

Expectations of choice: an exploration of how social context informs gendered occupation

Expectations
of choice

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Received 9 July 2015
Accepted 19 December 2016

Abstract

Purpose – Occupational choice describes the process that leads to occupational engagement as a result of intrinsic and extrinsic influences. There has been a considerable amount of research concerning occupational choice, gender and adolescence. However, this has largely focused on the areas of career choice and engagement in risky health behaviours. This paper aims to expand on the literature by providing a broader scope of occupation more aligned with the concept associated with occupational science. Furthering this, the researcher aims to examine the influence of gender as an extrinsic influence on occupational choice. The researcher aims to explore how contextual influences inform gendered occupational choice.

Design/methodology/approach – An exploratory qualitative approach was used in the current study. Incorporating photographs as a means of elucidating conversation during the interview process, photo-elicitation interview techniques were used as part of the data collection. This involved using a collection of photographs to prompt participants to discuss their interpretations of various occupations. Six adolescent boys and girls aged 11-14 years participated in the study. Participants were recruited from mixed-gendered sports clubs in the West of Ireland. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. An occupational justice perspective was used to interpret the data.

Findings – Responses suggest that gender informs occupational choice through different mechanisms. These included social systems, physical and institutional opportunities as well as expectations participants held of themselves and others they considered to be within their social grouping. Social systems included groups such as friends and family. The ease of access to physical and institutional resources was another factor that informed choice. Participants projected views of expectations they perceived others held for them informed how the participants made their choices. These factors varied across gender. Despite opportunities being available to both sexes, choices were often restricted to particular occupations.

Originality/value – The findings suggest that factors informing the occupational choices of adolescents included a combination of intrinsic factors such as gender and perspectives, as well as external factors including peers, family and opportunities in the local community. Practical applications of this involve acknowledging and further understanding the contextually situated nature of choice to provide more equitable practice. The results of the study may provide more insight into the factors that enable and inhibit occupation. A further understanding of these influences can redirect how we view adolescent occupations in a way that promotes health.

Keywords Occupational choice, Photo-elicitation interview

Paper type Research paper



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Irish Journal of Occupational
Therapy
Vol. 45 No. 1, 2017
pp. 15-27
Emerald Publishing Limited
2398-8819
DOI 10.1108/IJOT-01-2017-0003

Introduction

Occupational choice describes the process that leads to occupational engagement (Galvaan, 2015). Using a keyword search of “Choice”, “Gender” and “Adolescence” identifies that research in relation to a teenage population and choice has largely focused on the areas of career choice and engagement in risky health behaviours. Health behaviours in adolescence often inform those later in life setting a trajectory going forward (Viner *et al.*, 2012). As occupational therapists, we aim to promote health through autonomy and participation in occupation (Clark, 1991). As such, a deeper understanding on this topic would assist occupational therapists identify how one’s gender can affect their choices with regards to occupation in the broader context as understood by our discipline.

Occupational justice is the view that people have a right to engage in diverse and meaningful occupations which meet their values and needs. This concept is underpinned by the belief that participation in occupation can affect health (Gibson, 2013). Barriers to engagement can then be considered injustices when populations are occupationally limited or marginalised (Townsend and Wilcock, 2004). Using this perspective to explore how gender informs occupational choice could highlight social and institutional barriers to participation.

The purpose of this study was to develop a better understanding of how context informs the choices made by adolescents. This can provide us with further insights into how we can promote participation in occupations that adolescents consider meaningful, but inaccessible.

Literature review

Occupational therapy is a discipline that aims to promote participation in meaningful activities. This is for clients to achieve optimal health and well-being (Law, 2002; Townsend and Wilcock, 2004). Participation is achieved by enabling people to engage in occupation through client-centred means that accommodates their idiosyncratic needs (Law, 2002; Townsend and Wilcock, 2004). Occupational science has developed in parallel to occupational therapy as a means of grounding the discipline (Clark, 1991). The aim of occupational science is to identify what promotes and inhibits occupational engagement (Townsend, 1993). Occupational choice is a concept that explores this.

