief in "self-efficacy". This all too easily supports translating system inequality into individual deficit. Therefore, when psychology addresses the problems of social justice it contributes to the processes of social control and the perpetuation of the status quo.

The positivist paradigm has led the behavioral and social scientists to treat the social constructions in the same way that Newtonian physicists approached nature. That is, the current social taxonomies are accepted as "givens", to be analysed, measured, and accounted for by principles that cannot include human consciousness and choice (except as illusory manifestations of a more material causal order).

Stephen Jay Gould (1981), in THE MISMEASURE OF MAN, traces the devastating history of use of scientific method to classify and order groups of people in American society. From the measuring of skulls and bodies to I.Q.s, a hierarchy of group relations has been maintained that curiously supports the very tenets of a capitalist economy, its competitiveness, and the institutionalized inequalities that are needed to make it work. Of particular potency is the American conversion of Binet's early interest in testing children for educational planning into the measurement of some innate capacity called Intelligence. The logic of quantification and discovery diverted attention away from the situational and interactive nature of the testing itself

(and overpowered the critics in the process). Even more significantly, the loop back to the institutionalizating of the findings into subtle, and not so subtle, social expectations was obscured.

This means-ends division, or more correctly, the unquestioning acceptance of ends followed by the technical pursuit of means, is also central to the classification of many human problems. The utility and morality of locating the source of bothersome behaviors within the individual does not receive much cultural or professional skepticism. Rather, attention is directed to the construction of correct classification schemes, and the procedures for the correct assignment of individuals to the categories (the recalcitrance of some of these problems is shown by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual beginning to develop sequels with Roman numerals at almost the rate of "Rocky" movies). The declared goals of "treatment", or some matching of talents to social tasks in the case of intelligence testing, are subverted by more potent processes of social control and maintenance of the historically developed inequalities. In other words, the categories of outcomes of social processes are studied, described, and explained in such a way as to imply that the outcome "variables" were there at the beginning and "caused" the events to come about in some inevitable fashion.

> A central point they [Critical Theorists] derive from the story is the deceit of the human mind that results as people seek to conquer nature by first conquering what is nature in themselves: this is the dialectic of enlightenment. The forces marshaled to master nature turn about and become the forces in whose name the mastery of nature was itself sought.
> Horkeimer and Adorno see the subject seeking to govern the object (nature) and in this very process being swallowed up and destroyed. The identity between subject and object eventually destroys the subject itself. The dialectic represents the process whereby what begins affirmatively as the conquest, administration, and technical control of nature ends up creating just its opposite- namely, self-understandings from the viewpoint of technical control. The result is a technocratic consciousness or instrumentalized rationality in which the core of domination is both contained and concealed (Sampson, 1981, p. 64).

The Judgments

Whence comes the moral indignation when someone gives an account for a social phenomenon that does not match our own account? We are just beginning to recognize the embeddedness of our observations and conclusions in powerful beliefs that give order to our group and individual existence. These belief systems (paradigms) offer proof of truth, or trustworthiness, of conclusions only within themselves. When the arguments of a paradigm are taken to another paradigm for consideration they inevitably encounter judgments of falsity. To decide between paradigms requires a transcending paradigm which is never clear. Consequently, a sort of dialectic goes on historically. At present it seems that the thesis of positivism in social science is being challenged by the antithesis of new paradigm stirrings that cannot be dismissed quite as easily as before. If a synthesis is possible it is not likely to emerge immediately. As mentioned in the above quote Critical Theory has some possibilities, but that discussion is not my purpose here.

The judgments I am concerned with are the ones based on disagreements over the correct path to knowledge, and the consequences of the kind of knowledge produced for improving our understanding of the relation between knowledge and practice in social work. The issues of intersubjectivity and inversion of mastery can get at the nature of these judgmental conflicts. From the positivist heritage these issues tend to be seen as nonexistent or amenable to technical solutions. The belief in an orderly, deterministic, measurable reality underlying human action promotes the value of finding out what that order is, and controlling it. For this process to work, the generating of the data must be seen as "discovery" of the external reality by imperfect human perceivers (certainly not as the inversion of mastery). The tendency for holders of the traditional view is to see the advocate of a constructed, relativistic, descriptive, value-oriented scientific paradigm as being *irresponsible*. That is, by questioning the pursuit of objective causal knowledge the new paradigm advocate is accused of depriving people of tools for handling their anxiety and their unpredictableness to each other—of leaving them ungrounded and floating, without solid anchors.

