

Humour and belonging: a thematic review

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Abstract

Serving as introduction to this Special Issue, this article presents a thematic review of topics involved in studies on humour and belonging. It briefly elaborates on the intricacies of concepts such as humour, sense of humour and belonging and their relationships. It then provides a selective review of some major relevant studies. Finally, the themes and contents of the Special Issue are introduced.

Keywords: humour, laughter, belonging, inclusion, exclusion.

“Against the assault of laughter nothing can stand”.

Mark Twain, “The Mysterious Stranger” (1916)

1. Introduction

Humour is often claimed to be “a double-edged sword” (Meyer 2000) and to have a “bad reputation” (Morreall 2020). Historically the three terms *humour*, *the comic*, and *laughter* have all had negative connotations (Ruch 1998), and it is only since the 19th century that *humour* has attained its current largely positive meaning (Morreall 2020). While humour can undoubtedly be offensive, divisive, aggressive, and humiliating, a *sense of humour* is nevertheless a prominent and highly-valued interpersonal quality in a number of different cultures nowadays (Ruch 1998; Martin 1998).

Plato's views have played an important role in creating this bad reputation for humour. He warns - in his *Laws*, Book VII - that freemen should not take part in comic practices; hence he laid down regulations for laughable amusements (*Laws*, in Jowett 2012: 284). He also recommended that the penalty for nurses who unforgivably neglect their duties towards children should be *ridicule* (Jowett 2012: 265), a crushing punishment. But, as Billig notes, "for Plato, ridicule was, under certain circumstances, one of the few permitted forms of humour" (2005: 158). It was singled out for its divisive and cauterising effect. This view of its power, for good or ill, is reflected both in the epigraph above and in the work of comedians and satirists down the ages.

Pious guardians of many religions have contributed to this ill-fame. Laughter, joking, and humour have often been condemned as devilish rather than being accepted as godly social practices in the Abrahamic religions (see Gilhus 1997; Saroglou 2002); while at the opposite pole, self-control was admired and enforced in many religious circles (Adkin 1985). To add to the negative sentiment, laughter long managed to escape rigorous scholarly explanation, as Norbert Elias observed: "Laughter [...] seems to give pleasure without having a duty to fulfil. It is a source of joy, the usefulness or function of which remains in the dark" (Schröter 2002: 3; translated by Gerdes & Milner Davis).

Despite humour's negative reputation, the sense of humour has gained a good reputation (at least in the English language) and, accordingly, humour is considered an important tool in interpersonal relationships (e.g., Miller 1996; Houston et al 1998; Kuiper & Martin 2010). It is seen as something which can create a positive emotional state with corresponding health benefits (Martin 2003; Göttestam et al. 2008). As an example, studies show that people who are perceived by participants as possessing a good sense of humour receive significantly higher ratings in measures of attractiveness and suitability as a long-term partner (McGee & Shevlin 2009).

Humour has a narrow historical sense, in which, according to Willibald Ruch, it is "simply one element of the comic [...] and basically denotes a smiling attitude toward life and its imperfections: an understanding of the incongruities of existence" (Ruch 1998: 6). In its broad meaning and general usage in the field of humour studies, including this special issue, it is "used as the umbrella-term for all phenomena of this field" (Ruch 1998: 6). *Sense of humour*, on the other hand, can be defined as Bergler (1956: 275) did in the mid-twentieth century as "an ability to take a joke (directed against oneself and made by somebody else) in good grace, and to join in the laughter", or perhaps as different variations of that ability. Ruch regards *sense of humour* as "an umbrella-term for the totality of habitual individual differences" which can be summed up as referring "to the ability to put others down in a funny way" (Ruch 1998: 7). It should be pointed out that this summative definition is a particularly narrow one, as, if taken literally, it would seem to exclude a sense of humour in which one has the ability to laugh at oneself, or to see the funny side of the human condition in general. However, scholarly endeavours as well as public belief often regard sense of humour as relating particularly to or being characteristic of Anglo-Saxon culture, whereby "having a sense of humour has become a core value in American society" (Apte 1987: 28) and a sense of humour has even been seen as "the heartlands of Englishness" (Easthope 2000). Wickberg (1998: 102) in a detailed study outlines the process by which the concept and the term passed from its English origins into general use and came to be incorporated into the early stages of psychological assessment at Harvard University (by Gordon Allport in the 1930s), a position which it has ever since maintained.

