Cross-Cultural Research on Kohlberg's Stages: The Basis for Consensus

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Part XIV: Cross-Cultural Morality

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When Lawrence Kohlberg (1969, 1971a) claimed that his moral stages were culturally universal, he ensured that a storm of controversy would greet his theory. He then intensified the controversy by further claiming that preliterate or semiliterate village peoples would generally fall behind other cultural groups in their rate and terminal point of development due to a relative lack of 'role-taking opportunities' in their daily lives.

Moral values are known to vary so greatly from culture to culture that a universal, invariant sequence in development or moral judgment is a provocative claim. Furthermore, to characterize the difference between the moral judgment of people in traditional face-to-face societies versus modern, complex, national states as a difference in 'adequacy' of moral judging (Kohlberg, 1971a) seems to violate norms of inter-cultural respect and ethical relativism.

Kohlberg's statements have been met by many theoretical statements attempting to refute aspects of his conclusions or assumptions about cultural universality (see, for example, Bloom, 1977; Buck-Morss, 1975; Edwards, 1975, 1982; Shweder, 1982a; Simpson, 1974; Sullivan, 1977). Equally of importance, the theoretical controversy has stimulated much empirical research intended, at least in part, to test the cross-cultural claims. Cross-cultural research is the only empirical strategy that can actually establish or discount the universalizability of the theory, and for that reason it has been actively pursued. This paper will review the status and current progress of comparative studies of moral judgment. I will attempt to show why the work as a whole can be considered productive, tending toward increased rather than diminished understanding of the moral reasoning of humankind. I will answer each of the following, pivotal questions below with a 'Yes, but . . .' argument. Finally, I will try to show how, as comparative research has proceeded to become increasingly elaborated in theoretical intent and sophisticated in design and methods of analysis, it has quietly established its position as a viable

field of research. Controversy remains, of course, but it is a fruitful one, and there is a solid core of issues upon which we can reach reasonable consensus.

Questions Central to Establishing the Universality of Kohlberg Moral Stages

1   Is the dilemma interview method a valid way of eliciting the moral judgments of people in other cultures?
2   Is the standard scoring system appropriate and valid for cross-cultural use?
3   Is cognitive-developmental theory useful for understanding psychological development in comparative cultural perspective?

THE VALIDITY OF THE INTERVIEW METHOD

For the moral dilemma methodology to be considered valid for either a particular research study or comparative research in general requires three things. First, the specific dilemmas used in research must be 'real' to the particular people involved, that is, they must raise issues and pit values important to the respondents. This criterion requires either development of new dilemmas appropriate to particular cultural contexts or adequate adaptation of Kohlberg's Standard Interview. Secondly, dilemmas and probing questions must be well translated into respondents' native language, and respondents' answers must be translated without distortion back into the language of scoring. Thirdly, the interview methodology itself must be adequate to the sensitive task of eliciting respondents' 'best', 'highest', and most 'reflective' reasoning about morality (Edwards, 1981). The third criterion is the most subtle and difficult to determine, but it is absolutely critical to the success of the cross-cultural endeavour.

Research to date is uneven in quality according to the first criterion, but recent research can surely be judged generally more satisfactory. Most researchers have opted to adapt Kohlberg's standard stories rather than to create entirely new dilemmas, in order to take advantage of standard scoring systems. This practice assumes that standard stories (if adequately modified in details to fit the local setting) present real and relevant dilemmas to people everywhere because they share certain universal moral concerns, such as affectional, property and authority issues. Such an assumption seems to me a fair one, with a notable exception. True hunter-gatherer societies do not contain headmen or chiefs; nor do they contain formal courts or governing institutions. People in these societies would not be expected to make sense of problems pitting 'law' and 'life', or 'authority' and 'conscience'.

