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Emotional and Relational Dynamics in Child-Focused Social Work: Social Workers' Subject Positions and their Consequences

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Abstract

This article examines the subject positions taken by or given to social workers when working with a grieving child. The research data were based on five group interviews with Finnish public-sector social workers (N=17) collected in January–June 2022. The data were analysed through subject-positional analysis that identified four subject positions representing the social workers' actions in dealing with a child experiencing grief and the consequences of these actions. The positions of service system navigator, visibility enabler, listener, and referrer make visible the social workers' actions and their concrete consequences for the bereaved child. They highlight not only the important role of social work in identifying children's emotions, but also the effect of confusing work practices on children's access to help.

Introduction

Social work is fundamentally interactive, emphasizing interpersonal relationships between practitioners and clients, and the broader social networks that influence clients' experiences and well-being. Emotions play a critical role in these dynamics, requiring social workers to navigate the physiological, neurological, cognitive, unconscious, social, and cultural dimensions of emotions to address their clients' needs effectively (Barrett 2017; Day Sclater et al. 2009). This understanding is crucial when working with children, as it involves considering both their immediate situations and the broader relational contexts in which the emotions exist.

Social work is set to “sit with suffering and hold on hope” (Berzoff & Drisko 2015). Social work clients come across difficult experiences, often including trauma (Berzoff & Drisko 2015) and difficult emotions such as grief. Social work has also been recognized as demanding and stressful practice that requires full emotional presence (Grant et. al 2014; Grant et al. 2015; Ikebuchi & Rasmussen 2014). The central role of emotions is at the core of the literature on relationship-based practice (Munro 2011). There is a constant debate between professionalism and showing emotions, and when discussing how social workers show emotions in their work, we are on uncertain ground (Ingram 2013). From previous research we know that practitioners' own level of empathy correlates with positive client outcomes and is also central in effective communication situations in child protection (Forrester et al. 2008). Previous studies show that low levels of empathy can have an impact on parental engagement (Forrester et al., 2008; Lynch et al., 2019).

Furthermore, the ethical foundation of social work requires practitioners to engage reflexively, critically examining their own emotional responses and positionality in their work. Reflexivity helps navigate power dynamics, maintain professional boundaries, and foster meaningful client engagement (Fook & Gardner 2007). Social workers' subject positions are essentially connected to power, which manifests itself in discourses as different levels of control. Power significantly affects not only what is possible to say, but also the relationships between practitioners (Fairclough 1989). It is also necessary to look at the relationship between the social worker and the child in terms of the use of power, because in certain situations the social worker's power to decide on the child's affairs is prescribed by law (Dingwall et al. 2014).

Even though previous research highlights the significance of emotions in social work, the studies have mainly explored social workers' own emotional experiences and strategies to

manage them (e.g. Sewell 2020), as well as children's emotional experiences in contexts such as maltreatment (Maschi et al. 2009), maternal sensitivity, emotional development (Bernard et al. 2015), and grief in foster care (Mitchell 2017; Look 2023). However, grief from a social workers' perspective, particularly children's grief, remains underexplored and the research also lacks knowledge on how social workers are positioned in helping children who experience grief and sorrow. Addressing this gap, this article focuses on children's grief and sorrow, examining how social workers position themselves when working with children experiencing these emotions. This article seeks to answer the following questions: How do social workers position themselves or how are they positioned when working with grieving children? and What consequences do these subject positions entail?

Exploring Emotional and Relational Dynamics in Child-Focused Social Work

Social workers frequently engage in complex social systems, mediating between individuals, families, and communities to provide support. Their role as facilitators of change hinges on building trust and fostering relationships through active listening, empathy, and culturally sensitive communication (Morgenshtern et al. 2011). This interpersonal engagement underscores the profession's relational foundation, where practitioners are deeply involved in clients' emotional landscapes.

In this article, I focus on the relationship between the social worker and the child and look at the social worker positions formed in this relationship. I view the relationship as a multidimensional discourse consisting of sub-discourses (Lassen & Moreira 2017). Social work as a profession aims to remove factors causing human suffering and to support and help individuals in weakened positions under different societal, political, and economic circumstances. Relationships in social work are thus not only built of but also affected by various factors in multidimensional ways. The positions that social workers assign themselves in their interviews can be viewed as social constructions that contain different mechanisms and boundaries (Blaikie 2000). It can therefore be thought that social workers construct the reality of their work, in this case the relationships between them and grieving children, through positions (cf. Fairclough 2012), and it is these subject positions according to which they see the world (Willig 2013; also Foucault 1980).