Occupational choice

Early conceptions of occupational choice first emerged in economics and refer to the process by which a person chooses a career as a result of the interaction of psychological, social and economic factors (Blau *et al.*, 1956). In this model, occupational preference is what a person would like to do. Occupational choice is the interaction of intrinsic preference and what a person’s circumstance or environment allows them to engage in (Mitchell, 1974). A similar view is posited by the models within occupational therapy, which identify how the environment affects choice, but ultimately the locus of control, and the determining factor is the individual (Galvaan, 2015).

However, recent perspectives of occupational choice which are emerging in occupational science posit that choice is not with the individual, but entirely contextually situated (Galvaan, 2015). Choice has its basis in Social Role Theory which posits the environment positively reinforces stereotypes and that people behave in accordance with these stereotypes (Eagly, 1987; Eagly and Wood, 1991; Galvaan, 2015). This view suggests our expectations, and choices are influenced by patterns of occupational choice or the habitus, seen to be carried out by social groups (Galvaan, 2015). Habitus refers to the lifestyles, values, dispositions and expectations of social groups (Bourdieu, 1990). This means that the

choice is never entirely with the individual, but tied in the cultural context in which the person is situated. This interaction between person and the environment is dynamic. Choices are co-constructed through the transactional nature of occupation with context, with one influencing the other (Galvaan, 2015). Research in this area has largely adopted an occupational justice perspective in relation to socially disadvantaged areas (Gallagher *et al.*, 2015).

“Occupational Injustices” are when the individual needs of a group are not met to the extent that populations are occupationally limited or marginalised (Townsend and Wilcock, 2004). The injustices are not necessarily overt. They can be culturally bound and arise at the micro level as a result of the macro (Townsend and Wilcock, 2004). Increased knowledge of political, social and cultural influences can inform attempts to shape environments that maximise occupational possibilities and justice (Townsend, 1993).

Occupational choice and adolescence

There is a large body of research regarding Occupational Choice and adolescence. However, this has been largely in disciplines such as psychology, career development and adolescence studies has focused on career attainment and aspirations, and risky health behaviours. The findings have been developed towards a congruence with the contemporary view of choice suggesting that choices are contextually situated (Albert and Steinberg, 2011; Blakemore and Robbins, 2012; Cochran *et al.*, 2011; Jodl *et al.*, 2001; Rogers and Creed, 2011) and that individual references are not determinants of what a person will be able to do (Rojewski and Hill, 1998). In addition to choices made in relation to career and education, adolescence is a stage of identity formation (Erikson, 1963). As such, the choices made during this life stage are likely to have large implications for a person’s development going forward.

Doing gender

“Doing Gender” is the idea that gender is socially constructed rather than a biological characteristic (West and Zimmerman, 1987). This has since been integrated into Occupational Therapy literature (Goodman *et al.*, 2007; Liedberg and Gunnell, 2011). Two studies exploring and examining the idea of “doing gender” found that occupational therapists and occupational therapy students were focusing on gender traditional roles when setting goals and interventions (Liedberg *et al.*, 2010; Liedberg and Gunnell, 2011). This is an example of how the parameters can be set for the choices available to us by the social environment. In turn, we can be ascribed to occupations based on a socially constructed grouping.

Gender and adolescence

Gender has been suggested to play a major role in the occupational choices made by adolescents (Eccles, 1994; Fitzgerald *et al.*, 1995; Rojewski and Hill, 1998). Sinclair and Carlsson (2013) found that there was a substantial difference in the occupational preferences of boys and girls and highlight that construction workers are predominantly male, and healthcare workers female. An Irish study using a quantitative design of time-use found that there were differences in how teenage boys and girls spent their time (Hunt *et al.*, 2014). Klomsten *et al.* (2005) examined stereotypes and sport. They found that both boys and girls both believed a number of sports to be gendered. They suggest that boys were more inclined to engage in “masculine” sports, while girls were more engaged in “feminine” sports.

The current study

Should occupational injustices be taking place can have huge implications for the restricted development of a child's occupational story throughout their life. The current study aimed to adopt an occupational justice perspective to explore how gender informs the occupational choices of a healthy population of adolescents in context to identify what factors may be setting the parameters for choice (Townsend and Wilcock, 2004). The context of the current study was a rural town in the West of Ireland. The researcher aims to expand on the current research in relation to how occupational choices are informed by contextual factors, to enable practitioners to be more equitable in their practice when working with adolescents.