Part of the historical suspicion about humour has been due to its divisive aspect. One cannot discuss humour or laughter in any depth without taking into account the psychological and sociological effects of mocking, teasing, racial or ethnic joking, etc. For instance, many studies have shown that ridicule, endorsed by Plato for special purposes, is indeed effective in social settings as a tool of humiliation (cf. Bergson 1911; Sharkey 1992).

Martin & Ford (2018) argue that humour is well understood to be a double-edged sword because of its essentially bi-valent nature. Humour communicates an explicit message, along with an implicit message – or *meta-message* as Attardo (1993) terms it – that “the explicit message is not real ...[and] thus creates an inherent ambiguity about the underlying intentions of a message” (Martin & Ford 2018: 248). Such ambiguity can easily be uncomfortable for a recipient, especially if he or she feels targeted by the joke or laughter. The articles in the present collection illustrate this kind of effect in several different contexts and certainly do not attempt to dodge the negative aspects of humour.

Pertinently, another inherent feature of humour is that it is interpersonal. While it is possible to laugh alone at something that one has read or witnessed or that has occurred to one, there is always a sense of looking for an audience. This is why one cannot study humour without commenting on the social elements involved. On the positive side is the sense of belonging that is promoted by the exchange of humour and which as a general concept has won unanimous praise. Although several publications in humour studies have looked at aspects of belonging in humorous contexts (e.g., Hay 2000; Holmes 2000; Davies 2006), despite its importance, *belonging* has not until now been adopted as the theme of a dedicated collection. The present special issue titled “Humour and Belonging” presents a selection of papers from the 26th Australasian Humour Studies Network Conference (AHSN2020) at Griffith University, Australia, which took that topic as its theme. The papers here collected seek to address both positive and negative aspects of the topic.

As the gateway to this Special Issue on “Humour and Belonging”, this introduction reviews the main themes at the intersection of studies on (sense of) humour and (sense of) belonging. We will ground the discussion in the binary form of belonging vs non-belonging with a special focus on topics in humour studies. Then, we will review major themes that have been covered in the existing literature, and finally we will briefly preview the valuable contributions made to this Special Issue.

2. Humour and belonging themes

When it comes to *sense of humour* and *sense of belonging*, we can make both one cautious claim and one confident one. Based on existing research, we can cautiously claim that, in Western culture at least, a sense of humour is an extremely desirable attribute (Martin 2003), to the extent that Billig can claim that “to say that someone has no sense of humour is to utter a criticism” (2005: 17). But the term is moot and cultural variations definitely come into play affecting any universality for this claim. On the other hand, extant literature helps us argue that to satisfy a sense of belonging is a fundamental human motivation (for a review, see Baumeister & Leary 1995, and note the important role that sense of belonging plays in the Maslovian hierarchy of needs; Maslow 1943).

Intuitively, we know that some forms of humour can boost the sense of solidarity and promote identification as a member of a group sharing laughter or humour (see Collinson 1988) since participants *feel good* about achieving such a goal. We do instinctively seek to share something that we have found amusing and we feel a sense of reward when others also find it funny. Conversely, we are disappointed, even embarrassed, when our joke falls flat or is greeted with a groan (with the important exception of so-called *dad jokes* which anticipate groaning as a desired response). However, as noted above, we also know that some forms of humour can be divisive. Martineau (1972), for instance, examines the sociological consequences of humour and believes humour can be either a *lubricant* or an *abrasive* in social settings; and more recently

Takovski (2021) has argued cogently that it can be especially lubricative when different cultures are to be bridged.

Other studies have shown that humour can be inclusive (Hay 2000; Holmes 2000; Davies 2006; Lampert & Ervin-Tripp 2006) but also exclusive (Davies 2006). Thus, while humour can be used to strengthen the sense of belonging among members of a community, it can also be used within a community to *mock* the perceived non-belonging of a person. This is a complex phenomenon, as in order to belong, one may well use critical self-description within a jocular and humorous frame as a solidarity-building practice (Dynel & Poppi 2020). Speakers generally display pragmatic knowledge of the level of humour being directed at others in different cultural and situational contexts. This has often been described as one aspect of the common-sense knowledge of social structure that is shared among members (Sacks 1989; Shrikant 2020). Provided that cultural sharing is in place, speakers can also identify appropriate versus inappropriate humour, based on the contextual elements. As a result, when humour goes beyond the norms and metrics of appropriateness, it can be detrimental to social relations, individual identities and harmony (Lockyer & Pickering 2005; Chen et al. 2013; Jiang et al. 2019; Nevo et al. 2019; Plester & Kim 2021).