In examining the subject positions, I understand that social workers' decision-making power related especially to child protection affects the relationship between the child and the social worker. Although I am looking at all social work with children in this study, it is essential to keep this dimension of power in mind, because it essentially affects the relationship between the child and the social worker by defining, for example, the roles, positions, and rules involved (Gergen, 2003; Parton, 2006; Shotter, 1997). When clients and social workers interact with each other, they are constantly evaluating the effects of the positions they are in. The positions also have moral consequences for clients (Keddel 2014, 73).

In conclusion, social work's relational and emotionally charged nature underscores the need for professionals to integrate an understanding of individual and socio-cultural emotional contexts into their practice. Recognizing the diverse causes and implications of children's grief is critical for developing effective and empathetic interventions that address the multifaceted nature of clients' experiences.

Materials and methods

Ethics

The research received ethical approval from the ethical board of the University of [name anonymized] and adhered to the principles outlined by TENK (2019), including self-determination, avoidance of harm, and privacy protection. Research permits were obtained from all participating organizations, and the interviewees were recruited through their supervisors, as no direct contact information was provided. At this point, also the information letter and privacy statement were provided. To minimize the researcher's influence on group formation, alternative interview times were offered; however, some participants from the same organizations joined the same interviews and were familiar with each other. A written informed consent was collected from all participants, with the voluntary nature of the study and the option to withdraw at any stage emphasized. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and anonymized by removing all identifying information about individuals and organizations. The participants were offered an opportunity to discuss their feelings after the interview, and these discussions were not recorded or included in the research material.

Participants and gathering the data

The data for this research were collected from Finnish public sector social workers between January and June 2022. 17 practitioners participated in five group interviews. These professionals, all with either a university degree in social work or a degree from a university of applied sciences, worked in different roles within social services. While most of the interviewees were women, the common denominator among them was child-centered social work. Their roles spanned child and family social work, child protection (in assessment teams or foster care), social and crisis emergency services, family work, and legal services for families.

The interviews followed a thematic approach, focusing on three main themes: manifestations of sorrow in children, approaches to work with children experiencing sorrow, and the social work methods employed in organizations. Each interview lasted between 75 and 90 minutes, with 90 minutes being the most common duration. The interviews were transcribed, resulting in 151 pages of text formatted in Times New Roman, font size 12.

The rationale for employing focus group interviews was to explore children's grief and sorrow as they are encountered in social work, a relatively under-researched area. This method allowed for the collection of diverse perspectives and facilitated the exploration of the child-professional relationship in the context of grief. According to Morgan (1996), focus group interviews provide a suitable framework for gaining insights into such phenomena. In these interviews, the social workers situated themselves within the social activity structure, discussing their roles in supporting grieving children (Fairclough 1989).

Data Analysis

The analysis revolved around the concept of *subject position*, referring to the structures of agency shaped by social practices. I utilized a discourse analytic approach by looking at different subject positions assumed by or given to social workers when working with children experiencing grief. In discourse analysis, speech is seen as action (Winther Jørgensen & Philips 2000) and two key concepts can be used: ideological dilemmas or subject positions (Edley 2001). I chose to use the latter since I was interested in social workers' agency. Subject positions are connected to the wider notion of discourse and to the social construction of self (Edley 2001). In the interviews, the social workers addressed their role in working

with grieving children, discussing their professional skills and identities. The conversations enabled me to identify the subject positions either assumed by or given to the professionals.

It has been noted that subject positions emerge in different sociocultural conventions. By examining the data through subject position analysis, I aimed to find out the mechanisms and situations that lie behind identification and to reveal how the positions are utilized as a method of concrete interaction (Törrönen 2014). Subject positions are essentially connected to power and are thus manifested as different levels of control (Fairclough 1989), which in this study is particularly evident in the consequences of the positions—the social worker's action determines the help the child receives in his or her grief. It is crucial to explore power and control in social work, especially in working with children, since children are almost always to some extent dependent on adults around them. Subject positions also entail rights and responsibilities (Davies & Harré 1990), which led me to examine their consequences. Furthermore, it is important to recognize power at the individual, professional, and structural levels. By understanding these dynamics, social workers can use their authority to empower children, ensuring that their voices are heard and their needs are met. This approach facilitates ethical exchanges of power, promoting trust and collaboration between social workers and children (Karim 2023).