The purpose of the current study

The aim of this study is to explore how gender informs the occupational choices carried out by adolescents in rural Ireland. This will involve:

- identifying the socio-cultural factors informing the occupational choices of the participants in the current sample;
- identifying how environmental factors inform the occupational choices of the participants in the current sample;
- identifying how gender informs choice in the current sample;
- identifying some of the expectations the current sample hold for themselves in relation to occupation; and
- exploring how adolescents construct expectations of occupations in relation to different social groups.

Methodology

Design

The study was an exploratory piece of qualitative research. This approach aligns with the research aim, which is to gain insight into the processes that take place when adolescents choose to engage in occupation. Semi-structured interviews were adopted as they allow for freedom within exploratory research (Seidman, 2013). The process of occupational choice cannot be directly examined through phenomenological means. However, adopting an emic lens, viewing the perspective of the participant, allows us to focus on the meanings that the participants ascribe to the choices that they make (Polgar and Thomas, 1995).

Participants

Six participants were recruited from two sports clubs in a rural town in the West of Ireland. Participants were recruited through a gatekeeper, who acted as a mediator between the researcher and participants providing information on the study. Informed consent was gathered from both participants and their guardians. Participants consisted of three boys and three girls between the ages of 11-14 years. All attended single sex schools. This age group was selected to compare and contrast with research carried out by other researchers on related projects examining occupational choice in different contexts. Participants were recruited from clubs that were not gender specific, in that training sessions within these clubs are not segregated based on gender.

Photo-elicitation interviews

This technique involves the researcher showing photos to the participant to provide a reference point for conversation. It provides a different medium for communication and allows the participant to interpret the image in their own way, thus producing an emic perspective to share with the researcher. Photos used in the current study showed adolescents engaged in various occupations, or equipment associated with occupations such as sport, technology and group interactions.

Data collection through photo-elicitation interviews (PEIs): When collecting data, it was important that participants felt it was safe to disclose information and to acknowledge the power dynamic between researcher and participants due to age (Seidman, 2013). PEI has been noted to be a useful tool for overcoming this, by acting as an ice-breaker, sparking adolescents' interest in research and providing a feeling of flexibility to the interview (Epstein *et al.*, 2006; Harper, 2002; Smith *et al.*, 2012).

PEI has been found to be a useful method for collecting emic data about how adolescents create their self-identities within groups, as photographs can create a visual language provoking emotion and opinion, just as words can (Blackbeard and Lindegger, 2007; Moran and Tegano, 2005). Semi-structured interviews using PEI was considered an appropriate form of data collection for the current study due to its success within similar populations using similar theoretical approaches.

A set of photos was decided upon by those involved in the current study, along with other researchers involved in related research. A loose script was used in conjunction with the photos to structure the interviews and provide prompts for the participants. The script included the following list of questions:

Q1. Does this look like something you would choose to do?

Q2. Why might you choose to participate in this?

Q3. Is that something you do often or only once in a while?

Q4. What makes it something you do often?

Q5. Who might do this activity?

Q6. What makes it something you would never do?

Q7. Is there anyone who you think would not be able to take part in this activity?

A pilot study was carried out with an adult to assess the duration of the interview and the relevance of the questions (Epstein *et al.*, 2006). Audio recordings were used to record the data prior to transcription.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. This is a tool for identifying, reporting and analysing themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Holloway and Todres (2003) note the importance of making researcher biases explicit when conducting research. The researcher will attempt to acknowledge all biases. As noted, an occupational justice perspective was adopted. The epistemology directing the researcher's belief largely follows a socialisation perspective, which suggests that culture has an impact on how adolescents make occupational choices. More specifically, the researcher set out to explore how gender differences inform the choices made by adolescents as observed within the literature.

Replicability has not been considered paramount to qualitative research (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992). However, precision, credibility and transferability are essential to evaluate the merits of this type of inquiry (Hoepfl, 1997; Winter, 2000). The measures to ensure these were undertaken are listed below.

Trustworthiness: Reflexivity was carried out using a reflective diary during the research proposal and interviews to ascertain the researcher's biases and motives in relation to the study (Conneely, 2002). Data resulting from leading or closed questions was omitted from the data set. This was to ensure responses were participants' emic perceptions rather than the researcher's own biases (Finlay, 1998). This rigour was applied within the analysis when elucidating themes. This has been made explicit to ensure that the conclusions drawn from this study are placed in context and for the research to maintain credibility (Maxwell, 2012; Seidman, 2013).