Reflecting the fact that belonging is an accepted human motive, studies originating within the *belongingness hypothesis* postulate that “human beings have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships” (Baumeister & Leary 1995: 497). This becomes important for numerous studies showing how, at least in some societies, unacquainted people and new members of a group frequently initiate interaction by making humorous remarks (Haugh 2011, 2017; Haugh & Pillet-Shore 2018), such as quips (Haugh & Weinglass 2018) or bantering (Plester & Sayers 2007).

A recent report by Borgella et al. (2020: 114-115) finds that “the literature exploring humour in intergroup contexts has focused almost exclusively on humour that targets a person or persons based on their membership in a social group”. This is often referred to as disparagement humour (Ford & Ferguson 2004) that maligns a group at the social level (Cundall 2012), whether playfully or maliciously (Borgella et al. 2020, after Janes & Olson 2010). Disparagement humour is usefully defined as “communication that is intended to elicit amusement through the denigration, derogation, or belittlement of a given target” (Ford 2015; see also Zillmann 1983).

Even when it is aggressive, humour can still be received as genuine, even playful (Davies 1990), with the initiator claiming that this is only a play and the recipient accepting that claim. In other cases of course, the claim is rejected and mutual amusement does not result. However, when it does, such so-called *light-hearted humour* can be described as a positive tool from a social or psychological point of view (Lefcourt & Martin 1986; Hageseth 1998; Lefcourt 2001; Billig 2005).

A leading example of aggressive humour, whether successful or not, is the ethnic joke that has been studied in various contexts and from several approaches (e.g. Davies 1990; Shifman & Katz 2005; Weaver 2011; Gillota 2013; Kuipers & van der Ent 2016). Some cases illustrate that such jokes are intentionally racist even though they are presented in the meta-discourse of disclaimers to justify that the joke is “just a joke” (Billig 2001). An interesting study by Douglass et al. (2016) suggests that among youthful American peers, deliberate ethnic/racial teasing is a common way for today’s adolescents to interact around issues of ethnicity and race. The study found that, although they were largely considered normative and harmless, such jokes did have negative psychological effects for some adolescents (Douglass et al. 2016: 69), confirming Glenn’s (2003: 123) remark that teasing itself is inherently dualistic, containing both serious and playful elements.

When Boskin & Dorinson (1985) made an initial examination of the history of ethnic humour in the USA, they observed that ethnic humour had functioned as a tool against sense of belonging in “distinct social groups” and social class feelings of superiority:

Ethnic humour against supposedly ‘inferior’ social groups initially conveyed the thrusts of the well-entrenched members of society, the white, mostly Protestant ‘haves,’ against the newly arriving immigrants or their imperfectly assimilated offspring, or against black slaves, freedmen, their children, and children’s children (Boskin & Dorinson 1985: 81).

Cundall (2012) however argued differently. He criticises the conventional wisdom that all ethnic or racist humour is problematic, categorising such studies as a conservative reaction that is *consequentialist in nature*. He offers several counter-examples and concludes that racist and ethnic humour is “not so deeply problematic as has been claimed or might at first glance be taken to be” (Cundall 2012: 171).

Other studies find that humour that seeks to “acknowledge group disparities could be a viable strategy for majority and minority group members to buffer the experience of anxiety in interracial contexts and its downstream consequences” (Borgella et al. 2020: 114). One highly practical study has shown how humour can be used to counteract racism in English football (Hylton 2018). In an early study, Gruner (1985: 143) insisted that self-disparaging humour enhances speaker image and should have a cushioning effect on perceptions of the speaker by others. Studies of the so-called “ethnic comedians” and their highly successful careers in today’s modern multi-cultural societies such as Australia seem to confirm that humour based on race and other social minority groupings such as the disabled can be markedly positive when it emanates from within that community—although it may well be a different matter when it is appropriated by mainstream humourists (Milner Davis 2009: 42-47; Pickering & Lockyer 2009; also cf. Wisse 2013 on Jewish humour).