The accusations going the other way are the mirror image in a sense. If nature is seen as flux ordered by information of which human consciousness is inseparable, then positivism is seen as perpetrating a very *damaging hoax* on humankind. By engaging in transactions that claim to discover causal explanation (or probabilistic correlations, which are even more mystifying), the "outcomes" of the human pursuit of order are *interpreted as the cause of the pursuit*. This somewhat enigmatic statement also relates to an earlier suggestion that social structures require *participation* for existence and maintenance. We precipitate out artifacts to remind ourselves; such as, codes, costumes, buildings, implements, recorded traces of prior events, etc. However, these guide-posts mean nothing without current actors giving them expression. Using these guides we constantly create and recreate our society. The spillage and surplus activity in this process must be accommodated.

Collectively we organize and maintain all sorts of reciprocal roles and definitions to deal with actions judged to be threatening to social order and meanings (an arena where social workers often find themselves). Historically our society has defined many of these categories for classifying deviant behaviors and the response to them as medical-like problems. Confusion results between beliefs that the behavior is a manifestation of an invading agent in the human being versus somewhat older beliefs attributing the behaviors to deliberate choice or evil. The problems are studied from a perspective that includes neither choice, nor evil in human affairs. Hence, the positivist's explanations lose the social history and creative interactions of the definitional processes, and focus on perceived characteristics of the already identified individuals. Commonalities are stressed, measured, and names given to variables which then become explanations for why the individuals are in their social positions. The causes, due to the guiding paradigm, are located beyond the control of the individual actor. Not inconsequentially, the reciprocal role of expert treater gets created and maintained. Rather than knowledge freeing humans to recognize and assume responsibility for creating more humane relationships and institutions, the *status quo* tends to be reinforced by scientific support. Human anxiety may occasionally

be relieved by an illusion of causality and control, but at the price of human freedom and creativity. Therefore, the new paradigm believer develops strong feelings of indignation at the continued unquestioning use of the traditional methods.

Brief Illustration of Paradigms in Action

How might the conflict look in "clinical" practice? Imagine two social workers, similarly licensed and proclaiming the same set of abstract values, but different in their paradigmatic stances. Dick is basically a positivist, while Jane is attracted to the new paradigm. The controversy is often cast in gender metaphors which relate positivism to male dominance and intellectual mastery, and female nuturance and emotional understanding are equated with the new paradigm stance. I acknowledge some usefulness to these formulations and hence name my workers accordingly.

The sociohistorical processes that influence a person to become a "client" in contact with a "helper", and policies and structures that locate them in the same place whether it be an agency, private practice, or some other auspice, will be of very different concern to the two workers. Dick is more likely to see all this as "natural", since his belief system is more closely related to the social structure that has generated the whole problem definition/helping situation. His value based task of relating to the client as possessing "dignity", with perhaps even goals of "empowerment", etc. will be seen as problems of "technique." Jane will find the situation much more problematic. For her the processes are very much a part of subtly defining the "problem" as personal failure or moral defect. Such definitions make dignity and empowerment doubtful, if not absurd goals. The process must somehow be countered by liberating awareness on the part of Jane and her client.

Once the client and worker are in social contact, some sort of "assessment" is mandated in order for contact to continue (both paradigms are trying to shed some of the medical-like trappings of "diagnosis"). Dick will essentially ask the client to hold the problem in abeyance while information is gathered to locate the problem in some classification scheme of problems. In attempts to standardize practice delivery the scheme more and

more in use is the APA Diagnostic and Statistical Manual in its most current form. Much of the information gathered, with the client's participation, will be defined as "objective", whether it be self-report, responses to tests, physical examinations, etc. The material will tend to be organized in such a way as to locate the "cause" of the problem in the biography of the client, even though the rhetoric involves social "factors," or an additional "axis," or two in the manual. In any case the material will tend to be treated as additive and linear. All this must take place before "intervention" can be planned and executed.

