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I've never ever felt like that in my life before ... never ever felt that intense : penetration of the male body as transformative experience

By Terry Evans

Introduction

In this paper I question the discursive construction of penetration [1] as an exclusively masculine and masculinising practice in which the "penetrator" is represented as heterosexual, male and active while the "penetratee" is represented as feminine, female and passive. What is being questioned here is the taken for granted truth of the hetero/homosexual, masculine/feminine, active/passive binaries that emerged in the late nineteenth century following the constitution of the homosexual male as a "species" different psychologically and biologically from the heterosexual male (Foucault, *History of Sexuality 1*).

Eve Sedgwick and other queer theorists have argued that the constitution of the hetero/homosexual binary in the late nineteenth century has had a profound effect on how epistemologies of gender, sexuality and desire have developed throughout the twentieth century and beyond (*Epistemology of the Closet*). Sedgwick argues that "many of the major nodes of thought and knowledge in twentieth-century Western culture as a whole are structured—indeed fractured—by the now endemic crisis of homo/heterosexual definition, indicatively male, dating from the end of the nineteenth century" (1). Accepting Sedgwick's argument I aim in this paper to explore some of the ways in which the hetero/homosexual, masculine/feminine and active/passive binaries are problematised within intensely homosocial contexts such as competitive male sport and how homosociality blurs into homosexuality through particular readings of sport texts. Secondly, using transcripts of stories from men interviewed for my PhD thesis, I provide examples of the transformative power of individual experiences of being sexually penetrated in terms of masculine subjectivities. What I am theorising here is that the choice to discursively surrender the "truth" of the hetero/homosexual definition provides opportunities to theorise about men and masculinity in ways that are transgressive and transformative. Strategies for this process include queer readings of masculine cultures such as competitive male sport and an exploration of meanings generated when heterosexually identifying men experience being sexually penetrated.

Many gay identified men understand the experience of being penetrated as active and passive, dominant and submissive and masculine and feminine. Having developed socially and psychologically within the same heterosexist [2] culture as heterosexually identifying men, gay men have learnt that meanings of masculinity are related to the impenetrable male body. However, after coming out, gay men effectively exclude themselves from and are excluded by hegemonic masculinities, enabling them to reconstruct their understandings of masculinity in new ways. Being outside of arenas of masculinity and masculinising practices, gay men are well positioned to play around with roles of active/passive, masculine/feminine and dominant/submissive. An examination of gay cruising sites on the internet as well as the personal

columns of gay media show that men describe themselves as "tops," "bottoms" or "versatile" with versatile being the most common descriptor.

Many heterosexually identifying men also play around with these roles in their relationships with women but mostly in covert ways as penetration within hegemonic masculinity is read as feminising. Moreover, female sex workers will confirm that many heterosexually identifying men want to be fucked by a woman wearing a strap-on dildo. Later in this paper I provide a story from a preoperative transsexual sex worker who says that most of her clients are heterosexually identifying men. Being sexually penetrated by a man, however, remains an experience that few heterosexually identifying men have or will explore and what I'm suggesting in this paper is that this is more to do with how masculinity is constructed in Western societies than it is with desire. Moreover, I'm suggesting that openness to being sexually penetrated by a man can be transformative in terms of one's masculine subjectivity.

Penetration within Western discourses

Penetration within heteronormative Western discourses is constituted as an act, process or mode of thought that involves the piercing of or breaking through a material or psychic boundary against varying degrees of resistance. These resistances to penetration are constituted through everyday practices of becoming and being male and masculine. Being male in Western societies is constituted as having the capacity to penetrate along with maintaining a resistance to penetration. Boys learn to be tough emotionally and physically and to not allow one to be vulnerable. Penetration is at times a violent or aggressive act as exemplified by war and the invasion of another country and at other times penetration is more subdued act as in making love but at all times penetration is discursively associated with the phallic and mostly male body. Dianne Elise, a research psychoanalyst, argues that fear of being penetrated is linked to masculine subjectivity based on the notion of an impermeable psychic boundary firmly linked to an impenetrable male body. This link between the impenetrable male body and an impermeable psychic boundary related to masculine subjectivity is one that I explore in this paper. What I am suggesting is that when the physical body is penetrated, the doors are open to enable dissolution of psychic boundaries and a consequent transformation of masculine subjectivity. Elise goes on to argue that men's psychic resistance to penetration affects their experiences of the meanings of desire: "An impermeable bodily and psychic boundary, the ability to penetrate without the ability to be penetrated collapses a necessary dialectical tension that may affect men's experience of sex and love and that may shape and limit their desire" (499).