Pseudonyms have been used to refer to participants' comments in the findings. Ethical approval was also granted by the University of Limerick, Education and Health Science Research Ethics Committee.

Findings

Three themes emerged as informing and directing the choices of the participants in the current study. immediate social systems: (the influence of friends and family); physical/institutional opportunities: (local amenities enabling participation in occupation); and expectations of socially constructed groups: (local beliefs and values surrounding occupation).

Immediate (micro) social systems

Family/friends. This importance of immediate friends and family was noted as informing choice. Colin noted how, "I'd do it if my friends were doing it". As well as this, he tells us how he would be more likely to engage in occupation, "if you know people who are doing it and they're like, they're trying to get you involved in the sport". Joseph reported that he felt his father and cousins had an influence on him joining the local soccer team. These provide evidence that family and friends can inform choice. Colin also developed an interest in contacting his friends when they came to own mobile phones, "As a child you find it boring [...] as you get older you feel like doing it more because everyone has a phone".

Physical/institutional opportunities

School. School provided a great place to trial novel occupations through various classes, PE (physical education) and school clubs. However, this could be very specific, "We don't swim at school, we don't do the tennis, or the rugby. We do soccer and volleyball 'mentioned Jane'".

Niamh mentions how she played volleyball primary school but that it was only available for one term. She reported that because she enjoyed the sport, "I'll definitely do it in secondary school".

Access in the community. Opportunities were also seen to be available through the facilities and resources available in the community. While the community provided various services and clubs, it also restricted choice and availability. Sarah reported that "I used to play tag rugby but I got told that no I can't anymore" "it stopped doing it when you were 12. I mean for girls".

John discussed how his sister could not play soccer as there was a low level of interest of girls of her age who wanted to join a local club. "There's no girls. Because not enough of

them are doing it. That happens in loads of sports". Despite this, there was a club available for boys of the same age.

Expectations

Expectations of others. The participants' expectations had for others and themselves informed choice. Sarah would not engage in Tennis as she felt it was "kind of more of a kid's sport". She also felt that rugby was a "quick sport, and kind of rough as well" and so believed that boys would be inclined to engage in it. In contrast, Joseph noted that "girls play it, because it's a girl's 'sport'". Jane felt that pool was something "men like to play in pubs and stuff". When considering video games, Joseph reported that "there's a lot of shooting games and there wouldn't be much [...] whatever girls like to do".

Expectation of engagement. Differing views of why you would engage in a sport occurred for the girls and younger boy than did for the older boys. Niamh noted that "if you're good at something you enjoy it more". Jane reported that she would choose an occupation "because it's fun". John, the youngest participant in the study commented that he chose to play football "to kick the ball around and have fun".

When asked why he would engage in an occupation, Joseph responded, "It's a sport", as though it was implicit that he would choose this occupation for this reason. Colin remarked that "because I'm part of a club and I want to get better and to train harder".

Some participants did not follow the expectancies they observed. Niamh, who was in primary school and part of the swimming club noted that "I've loads of friends in first year as well, and loads of them swam", despite the fact that "girls in my class aren't as active". She also played rugby, "just with lads".

Expectations on themselves. The participants placed an emphasis on the importance of school. This was seen in their view that they had to choose to engage in schoolwork over other more enjoyable occupations.

Colin looked forward to the school holidays as an opportunity to exercise choice over how he spent his time, "(You have) less time during the school year when you finish doing your homework".

Choice was interrupted as classes, schoolwork and homework were occupations that demanded a lot of time. Referring to her local Gaelic football team, Niamh noted that "People just drop out because of exams and stuff like that". Also, in relation to Gaelic Football, Sarah remarked that, "I'd keep playing because it's enjoyable and it's good. But like, if it got to the point where I was like, doing too much or I was like, with schoolwork and stuff".