I was able to identify four different subject positions in the analysis. These positions are **service system navigator, visibility enabler, listener, and referrer**. I examined how the positions were embodied and what consequences they were associated with. The positions are not completely unambiguous, and parts of them can overlap. They are also influenced by the social sector’s professional practices, organizational structures, and resources that are directed to social work. The subject positions are summarised in table 1, below.

POSITION	EMBODIMENT OF THE POSITION	ETHICAL-MORAL FOLLOWINGS OF THE POSITION
Service system navigator	Identifying the needs related to the child's grief, knowing the service system, knowing other professionals	Child gets the help needed at the right time, professionals gather around children
Visible maker	Knowing the child and their needs, creating a relationship with the child, relationship-based working	Child’s grief becomes visible for the close ones and the service system. Child is accepted and encountered with empathy.

Present listener	Being calm, offering support, noticing child's age and developmental stage, seeing child as a person	Social work remains flexible, adaptive, and responsive, ensuring that the child's perspective is not only heard but valued in shaping the social work process. The ethical and moral consequences of the present listener approach in social work center on balancing empowerment with protection
Elsewhere referrer	Referring a child to someone who ones them better, being uncertain of their own skills regarding grief work, identifying grief but having to refer to other services because of resources	Continuity and constancy are harmed. Frequent handoffs lead to fragmented services, where the child does not receive consistent support or clear communication. The trust between social worker and a child might be harmed.

Table 1. Social Worker's Subject Positions and their Consequences

Results

Service system navigator

The role of a service system navigator is fundamentally rooted in both comprehensive knowledge of the service system and hands-on experience in child-focused social work. Professionals in this role often have extensive experience of working with children who require a range of services. Their primary responsibility is to build and sustain multiprofessional networks ensuring that the child receives appropriate and timely support. By fostering cooperation among diverse professionals, the service system navigator facilitates integrated responses to complex needs. This position emphasizes proactive engagement with other professionals and the capacity to align services with the child's unique circumstances. As noted by the interviewees, ensuring that the grieving child receives the right support from the service system can entirely prevent negative outcomes (cf. Mitchell 2017, 1, 9).

Social workers functioning as service system navigators underscore the critical role of multiprofessional collaboration. In this position, rather than transferring a grieving child to another professional, the navigator constructs a support network that holistically meets the child's needs. This approach ensures that multiple experts work together, rather than in silos, to provide comprehensive care. An interviewee from family work describes the practical application of these professional networks:

"I had a recent good experience in an acute situation where I worked on duty, and I got help from family counseling and from nurses in the youth services. The three of us visited a family, and we were able to divide our attention."

In this subject position, the relationship between the social worker and the child becomes important in ensuring that the child receives the necessary services. The actions of the service system navigator greatly increase the likelihood that the child receives the right services at the right time. This structured approach enhances the ethical sustainability of social work practice. The ethical and moral implications of providing services to children in need are complex. By ensuring that services are delivered in a way that respects the dignity and rights of children and their families, social workers contribute to positive outcomes while maintaining an ethically sound practice (see Reamer 2013).

Visibility enabler

The position of a visibility enabler in social work is defined by an effort to make children's grief and sorrow visible. Social workers in this position serve as intermediaries between children and the service system, ensuring that children's emotional needs are recognized and addressed (see Author's own, 2025). The essential function of this role is to facilitate conversations about grief in a way that is accessible and comfortable for children, allowing them to express their emotions in supportive interactions.

One of the key responsibilities of a visibility enabler is attentiveness to subtle cues from children. Social workers must be highly observant to recognize even the smallest gestures or expressions of need, especially in cases where parents, due to their own emotional distress, may overlook their child's grief. As described by one of the social workers:

“You need to notice if the child makes even a small gesture indicating a wish or need, you need to be observant, to hear and see. Those gestures are pretty small in the end, because when we are talking about grief, it can be that children’s needs have become invisible for the parents because of their situation.”