Regarding the first criterion, we can feel most confident about research conducted by investigators who are thoroughly familiar with the cultures studied. We can expect such researchers to have the best sense that the dilemmas used are relevant and adequately adapted. The early research studies (especially Grimley, 1973; Kohlberg, 1969; Saadatmand, 1972) are flawed by serious weakness in terms of trying to cover too much ground (four or five cultural settings each) with little or no ethnographic description provided for each sample and its moral values. In contrast, many of the recent researchers have focused in depth on their own society or cultural group (e.g., Lutz Eckensberger, Germany; Jean-Marc Samson, French-

speaking Canada; Y. H. Chern, S. W. Cheng and T. Lei, Taiwan; Muhammed Maqsud, Nigeria; Bindu Parikh, India). In other cases, researchers have gained thorough familiarity of the cultures they studied. For example, Sara Harkness lived as an anthropologist for three years in Western Kenya, and John Snarey provides detailed ethnographic description of the Israeli kibbutz where he based his work. Although these researchers have not generally commented on how well dilemmas have seemed to 'work' in their studies, when they do, their comments have been generally positive. For example, Harkness, Edwards and Super (1981) say, 'All of the men readily accepted this task and became quite involved in giving their judgments' (p. 598).

Only a few researchers have experimented with creating entirely new dilemmas. I found (Edwards, 1975, 1978) that Kenyans were intensely interested and provoked by a new dilemma, called Daniel and the School Fees. However, I did not systematically compare subjects' level of responses to the new versus standard stories. Charles White and colleagues (1978) found in pilot work in the Bahamas that there were no stage differences in response to their new versus the standard dilemmas, so they did not pursue its use. By far the most original approach has been taken by Benjamin Lee (1973, 1976). Lee, an American of Chinese descent, departed completely from the standard stories and developed a series of 'filiality' stories to study moral reasoning in Taiwan. Filiality is a core Chinese value, of course, and Lee reports (personal communication) that subjects, especially those of the older generation, scored higher on filiality than standard stories, because 'fairness' was not an important issue for them. Lee's research illustrates how broadening the interview base to issues outside the core concerns of Westerners can enrich, not undermine, the structural approach to moral development. Further work, in my opinion, should involve quantitative and qualitative comparison of people's responses to original versus standard dilemmas. Such an approach would fully and adequately meet criterion one and lead to an improvement or elaboration of the theory.

Criterion two concerns adequacy of translation. Only one set of German researchers has taken the notable step of translating not only dilemmas but also the scoring manual into another language (Eckensberger, Eckensberger and Reinshagen, 1975–6). Most other researchers have translated the dilemmas into subjects' native language, then translated answers back into English for scoring. Their procedures have probably met at least minimal standards, especially when investigators, such as Jean-Marc Samson, are bilingual, with their first language the target non-English language. They have considered carefully problems of translating ethical terminology. For example, Parikh (1980) states, 'The first 10 translations were checked by a professor of English and a native of Gujarat. A list was made of those words for which it was difficult to get equivalents in English and this list was then discussed with a professor of Gujarati and another of English' (p. 1033).

However, translation is a fascinating subject in its own right that deserves closer inspection and analysis. No researcher, for example, has yet compared responses to a dilemma as translated by several different people, or compared moral maturity scores given to the same interview as translated into English by several different translators. Past researchers, quite rightly perhaps, have been more interested in simply taking the initial step of seeing whether moral judgment scores distribute themselves in a predictable or reasonable way over a target sample of people.

Criterion three concerns whether the interview method is able to elicit the very best and most mature reasoning about moral problems in cultures other than our own. This is an extremely difficult question, and common to research on cognition and social cognition in general, not just Kohlbergian research. The crux of the problem revolves around those groups who seem to show least high-stage reasoning. Findings from a large number of studies (reviewed in Edwards, 1981, 1982) have indicated that moral judgment Stage 5, and perhaps even full-Stage 4, are not found in interviews with preliterate or semiliterate adults who live in relatively 'traditional', small-scale societies, such as isolated peasant or tribal communities. Are these stages really missing, or are the results an artifact of testing bias? There are, in my opinion, good theoretical grounds for thinking that Stage 3 may be the stage at which the judgment of village adults stabilizes. The underlying structure of Stage 3 corresponds well to the social and moral order of a society based on face-to-face relations and a relatively high level of normative consensus (Edwards, 1975, 1981, 1982; Nisan and Kohlberg, 1982). However, it is still important to consider carefully the fundamental problems that exist with eliciting moral reasoning by asking people to reflect upon moral dilemmas.