Jane, on the other hand, would find all this distressing for a number of reasons. First, a human being, particularly one who is hurting or confused, cannot be asked to wait for some imper-sonal procedures to be performed, before "real" help is offered. Second, all human communication and action is seen as "inter-vention," and the pretense of "objective" measurement will be given subjective meaning by the client. Consequently, Jane will focus on the person's biography, but also as much, if not more, on the client's current action world and the subjective inter-pretation of it, particularly on what is happening in the helping process. As does Dick, Jane will locate the client's problem in the classification scheme, but the process will be different. Dick is likely to present the category chosen as a description of reality, to which the client belongs. Jane is likely to present the infor-mation as a judgment that had to be made in order for help to be attempted under current practices. "Solving the client's prob-lem" may not have much to do with the description contained in the category. The current efforts at behavioral description, rather than etiology, in DSMIII onward are attempts to stan-dardize classification across theoretical differences. However, it would not be unlikely that Dick and Jane could choose differ-ent categories to label the same client. Dick would emphasize the importance of accuracy of diagnosis, while Jane would be more concerned with managing the meaning of a designation of "mental disorder" in the client's life situation.

Intervention will also be different. Dick will proceed on the assumption that a direct causal connection can be made be-tween the interventive acts and desired outcomes, dictated by the problem assessment. Jane thinks she has been intervening

all the time, perhaps even before the client showed up through whatever she has been thinking that could possibly question the established practices. Her efforts to help are more likely to focus simultaneously on the client's subjective meanings and the social context that defines the client's problem.

When these two workers encounter each other to discuss practice, conflict is likely to be high regarding preferred theories and practice modalities. Covertly, or overtly, implications of doubtful moral action are likely to be present. Jane stresses the meaning to the client of the processes that are being imposed in the name of helping, and for her the measurements and judgments are mystifying and degrading to the participants, and perhaps are a continuation of the very social interactions that precipitated the client's problem. Dick counters that these measurements and judgments are scientific (and that the client's "reactivity" can be technically controlled or ignored), and that Jane is irresponsible in not manipulating the client into formulas for objectively assessing and managing one's life. Jane continues to argue that essentially mechanical explanations and problem solutions further remove people from experiencing and responsibly defining their own lives. She stresses that the separation of people from their experiences is supported by the promise that structures for understanding and control do objectively exist, when according to the new paradigm they do not, and this is the damaging hoax.

Conclusion

This paper is obviously written from a new paradigm position, otherwise the presentation would be very different, or not made at all. "Normal" social scientists working within an established position do not raise questions about underlying assumptions, but tend to judge each other in terms of technical efficiency in carrying out the paradigmatic implications. The challenging suggestion that *that positivist* system of knowledge production is flawed by being caught in the circular tracing of social footprints and the perpetuation of social inequality through scientific justification, prompts indignation from believers. These persons who have experienced their careers and life

meanings as being validated in the traditional process do not take kindly to having their activities defined as harmful.

A part of the positivist paradigm is the belief that continued empirical investigation will eventually resolve knowledge differences—so, what's the big fuss? To argue this position another assumption is necessary which separates *is* from *ought*, and makes facts more fundamental than values. It is this fact-value separation that is challenged by the new paradigm. The argument is that social facts are socially created from disguised value premises, and that a human science is needed to make *that process conscious and visible.*

Another complication in the conflict of views is that at this historical time in our culture the new paradigm adherents have almost inevitably shared the positivist world view in socialization and education. Consequently, some sort of transformation or revolution has taken place in their thinking. Like most converts who survive the upheaval of previous beliefs, they become excited over new ways of seeing and express impatience with those who remain entrenched.

The conflict could perhaps be defined by some as inconsequential if only the philosophical differences about knowledge were being argued. However, in a helping profession such as social work, human lives are "intervened" in with outcome goals stated in value terms. When each side translates their version of knowledge into action, it is then that the counter charges of *irresponsibility* and *damaging hoax* gain their moral quality as accusations of harming people.

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