Discussion

Following a deductive line of reasoning (Hyde, 2000), the themes that arose in the current study can be better understood by interpreting them through the Canadian Model of Occupational Performance and Engagement (CMOP-E) model identifies the dynamic interaction of personal factors such as physical, cognitive, affective and spiritual components of the individual, with environmental factors including physical, social, institutional and cultural factors through the process of occupation. The themes noted are considered to have implications both promoting and inhibiting choice.

Friends and family can be seen to be social environmental factors within the CMOP-E influencing choice (Townsend and Wilcock, 2004). These individuals could act as either advocates or opponents of choice. This could occur overtly by asking the participants to engage in occupation, or subtly, by acting as examples within a person's social circle who were, or were not engaging in a particular occupation. We can also see how this was dynamic over time, as expectations changed and children were defined by new social

categories. This was evident as Colin began to subscribe to the habitus he sees being carried out by his friends and other adolescents as they came to own mobile phones (Bourdieu, 1990).

School can be seen as physical and institutional characteristics of the environment which shape the choices that are made by the person. More importantly, the findings display how institutional factors not only provide and take away opportunities, but that they can inform choices we make in the future. Niamh's plan to engage in volleyball when she began attending her local secondary school displays this. While opportunities were available, choice was largely determined by school policy, administrators and staff rather than lying with the participants. In this way, schools could be seen as enforcers of occupation where the locus of choice was largely held by the institution rather than the individual.

Beyond this, we can see how contextually situated physical/institutional factors such as clubs and local resources in the community were seen to be catering for gendered preferences. This created occupational marginalisation and restricted choices for some of the girls in the current study (Townsend and Wilcock, 2004).

The expectations held by participants can be seen to arise from cognitive and affective interpretations of what the environment provided to them based on their physical characteristics such as age and gender. These expectations reduce the occupational possibilities of those who hold them (Galvaan, 2015). These were seen to change and develop through occupation.

Sarah's view of tennis as childish may have been reinforced by the habitus she observed in her local community (Eagly, 1987; Galvaan, 2015). Sarah had played tennis in the same club as Niamh, who continues to play regularly. Niamh noted how large numbers attended introductory tennis camps for children, but that numbers fell over time. She felt this was due to the intensity of the training involved. This shows us how different choices can construct entirely different expectations. Similarly, expectation of a sport as gendered has been suggested to inform whether an adolescent will engage in that occupation (Klomsten *et al.*, 2005).

Differing views of why you would engage in a sport occurred for the girls and younger boy than did for the older boys in relation to self-efficacy and preference. For the girls and younger boy, being competent enough to engage in and enjoy an occupation was enough to inform and promote choice. In comparison, for the older boys, the opportunity to excel and improve one's own ability through sport and competition was a more decisive factor informing choice. The difference between learning and mastery. Here, we can see how different groups derive different meanings from occupation (Barbalet, 1999). Whether these expectations are the result of choice or vice versa is hard to discern.

A study exploring the occupational choices of adolescents from disadvantaged areas in Ireland found that dedication to sport informed the male participants, while maintaining a positive appearance informed the girls' choice (Gallagher *et al.*, 2015). Similar findings arose in the current study as an eagerness to participate and improve at sport for the boys, and the reluctance of the girls to take part in occupations that they were unskilled at. This suggests that this may be a broader cultural theme. It also reflects the findings that boys are more likely to engage in sports and outdoor activities than girls (Hunt *et al.*, 2014).

The importance Sarah places on schoolwork means that Sarah will need to redefine her occupational lifestyle due to a cultural expectation that school is more important than football. This highlights how expectation can limit choice and while opportunities are available to engage in an occupation, they may not be chosen due to the values and expectations of individuals (Galvaan, 2015). The individuals' expectations of how one "needs" to appropriate oneself to institutional and cultural norms, is removing the locus of control from Sarah, and ensuring that she chooses school over Gaelic football (Eagly, 1987;

Galvaan, 2015). This prioritisation of school activities is in contrast to that found by Gallagher *et al.* (2015).

As noted earlier, choice is a transactional process between the individual and the environment with one influencing the other. While context influences expectations, preference and choice, the opposite can also be seen to happen through the process of occupation. Choosing occupations belonging to “others” allows Niamh to extend beyond two socially constructed categories based on her stage of education and gender. These categories were “primary school student” and “girl”. This in turn allows Niamh to assert control over her own choices rather than allow them to be contextually determined or socially expected resulting in her swimming with older peers and playing rugby with her male friends.