Lyn Segal goes further and suggests that heterosexually identifying men desire that which they also fear and dread, the desire to be penetrated by another.

Men, like women, long for what they also fear and dread: the intense vulnerability that accompanies the embraces, enclosures and penetrations of another, whether rhythmically stroked by fingers, tongues, lips, teeth, arms, or that most fragile of appendages, the penis. The distinction between inside and outside breaks down as fingers, lips, nose or tongue, wander over, in and between the flesh of the other. (19)

To be penetrated is to acknowledge one's vulnerability to penetration, an experience that conflicts with how masculinity is constituted within Western discourses. Allowing oneself to be penetrated opens both the body and the psyche to different meanings of masculinity. Experiences of being penetrated like other adventurous sexual experiences provide what McInnes and others have described as significant learning events and what Connell refers to as body reflexive practices, that is, experiences in which new meanings and subjectivities are generated (52). What Elise and Segal are arguing is that resistance to penetration, bodily or psychically, is tied up with meanings of masculinity within hegemonic discourses in which being penetrated is a feminising experience and that by being open to penetration men can experience new ways of being. Moreover, Elise and Segal are suggesting that although being penetrated is constituted as a feminising experience,

there is present psychically and discursively an unconscious desire to be penetrated. Brian Pronger, a sport researcher in Canada, has also noted the paradox of meanings of penetration within masculine discourses: "for many men the intuitive feel for one erotic incarnation... does not exclude the possibility of the other.... [L]urking in the shadow of the orthodox [masculinity] is the erotic potential of the paradox (*The Arena of Masculinity* 96).

Football as homosexual ritual combat

Brian Pronger and other masculinity researchers have identified football as one of the key arenas of masculinity in Western societies. Pronger writes that competitive male sport is an "apprenticeship" to masculinity, an "initiation into manhood... a masculine obligation" (*The Arena of Masculinity* 17-19). It is through football that boys learn how to become men where being a man is about being heterosexual, strong and competitive and above all, not being feminine or gay. As Mark Simpson points out football on the one hand is the context in which men and boys have the opportunity to celebrate masculinity and enjoy the closeness and pleasure of immersing oneself in manliness, but on the other hand football is also the context in which any hint of homosexuality can lead to exclusion:

The overwhelming maleness of football is a swooning passion for virility that sweeps boys keen to be men and not at all sure of how to become one (except not to be a 'poof') off their feet. Football provides the boy with an answer to the problem of how to reconcile his homoerotic desire, his 'feminine' love of 'manliness', with his desire to be manly. (72)

Football, as the arena in which boys learn how to be men, is an intensely homosocial context in which the love of manliness must be reconciled with the desire to be manly. This is the conflict that football as an exclusively heterosexualised male context creates. On the one hand football is a celebration of all that is constituted as masculine and in celebrating masculinity and manliness, football creates the dilemma of homoerotic desire, a dilemma that must be managed through homophobia and sexism. Brian Pronger writes that "sport, as a masculine genre, presents some men with an archetypal mythic form for homoerotic desire: the sexy, muscular, masculine athlete... that desire is paradoxical, being at once a reverence for and a violation of masculinity" (9). Through the exclusion of all things gay along with the exclusion of women, football retains the myth of a purely heterosexual male masculinity in which men learn not to be feminine and passive.

Alan Dundes, a psychoanalytic anthropologist, has examined various songs, jokes, games, stories and other forms of folklore texts associated with American football and has argued that football is a form of homosexual ritual combat. Dundes argues that football as a competitive sport is a game in which the object is to penetrate the territorial space of the opposing team and in doing so successfully render the opposing team as feminine. Masculine, active, and dominant must overpower the "other" through penetration and the experience of being successfully penetrated against courageous resistance is an experience that is ultimately passive and feminine. Mark Simpson, a journalist in the UK, refers to the experience of defeat as being "fucked:"