Boxer & Cortés-Conde (1997) argue helpfully that there are two types of motives in joking: one that is directed at a participant in the conversation, having the potential of biting; the other that is directed at an absent other, having the potential of bonding those present. If the absent other is acknowledged as part of the same ethnic or social group as the joker, then an element of self-deprecation (or depreciation, as humour psychologists like to term it—see Martin 2003) is present. *Laughing at* and *laughing with* are two key phrases in any discussion concerning humour and belonging (Dore 2018; cf. Jefferson 1972). They suggest “a long-recognised distinction between the power of laughter to promote distancing, disparagement, and feelings of superiority; or, conversely, to promote bonding and affiliation” (Glenn 2003: 112). Several studies discuss how these two different forms of laughter play an important role in creating sense of belonging in terms of affiliative laughter and disaffiliative laughter (e.g. Clayman 1992; Glenn 2003; Romaniuk 2013). Glenn (2003) also adds *laughing along* as a means of consolidating relationships and identity of group members (also see Clift 2013; Liebscher & Dailey-O’Cain 2013). Once again, we see the two-edged nature of humour as a tool for good as well as bad.

Humour and the sense of belonging at workplace has been a particularly rich area of research (e.g. Plester & Sayers 2007; Romero & Cruthirds 2007; Plester 2015), in terms of the relationship of managers and subordinates (Holmes 2000; Holmes & Stubbe 2003; Rosenberg et al. 2021), facilitating group processes (Romero & Pescosolido 2008), and how humour can unmask power relations (Dwyer 1991). Wise (2016) studied the role and effect of humour in multi-ethnic blue-collar workplaces and argues that humour delineates boundaries of group membership, establishes insiders and outsiders, and offers a ritual solution to ambiguity and liminality, tension and social unease. Belonging at the workplace can be created through adoption of the local work-place joking culture. Joking culture has been defined as a set of:

humorous references that are known to members of the group to which members can refer and that serve as the basis of further interaction. Elements of the joking culture serve to smooth group interaction, share affiliation, separate the group from outsiders, and secure the compliance of group members through social control (Fine & de Soucey 2005).

Even negative humour at work has been seen to possess some value: Terrion & Ashforth (2002) discussed how putdown humour, enacted in a ritualistic manner, helped meld individuals into a group as members tested, signalled and reinforced their growing mutual trust and solidarity. They concluded that “the putdown was where members subscribed to a set of implicit rules that preserved self- and social esteem and facilitated a progressive sense of inclusion” (Terrion & Ashforth 2002: 84). Similarly, Newton et al (2022: 11) argue that internet memes can work as bonding icons when shared as they “cultivate and sustain experiences and feelings of belonging”. In fact, the very nature of internet memes promotes this function since they are “a set of texts with shared characteristics, which are circulated and transformed by users online” (Newton et al. 2022: 1; also cf. Shifman 2013). In the process, the users create a sense of belonging to a group, even when the members of that group remain anonymous.

3. Overview: themes and contents of the Special Issue

Societies have always used humour to include and exclude, as ethnographic studies of scapegoating and ritual joking relationships around the world have shown (e.g. Radcliffe-Brown 1940; Jackes 1969). Similarly, ritualised celebrations of group identity characterised both literate and pre-literate societies, for example, in the form of the medieval Carnival (Bakhtin 1984) and other more modern activities such as school “muck-up days”, hazing of new bosses and practical jokes within families and friendship groups as well as in workplaces (Marsh 2015). Japanese society sets great store on annual celebrations of ritual laughter in different small communities (Abe 2007; Takekuro 2022). We modern humans bond by going to see comic movies and stand-ups together, sharing our online likes and favourite jokes and memes. But there always remains the Janus-face of humour: does it look towards or away from an individual? Hence the need for this Special Issue and for more research and study on this topic.

As the articles that follow demonstrate, belonging and exclusion take place at a number of different levels, both macro and micro. The first level concerns the all-important self-definitional issues of culture and language; below that lie social levels of economic and hierarchical status: the powerful versus the less dominant, the long-established, experienced group-members versus the newcomer and the outlier; the groupings by aesthetic taste and education, gender, profession, life-roles as parent, child, care-giver or receiver and so on. Friendship and peer groups are vital to human development and overlie many of these other divisions. In defining all of them, laughter and humour have an important role to play. The authors for this Issue have set out to explore why that should be and how it might operate in several different dimensions.