Visibility enablers continually refine their approaches, sometimes drawing from formal training and at other times developing their methods through experience. However, beyond specific techniques, the fundamental aspect of this role is human connection. As another social worker points out:

“The most important thing I learned was that you don’t need to know much, you just need to be present. So that you can go into those situations calmly, you don’t get panicked.”

The visibility enabler’s position extends beyond making grief visible—it also involves a significant shift in power dynamics. This position emphasizes the importance of ensuring that children are not merely passive objects of decisions but are active participants in conversations about their own lives. Social workers must balance interpreting children's wishes with respecting their autonomy, allowing them to define their level of participation in decision-making (Thomas 2002). This is particularly important in family settings, where making the child’s grief visible can also support parents in acknowledging and accepting their child’s emotions:

“We don’t dictate and tell you how this is going to go, but we make the child visible with their grief, we make the child feel accepted with their grief. Because children always look at their parents as to whether it is okay for me to be like this. So, we can put it into words that it is okay, it is okay to be just as you are.”

By refraining from making decisions on behalf of the child and instead fostering participatory decision-making, social workers shift the power dynamic. According to Keddell (2014, 74), power in social work should not be about control but about forming more equitable relationships and co-creating knowledge. This approach ensures that children are seen as active participants rather than powerless subjects (cf. Healy 2000, 203).

“We have all these negotiations and transfer meetings and stuff. But from the children’s point of view it is crucial that social workers tell the children and others in those meetings what is going on so that the child knows they don’t have to speak if they don’t want to. We can just go on from this. Because the service system, especially around foster care children, is quite heavy.”

The visibility enabler’s position highlights the ethical and moral implications of power-sharing with children in social work. While empowering children can lead to positive developmental outcomes, it also presents challenges requiring careful ethical reflection. Social workers must navigate complex situations where they interpret children’s needs while ensuring that the child’s best interests remain central. The approach demands ongoing sensitivity, adaptability, and professional discretion. Ultimately, this position reinforces the principle that children should not be overlooked but instead should be heard and recognized as active participants in social work practice (Davies & Wright 2008; Strömmland et al., 2022). By making grief visible and fostering environments where children feel safe to express themselves, social workers contribute to a more inclusive and responsive support system that respects children’s voices and emotional realities.

Listener

The position of a listener in social work is built through an emphasis on attentiveness, empathy, and adaptability in interactions with children. These social workers position themselves as active listeners, creating space for children’s voices, validating their emotions, and respecting their autonomy (Brummelaar et al., 2018; Collins et al., 2021; McPherson et al., 2021). The approach prioritizes meeting children as they are, both emotionally and developmentally, rather than following rigid protocols. Instead of merely hearing words, the social workers also engage with children’s behavior and non-verbal expressions, demonstrating flexibility in their interactions.

“The first meeting is crucial. How we take into consideration child’s ability to deal (with grief), how their age and developmental stage affects it. --- How we meet the child, at what point we meet the child is important so that we start working childlike and not following a specific manual.”

The significance of the initial encounter is highlighted, as these social workers recognize the impact of a child’s age and developmental stage on their ability to process grief. They stress the importance of tailoring interactions to fit the child’s unique needs, allowing for a more natural and meaningful engagement. By listening over time and learning from children who have experienced grief, social workers deepen their understanding and refine their approaches. This long-term commitment to listening underscores the value placed on children’s perspectives in shaping social work interventions. By critiquing overly formalized approaches, social workers advocate encounters that happen at the right time and in ways that truly acknowledge the child’s individual experience. This adaptability is crucial in recognizing that children have diverse needs and coping strategies.

“What I need is the possibility for actual encounters. Encounters that happen at the right time. Not in the way that we nowadays have, that all those debriefings are launched and everything happens with huge setups. But instead encountering the child as an individual.”

The consequences of adopting a listener stance in social work are profound. By centering on children's voices, social workers empower them while also bearing the ethical responsibility of balancing this empowerment with protection. There is a risk of misinterpreting children's needs, overburdening them, or inadvertently increasing their vulnerability. However, by maintaining a flexible and child-centered approach, social workers can enhance their competence and confidence in engaging with children effectively (Toros et al., 2018).