They [the losing team] have all become, in a symbolic sense at least, merely 'a fucked', the shame of which isolates them as much as scoring a goal unites: the terrible private secret of the *anus*, the vulnerability of the male to penetration has been made public. The goal mouths of each team are the acceptable representation of male orifices that must remain hidden and guarded, admitting no entry. "Whereas the phallus is essentially social, the anus is essentially private." This is the script of masculinity acted out by football, where goals are publicly celebrated as phallic victories and defeats as private shames. (80)

Simpson views football as a homosexual ritual combat in which winning is about phallic victory

celebrated publicly and losing is about private shame. Winning is about having successfully penetrated the goal space as the representation of the protected but vulnerable anus. Having watched many Australian Rules football games, I have noted the humiliation of defeat is evident in the body language of the losing team. However, this humiliation is short-lived as football and competitive sport culture have developed psychological strategies that enable defeat to be managed through masculine notions of being a good sport, taking it like a man, knowing that there will be other opportunities to show phallic power (383).

Eve Sedgwick and other queer theorists have read football and other male competitive sport in a similar way to Dundee. Sedgwick argues that the erotic component to men's relationships is socially prohibited through the operation of homophobia (Sedgwick *Between Men*). Sedgwick coined the phrase "homosocial desire" to bring the notion of desire or the erotic back into men's relationships in order to hypothesise a continuum from homosociality through to homosexuality, a continuum that she argues is problematic for men but curiously not for women. She points out that there is an uninterrupted continuum of desire as an affective social force from homosociality through to homosexuality evident in women's relationships but that such a continuum is not similarly evident in men's relationships. A recent book by Jen Sincero entitled *The Straight Girl's Guide to Sleeping with Chicks* and reported in *The Sydney Morning Herald* (Razer) seems to have popular cultural acceptance, but would a book entitled *The Straight Man's Guide to Sleeping with Blokes* have a similar cultural acceptance? I think not.

Moreover, in the reality television show *Big Brother* where young people live together in a television house where their lives can be viewed for three months, there have been several examples of two heterosexually identifying women erotically kissing, often for the pleasure of the men, but such behaviours between two heterosexually identifying men would not have the same cultural acceptance. The acknowledgement of desire between heterosexually identifying men is strongly denied as culturally such desire is constituted as homosexual. However, the acknowledgement of desire between heterosexually identifying women is often encouraged and celebrated as fashionably bisexual and does not usually lead to discursive exclusion from hegemonic feminine discourses. The continuum from homosocial to homosexual is clear, uninterrupted within women's relationships but not so for men. Homophobia or the fear of being thought gay operates to exclude erotic desire within men's relationships.

The underlying subtext of men's relationships, however, does contain discourses of desire and Dundee argues that once this "underlying homosexual paradigm" of competitive male sport and other intensely homosocial relationships such as the military and war is recognised, the clearly homoerotic behaviour of male bonding and other rituals becomes understandable (123). Similarly Sedgwick recognises that many of the homosocial bonding behaviours associated with competitive male sport "can look, with only a slight shift of optic, quite startlingly homosexual" (Sedgwick, *Between Men* 89). Moreover, Steven Zeeland has spent many years interviewing men in the navy and military and found that there is a very strong underlying subtext to ritual homoerotic behaviours such as initiations and crossing the line ceremonies (Zeeland, *Sailors and Sexuality, The Masculine Marine*).

Brian Pronger also recognises a homosexual subtext to competitive male sport such as football (*The Arena of Masculinity; "Outta My Endzone"*). Pronger argues that the culture of football demands a "libidinal economy and emotional formation that is embedded in the masculine colonizing will to conquer the space of an 'other' while simultaneously protectively enclosing the space of the self" ("Outta My Endzone" 376). The irony of football is that it is a competition between male teams and therefore while the goal is to penetrate the space of the "other" team there is always a losing or penetrated self. Pronger argues that this masculine learning begins when boys are initiated into male sport in which both phallic desire to penetrate and anal desire to resist penetration are present:

Boys raised on competitive sport learn to desire, learn to make connections according

to the imperative to take space away from others and jealously guard it for themselves. Competitive sport trains desire to conquer and protect space, which is to say it simulates phallic and anal desire on the playing field. ("Outta My Endzone" 382)

Football and other intensely homosocial contexts are arenas in which masculinity is constituted as being about heterosexuality, domination, power, control and penetration of the space of the other territorially, psychically and bodily. The "other" of heterosexual male masculinity is heterosexual female femininity. Gay men are constituted as being like women in that by allowing their bodies to be penetrated, they have relinquished their claim to hegemonic forms of masculinity. Pronger writes: "'real men' are assertive, men who are receptive are worse than failures, they have betrayed their dominant position and are like women, getting fucked is the deepest violation of masculinity in our culture" (*The Arena of Masculinity* 139).