The moral dilemma interview is best seen as a way to elicit a particular part of people's moral thinking, their 'conscious reflections' rather than intuitive or implicit knowledge about morality (cf. Pool, Shweder and Much, 1983). The interview stimulates people to explain their justifications and to self-reflectively volunteer criteria for decision-making. Do adults in all types of societies have this capacity? 'Yes', we can answer, considering the fact that adults in a wide range of cultural groups studied so far seem to enjoy dilemma discussions. They find it congenial to play the role of what Kenyans called the 'moral elder' and formulate their wisest, most considered opinion about posed, hypothetical problems.

Richard Brandt, a philosopher who many years ago studied Hopi ethical systems, similarly concluded that ethical principles are probably culturally universal. He inferred that 'wrong' had a true ethical meaning to the Hopi: 'If I were normal, impartial, and fully informed, I should feel obligated not to perform X' (Brandt, 1954, p. 109). Although Brandt had to piece together his picture of the Hopi's implicit principles from rather brief answers to formal dilemmas supplemented by many related remarks in other conversations, he believed that his results make 'a highly unfavorable beginning for any person who thinks the "moral" concepts of primitive peoples are quite different from, and vastly more simple and less elevated than our own' (p. 98).

Nevertheless, Kohlberg's highest stages are consistently missing in the interviews from certain groups, and this may relate to the level of formal discourse required for them. John Gibbs (1977, 1979; Gibbs and Widaman, 1982) has put forward the case that Stages 5 and 6 of Kohlberg's system are different from Stages 1 to 4. While Stages 1 to 4 are genuine developmental stages, Gibbs feels that Stages 5 and 6 are something else—namely, 'second-order' thinking about morality, 'meta-ethical reflections' on the decision-criteria constructed at an earlier stage—a kind of thinking made possible primarily by higher education. Gibbs, a close collaborator of Kohlberg, proposes to constructively revise the system by re-labelling Stages 1 and 2 as 'immature', Stages 3 and 4 as fully 'mature', and Stages 5 and 6 as a 'theory-defining level of discourse'. In a somewhat similar vein, Eckensberger and Reinshagen of Germany (1977, 1981), on the basis of theoretical analysis and their reading of the comparative literature, have suggested that Stages

1 to 3 are the basic developmental structures. Stages 4, 4/5 and 5, they speculate, represent horizontal *decalages* of the first three structures into less obvious content areas (social systems rather than concrete others).

Both of these sets of suggestions are very important from a comparative perspective. Although many adults in all societies seem able to step into the 'moral elder' role (Stage 3 or 4) in reflecting upon moral problems, they are not equally able to assume the 'moral theorist' role, as required for Stages 5 and 6. As anthopologist Richard Shweder (1982b) has said, 'Children and most adults in most cultures are not very good at spontaneously articulating the distinctions, ideas, and concepts underlying their sense of morality. Most people do not know how to talk like a moral philosopher' (pp. 58–9). While every cultural environment is indeed 'packed with implicit messages about what is of importance, what is of value, who counts as a person' (Shweder, 1982b, p. 56; also see Read, 1955), nevertheless most people in traditional societies may not be able to discourse at the 'theory-defining level' about what they know and think (Horton, 1968). Still, if critics are correct that the first 3 or 4 stages are the core developmental ones, then we can comfortably conclude that the moral dilemma method has shown itself surprisingly congenial to a wide variety of cultural groups with social systems at very different levels of political and economic complexity.

THE VALIDITY OF THE SCORING SYSTEM

The standard scoring system depends upon the theoretical notion that basic, universal moral judgment structures can be differentiated from highly variable, culturally-specific contents. Cross-cultural data, therefore, should 'fit' the scoring system. Problems can arise from two types of data: (1) data which seem to match most closely the criterion statements of one stage (e.g., Stage 2), but which really seem to flow from the social perspective or underlying structure of another stage (e.g., Stage 3); and (2) data which are 'unscorable', i.e., do not match any of the standard scoring categories. Insofar as empirical data present a serious challenge to either of these two varieties, they suggest that the scoring system is invalid or at least in need of revision.

Finding *any* anomalies, however, is not necessarily bad news for the theory. The scoring system is regarded by cognitive-developmental researchers as a living being, and new data that suggest ways to improve the scoring system can represent good news. The task of constructing and revising scoring categories that adequately distinguish form from content has been a continual one. Hard-to-score data are actually helpful if they suggest concrete ways to improve the scoring system.