In summary, the listener approach redefines social work by shifting the focus from structured interventions to meaningful, responsive engagement. This role requires professionals to be adaptable, empathetic, and deeply attuned to children's verbal and non-verbal communication. The ethical responsibility lies in ensuring that children's voices are heard without compromising their well-being. By embracing this practice, social workers not only validate children's experiences, but also contribute to a broader transformation in professional competence and child-centered care.

Referrer

The position of the referrer in social work is characterized by the transfer of the child from one professional to another, often because of unclear organizational structures and systemic limitations. This position is inconsistent with the ethical principles of social work, as it disrupts the continuity of care and may leave the child's emotional needs unaddressed (Banks 2021). While this position is shaped by institutional constraints rather than individual choice, it raises ethical concerns regarding professional responsibility and client well-being.

The social workers in this study described their work as significantly influenced by their specific job positions and available resources. Those engaged in service need assessment typically had short-term client relationships, leading them to refer cases elsewhere rather than engage in grief work. They expressed ethical concerns about addressing a child's grief within a brief intervention period, fearing it would be inappropriate and ineffective. However, it could also be considered ethically justified to seek proper help for a child elsewhere.

"Well, I also think that in our systemic team, in child protection, it is not common to do the actual griefwork. Our model of work is that we refer the child to developmental services or children's psychiatry, where I think they have more knowledge (of grief)."

Similarly, the interviewees working in preventive family services reported that resource constraints and large caseloads limited their ability to form meaningful relationships with children. As a result, children experiencing grief were often referred to specialized services, despite the risks associated with fragmented care. The absence of clear service pathways further complicated the allocation of responsibilities, making it unclear who should provide grief support.

"And specifically, our work, in family services with children, when we have those service need assessments and then we have these ongoing clients, our resources are far too small to be able to meet the children sufficiently. So, the fact that we would be the ones a child would talk to is definitely not the case, because these children meet us too rarely."

A key factor contributing to this position was the social workers' uncertainty about their own competence in grief work. Many felt that their training had not adequately prepared them for handling children's grief and sorrow (Eraut 2007; Bradford 2018), reinforcing the tendency to refer cases elsewhere. This self-doubt, coupled with organizational inefficiencies, increased the likelihood of multiple referrals, prolonging the child's distress and delaying appropriate support (Grant et al. 2015).

"Specifically, the fact that referring from one to another professional takes place. We feel for some reason that we don't know how to help, and we transfer them to another professional, and therefore you can never be sure when the other professional is be able to start with the client. There's a risk in that because of the wait and the fragmentation of it."

A significant consequence of the referrer position is that children must repeatedly recount their experiences to different professionals, which can be emotionally exhausting and impede trust-building. Moreover, the absence of long-term professional relationships may prevent children's grief from being properly recognized and addressed (Chatzifotiou & Papouli 2022). Frequent handoffs also risk creating fragmented services, further diminishing the effectiveness of support.

Discussion

This article has examined the subject positions that are either given to or assumed by social workers when working with children with grief experiences. In addition, the consequences for the child resulting from the subject positions have been examined. Four subject positions were found in the analysis: service system navigator, visibility enabler, listener and referrer. The positions overlap to some extent, as the activities in them are guided by the professional ethics of the social sector, the operating models and work practices of the organizations, and the resources allocated to the work. However, there are differences between them, and the consequences for the child clearly distinguish the positions from each other.

Service system navigator's position emphasizes readiness for multi-professional cooperation and finding services suitable for the child. As a result of the agency present in the position, the child is likely to receive the right services at the right time. *Visibility enablers*, on the other hand, aim to make the child and their needs visible both to the child's close ones and to the service system. In this position, making grief visible is in the center, because it is not always obvious that the child will verbalize their grief (see Author's own, forthcoming). The *listener's* position embodies concrete engagement and a desire to hear the child's point of view. Professionals in this position aim to achieve a positive helping experience and to share power with the child. *Referrer's* agency clearly conflicts the most with the ethics of the profession. In this position, social workers feel that they are limited by scarce resources, unclear operating models, and situational uncertainties (see Brummelaar et al. 2018; Chatzifotiou & Papouli 2022). It is, however, important to acknowledge that even in this position, social workers have a desire to help the child but feel that their agency is limited by external factors.