Meanings of penetration in the stories of men who have sex with men

At the level of the individual, one's vulnerability to penetration, particularly by another male, is something that can be both feared and desired. Getting fucked represents a violation of masculinity in Western cultures (Pronger *The Arena of Masculinity*), the death of masculinity (Bersani). However, lurking in the shadow of masculinity is the erotic desire to be penetrated (Pronger, *The Arena of Masculinity* 96). Men who have sex with men but don't identify as gay have explored this desire to be penetrated with surprising consequences.

No doubt many heterosexually identifying men have explored anal penetration by finger, dildo or vibrator with their female partners or sex workers but I suspect that few have ventured into this area of sexual pleasure with men. Not being a "poof" is what defines masculinity for heterosexually identifying men (Herek) and although much of the behaviour that happens within football and other all male cultures can be read, as Sedgwick suggests, as quite startlingly homosexual, there is a very strong defence within these cultures that it's not in any way homosexual but just good fun. There is as Sedgwick (*Between Men*) argues very strongly, a blurriness somewhere between what is constituted as male bonding and what is constituted as homosexual. However, being sexually penetrated by a man in a context that is consensual and pleasurable would generally be constituted as homosexual and therefore a major problem for heterosexually identifying men in terms of their masculine subjectivity.

What I'm wanting to suggest here is that while the act of being sexually penetrated by a woman, as a heterosexually identifying man, is an experience that is transformative, it is even more significant when the penetration is by a man. To support my argument I offer three stories from my thesis participants who are all men who have sex with men but don't identify as gay.

Graham Foreman

Graham is a 52 year old mechanic, married with two adult children. He spent his teenage years in the United Kingdom, growing up in a working class neighbourhood and having sexual relationships with girls that were culturally normalised. He also experienced sex with boys that included being the receptive partner in anal sex but says that at the time boys "mucking around" in this way was not unusual in the UK where he lived. His family migrated to Australia in the 1960s and he lived in Elizabeth as a typical working class boy. His father worked at GM Holden and he developed an interest in mechanics, completed an apprenticeship and eventually managed his own workshop. He married and had two children who are now in their twenties. He says that he is still very much in love with his wife and that their marriage has been a very happy one.

However, throughout Graham's marriage he has wanted to experience being fucked by a man, perhaps relating back to his teenage experience in the UK. He responded to an advertisement in his local *Messenger* newspaper that read "straight but curious, would a massage help, contact me

on [phone number deleted]." He rang the number, left a message and the masseur, a gay man, rang him back. They met and then went back to the masseur's home. The massage ultimately turned to sex with Graham having his first adult experience of being penetrated:

Graham: when he said he's going to fuck me... at first I thought... I mean... like he's not got a small cock... never in a million years... I thought... no way... at first... and then... once he... err... [penetrated me]... I thought... hey don't stop.... There's no way in the world that I would have ever had thought that I would do that.... I said to him, I said, "I can't believe this is happening. '... cannot believe it... you know, that I am actually letting a guy screw me... and... I was... the first time we did it, I thought... I was, I was a little bit worried that it would hurt... and Oh Jesus should I, and then the pleasure of it came over me and I thought it must be good, I like it.

Terry: once you relaxed and let go?

Graham: Yeah... no problems, I'd have done anything... you know, when he was... I said, "don't stop" you know, um... and when he's finished and, you know, we'd... talk... and after he said, you know, I wasn't going easy on you there you know, he said that was a really hard fuck... and I said, "well I enjoyed it"... if that's what you did, I enjoyed it... at first I don't think I did... it still... because until... and you've got to just relax, you know, obviously if you don't... you don't enjoy it but once it... and I can honestly say... when he's screwed me and... I've come at the same time when he's screwed me, I've never ever felt like that in my life before... never ever felt that intense, ever, even on our honeymoon, with the most... whatever... never ever ever felt that intensity... you know, you feel like you could just pass out... err... and if I, if it's that good it can't be wrong... that's my attitude anyway.