Past researchers have reported that their cross-cultural data are generally readily scorable. Inter-rater reliabilities, where determined, have achieved acceptable standards of agreement. Researchers have commonly presented illustrative material to show how the reasoning of their target group had culturally-typical contents yet revealed an easily recognizable underlying structure. Most data labelled as 'unscorable', especially from child subjects, consisted merely of brief 'yes' or 'no' statements, or responses that were too incomplete to reveal their underlying stage (but for an exception, see Tomlinson, 1983).

Recently, however, researchers have begun to report upon and critically

examine hard-to-score data from adult subjects and to suggest that these data are problematical. All of these scoring problems refer to ambiguities in Stages 3, 4 and 5. For example, Snarey (1982) and Snarey, Reimer and Kohlberg (1984) analyze difficult-to-score reasoning by Israeli kibbutz respondents. They describe how some subjects blind-scored as Stage 4 or 4/5 were determined by a 'culturally sensitive' scorer to be Stage 5. They conclude that the scoring manual needs to be 'fleshed out with culturally indigenous examples', especially at the higher stages (Snarey, 1982, p. 317). Cheng and Lei (1981) provide examples of Taiwanese reasoning that they thought difficult-to-score: some of the material seemed to be either transitional between 3 and 4, or between 4 and 5, but the categories and distinctions provided in the scoring manual did not allow accurate determination. They concluded, 'More clear delineation of the structure of the stages and better designed probing questions seem to be in need' (p. 16).

In research in Kenya, I too found several examples of hard-to-score interviews. While most of the interviews were readily scored, the most difficult ones were long and complete but arguably either Stage 3 or 4. These were interviews with mature adults who had not attended formal schooling beyond the primary grades. The men were 'community moral leaders', that is, respected elders often called to advise at hearings between local disputants.

To illustrate the way that interviews reflecting a non-Western frame of values and perspective upon society can be difficult to score—and to add to the growing literature seeking to elaborate constructively the scoring system—let me present two examples. The excerpts raise the fundamental question of whether Stage 4 merely requires a rough appreciation of society's need for institutionalized roles, or whether it requires a full-blown understanding of the organizational aspects of a social structure and the operation of a legal system (paraphrase of Cheng and Lei, 1981, p. 16). What the Kenyan elders have is a clear and elaborated vision of fair and reasonable rules for running a prosperous extended family, based on 'unity', 'respect', and 'understanding', key Kenyan traditional values.

From an interview with a Kikuyu man, age 53, with three years of schooling (Edwards, 1975; dilemma is Daniel and the School Fees):

Question: In general, should a grown-up son obey all of his parents' wishes? Why, or why not?
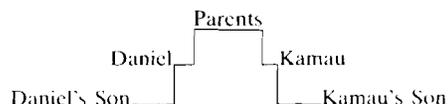
Answer: The parents should not authorize Daniel to educate his brother's son. They should only advise him. Daniel has a home to look after since he left his parents, and it's a complete house with one person as head, not two. So he should not obey his parents but should consider their advices.

Question: Is it more important for Daniel to maintain harmonious relations with his wife, or with his brother and parents? Why?

Answer: Once one is married, we say in Kikuyu society that, 'He is out of his parents' hands. . . .' The husband will be the Chairman and the wife the Treasurer, and as such she will control the resources. That is why Daniel's wife wants [to use the family money] to put her son in school.

Question: Would you condemn Daniel if he just moved away to the city and did not help his brother's son?

Answer: We cannot condemn Daniel   because it's right. He can only carry with him one home, not two. He can offer help if he can in other ways. If we draw a picture like this, we see that there are different generations being founded. Daniel is now very far from Kamau [his older brother who put Daniel himself through school].

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                        Parents
           Daniel__|    |__Kamau
                   |             |
Daniel's Son____|             |____Kamau's Son
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From an interview with a Kipsigis man, age 55, unschooled (Harkness, Edwards and Super, 1981; dilemma is adaptation of Joe story).