First, the vital question of the origins of laughter and humour is tackled in the contribution from Cliff Goddard and David Lambert. They combine recent developments in the study of laughter in linguistics with those from evolutionary biology to evaluate the possible role of laughter-like vocalisation as a bonding mechanism in early human species. Firstly, they make a case as to why it does not necessarily make sense to say that laughter evolved “for” its current wide range of modern social functions (i.e. taking the mechanistic view that a phenomenon’s current utility is its reason for existence). Introducing the concept of *exaptation*—meaning some features arise as a by-product of other factors—they establish a clear distinction from the

linguistic point of view between the earliest “play-vocalisations”, somewhat later “laughter-like vocalisations” and “modern human laughter”. They argue that chorusing laughter (i.e., shared laughter-like vocalisation) served to bridge the “bonding gap” for early hominids, not to signal amusement or other emotions that are now associated with modern laughter and humour. It was only later developments in physiology and cognition in fact that allowed these laughter-like sounds to ally with other human abilities and so evolve into the modern experience of sharing humour. If this is the case, then bonding is the evolutionary precursor to forms of “belonging via humour” that are cognitively and socially modern.

Articles by Angus McLachlan, by Barbara Plester and colleagues and by Meredith Marra examine the relationship of laughter to the social hierarchy or ‘pecking order’ in several different contexts. McLachlan bridges the gap between psychology and pragmatics in his examination of laughter and belonging. He argues that a full understanding of how we use laughter requires us to examine it in the same way that we study any other aspect of language, that is, laughter seen within its wider linguistic and social context. He takes laughter as an indexical that serves both a discourse deictic function, designating the utterance/s in which it occurs as non-serious, and a social deictic function, marking the laughing person’s preference for social proximity with fellow interlocutors. In doing so, he carefully distinguishes four types of laughter from each other: solitary listener laughter, solitary speaker laughter, joint laughter, and laughing at another interlocutor. He concludes that treating laughter as an indexical allows us to explain how interlocutors actually use laughter to modulate their relationship, while at the same time dealing with the complexities of the matter in hand. Evidently, modern laughter has travelled a great way from Goddard and Lambert’s social chorusing rituals.

Barbara Plester, Tim Bentley and Emily Brewer together address the important issue of bullying humour in the workplace, which, as they show, represents the dark side of organisational behaviour. In their study of one particular business organisation, they observe how humour can be far from innocent and is sometimes sexualised, dominating, and perpetrated by the most powerful organisational members. They argue that the reason for this occurring and also being tolerated is the compelling human need for belonging that makes itself felt even in this extreme organisational culture. The result is that workers accept bullying humour as *just a joke* even when it contravenes societal workplace norms. The authors offer a detailed analysis of carefully observed humour examples from this particular IT company located in New Zealand, whose CEO and senior staff favour the imposition of extremely aggressive forms of humour on their subordinates as well as on themselves. Such an extreme culture of humour, the authors conclude, at times crosses the line to become an insidious form of bullying disguised as joking and humour. In fact, such dangerous practices can easily become engrained and accepted as part of organisational culture so that employees feel compelled to accept and reinforce this practice, simply in order to belong at work.

In between the two polar opposites of affiliative and destructive humour in the workplace lies a more complex territory where, in all cultures, work relationships involve the exchange of humour and laughter. Meredith Marra investigates the role of humour in the path taken by newcomers in organisations to gain place and status. Like Plester and colleagues, Marra shows that this path involves cooperating with others in interactions that necessarily include engaging with humour and laughter as a way of indicating belonging. Marra goes on however to present an interactional sociolinguistic analysis of naturally occurring workplace humour, illustrating the role of laughter as a humour response, and illuminated by the reflections on their experiences made by skilled migrant interns in the New Zealand context. The focus of this paper is to show that entering any workplace not just as a newcomer but as a new migrant, often from a different language background, is especially challenging and demanding. Marra argues that the well-established fact that newcomers must grasp new information, develop new skills, and display

an ability to navigate the trajectory from outsider to insider, evidently includes learning the local expectations around humour. Thus, laughter by newcomers in this situation can be a laughing *with* that signals belonging, or it may be a laughing *along* that signals a temporary and temporising fit, without full participation and acceptance. No laughter at all can be perceived by co-workers as a demonstration that the person does not meet 'our' sociopragmatic expectations, in which case the non-laughter faces the 'linguistic penalty' and social reality of exclusion. Taken together, these two New Zealand-based studies provide deep insights into a phenomenon that is surely wider than merely local, perhaps even universal in human culture.