Graham's experience was transformative in terms of his sense of self as a masculine man. He speaks of the experience as leading to new knowledges about himself and his erotic desires. It was a learning experience in terms of his masculine subjectivity, an experience that McInnes, Bellone and Race refer to as sexual learning through adventurous sex. Although the experience is one of sexual penetration Graham constitutes it in masculine terms when he refers to being fucked "hard" by a man whose cock was large. Graham's masculinity is what Pronger refers to as paradox masculinity in that he (re)constructs his masculinity in the language of orthodox masculinity although the experience of being penetrated is a cultural violation of the meanings of orthodox masculinity.

Mark Henderson

Mark is in his late thirties and has lived his life as a heterosexually identifying man until recently. Moreover, his masculinity has been characterised by interests such as football, surfing, manual labour, alcohol, and the pursuit of women as objects of desire. Over several years since his early thirties, Mark has explored an erotic interest in men and at the time of his interview he was in a relationship with a gay man.

Mark's first experience of anal eroticism happened, however, with a female partner that he'd met in his early twenties:

Mark: she just turned me over and um... drove her tongue up my arse, and it was very, I remember the awkwardness of it, me having to... get on, it was hands and knees I think, doggie style, sort of and I felt vulnerable and I thought hang on, I'm not supposed to be, you're the one that's supposed to be with your fucken legs open, not me, I'm the bloke here, it was that real full control macho sort of thing.

Mark speaks of this experience as vulnerability, as having to perform a role that he wasn't used to performing as a masculine man in control. Here Mark draws on binaries of masculine/feminine,

power/control, active/passive and his experience is one that problematises these learnt social roles.

Mark went on to experiment with anal eroticism within his heterosexual relationships and during his thirties he bought a vibrator and tried that on himself both privately and with his female partners:

Mark: I remember the first vibrator I bought, it was ostensibly for the girl I was with but I reckon I knew deep down at that stage that it would end up as my possession... and it did, yeah there's no doubt about that, I knew that yeah, it was supposed to be for her but at the suggestion I went and bought it for her, yeah, that's happened a couple of times with a couple of girlfriends actually.

Mark talks about his experience of being penetrated by a woman:

Mark: it progressed to getting my girlfriend to do it, which made it all the more fun because there was another person and you were sort of being vulnerable in front of someone else and... bearing a bit of your soul and bearing your arse and, like it was a step of faith and trust I suppose and someone to trust them to do that.

Being penetrated by a woman and the experience of allowing himself to be vulnerable, to bear part of his soul, and to trust his female partners was transformative for Mark in terms of his masculine subjectivity. For Mark, identifying as a masculine man draws from traditional notions of patriarchy and being in control. Penetration is about allowing his body to be receptive, to open himself to penetration by another, to let go of control and this is an experience that he says he would only do with someone he trusts completely.

Mark: giving yourself over sort of... sheer trust and... I wouldn't be keen on some... you know, there's always the trust

Terry: as in letting go of power and control?

Mark: yes I think that's probably... that's a good way to put it, yeah, not having to be in control for bloody... perhaps, for males it's probably tied in with the whole patriarchal system, males are the dominant, traditionally have been the dominant for many centuries, you know, in the positions of power... often the more, bigger, aggressive, more clout... that turns it completely on its head in many ways

Here Mark conflates the experience of bodily penetration with psychic penetration leading to a transformation of his masculine subjectivity. Notions of man as the dominant aggressor are turned completely around through the experience of being penetrated.

Up to this point Mark's experience of being penetrated had happened only within heterosexual relationships. However, he wondered in the back of his mind what it would be like to be penetrated by a man. He had a long history of mateship and felt very emotionally close to his mates. He had long fantasised about what it would be like to have sex with a man but had never had the courage to explore that fantasy because he feared the stigma of being thought of as gay. However, in his thirties Mark explored that aspect of himself and eventually and to his surprise fell in love with a gay man. I asked Mark what that experience was like compared to with a woman.

Mark: I find it a bit harder to let a woman do that, you know, to let go, more comfy with a guy doing that act

Terry: because the power is equal?