> *Question:* Should James refuse to give his father the money?
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> *Answer:* If his father is a squanderer, then he shouldn't be given. But if he keeps it well, the father is like a bank, and he should keep it.
>
> *Question:* Should the father always direct the son?
>
> *Answer:* For the son to refuse to take his father's advice shows that he is not well cared for. But when you [a father] convince him [your son] by telling him, 'Do this sort of thing because this will earn us our living. You didn't do it this time, but do it next time,' then the child will comply since you did not command (shout at) him   and so both of you will be in good unity and understanding of each other.
>
> *Question:* Which is worse, for a father to break his promise or for a son?
>
> *Answer:* [If the father breaks his word] it will cause hatred because the son will be angry, saying, 'I wanted to follow my own intentions, but my father cheated: he permitted me and then refused me. Now I don't want to hear more of his words. He can't love me and is unable to protect me.' So it is bad. [However], the one for the son is worse. Imagine a child disobeying my own words, is he really normal?   Rules are mine and I want him to follow, e.g. 'Do this thing to earn you a living', as I did follow my father's rules also   Father's bad deeds are revealed when he does not care for his children ... That man is like a drunkard whose children do not sleep at home because he drives them away when not sober. The man does not have rules which work and so it is bad. But if he has good functioning rules, he is able to keep his family. The maize will be growing because of his good work. Then it is clear that his family is well looked after.

In conclusion, there seems a clear consensus that the scoring system has provided a useful tool for analyzing cross-cultural data. However, subtle distinctions between the higher stages need to be further clarified, and form and content need to be further differentiated to broaden definitions of stages or levels beyond Stage 3.

THE USEFULNESS OF THE THEORY FOR EXPLAINING HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

As explained in the earlier sections of this paper, recent years have seen the accumulation of many studies focused on groups other than the dominant majority culture of the USA. These studies allow us to consider our final question, whether cognitive-developmental theory has proven useful for understanding individual development within or between cultural groups.

The *within* question is surely less controversial and includes two parts. First, do the central claims of the theory about development (especially invariance of sequence) hold up in cross-cultural studies? Second, do specific examinations of moral judgment in relationship to experiential or background variables lead to increased understanding of the processes facilitating development? We cannot examine each of these questions in detail, but we can indicate the general shape of an answer.

In my recent survey, I found the following studies focused on groups from outside the mainstream US culture (also see review in Snarey, 1982):

The Americas
    USA   Alaskan Eskimo (Saxe, 1970)
               Puerto Rican (Pacheco-Maldonado, 1972)

Canada   Germanic Hutterite (Saadatmand, 1972)
           French (Marchand-Jodoin and Samson, 1982; Samson, 1983)
           English (Sullivan, 1975; Sullivan and Beck, 1975; Sullivan,
           McCullough and Stager, 1979; Sullivan and Quarter, 1972)
Bahamas   (White, 1975, 1977; White, Bushnell and Regnemer, 1978)
Guatemala   (Saadatmand, 1972)
Honduras   (Gorsuch and Barnes, 1973)
Mexico   (Kohlberg, 1969)

Asia
    India   (Parikh, 1975, 1980; Saraswathi, Saxena and Sundaresan, 1977)
    Iran   (Saadatmand, 1972)
    Israel   Kohlberg, with Bar Yam, 1971b; Snarey, 1982; Snarey, Reimer
           and Kohlberg, 1984)
    Hong Kong   (Grimley, 1973, 1974)
    Japan   (Grimley, 1973, 1974)
    Taiwan   (Cheng and Lei, 1981; Chern, 1978; Kohlberg, 1969; Lee, 1973,
           1976)
    Thailand   (Batt, 1974, 1975)
    Turkey   (Nisan and Kohlberg, 1982; Turiel, Edwards and Kohlberg,
           1978)

Africa
    Kenya   (Edwards, 1974, 1975, 1978; Harkness, Edwards and Super,
           1981)
    Nigeria   (Maqsud, 1976, 1977a, 1977b, 1979, 1982)
    Zambia   (Grimley, 1973, 1974)

Europe
    France   (O'Connor, 1974, 1980)
    Finland   (Helkama, 1981)
    Germany   (Eckensberger, 1983; Gielen, 1982; Villenave and Eckensber-
           ger, 1982)
    Great Britain   (Grimley, 1973, 1974; O'Connor, 1974, 1980; Simon and
           Ward, 1973; Simpson and Graham, 1971; Tomlinson,
           1983; Weinreich, 1977)