Local versus universal provides the thematic linkage for contributions from Mark Rolfe and from Melody Chang and Valeria Sinkeviciute: their articles both focus on the way that laughter and humour appreciation relate to and help define identity. Mark Rolfe deals with the elusive concept of a *unique national humour* which, even in humour studies, is so often regarded as a self-evident concept. With a special focus on Australia and the impact of cultural exchanges between nations over time, he takes a historical view of the globalisation process since the 19th century that brought about a degree of Americanisation in both the Australian and British senses of national humour. He highlights how, behind the comforting beliefs of belonging to a nation-state and sharing in its perceivedly unique national sense of humour, there is a huge and historic complexity of tensions and inter-transmissions. Using insights from political and cultural studies, he guides the reader through a myriad examples to show that even before today's more progressive views of national culture in Australia, the so-called British heritage was far from being a simple one. Today, after the recent advent of multi-cultural 'ethnic comedy' contributed by immigrants from many different cultural backgrounds (McCallum 1998), white Australians have thankfully discovered the humour of their Indigenous compatriots (Milner Davis 2009); but, for this nation as for many others, the complexities of humour and the process of Americanisation remain as relevant as ever.

Melody Chang and Valeria Sinkeviciute go beyond the considerable attention that the humorous practices of Anglo-Australians have received to focus on understanding such practices by Australian Mandarin Chinese speakers in today's multicultural Australia. Their insights are presented from the point of view of interactional pragmatics with an analysis based on approximately 8.2 hours interview data in which speakers of Mandarin Chinese provide their metapragmatic comments on humorous exchanges among main-stream Australians. The authors argue that evaluation of these humorous exchanges in Australian English is driven by the Australian Mandarin speakers' own culturally-informed perceptions that have been conceptualised via internal, emic notions. The concept of *familiarity* between participants emerges as highly significant in relation to conversational humour and the authors suggest that, at least in this case study, familiarity in relation to humour plays a crucial role in the perception of appropriateness of humorous interaction.

Bringing the studies up to date with recent years when, around the world, communication has depended so much on the internet, Kerry Mullan's final article explores the use of online humour in a subversive local community Facebook group. This group, largely from Australia but with an indeterminate geographical spread, was set up by disgruntled members who had been banned from a similar group because of their opposition to its arbitrarily-applied rules of enforced happiness, trivial chat, and suppression of any post that was not to do with giving away lemons or asking to borrow small appliances. Mullan argues that the marked use of humour in this rival Facebook group is intended to mark inclusion and exclusion and to create a sense of belonging in an online community of practice created by this small group of self-declared dissidents. She analyses fifteen comments or multi-post threads that included primarily affiliative or aggressive humour directed at the original group, concluding that humour shapes the identity of the group through the members' shared ideologies and beliefs. In addition, the

humorous messages are intended to denigrate and belittle the other group as the ‘Dark Side’. This has the effect of reinforcing unity among group members since the feeling of superiority over those being ridiculed coexists with a feeling of belonging. Whether for good or for ill, this humour points to the achievement of freedom and liberty of personal expression.

While several of these articles present specifically Australasian case-studies and contexts, it is evident from this summary that each addresses the thematic issue of humour and belonging in a way that suggests much wider implications than purely local. This focus supports the universal range of the opening two essays and points the way forward to further contributions on this important theme in humour studies. Humour binds us all, humour can damage us all, but above all it serves to connect us around the globe.

As Editors, we would like to thank each and every one of our contributors, and also, importantly, the Editors of this Journal and their anonymous reviewers, whose painstaking work has greatly assisted us in bringing this Special Issue to publication. We look forward to future fruitful collaborations that may extend the scope of studying humour and its dual roles of inclusion and exclusion.

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