Within this view of choice as framed by the CMOP-E, spirituality is seen to be heavily influenced by environmental factors which in turn determines occupational choice. It is not to say that the participants in the study did not have autonomy over the choices that they made, rather that the choices are all contextually situated, and so locus of control is never entirely with the individuals as there are always physical, social, cultural and institutional factors informing choice.

Application to practice

It is important to consider the influence of socio-cultural factors and how this constructs the expectations and biases which we see the world. This is particular relevant in relation to the expectations we may be creating within our own practice as therapists and how we ascribe gender traditional roles when designing interventions (Liedberg *et al.*, 2010; Liedberg and Gunnell, 2011). We should also aim to try and promote groups that are “gender neutral” and do not differentiate between boys and girls so as not to contribute to social constructions and expectations which can limit choice. It is important to acknowledge that adolescence is a time of identity formation (Erikson, 1963), when adolescents are more susceptible to the influence of social expectations (Dumas *et al.*, 2012).

It is also important to acknowledge that there are structural and organisational injustices that prevent certain groups from engaging in occupation. While a variety of opportunities were available, locus of choice largely belonged to the institutions such as school and club organisations or was shaped by the habitus within the participants’ immediate microsystem. Choice was also restricted by the participants’ values which the researcher suggests are contextually bound (Galvaan, 2015; Jodl *et al.*, 2001). Alternatively, the influence of friends, peers and families was evident as active agents informing choice.

Acknowledging the social influences that family members and friends may have on choice can enable the therapist to create a sustainable intervention plan for those that are difficult to engage in occupation. By including individuals who are closely involved with a client in the intervention plan, and applying changes to their occupational lifestyles, we may facilitate novel occupations that have reduced perceived barriers to choice, and that are more suitable to the expectations that the client holds for themselves and for others.

Limitations

The sample in the current study was a convenience sample as participants all belonged to the same sports club (Seidman, 2013). The study was qualitative with a small sample. As such, it is difficult to make generalised conclusions. Photos were chosen by the researcher and so may have overlooked some aspects of occupation that may have been meaningful to the participants. Coupled with this, the researcher made limited deviations from the script which was intended as a prompt. Areas that may have been overlooked included creative or artistic pursuits. Future research may consider the use of photo-voice as a methodology,

where the participants take the photographs themselves and explain them to the researcher (Cook, 2005).

Future research

The current study focused on the influence of local context on choice. Future research could explore the influence of the broader culture on occupation. Cultivation theory is a variation of social role theory that explores how the media, particularly television contributes to the expectations we hold for ourselves and for others (Gerbner *et al.*, 2002). There has been much consideration as to how gender is portrayed within the sports media. The media portrayal of competitive sport tends to focus on male sport, with lesser time given to female sport. As well as this, reporters tend to be men which further reinforces this expectation (Bernstein and Kian, 2013). It is the view of the author that this may explain some of the perspectives held by the older boys and the girls with regards to what was appealing about the sports occupations. Using this theory as a guide for future research on the occupational choices of adolescents may shine more of a light on the matter.

Laliberte-Rudman (2005) used discourse analysis of newspaper articles to gain insight into how political, social and cultural influences create subjectivities, with subjectivities referring to socially constructed parameters for ways of being and constructing identity (Dean, 1995). Adopting this methodology in relation to occupations directed towards adolescence may provide a better understanding of how political and larger cultural influences inform adolescent choices.

Conclusion

Adopting an occupational justice perspective, the current study explored how gender informs the occupational choices of adolescents in rural Ireland. Thematic analysis highlighted the complexity of choice. Our observations of the local habitus and context informs the expectations we hold for ourselves and other. This in turn informs choice. While opportunities are available, adolescents are orientated towards particular occupations based on these expectations. In this way, the locus of choice falls largely in the constraints of the environment, rather than the individual. This can restrict us from engaging in occupations that we consider meaningful.

Understanding and addressing the messages that adolescents receive from the environment can allow us to ensure that we are providing adolescents with the optimum level of autonomy when making their own choices. We can enable them to go against the grain to create their own enriched occupational lifestyle. Future research may look at how the broader cultures and politics inform the choices of adolescents in Ireland through media.

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