Mark: yes

Terry: so equal power when giving into someone of equal power like a guy whereas with a woman within patriarchy you're giving in to someone of lesser power?

Mark: yeah (laughing) I shouldn't bloody even bloody think like that because I like to think that I treat women as equal

So, for Mark, having crossed the invisible and blurred line that separates homosociality from homosexuality he finds that it's more comfortable being fucked by a man because of an equal social power relationship. Mark's references to trust and power and control suggest that the experience of penetration within cultures of men that have become closely bonded such as within a football team or military unit where power relationships are equal and trust is strong may only be inhibited by social controls such as homophobia. Certainly there is a substantial body of research that has shown that prohibitions against sex between men are cultural and that there are numerous cultures where sex between men in one form or another is culturally sanctioned (Boswell, *Christianity, "Same-Sex"*; Foucault, *History of Sexuality 2, History of Sexuality 3*; Halperin; Herdt, *Guardians, Same Sex*; Weeks).

Naomi Thompson

Naomi is a preoperative transsexual sex worker whose clients are mostly heterosexually identifying men who want to be fucked by a "chick with a dick."

Naomi: most of them are passive, I mean most of them want to see what's it like for the first time

Terry: Yeah, that's come out in other interviews too, a lot of straight guys I've interviewed and other guys who had sex with them have said the same thing, they want to know what it is like... because they're always...

Naomi: active, I say to them oh now the tables have turned (laughter) it's nice to be on the other end at times (laughter)

Terry: What do they say when you say that?

Naomi: They usually giggle, they think to themselves... yeah well it's true, I'm lifting my legs backwards to the view (Terry laughter)... but you'd be quite surprised, I mean you'd be very surprised how many men do... I mean you walk in and the first thing they do is throw back their legs and you think, well... HELLO!... You that quick (laughter)

Terry: Yeah I think that's really interesting in terms of "straight" guys... probably one of the themes that's come out... that's one of the key themes I guess is... straight guys wanting to be... passive in sex

Naomi: Yeah... that's for sure... definitely

"Straight" guys or heterosexually identifying men take on socially constituted roles of being masculine that equates with being active or dominant through the framework of epistemological binaries. However, there does appear to be a curiosity in the minds of many men about what it would be like to play around with the other side of those binaries. A desire to be the "other" is evident here. Naomi's clients want to experience being sexually passive, to experience "being on the other end", to "know what it's like" to be sexually and psychologically passive.

Conclusion

What I have shown in this paper is that the experience of sexual penetration for many men has a transformative effect on subjectivities of gender, sexualities and desire. I've employed Sedgwick's notion of a continuum of desire as an affective social force that blurs the socially constituted boundary between homosociality and homosexuality. I've shown that football and other intensely homosocial contexts can be read as masculine homosexual combats in which phallic penetration is accompanied by anal resistance to penetration. I've provided three examples from my PhD research showing how the experience of being sexually penetrated can lead to a reification of masculine subjectivities. Moreover, I've employed Sedgwick's argument that binaries in Western thought have as their source the establishment of the hetero/homosexual binary in the late nineteenth century and have shown that while many heterosexually identifying men have been sexually adventurous and explored being penetrated by "women" and enjoyed playing with being passive the most socially feared experience is to be penetrated by a "man" as the meanings attached to that experience are embedded within meanings of homosexuality. Simply put, being sexually penetrated by a man for those men who may want to explore that aspect of their sexuality ought not to be as problematic as it is within hegemonic discourses of masculinity. The fact that it is very problematic and can lead to exclusion at best and homophobic violence at worst speaks more of social attitudes and beliefs that regulate sexuality and desire than of what areas of sexuality men might want unconsciously to venture into. The desire to be sexually adventurous is present in men's discourses of sexuality and desire including the desire to experience being fucked.

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Endnotes

[1] At an individual level the term "penetration" is being used in this paper in reference to the sexual penetration of the male body. At a social or cultural level "penetration" is being used in reference to the penetration of social space or territory. [\[return\]](#)

[2] Here I use the term 'heterosexist' to mean growing up within a heterosexually dominant culture in which every individual is assumed to be heterosexual unless identified as otherwise. Butler refers to this phenomenon as the heterosexual matrix and Rich refers to it as compulsory heterosexuality. [\[return\]](#)

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