Based on this article, social workers' subject positions and the associated types of agency have concrete consequences for the child. It is typically difficult to recognise grief and sorrow in social work (Author's own, 2025). The relationship between the social worker and the child should be considered from the perspective of how it enables the treatment of difficult emotions. While both parties have their own positions in the relationship, the social worker's

position entails power and responsibility (Keddeh 2014). It is important to note that this power also opens up possibilities for the child by making the needs of a grieving child more visible, for instance.

This research brings out unclear models related to grief work, not only in social work, but also more broadly in the service system for children. Grief and sorrow are sensitive emotions, and it is essential to meet the related needs at the right time in order to reduce their negative effects (see Fineran 2012). According to my analysis, when work practices are unclear and resources lacking, it is sometimes not possible to provide help that is sufficiently extensive and effective. The operational practices of organizations should be examined from the perspective of enabling effective and timely help. It is also worth considering why social workers feel that their training does not provide them with sufficient skills to work with clients experiencing difficult emotions. Although generalisations cannot be made based on this study alone, the following questions should be considered: “Does training provide social workers with sufficient skills to confront clients with difficult emotions?” and “If it does, why are the skills not transferred into practice?”

Limitations

This study has some limitations. Firstly, the research was carried out in the context of Finnish social work. The Finnish culture of mourning has special features that affect, for example, how grief is shown to others and how societal grieving practices affect children and families. This makes grief a difficult emotion for social workers to grasp, whereby working with a grieving child can be associated with uncertainty. Secondly, the study dealt with subject positions and the associated consequences defined by social workers themselves without hearing the grieving child's own voice. In terms of future research, hearing the child's voice is important. Also, targeting a larger and more diverse sample of participants, including social workers from other countries and children themselves, would likely expand our understanding of the topic and help us confirm or create significant points of intervention and useful strategies for social workers who support young people and their families undergoing grief-related experiences.

Conclusion

This study expands our understanding of the role of social work in supporting children experiencing grief. Its findings imply a need to focus on a broader approach to grief-related work and organizational operating models related to it. There is also a need for a practice-based examination of the relationship between the child and the social worker from the perspective of emotions. Further exploration of that relationship could provide more information on how help can be provided effectively during client encounters. The relationship also plays a key role in making children feel secure and listened to.

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Table 1. Social Worker's Subject Positions and their Consequences

POSITION	VERBAL ACTION DESCRIBING THE POSITION	EMBODIMENT OF THE POSITION	CONSEQUENCES OF THE POSITION
Service system navigator	"But having the sensitivity to observe, listen, understand, and at least meet the child so that the child feels heard and seen, and then based on that, services of a professional are taken into account, I think that will go a long way."	Identifying the needs related to the child's grief, knowing the service system, knowing other professionals	Child gets the help needed at the right time, professionals gather around child
Visibility enabler	"I've had observations that I can interpret grief from, from kindergarten. The kindergarten produces such a narrative that I, who know the child, can deduce that the child is going through this kind of grief."	Knowing the child and her/his needs, creating a relationship with the child, relationship-based working	Child's grief becomes visible for the close ones and the service system. Child is accepted and encountered with empathy.
Listener	"And I think you have to listen to the child with a sensitive ear, because it is not just that we have a certain profession that automatically acts as a magic wand that produces the solution through which the grief can be channeled and then it can be brought to the level of speech."	Being calm, offering support, noticing child's age and developmental stage, seeing child as a person	Social work remains flexible, adaptive, and responsive, ensuring that the child's perspective is not only heard but valued in shaping the social work process. The consequences of the present listener approach in social work centre on balancing empowerment with protection
Referrer	"Sometimes there have been some strange situations where we think that the child is referred to the health care system, and they think "isn't child protection taking care of this?" or "why don't you talk to him?" So we may have a completely different view. I mean, sometimes there's a buzz here that someone calls from downstairs, they refer the child to us, we refer the	Referring a child to someone who knows them better, being uncertain of their own skills regarding grief work, identifying grief but having to refer to other services because of resources	Continuity and constancy are harmed. Frequent handoffs lead to fragmented services, where the child does not receive consistent support or clear communication. The trust between social worker and a child might be harmed.

	child to them, so, it's a bit strange. .”		
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