Australia and Oceania
    New Zealand   (Moir, 1974)

Two types of societies still represent critical missing cases: (1) foraging
(hunter-gatherer) societies, which lack social classes or hierarchy and also formal
political and legal institutions; and (2) societies such as those of Eastern Europe,
USSR, and Peoples' Republic of China, which are complex nation-states but based
on non-capitalist economies. A further serious weakness of the literature is that the
only longitudinal cases in the above list are from the Bahamas, French Canada,
Israel, Great Britain and Turkey. The great majority of studies are cross-sectional,
due to the enormous expense and difficulty of conducting longitudinal work.

The proposition of invariant sequence requires that stage development be
stepwise and progressive, with stage regressions and stage skippings no greater than
expected by chance (measurement error). All of the cross-sectional studies have

found average moral maturity and/or upper-stage-range to increase with age during the childhood and adolescent years (with the exception of the Hutterite sample). No studies have found any 'missing' stages between the lowest and highest stages present in a sample. Furthermore, the longitudinal studies (with the probable exception of Tomlinson's, 1983, British sample) have supported these conclusions by indicating no significant amounts of stage regression over time. Thus, while the available data cannot positively demonstrate invariant sequence, taken together they strongly suggest that development change is generally gradual and positive throughout the childhood and adolescent years, in a wide variety of cultural groups.

Most investigators, naturally, conducted their research with broader questions in mind than merely invariant sequence. Taking advantage of the natural range of variation in social life worldwide, they have been able to gain increased leverage on understanding experiential influences. For example, a number of researchers from the list above have been able to show that the following experiential factors relate positively to moral judgment. (*Note:* the dates of the studies are provided only when necessary for the reader):

> *socioeconomic status* (Grimley; Kohlberg with Bar Yam; Nisan and Kohlberg; Simpson and Graham; Turiel *et al.*);
> *residential factors*, e.g., living in city or village, or city versus kibbutz (Gorsuch and Barnes; Nisan and Kohlberg; Snarey; Turiel *et al.*);
> *educational level* (Batt; Edwards, 1975);
> *school experiences* (Edwards, 1978; Maqsud, all studies; Marchand-Jodoin and Samson; Sullivan, 1975; Sullivan and Beck);
> *parental discipline, warmth or identification* (Parikh; Saadatmand; Simpson and Graham).

These studies taken together converge to suggest that moral judgment level is stimulated by at least three general types of experiences, that increase: (1) an individual's contact with a *diversity of personal or cultural values*; (2) an individual's ability to *reason in formal or school-like ways* about moral issues; and (3) an individual's tendency to *take as one's reference group a complex society*. The research allows a general consensus that conditions that lead to development in one group are comparable to conditions that lead to development in other groups.

Finally, we return to the issue with which this paper opened: how valid is Kohlberg's theory for comparing moral development (and moral adequacy) *between* people of different cultural groups?

Even on this controversial issue a certain consensus may be achievable. It is noteworthy that in response to criticism, Kohlberg has revised his own earlier position. He now states (in Kohlberg, Levine and Hewer, 1983):

> We do not believe that the comparison of one culture to another in terms of moral development is a theoretically useful strategy for the growth of scientific knowledge.. It is difficult to understand what a valid concept of 'comparative moral worth of culture' might be, but in any case such a concept could not be established on the basis of a comparison of means on our moral judgment assessment scale. There is no direct way in which group averages can be translated into statements of the relative moral worth of groups (p. 113).

In other words, cross-cultural differences have nothing to do after all with the relative moral worth or adequacy of moral judging. Moral judgment stages, from a cross-cultural point of view, are simply not achievements for which higher is

necessarily better. Rather, Kohlberg's theory and methods offer just one useful way to study developmental growth in wisdom or 'conscious reflectiveness' in moral decision-making. Certainly they do not begin to encompass all that we would like to know in terms of understanding how human beings across the spectrum of world cultures develop in the capacity to make moral choices. Nevertheless, Kohlberg's theory and methods have surely generated a productive line of comparative research that has become more sophisticated, multidimensional and theoretically lively over time.

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